



Nate Hayes (Seals On Frasier Mountain #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: He was trained for war.

But nothing prepared him for her.

Navy SEAL Nate Hayes has faced enemies, explosions, and a mission that nearly broke him when he was held prisoner in Iran. Back home on Frasier Mountain, he's piecing his life back together—one engine, one mission, one breath at a time.

Then Willa Jensen crashes into his world.

Strong, stubborn, and living off-grid with a goat named Pancake, Willa has no interest in romance—especially not with a man carrying invisible scars. But there's something about Nate she can't ignore. He's steady. Safe. Everything her past never gave her.

They weren't looking for love.

But love found them anyway.

Just as their hearts begin to heal, shadows from Nate's past resurface—and the threat that nearly destroyed him might not be finished.

To protect the woman he loves, Nate will have to face the one battle he hasn't won yet—

The one inside himself.

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Nate

I came to Frasier Mountain for peace and quiet, and to be with my Seal buddies. We had a High-Security guard and rescue team, and a couple of the guys and I had a car shop where we worked on old, classic vehicles.

I stood outside when I saw a goat barreling across the trail behind my cabin as if it were late for a date. I barely had time to register the tiny bell around its neck before it headbutted my leg and kept running.

I stared after it.

Then I heard her.

“ Pancake! ” a woman’s voice echoed through the trees, exasperated, honey-sweet southern accent, and somehow both furious and adorable.

Another second passed before she appeared—boots unlaced, braid half out, a smear of dirt on her cheek, and a small mason jar of what I think was lotion in one hand and a net in the other.

A net.

She spotted me, skid-stopped like a cartoon, and narrowed her eyes.

“You didn’t touch him, did you?”

“...The goat?”

“Obviously.”

“I mean... he headbutted me, so I think he touched me.”

“Damn it, Pancake,” she muttered, blowing a curl out of her face. “He’s got a thing for legs. Sorry about that. His favorite thing to do is head butt legs.”

I blinked. “Don’t worry about it.”

This is Wisteria Bliss, by the way.” She held out the jar, as if that explained anything. “You smell like stress and man problems. Rub this on your neck before bed. It will soothe your muscles.”

“...Are you trying to sell me goat lotion right now?”

“I was going to give it to you for free, I knew Pancake would headbutt you, and this is a peace offering, but now you’ve got an attitude.”

I stared at her—this wild, beautiful hurricane with a goat named Pancake and a complete lack of personal boundaries—and I felt something shift in my chest for the first time in a very long time.

“Willa Mae Jensen,” she said, planting her hand on her hip. “From Honeywood. I run Jensen’s Jars & Goat Goods . You’ve probably smelled me at the farmers market.”

“That might be the weirdest sentence I’ve ever heard.”

She grinned. “Thank you.”

Willa Mae adjusted her grip on the net like she was about to catch a wild boar instead of a goat.

“Mind giving me a hand?” she asked.

“I don’t usually chase farm animals.”

“You’ll get a free candle,” she said, already stomping off after the runaway.

I sighed, glanced at the trail I’d been about to hike up, then followed her like a man walking into battle he absolutely didn’t sign up for. I put the lotion on the railing and followed her.

We found Pancake in the middle of my yard, proudly standing on top of a tree stump and chewing on one of my socks, from my boot on the porch.

“My favorite wool sock,” I muttered.

Willa Mae didn’t look concerned. “Consider it a donation. He’s working through some things.”

I stared at the goat. The goat stared back— chewing.

“You know,” I said, “for someone who makes soap, your whole operation smells like chaos. Are your goats always like this?”

She grinned. “Yes. That’s just the beginning. The goats love my vanilla and sass. Every time they smell me making it, they go wild.”

I crossed my arms. “Are you always chasing them around the mountain?” I asked, watching her.

Tossing the net over Pancake with alarming precision, “You have no idea.”

Once she had him secured, she put a leash on him and turned to me.

“Thanks for the help, soldier boy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You always just assume people have military backgrounds?”

“No,” she said, “but you’ve got the haircut, the posture. Plus, I knew some former Navy SEALs lived on this side.”

“I’m glad you caught your goat,” I said.

“I’m lucky I still have goats,” she shot back. “Now, you coming to the farmers market on Saturday, or are you too tough to buy exfoliating scrub in public?”

“...What time?”

She smirked. “Thought so.”

Saturday morning, I’d told myself I was going for the honey.

Or new sunglasses.

Or maybe to grab some eggs from the guy who wore overalls and talked to his chickens like they were coworkers.

But the second I stepped onto the gravel lot and saw her booth—bright yellow awning, wooden crates full of soaps, candles, salves, and an extremely smug-looking goat chewing on a sign that said BUY 2, GET 1 FREE—I knew exactly why I was there.

“Look who showed up,” Willa Mae called, shading her eyes with one hand. “Mr. Too-Cool-for-Conditioner.”

“Thought I’d see if I could smell like moonlight and goat dreams.”

“You’d be lucky,” she said, tossing me a bar of soap wrapped in twine. “That’s Vanilla Woods . Made it last night. Smells like the woods after rain. Also, men who chop firewood shirtless and cry during sad movies.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And do you cry during sad movies?”

“Absolutely.”

I picked up a candle labeled Lust in the Lavender Patch and turned it over. “Do you just make these names up?”

“Every damn day.”

I pulled out my wallet. “I’ll take four.”

She blinked. “Four? That’s like... boyfriend-level commitment to bath products.”

I leaned across the counter just a little. “I’m a committed man, Willa Mae Jensen.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

And I walked away—soap in one hand, candle in the other—before she could say a word.

“Behind me, I heard her mutter, “Lord help me, I think I’m gonna marry that man.”

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Nate

I 'd just poured my coffee when I heard the knock.

Not the “I need something” kind. The tap-tap-tap, I brought you food and probably chaos kind.

Sure enough, when I opened the door, Willa Mae stood there with a wide grin and a basket full of pancakes wrapped in a gingham towel. And a thermos. And a goat.

The goat.

“Please tell me that’s not Pancake.”

“It’s Pancake,” she said, like I’d just won a prize. “He gets separation anxiety.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. “You brought him to my porch.”

“I also brought cinnamon pecan pancakes and homemade blackberry syrup, so stop judging.”

Fair enough.

She breezed past me, stopped, and glanced at the table on my porch. Pancake trotted behind her, head high, as if to say This is my porch now.

I was about to comment on territory marking when Willa suddenly stopped..

She went still.

I followed her gaze and froze.

There was an envelope on the little table. A plain white envelope I hadn't seen when I walked outside earlier.

No address. No stamp. Just my name on the front.

Handwritten.

In thick black marker.

"Was that here earlier?" she asked.

"No," I said slowly, crossing the porch. "You know how far off the road I live. No one should've been able to get inside, my screen door is always locked."

"Then how'd they get on your porch with that screen door locked?"

I didn't answer. My gut was already twisting.

I opened the envelope.

Inside was a single photo.

Willa.

At the market.

From behind a nearby stall. She was laughing, tossing her braid over her shoulder,

holding a bar of soap like she was telling some ridiculous story.

“Max said this town was quiet,” I muttered.

Willa took a step back, her hand gripping the counter's edge. “Why would someone take that?”

“I don’t know yet.” I grabbed my phone. “But I’m calling Frasier. And I’m locking this place down.”

“You think someone’s watching me?”

I looked at her—really looked. Her face had gone pale, her freckles standing out more starkly.

“I think,” I said carefully, “you’ve got someone in your life who doesn’t want you to be happy.” We walked inside.

She blinked at me.

And then, very quietly, said, “I think I know who it might be.”

She stood frozen in my kitchen, the sunlight catching the edges of her hair—long, wild, honey-blond waves tumbling down her back like a damn shampoo commercial that had no business being this distracting in the middle of a crisis.

Her gray eyes—stormy and impossible to read—locked on the photo in my hand.

“I know who took that,” she said quietly.

I set the picture down carefully. “Tell me.”

Willa swallowed hard. “His name’s Derek. He’s my ex-boyfriend. We dated for a few months before I moved here. He didn’t take the breakup well.”

I leaned back against the counter, arms folded. “Define not well. ”

“He followed me around for a while. Left weird notes on my windshield. He showed up at the farmers' market a few times after I asked him not to. Always made it seem like it was a coincidence.” She looked down. “He’d never been violent... just watchful . Creepy.”

“Did you report any of it?”

“I tried. But it was always just shy of actual harassment. No threats. No texts. He’s smart—knows how to push the line without stepping over it. The police said they had nothing to bring him in for questioning.”

I ran a hand down my face, adrenaline still buzzing under my skin.

And then I looked at her— really looked at her.

Her cheeks were flushed, lips parted just slightly, like she hadn’t quite caught her breath. That soft curve of her jaw. The way those gray eyes flashed silver when she was afraid but trying to be brave anyway—the subtle tremble in her hands.

God, she was beautiful.

Not just beautiful— breathtaking , in a down-to-earth way.

Strong and stubborn, with that fierce independence and a heart bigger than her damn herd of goats. And in that moment, all I could think about was how much I wanted to protect her.

And maybe how badly I wanted to kiss her.

Those lips... yeah. They looked like trouble.

The kind I'd walk into on purpose.

Focus, Hayes.

I blinked, forced my brain to reboot.

Now wasn't the time for fantasies and heat and whatever the hell she was doing to me without even trying.

Now was the time to get serious.

"I need a picture of this Derek guy," I said, grabbing a pen and notepad. "Any chance he'd know your routines? Where you deliver your products to? Where you park your car?"

She nodded. "He followed my social media. He'd know I come to Frasier Mountain every Saturday."

My jaw tightened.

This wasn't random.

This was planned.

I turned back to her. "You're not staying at your place tonight. You'll stay here."

Her eyes widened. "With Pancake?"

“With me. And if Pancake behaves, he can stay too, on the porch.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“He sleeps in the shed.”

She tried to smile, but it faltered. “Nate... are you sure? I don’t want him to think he is scaring me.”

I stepped closer. Close enough that I could smell that lavender and wildflower scent she always seemed to carry, like it followed her around on purpose. I’m surprised the bees didn’t follow her around.

“Willa Mae Jensen,” I said, voice low and steady, “someone leaves a photo like that in my cabin, they’re not just messing with you. They’re messing with the wrong damn SEAL.”

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Nate

We ate the delicious pancakes for dinner, and later that night, I tossed Willa a blanket and pointed to the couch. She didn't argue.

She just nodded, arms wrapped around herself like she was holding in more than fear.

"I don't mind sleeping out here," she said. "The couch looks comfy."

"You're not sleeping out here alone."

Her eyes flicked up, wide and startled.

"I'll stay on the recliner," I added. "Unless Pancake calls dibs, in which case I'm flipping a coin."

That got a weak laugh out of her. Just a little one—but it was a start.

She went to wash up, and I moved around the cabin, checking every window, rechecking every lock, and ensuring the security cam above the porch was live. Every movement was automatic. I was trained. I was focused.

But my mind kept circling back to her.

To the sound of her voice when she told me about Derek.

To the way she'd looked at me when I said she wasn't going home.

To the way she was trying to be brave even when she was clearly terrified.

When she returned wearing one of my old flannel shirts— my flannel shirt—barefoot, with her damp hair in a braid and those sleepy gray eyes searching for comfort, something in my chest pulled tight.

She curled up on the couch, legs tucked under her, the blanket around her like a cocoon.

I sat down beside her—not too close, but not far, either.

She turned her head to look at me. “You don’t have to stay up.”

I shook my head. “Can’t sleep yet.”

Silence settled between us, heavy but not uncomfortable. The fire crackled softly, casting a warm glow over her face.

“You ever have something you thought you got away from,” she said quietly, “but it catches up anyway?”

I looked at her. “Yeah. I have.”

She nodded, like she already knew that about me. Like she’d seen something in me that others hadn’t.

My hand twitched on the couch cushion, inches from hers. “You’re safe here, Willa.”

Her eyes met mine. “I know.”

And in that moment, I leaned in.

Not all the way. Just enough that our faces were inches apart. I could feel her breath and smell the lavender on her skin, even after her shower. Her eyes flicked to my lips, and mine did the same.

We were both right there .

I wanted to kiss her. Needed to.

But I didn't.

Not yet.

Because this wasn't about me, this wasn't about want.

It was about her.

So I pulled back, slowly, forcing the space between us to open again.

Her gaze lingered on mine for a long beat before she whispered, "Good night, Nate."

I nodded. "Night, Willa."

She lay down, curled up with the blanket pulled to her chin, and within a few minutes, her breathing had slowed.

I stood, grabbed my laptop, and settled into the chair across the room.

Then I typed his name: Derek Jacob Holloway.

And started digging.

If this guy thought he could sneak onto my mountain, scare her, and walk away clean?

He had no idea who he was messing with. You never come into my home uninvited. If he thought he could sneak onto my mountain, scare her, and walk away clean? He was fixing to find out how wrong he was.

Derek Jacob Holloway.

Age thirty-five. Born in Portland, Oregon. Currently listed as living in Spokane, but his last recorded lease ended four months ago, and there was no new address filed. That was the first red flag.

The second? A string of sealed court documents connected to a restraining orders filed by an “unidentified female party” just before he started dating Willa.

I leaned forward, fingers flying over the keys.

He wasn't just a clingy ex with boundary issues.

He was a seasoned manipulator with a pattern—and he'd learned how to stay just inside the lines of legality.

Photos. Disappearing addresses. Loopholes.

He was smart. Careful. Calculated.

But what got my attention wasn't in the legal database—it was in a backlogged local news article from three years ago.

A woman named Jenna McCrae had gone missing after filing a harassment report.

She'd dated Holloway for five months. Friends claimed she'd said he was "too intense" and that she'd "tried to cut things off."

She was never found.

And Derek? Never charged.

I sat back in my chair, heart pounding, the glow of the screen painting my face in cold light.

I looked toward the couch where Willa was curled up, her breathing soft and steady, her braid draped over the pillow like a ribbon of gold.

She had no idea how close she'd come to something worse.

He wasn't just following her.

He was hunting.

And he was getting bolder.

The photo left on my porch wasn't just a message.

It was a warning.

I see you. I see her. I'm close.

And that meant it was time to stop playing defense.

I opened a secure chat and typed a quick message to Frasier, Max, Axel, and Turner, my SEAL brothers who lived on Fraiser Mountain.

‘Need intel sweep. Subject: Derek Jacob Holloway. Cold trail, but he’s around here. Might be escalating—possible pattern. Need confirmation if Jenna McCrae is connected. And if he’s made it to Honeywood.

Frasier replied instantly:

I'm on it. Sending Axel your way for backup. Stay sharp.

Good. That gave me time to prep.

I looked back at Willa one more time.

She trusted me to keep her safe.

And now? I was going to do more than that.

I was going to end this.

I was on my second cup of coffee when I heard the low rumble of tires on gravel.

Axel didn't use GPS or text to indicate his arrival time . He just showed up when he showed up—like a ghost with a Glock and a perfect beard.

The Jeep stopped, and a second later, the door creaked open.

Axel stepped out in all black, boots silent against the dirt, backpack slung over one shoulder. Next out of the truck was that huge German Shepherd of his. Bravo, he didn't look like it, but he was a gentle dog. Until he felt you were an enemy. I've seen him take grown men down more than once.

“Morning,” Axel said, it was barely six a.m.

“You sleep?”

“On the plane.”

“Eat?”

“Jerky.”

“Still a robot, I see.”

Axel grinned slightly. “Let’s get to work.”

I filled him in while he unpacked his gear—drone, high-res cameras, and a laptop that could probably reroute satellites if we asked nicely. He listened silently, nodding once when I mentioned the photo.

“Guy’s escalating,” he said. “Leaving that picture was bait.”

“I’m not biting,” I said. “I’m building the damn trap.”

We were halfway through syncing the security feed to a secure line when I heard the creak of the floorboards behind me.

Willa.

She stood there still in my flannel, her hair a wild halo of blonde waves, blinking like she wasn’t sure if she was dreaming or about to yell at someone.

“Um. You invited company?” she asked groggily.

Axel turned around. “Ma’am.”

She blinked at him, then me. “Is this... another SEAL?”

“He’s the quiet one,” I said.

Axel gave her a nod. “Name’s Axel. I’m here to help keep you alive.”

“Oh,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “Cool. Do you want pancakes or...?”

“Always,” Axel said seriously.

She disappeared into the kitchen, and I swear to God, that man smiled.

But the lightness didn’t last.

Because five minutes later, I went out to check the porch cam—and found a white envelope wedged under the doormat.

It hadn’t been there when Axel arrived.

Someone had been watching. Waiting.

This one didn’t have my name.

It had hers.

Willa Mae Jensen. In the same black scrawl as before.

I opened it carefully, jaw clenched tight.

Inside was another photo.

This time, it was me —standing at the farmers market last Saturday, talking to her. She had her hand on her waist, laughing.

The message on the back was written in block letters:

SHE WAS MINE FIRST.

I turned the photo over slowly.

Axel stood beside me now, reading over my shoulder.

“We got a problem,” he said.

I didn’t answer.

I was already moving—inside, to the woman who was still humming while she made breakfast, completely unaware that her past had officially crossed the line.

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Willa

The moment I walked out of the bedroom and saw the envelope in Nate's hand, I knew.

My stomach dropped.

I didn't need to see the handwriting. I didn't need to look inside.

I knew it was from Derek.

It was the same pressure in my chest I used to feel when I came home and found him sitting in the dark, waiting. The same knot in my gut every time he got quiet—and too calm. It was the same voice that whispered, He's not done with you. Not yet.

Axel didn't say a word when I walked up. He just nodded once and stepped back.

Nate held the envelope tightly, as if he were afraid it might explode.

And then he handed it to me.

I already knew what it was before I even opened it.

The photo was folded once, creased down the middle like it had been in someone's pocket for hours. Maybe days.

It was of me and Nate. At the market, two Saturdays ago.

My hand was on my hip. I was laughing. I looked... happy.

On the back, in thick black ink, it said:

SHE WAS MINE FIRST.

I couldn't breathe.

I closed my eyes, but that didn't stop the flood of memories—the locked doors, the guilt trips, the promises, the please don't leave me that always turned into if you go, you'll regret it.

He'd never hit me.

But that's not the only way someone can leave a bruise.

"You okay?" Nate's voice was low, careful. Like he was afraid that if he touched me too fast, I might shatter.

I opened my eyes. "No."

He stepped closer.

"I'm scared," I admitted.

Nate didn't try to downplay it. He didn't say you're safe now, or we won't let anything happen.

He just nodded. "You should be. But you're not alone anymore."

That's what cracked something open in me.

Because I wasn't used to being scared out loud, I was used to bottling it, hiding it behind goat jokes and lavender-scented distractions.

But Nate wasn't backing away.

He was stepping in.

And God help me... that was scarier than Derek.

Because my parents loved each other like the world spun for their marriage, they laughed, they danced in the kitchen, they grew old side by side.

My mama died in that cold hospital room, and my dad went three months later.

Not because he was sick. But because his heart didn't know how to beat without hers.

That's what love was to me.

Not flowers or flattery.

But forever.

And I'd promised myself—after Derek—that I would never settle for less.

So, standing here now, with a man who made me feel seen and make me feel safe and not like something broken to be handled... was almost too much.

"Why did you let me stay here, Nate?"

"Because I want you safe."

I searched his face, afraid of what I might see.

“But what if this is too much?” I asked softly. “What if I’m too much?”

He looked at me like I’d just asked if the sky was blue.

“You’re exactly right, Willa.”

My throat tightened.

And when he reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, I didn’t flinch.

For the first time in over a year, I didn’t flinch.

I didn’t mean to say anything.

I’d spent months—learning how to hold it all in. To swallow down the fear, the grief, the ache of everything I’d lost. But standing in Nate’s kitchen, wearing his shirt and clutching a photo that made me feel both threatened and fragile, something inside cracked.

“My mama died alone,” I whispered, eyes fixed on the floor.

Nate didn’t move. Didn’t rush me. He just stood there, still and quiet and present.

“It was COVID. One of the bad waves. She went in with pneumonia and never came out. We couldn’t visit her. Couldn’t hold her hand. She passed in a hospital room with a nurse she didn’t know and a mask over her face.”

My voice broke, and I covered my mouth with shaking fingers.

Nate's hand came to rest gently on my back, warm and steady. He didn't say a word. He just was there.

"My dad..." I choked out I still felt the pain from losing my Dad. "He died three months later. His heart just... stopped. He wasn't sick. He just couldn't live without her."

Nate finally spoke, soft and sure. "He loved her that much."

"Yeah." I nodded, tears slipping down my cheeks. "He used to dance with her in the kitchen every Sunday morning. Just them and an old Patsy Cline record. And when she died, he stopped dancing. Stopped talking much. One day, he went to bed and never woke up."

I looked up at Nate through blurry eyes. "That's what love is to me. Not flowers, date nights, or someone saying pretty things. It's choosing the same someone every day. Even on the hard days."

He reached out and gently brushed the tears from my cheek.

"And Derek?" I said, my voice barely a breath. "He was the exact opposite of that. He didn't love me—he possessed me. He made me feel like leaving him was a betrayal instead of survival. And I stayed longer than I should've because I was afraid ."

Nate's hand cupped my cheek, thumb sweeping slowly under my eye. "You don't have to explain any of that to me, Willa."

I swallowed hard. "I just... if I ever fall for someone again, it has to be real . Like my parents. I want someone to love me like my Dad loved my mom."

He nodded. “I can understand that.”

I gave him a watery smile. “I’m still learning how to trust again. How to believe someone could love me like that without turning into another Derek.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine. “You ever want someone to prove it’s possible... you let me know.”

God. That did it.

Not the kiss I was expecting. Not the sweeping gesture. Just those quiet words that landed deep in my chest like an anchor.

You let me know.

Because Nate wasn’t going to push, he was going to show up.

And somehow, that felt like the most romantic thing in the world.

I was still tucked into the curve of Nate’s side when Axel stepped back into the cabin. He moved so quietly that if Nate’s dog Joe hadn’t let out a low growl, I might not have noticed him at all. But as soon as Joe growled, a giant German Shepherd was there right in Joe’s face.

“Bravo, stand down,” He said, he didn’t say anything else right away.

Just looked at Nate.

And Nate stood, shifting instantly back into protector mode—broad shoulders tight, jaw clenched, eyes sharp.

“What did you find?” Nate asked.

Axel didn’t mince words.

“He’s in Honeywood. At the Whispering Pines Motel, room twelve. Checked in under the name Daniel Holloway. Fake ID. Real enough to slide under the radar, but I ran facial recognition through the security cam at the gas station on Main.” He tossed a small flash drive onto the table. “That’s him.”

My stomach twisted.

“He’s really here, I said, the words sticking in my throat like honey gone bitter, I knew he was here that bastard won’t get near me. I have my goats to care for I can’t stay here hiding from him.

Axel nodded. “Yeah. And he’s been here at least three weeks.”

That was before the envelope showed up.

Before I’d even seen Nate at the farmers market.

“So he’s been watching me,” I whispered.

Nate didn’t hesitate. “He’s crossed the line. He’s not just watching. He’s planning something.”

Axel glanced at me. “We also found something else. His internet history... he’s been searching for stun guns. Handcuffs. How to bypass security systems I’m sure on your cabin.”

The blood drained from my face.

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

Nate was already on the move—pulling a gear bag out of the hall closet, loading a pistol into his holster, checking the lock on the door like life depended on it.

Because now, it kind of did.

He turned to me, calm but deadly serious. “I need you to listen carefully. We’re going to make a move tonight. We’re not waiting for him to make the first one.”

“Tonight?” I asked, my heart racing.

Nate nodded. “He made this personal when he brought it to my door. I’m going to finish it before he gets the chance to hurt you—or anyone else.”

Axel handed Nate a tablet. “We’re tracking his phone. He left the motel about twenty minutes ago, headed toward the lake road. Could be nothing. Could be him circling your property.”

Joe let out a soft growl again, ears pricked, tail stiff. At the same time, Bravo stood in front of the door, blocking the entrance to anyone trying to get inside.

I pressed a hand to my chest. “What do you want me to do?”

Nate crossed the room in two strides, cupped my face, and looked me dead in the eye.

“I want you to be brave. Just like you’ve already been. And I want you to trust me.”

“I do,” I said, without thinking.

And I did.

With everything in me.

Because if there were anyone I'd trust to stand between me and the storm, it was Nate Hayes.

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Nate

Axel and I moved through the trees like shadows, quiet and deliberate. The lake road was empty—just a narrow path that twisted through the woods, skirting the waterline. No lights. No cabins. Just pine needles, dirt, and the kind of silence that only meant one thing:

He was close.

“He’s down by the inlet,” Axel murmured, watching the thermal feed on his tablet. “Still moving. Slow. Cautious.”

He was stalking.

Not just observing— hunting.

And he was headed straight for Willa’s land.

I clenched my jaw and kept moving, eyes scanning the trees ahead. Every instinct I had screamed danger . The air felt tight and charged, like the forest itself was holding its breath.

“Movement,” Axel said, raising a hand. “Ten yards. By that old birch.”

I saw him.

Derek Holloway.

Dressed in black. Hood pulled low. Moving with purpose, like he'd done this before. In one hand, a crowbar. In the other—a bag. Heavy. Weighted.

God only knew what was inside.

“Drop it,” I called out.

He froze.

Then turned slowly, a mock-surprised smile curling across his face. “Well. That didn't take long.”

“Put it down. Now.”

“I just came to talk,” he said, lifting the crowbar and letting it dangle at his side. “You people act like I'm a threat.”

“She doesn't want to see you. You come near her again, and it's over for you.”

“You don't get to decide what she wants,” he snapped. “She was mine.”

The second those words left his mouth, he dropped the bag and reached—from under his coat, fast.

Gun.

“Gun!” Axel barked.

I drew at the same time Derek lifted the weapon.

It was instinct. Training. Survival.

Two shots.

The shots echoed through the trees—one from me, one from Axel.

Derek dropped to the ground before he could fire.

Silence.

I moved in fast, weapon still raised, heart pounding so hard it hurt.

He wasn't moving.

Axel crouched beside him, checked for a pulse, then shook his head once. "Clear."

I exhaled slowly. My fingers were tight on the grip of my weapon. My mind already flashing to Willa. Safe. Alive. Not just a target anymore.

This man—this threat—was done.

"Law enforcement's ten minutes out," Axel said. "We'll give them the whole picture. Cam footage, threats, the works."

I nodded, but I wasn't listening.

All I could think about was her.

Her laugh. Her eyes. Her quiet bravery. Her voice saying I do when I asked her to trust me.

And the promise I'd made that she wouldn't have to run anymore.

I was going home.

To tell her she never had to be afraid again.

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Willa

Nate stood in front of me, his jaw tight, hands steady. But I could see it in his eyes—he hated telling me this. Hated that it came to this.

“Derek’s gone,” he said. “He pulled a weapon. We didn’t have a choice.”

Gone.

The word felt surreal.

No trial. No lingering court dates. No chance he could slip through a loophole again. Just... gone .

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding for the two years I escaped him.

Years. I wanted to jump for joy, does that make me a bad person? I didn’t give a damn.

I looked down at Pancake, who was chewing on a belt he found somewhere, like he had control of anything in the house. I bent down, scooped him into my arms—he gave a disgruntled bleat—and turned toward the door.

“Well,” I said, blinking fast and trying not to cry in front of two emotionally complex Navy SEALs, “thanks for the save. Again.”

“Willa—” Nate started.

“I should really get home to my goats,” I added. “They don’t sleep well without their bedtime song.”

“Wait—what?” Nate said.

“Long story.”

I stepped outside, walking fast. I needed air. I needed something normal.

I was halfway down the steps when I heard him behind me.

“ Willa, stop. ”

I paused.

“Get in the truck. I’m driving you home.”

“It’s not that far.”

“It’s dark. You’re rattled. And your goat’s got one good headbutt left in him. Just let me drive you.”

I hesitated.

Then nodded.

The drive to Honeywood was quiet. I lived over the hill if you walked, but if you drove, we had to take the road around.

Unless you had a four-wheeler, you could get there quickly.

I was used to walking all over this mountain.

Pancake snored softly in my lap while Nate watched the road as if he expected another threat to pop out of the trees.

But when we turned down my lane and the lights of my house came into view, he slowed.

I saw his eyebrows lift. “Wait a second. This is your place?”

“Yep.”

“You’re on the grid?”

“Technically. Got solar panels on the barn roof. Starlink for the internet. Rain barrels. Compost. I’m on the grid, but not unplugged. My goat business is highly profitable online. I have to have Internet as much as I ship around the country.

He parked beside my garden fence and got out, eyes scanning the space.

The porch lights glowed warm over a swing I’d built with my dad. The house itself was simple and strong, with whitewashed siding and sky-blue shutters. A big bay window looked into the kitchen, where a pot of lemon balm still sat on the windowsill.

It was quiet, but full of life. Soft. Safe.

“French country,” Nate muttered under his breath, still staring.

“Excuse me?”

He glanced at me. “Your place. It’s got a French country vibe. Rustic and elegant. Kinda like you.”

My heart did something strange at that.

He stepped onto the porch with me and peeked inside through the screen door.

The furniture was old but polished to a shine. My mama loved the floral-patterned armchair. My dad built the rocking chair by the fireplace the year they got married.

Everything in that house was loved and cared for. Chosen.

Just like I wanted to be.

“I didn’t expect this,” Nate said quietly.

“What? Did you think I lived in a shack with goat hair insulation and a candle-powered fridge?”

He looked at me—really looked. “No. I just didn’t expect to want to stay. It’s so homey.”

That stopped me cold.

But before I could ask what that meant, he added, “You should rest. Lock the door. I’ll swing by in the morning.”

I nodded, then turned the doorknob, already stepping inside when I heard him say my name.

“Willa.”

I turned.

And this time, I saw it.

The heat. The care . The want he was finally letting show.

“Yeah?”

He stared at me for a second longer, then gave a soft, crooked smile.

“You still smell like goat milk and vanilla.”

And somehow... it sounded like the most beautiful thing I'd ever been told.

It had been four days since Nate and Axel took down Derek.

Four days since the danger passed. Four days since Nate dropped me off, told me I smelled like goat milk and vanilla, and disappeared back into the pines like some kind of broody lumberjack guardian angel.

I hadn't seen him since.

Not once.

Not even when I definitely loitered near the coffee stand at the edge of the farmers market, hoping for a glimpse of him.

But no, Nate was nowhere around.

So I did what I always did when my nerves were twisted in knots—I worked. And talked. And sold soap like my life depended on it.

“Jasmine Sunrise is flying off the shelves today,” I told Mrs. Dinwiddie as she sniffed one bar like it held the meaning of life.

“Because it smells like hope and clean laundry,” she declared, dropping it into her basket. “Now when are we going to meet that handsome SEAL who’s been sniffing around you?”

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

“Don’t play coy, Willa Mae. This town hasn’t seen that much action since the square dance scandal of ’03.”

I was just about to change the subject when the crowd near the main path shifted.

And I felt him before I saw him.

That ridiculous walk—long strides, lazy confidence. Gray t-shirt, sunglasses hooked in the collar, and a smile that made my brain glitch, and my thighs twitch.

Nate.

He spotted me and didn’t slow down.

Didn’t smile. Didn’t wave.

Just walked.

Straight through the crowd, eyes fixed on mine, as if I were the only person in the whole damn county.

My heart tried to escape through my throat.

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—

And then he kissed me.

Right there. In front of everyone.

One arm wrapped around my waist, the other lifting my face as his mouth claimed mine like he'd been waiting his whole life to do it.

It was warm, solid, and honest, and my knees were officially at ease. My panties were getting wet. Damn, he was so frigging hot.

The box of soap I'd been holding slipped from my hands and crashed onto his foot.

He didn't flinch.

Didn't even notice .

He pulled back slowly, like he was giving me time to catch up.

Which I couldn't. At all.

“I—what—Nate—why—?”

He grinned. “Because four days is too damn long.”

People clapped.

Someone whistled.

Pancake headbutted the corner of the booth.

I blinked up at him, my face burning. “You kissed me in front of everyone, ” I whispered.

He stepped closer, his voice low. “Good. That way, no one’s confused about where I stand.”

“And your foot—my soap—”

He looked down at the box. “Looks like I’m taking home the Wild Honey Oatmeal special.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“Maybe,” he said, leaning in again and kissing me. “I like you a lot.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“I like you a lot, too. But you can’t kiss me anytime you want.”

He kissed me again and turned around. I watched as he walked away.

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Nate

I hated leaving, but this high-security business provided me with a steady, good income. We loved working in the garage and on the classic cars. We made a little money from it; however, the big bucks came from our high-security business. Everyone wanted a Navy SEAL guarding them and their families.

I pulled into Willa's driveway and laughed. She was trying to catch a goat. I looked around and saw at least thirty goats. I watched as a goat ran up behind her and head butted her and she went flying. She got up, and that was when she noticed me.

She stood up, brushed herself down, and started walking over as I got out of the truck. She was headbutted again. This time, I ran and caught her before she hit the ground. I picked her up and looked at her.

"Why the hell do you still have that goat? Get rid of it."

"That goat is my best breeder. He's supposed to be locked in his pen. Pancake let him out, which is why Pancake is locked up right now."

"I'll catch him, you stay right here away from him."

"Be careful, he's dangerous. Every time I got back up, he knocked me down. So be careful."

"Don't worry about me, no goat is going to knock me down. Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

“No.”

“Liar,” I said before I walked back to her and kissed her. Before I knew what she was about, her arms went around my neck, and she wrapped her legs around my waist.

“Oh, that feels good,” Willa said, as my dick became hard. Then she rubbed against me. I was on fire. My hands went to her ass and I squeezed. Willa wiggled some more.

“Would you rather we go inside and catch the goat after?” He asked.

“Yes. Does that make me too pushy?” she whispered before kissing me again. Then she rubbed herself against my erection.

“Hell no. It makes me hungry for you. I walked inside as she was pulling my t-shirt over my head.

I could barely walk, I was so hot. I let her down and stripped her naked before the door closed behind us.

My mouth found her breast, and they were magnificent, more than a handful, just the way I loved them.

Should I shower first?” Willa, whispered in my ear.

“No, we are doing it right here,” I said as I kicked my pants off.

I pushed her against the wall and picked her up I felt how wet she was and she cried out so I moved my finger more and she orgasmed, she was crying for more I slid her down onto my hard cock, she pushed her hands into my hair, and threw her head back as we made love standing against her wall.

“Let’s do it on the sofa and then in the kitchen before we move to the bedroom,” she said, pushing me further into her.

I tried my best to make it to the sofa, but it was too small, so we had sex on the floor.

I skipped the kitchen and searched the bedroom with Willa, who was still very attached to me.

By the time we made it to her bedroom, Willa had stripped me of every ounce of control I thought I had. I dropped her gently on the bed, and she pulled me down with her, her legs wrapping tight around my hips like she was never letting me go. I didn’t want her to.

We moved together like we were made for it—desperate, hot, and breathless. The kind of lovemaking that carved itself into your bones. I buried my face into her neck as we both cried out, a tangled mess of limbs, love, and lust.

When it was over, I lay beside her, one arm slung over her waist, pulling her close while we caught our breath. Her chest rose and fell against mine, her fingers lazily tracing my jaw.

“Well,” she said, voice soft and sultry, “you still think you can take a goat butting and survive?”

I laughed. “I’d rather fight ten goats than go one more week without seeing you.”

She rolled to her side, propping her head up on her elbow. “Then maybe don’t wait so long next time.”

“Deal,” I said, brushing a kiss to her shoulder. “But I actually came by to tell you I’m heading to Italy tomorrow. Escort mission. I’ll be gone a few days.”

Her smile faded a little, but she nodded. “Okay. Be safe.”

“I will. And I’ll call you every night. If I don’t, it means something went wrong—like I got arrested for smuggling Parmesan cheese or something.”

She laughed, then leaned in and kissed me gently, sweetly this time. “Bring me back something cheesy.”

“Like a tourist magnet that says, ‘My hot Navy SEAL boyfriend went to Italy and all I got was this lousy goat T-shirt?’”

She smacked my chest. “That’s exactly what I want.”

We remained like that for a while, wrapped up in each other. No words, just the kind of silence that conveys everything. I didn’t want to leave. Hell, I hadn’t even wanted to fall this hard, this fast. But there she was. Willa Mae Jensen, goat queen, soap maker, my unexpected everything.

Eventually, I dragged myself up and started pulling on my jeans. “Now, if I don’t go outside and wrangle that demon goat, he’s gonna tear this place apart.”

“You’re the one who said no goat was gonna knock you down.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. “Pray for me.”

“Go get ‘em, cowboy,” she called after me with a grin as I stepped outside to face the real danger.

The goat.

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Willa

I lay in bed, completely, blissfully wrecked. My body hummed, my heart thundered, and every part of me still tingled from Nate Hayes.

Navy SEAL, goat wrangler, who looked hotter than sin... and now, apparently, mine?

I blinked at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath and maybe a little bit of my dignity. Who wraps their legs around a man and climbs him like a tree in broad daylight, in the middle of a goat stampede? Me. That would be me.

And I had no regrets.

I smiled as I sat up, listening to the muffled sound of Nate yelling something outside. A loud thud followed, then a string of curse words that I was pretty sure weren't Navy-approved. That goat was not going down easy.

I wrapped a throw blanket around myself and padded barefoot to the window, just in time to see Nate holding the headbutting goat under one arm like a furry battering ram while the other goats scattered in all directions.

He looked furious. And hot. So stupidly hot I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"You good out there?" I called through the open window.

He turned, hair a mess, shirtless, jeans low on his hips. "Oh, I'm great . Just got

headbutted in the thigh. I may never walk the same again.”

“That’s the one he goes for. He’s got a type.”

Nate narrowed his eyes at me, then grinned. “He better watch it. I’ve seen war zones with less chaos than your front yard.”

I leaned on the window frame, feeling the breeze on my skin, still flushed and warm. “You knew I came with goats. It’s right there in the brochure.”

“Yeah, well, I was too distracted by the curves and the sass to read the fine print.”

My stomach did that swoopy thing again. I should’ve known it wasn’t just a kiss at the farmers market. Not with the way he looked at me. Not with the way he held me like he wasn’t ever going to let go.

But now he was leaving.

Italy. Kids. Escort mission. Probably flying into danger with that quiet, calm confidence he always wore like a second skin.

I hated that part. I hated how much I liked him already.

By the time Nate got the goats wrangled and came back inside, I had pulled on a long T-shirt and made some sweet tea. He looked like he’d just survived a bar fight—his hair was sticking up, a rip had appeared in his jeans, and Pancake was sulking in the corner with a bucket of feed.

“You okay?” I asked, handing him the glass.

“Define okay.”

“You have all your limbs. That’s a win on this farm.”

He took a long drink and leaned back against the counter. His eyes locked with mine, and the heat between us returned like a summer thunderstorm—fast, heavy, and impossible to ignore.

“I’ll be gone a few days,” he said, voice low. “But when I get back... I’m taking you out. No goats. No interruptions. Just you, me, and maybe a real bed the first time next time.”

I nodded, my heart thumping against my ribs. “I’ll be here. Soap to make, goats to wrangle, inappropriate fantasies to relive.”

He grinned and pulled me into a kiss that was somehow soft and dirty at the same time. The kind of kiss that left promises behind.

When he finally left, the place felt quieter. Too quiet.

I turned to walk and looked at the evil goat. “You’ve got terrible timing, you know that?”

He let out a little meh and wandered off like he owned the place.

I smiled, leaning against the doorframe, already counting down the days.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Nate

The jet roared to life, and I leaned back against the seat, watching the clouds blur past the window as we lifted off.

Axel sat across from me, chewing on a protein bar like it personally offended him.

Neither of us spoke for the first half hour.

It was too damn early, and neither of us were excited about babysitting a couple of rich teenagers with TikTok addictions and trust funds bigger than our whole damn base budget.

Don't get me wrong—I'd lay down my life to keep them safe. That was my job. But I preferred the kind of missions that came with adrenaline and chaos, not shopping malls and side-eyes from kids who thought they were smarter than the SEALs assigned to protect them.

They stayed on their phones for most of the plane ride. When we landed in Milan, Axel finally said, breaking the silence. "Then it's a private driver through Tuscany to the grandparents' estate."

"Do we get wine?" I asked.

"Probably. You gonna drink it?"

I snorted. "Not if I'm on watch. But I'm not above stashing a bottle for later."

My phone buzzed, and I fished it out of my pocket. A photo of Willa filled the screen—just her, standing in front of her farmhouse, holding a bar of soap with “Goat Butt” stamped on the label and a totally serious face.

Miss me yet?

I laughed out loud.

Axel raised a brow. “That her?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s cute. The goat soap thing still weirds me out, though.”

“She named one butt head. He headbutts everyone he meets.”

“Sounds like my kind of goat.”

I stared at the photo a second longer before replying.

Miss you like hell. The goat still alive?

Barely. He tried to kill me with a bucket this morning.

I grinned and slid my phone back into my jacket. Willa. That woman had cracked something open in me I didn’t know I had—a longing that went deeper than just lust. She made my world feel lighter. Simpler. Like maybe I didn’t have to always carry the weight of being on all the damn time.

We landed without a hitch. The kids, Chloe and Ethan, walked between us. Chloe had her nose buried in her phone, headphones in. Ethan gave us a nod and a muttered,

“Cool.”

They were teenagers—awkward, moody, trying not to care while clearly caring a whole lot. I remember being that age. The world felt like a punch in the gut every day.

We loaded them into the SUV, Axel up front, me in the back with the kids. The drive was smooth... for exactly twenty minutes.

That’s when we spotted the tail.

“I’ve got a black Audi four clicks behind,” Axel said quietly into the mic. “Holding steady.”

I glanced over at Ethan, who didn’t seem to notice anything yet. Chloe was still oblivious, scrolling through whatever dance challenge was popular this week.

“Keep steady. Let’s see if they follow us through the next turn.”

They did.

And that’s when everything clicked. This wasn’t just a precautionary escort job.

Someone was after them.

“Change of plans,” I said. “We’re not going to the estate. Find a secure location off-grid. Something quiet. Abandoned if possible.”

Axel didn’t ask questions. He just drove.

I looked back at the kids, suddenly a hell of a lot more serious.

“New plan. You stick with us. Don’t argue, don’t panic, and if I say move—you move.”

Chloe finally looked up. “Wait, what’s going on?”

“Trouble,” I said. “And I plan to make sure it never touches you.”

I pulled out my weapon from the secure case, checked the rounds, and glanced out the window. My gut was tight, every instinct on red alert.

I didn’t know who was following us yet.

But I was damn sure they picked the wrong kids to target.

And the wrong SEALs to mess with.

The Audi didn’t just follow us through the next turn—it sped up.

“Axel,” I said, keeping my voice calm, “we’ve got movement. They’re closing the distance.”

“I see ‘em. If they pull up any closer, I’m punching it.”

I twisted in my seat just as Chloe let out a quiet, “Is this for real?”

“Dead serious,” I said, meeting her wide-eyed stare. “You’re not going to the vineyard. You’re in a potential abduction setup. Your job is to stay down and listen to me. Can you do that?”

She nodded, pale now, and tugged Ethan down with her. He looked like he was about to argue, but I didn’t give him a chance.

“Down , now!”

Gunfire cracked behind us, a shot pinging off the rear fender. Axel swore and floored the gas.

The kids screamed. I reached over the seat and shoved them down flat as Axel veered off the main road and down a narrow dirt path.

“Hold on!” he barked.

I grabbed the handle above my window, bracing myself as the SUV hit a patch of uneven gravel. The trees on either side grew thicker, the path bumpier, the shadows deeper. Dust kicked up behind us in a swirling cloud. The Audi stayed right on our tail.

We burst out of the tree line and into the back entrance of what looked like an abandoned vineyard. Ivy-covered stone buildings loomed in the distance, their windows long boarded up. The gate was hanging off its hinges. A perfect hideout—or a perfect trap.

Axel jerked the wheel hard, swerving around a fallen tree, and brought the vehicle to a skidding stop behind one of the crumbling barns.

“Out, now!” I barked. I grabbed Ethan’s arm and hauled him up, Chloe right behind.

“We need to move, get inside before they get eyes on us. Go! Axel, cover them!”

Axel hopped out, gun raised, sweeping the area as I ushered the kids into the barn. The place reeked of mildew and old grapes, but it had a loft, a few rusty tools, and a door that locked from the inside. We could work with this.

“I want you two in that corner, behind the barrels. Stay low. No sound unless I say otherwise,” I ordered.

Chloe and Ethan nodded, still shaking.

Axel came in, shut the door, and dropped his voice. “They stopped just outside the trees. Two men got out—light body armor, probably ex-military. Professional. But they don’t know exactly where we went.”

“Which buys us maybe five minutes.”

I checked my gun to make sure it was loaded, then looked out through a sliver in the boarded-up window. Sure enough, I spotted the Audi parked crooked under the trees. Two shadows moved around it, scanning the area.

“Think they’re after ransom?” Axel asked quietly beside me.

“Could be,” I said. “Or something worse. It could be that they were never supposed to make it to the grandparents. Maybe someone paid for a disappearance.”

Axel grimaced. “Damn.”

A long creak sounded behind us—floorboards above.

I spun, gun raised.

There was no one there. But something shifted in the shadows.

I motioned for Axel to follow and crept up the narrow staircase to the barn’s loft. My boots barely made a sound on the rotting wood. The air smelled like old straw and damp wood, and the silence was thick.

Then I heard it again. Another creak.

We weren't alone in this barn.

I stepped forward, heart pounding, every nerve in my body coiled tight.

And that's when I saw it.

A figure crouched low in the corner held something that glinted in the pale light leaking through a cracked window.

I leveled my weapon. "Don't move."

The figure froze.

And then slowly raised their hands.

It was a girl. Maybe seventeen. Wide green eyes, hair a tangled mess, a bruise blooming along her cheekbone. Her lip was split, her clothes torn.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

She looked at me like she'd seen a ghost. "They took my sister. Please... don't let them take me too."

She was trembling, clutching a broken rake handle like it was the only thing keeping her alive. I kept my weapon trained on her, just in case—but something in her eyes told me she was more terrified than dangerous.

Axel stepped in behind me, gun raised, taking position just over my shoulder. "You know her?"

“Nope. But she’s not one of them,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “Look at her—she’s been through hell.”

I holstered my gun and stepped closer, hands raised to show I wasn’t a threat.

“It’s okay,” I said gently. “You’re safe—for now. What’s your name?”

She swallowed hard. “Siena. Siena Ricci.”

Axel and I exchanged a quick glance.

“Any relation to Alessandro Ricci?” Axel asked. “The family we’re delivering the kids to?”

Siena gave a shaky nod. “He’s my grandfather.”

Shit.

I knelt down in front of her. “Start talking. We’re escorting his other grandkids—Chloe and Ethan. They’re downstairs. We were supposed to bring them to him.”

Her face crumpled. “You can’t. You can’t go to him.

That house—it’s not safe. The people working for him...

they’ve changed. They’re not his regular staff.

I heard them talking. They planned to kidnap all of us.

Me , Chloe, Ethan. Something about insurance.

I escaped two days ago. I've been hiding here ever since. ”

Axel muttered, “Well, that explains why we're being followed.”

“Why didn't you go to the police?” I asked.

“They're in on it. At least the ones around the estate. I tried to flag down a passing car, but when they saw me, they sped off. I've been surviving on rotten grapes and rainwater.”

“Hell,” I muttered.

Chloe and Ethan. Grandkids of a billionaire. Suddenly worth more as hostages than as heirs.

“What about your sister?” Axel asked. “You said they took her.”

“She's younger. Only twelve. They separated us. I think they kept her at the main house. They knew I was older, harder to control.”

The knot in my gut twisted tighter.

This wasn't a job anymore. This was a rescue.

I stood up and motioned for Siena to follow. “You're coming with us. We'll protect you. But if what you're saying is true, we need to move—now.”

We got back downstairs just as another bullet hit the outer wall.

The kids screamed, ducking again. I grabbed Siena's hand and pulled her forward.

“Chloe, Ethan—this is your cousin Siena. She’s been hiding here. And she says you’re all targets.”

Chloe’s mouth dropped open. “What? No—Grandpa would never—”

“Maybe not,” Siena said, her voice breaking, “but the people around him will.”

“We’re leaving,” I told Axel. “We’ll circle west, head toward that rocky ravine we passed. Lose the car, then we go on foot from there.”

“With three kids?” Axel said.

“Better that than ending up in a body bag,” I said.

I slung my rifle over my back and opened the barn’s side door just a crack. The Audi was still there. The two men were closing in, one with a radio to his ear.

“We move in thirty seconds,” I whispered. “Fast. Silent. Follow my lead.”

I looked down at Siena, then at Chloe and Ethan.

“I swear to you—I’ll get all of you out alive.”

Even if it killed me.

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Fraiser

The mountain was quiet tonight.

Too quiet.

I leaned against the porch railing of the command cabin, sipping my coffee and gazing into the dark. Stars twinkled high above the pine trees, and the only sounds were the crickets and the occasional rustle of a wild deer in the brush. I loved the tranquility of my mountain.

But something wasn't sitting right in my gut. Something wasn't right.

Maybe it was age, perhaps it was instinct, or maybe it was just being responsible for too many of these damn SEALs who acted like invincible cavemen in camo.

Then my phone buzzed.

Encrypted channel. Nate.

I straightened immediately, heart thudding. Nate didn't check in often during jobs, but it was always short and sweet when he did. This time, his message was anything but sweet.

NATE (Encrypted):

We are being hunted, someone is after the kids I found another grandchild in a barn

she escaped but they have her little sister. They were waiting for us when we landed.

Damn it.

I tapped in a secure trace request and pulled up the coordinates. Tuscany. Middle of damn nowhere.

Just then, another message came through. This one wasn't from Nate.

It was from a local Italian number.

UNKNOWN PERSON:

If you want the kids back alive, stay out of this. Do not contact authorities. Your men won't make it out next time.

I stared at it for a beat. Then I grabbed my secure phone and hit a speed dial marked only A&R Ricci .

It rang twice before a smooth voice answered.

“Mr. Fraiser. It's been a long time.”

“Alessandro Ricci,” I said. “I need to speak to your son and daughter-in-law. Now.”

There was a pause.

“They're not available at the moment. Perhaps you can speak to me instead.”

“No. I'm not playing games. Your grandchildren are being hunted. One's already missing. If you've got anything to do with this—”

“My dear friend, my family would never harm my grandchildren.”

“I hope for your sake that’s true,” I said. “Because if even one hair on their heads is out of place, I will personally come to Italy, and you’ll find out why Delta and SEALs never retire. We evolve.”

I hung up and grabbed my field tablet. I tapped a few keys, encrypting a message to every man on Frasier Mountain.

SEALS—ALL UNITS. CODE ORANGE. NATE AND AXEL ENGAGED. UNKNOWN HOSTILES. CHILDREN INVOLVED. POSSIBLE HUMAN TRAFFICKING ELEMENT. NO MEDIA. NO POLICE. THIS STAYS IN-HOUSE. STAND BY.

I fired off a second message—directly to Chloe and Ethan’s parents.

Your children are in danger. I’ve got men on the ground. Trust me to bring them home. Do not engage anyone or answer strange calls. We’ll handle this.

A third message was already in the works—to Jack and Max.

Time to wake up the wolves.

I was sprinting through the woods, dead set on finding that little girl, when I heard it.

Not a scream.

Not a shout.

But a signal .

A three-beat owl call that wasn't from any bird.

My blood went hot.

Only one man used that signal.

Fraiser.

I veered toward the sound, instincts on fire. The forest was thick here, the ground wet from yesterday's rain, and it had the kind of quiet that always came before an ambush.

Then I saw movement up ahead—dark shapes, moving low and fast through the brush. Not enemies. These were ghosts . SEAL ghosts. Faces I knew.

Max. Jack and Tucker.

And dead center, taking point with a silenced rifle slung across his chest, was Fraiser.

The man hadn't lost an ounce of edge.

He raised two fingers and pointed left. Max broke off instantly, looping around toward a small ravine. That's when I heard it—muffled cries.

The girl.

Trapped in a hollow, tied to a tree.

A guard stood over her with a radio in one hand and a pistol in the other, scanning the dark like he knew something was coming.

He had no idea how screwed he was.

Jack slid up beside me, whispering, “We got eyes on three more behind the rise. You ready?”

“Always.”

Fraiser gave a sharp hand signal. Go.

And we moved .

It was over in less than a minute.

Three clean takedowns. No noise. No alarms. The kind of coordinated strike that made the devil think twice about showing up.

Max reached the girl first, cutting her bonds with a blade so fast she barely had time to flinch.

“You’re safe now,” he said softly. “We’ve got you.”

She looked up at him, then over at Fraiser stepping out of the shadows like he owned the damn night. Her eyes welled up with tears.

“I—I thought I was going to die.”

“We would never let that happen,” Fraiser said, crouching beside her.

I stood at the edge of the scene, breathing hard, pulse slowing.

We did it.

She was alive.

The SEALs had landed.

Fraiser turned toward me with a wry smile. “Heard you could use a hand.”

“Took you long enough.”

“We had to finish our coffee,” muttered.

Max gave me a pat on the back. “Nice to see you still know how to get into trouble.”

“Better at it than ever,” I said. “But seriously—how the hell did you find us?”

Fraiser pulled a GPS tracker from his vest pocket. “You think I’d let one of my boys leave the country without one of these tucked into his gear?”

I couldn’t help but grin.

“Good to see you,” I said.

“Let’s get the kids out of here,” he said. “Then you can buy me a bottle of Italian wine and explain why a goat named Pancake is on your personnel file.”

Nate

We slipped into the trees just as the barn exploded behind us.

The blast hit the ground like thunder, throwing heat and debris into the night. Chloe screamed. Siena dove to the ground. I covered Ethan with my body, shielding him as flaming wood and dust rained down around us.

“Move!” I shouted, yanking Ethan to his feet.

Axel grabbed Siena and motioned for Chloe to follow. We pushed into the woods, deeper, faster, our boots pounding over uneven terrain.

“They knew we were in there!” Siena shouted.

“Correction,” Axel said, panting beside her, “they assumed . Which means they’re not just following—they’re hunting.”

I scanned the terrain as we ran. Rocky incline. Dense pines. The air smelled like smoke and moss, and every snapping twig behind us sounded like gunfire. I could feel them—whoever they were—closing in.

“Up there!” I pointed to a jagged cliffside trail about fifty yards ahead. “We take the high ground. Lose the tracks. Find shelter.”

We scrambled up, hands gripping rocks and roots, the kids slipping on loose gravel. Chloe nearly went over the edge, but Axel caught her just in time, hauling her up like

she weighed nothing.

Once we reached the top, I dropped into a crouch and pulled out my field binoculars. Below, two shadows moved near the burning barn, sweeping the area with flashlights and rifles.

“They’re splitting up,” I murmured. “We’ve got maybe ten minutes.”

“We need to go dark,” Axel said. “Phones off. No signals. If they’re tracking heat or comms, we’re dead.”

I powered mine down and turned to the group.

“Listen up. From here on out, we go silent. No lights. No talking unless it’s an emergency. We’re heading west—through the hills. There’s an old hunting lodge about three miles out. If we can make it there, we regroup, rest, and figure out our next move.”

Siena was shaking again. “They’ll come after us.”

“Damn right they will,” I said. “But they won’t find us.”

We moved fast and quiet, ducking under branches, climbing over logs, sticking to the shadows. I kept one hand on my weapon the entire time, my ears trained on every rustle, every breath, every sound that didn’t belong.

Behind me, I heard Siena whisper something to Chloe.

“Did you hear what he said? They’re hunting us.”

I didn’t turn around. I didn’t have to.

Because I already knew.

And I was ready.

We kept going until the trees thinned out and the outline of the lodge came into view—just a silhouette against the dark sky, abandoned, but still standing. One door. One chimney. And hopefully no surprises inside.

Axel moved up and swept the perimeter while I checked for tracks. No signs of recent use. No vehicles. Nothing to suggest it had been touched in weeks, maybe months.

“Clear,” Axel said a few moments later, returning with a nod.

We ushered the kids inside. The floor creaked under our boots, and the air smelled like mold and dust, but it was shelter. There was a woodstove, a few old cots, and a beat-up couch missing a leg.

It would do.

I blocked the windows, started a fire in the stove to warm the place up, then checked our water rations.

Not enough.

I’d have to find a creek by morning.

The kids were curled up together now—Ethan with his back to the wall, Chloe resting on his shoulder. Siena sat apart from them, arms wrapped around her knees, watching the flames like they might turn into something else.

Axel looked at me. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re not after ransom. They’re cleaning house.”

“Inside job?”

“Looks like it. And now we’ve got three kids and a war zone.”

He nodded slowly. “You miss your goats yet?”

I let out a quiet laugh. “Yeah. I miss everything about that damn mountain.”

Willa’s face flashed in my mind—her laugh, the way she’d felt in my arms, the way she made me believe, just for a minute, that I could have something real.

“I’ll get back to her,” I muttered. “I have to.”

Axel handed me a ration bar. “First, we keep these kids alive. Then we burn the bastards who tried to bury them.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

But before I could sit down, I heard something outside.

A twig.

Snapped.

Then another.

And then—

A child’s scream.

But not from inside.

It was coming from the woods.

Siena bolted upright. “That’s my sister.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Nate

I was out the door before the second scream faded.

Siena was right behind me.

“I’m coming with you,” she said, breathless.

“No. Stay put.”

“She’s my sister .”

I turned, grabbed her shoulders, and locked eyes. “I need you to be alive for her. If something happens to you, she has no one. You want to help? Stay safe. Guard the others. I will bring her back.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but she nodded. “Please find her.”

“I will.”

Axel handed me his backup Glock. “You want backup?”

“Not yet. If I’m not back in twenty, you come after me with hell in your hands.”

He nodded once.

Then I vanished into the trees.

The forest swallowed me whole. Moonlight filtered through the canopy in broken streaks, but I didn't need it. My eyes were locked on the direction the scream came from. My ears tuned to every sound. My pulse had slowed—SEAL calm. Predator still.

Something moved ahead.

Soft. Quick. Darting.

I followed.

Branches whipped against my arms. A root nearly took my ankle, but I kept going. Breathing steady. Quiet as death.

Another cry echoed through the night—closer now.

I paused beside a thick tree trunk, crouching low. That's when I heard it.

Voices.

Men. Two of them. One laughing, the other cursing.

"She keeps fighting me," one said in Italian-accented English. "Little brat scratched me."

"You want me to hit her again?" the other asked.

My vision narrowed.

Rage, pure and cold, slid through my veins.

Not on my watch.

I crept closer, inch by inch. The girl was tied to a tree, hands bound, blood on her lip. She looked like Siena, but younger. Fiercer. Her eyes blazed even as her whole body shook.

One of the men turned, a cigarette dangling from his lips. That was his last mistake.

I surged out of the dark like a ghost.

Two shots.

One in the knee. The other in the shoulder.

The man dropped like a stone, screaming.

His buddy spun, raising his weapon—but I was already there. I slammed into him, drove my elbow into his throat, twisted his wrist, and disarmed him in one smooth move. He went down gasping, and I left him that way.

I dropped to my knees beside the girl. “Hey—hey, it’s okay. I’m Nate. I’m a Navy SEAL. Your sister sent me.”

Her eyes widened. “Siena?”

“She’s safe. Waiting for you.”

I cut the ropes with my knife and pulled her into my arms.

“I got you,” I whispered.

And I meant it.

I carried her through the forest, the adrenaline still thick in my blood. She clung to me like a lifeline, whispering over and over, “You really came.”

“Damn right I did.”

Axel met us halfway, gun raised, eyes scanning the trees. When he saw the girl, he nodded. “Told you. Predator mode.”

“Let’s get her inside.”

Back at the lodge, Siena ran to her sister and broke down. The reunion gutted me in the best way. It reminded me why we do this—why we fight.

And why I have to get back home.

Because one day, I want someone to run to me like that.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Willa

I stared at the soap mold in my hands like it had personally betrayed me.

I'd remelted the same damn batch of lavender-goat-milk bars three times already today, and each time I poured it wrong. The scent was too strong, the swirl was off, and honestly—I didn't care.

Because Nate was still gone.

And I missed him like hell.

It had only been a few days. I kept telling myself that. A few days wasn't long. But it felt long. Too long.

The last time I saw him, I'd been half-naked, high on adrenaline, and thoroughly wrecked against my bedroom wall, for a quickie that nearly destroyed me. Now I was wearing the same T-shirt for the third day in a row, and I accidentally dropped a measuring cup into the goat bucket this morning.

Pancake kicked it down the hill. I didn't even go after it.

I wiped my hands on my jeans and stepped outside onto the porch, hoping the fresh air would clear my head.

It didn't.

It simply reminded me that Nate's truck wasn't parked out front. That the night was quiet, too quiet. And that the damn stars didn't shine nearly as bright when he wasn't under them with me.

I sat on the porch swing and hugged a cup of tea to my chest, staring at the moon.

"I hope you're safe," I whispered.

As if he'd hear me from across the world.

Just then, Pancake came trotting up from the barn like he had something important to say. He headbutted the side of the swing, then plopped down at my feet with a loud sigh.

"You miss him too, huh?"

He blinked at me like, Duh.

"I know. I scratched behind his ears. "I didn't think I'd fall for a Navy SEAL but here we are."

My phone buzzed on the armrest beside me. I grabbed it fast, my heart leaping.

Unknown Number.

I tapped it open.

A photo appeared.

Nate. Covered in dirt, smiling like he just survived a warzone—which he probably did. And behind him? A group of kids. Chloe. Ethan. Siena. And one girl hugging

Nate like her life depended on it.

And the caption:

COMING HOME.

I pressed the phone to my chest and let out a laugh and a sob all at once.

Pancake bleated loudly and then immediately knocked over my tea.

“Of course,” I said, wiping my eyes. “You couldn’t just let me have that moment, huh?”

But I didn’t even care.

Because Nate was coming home.

And when he did, I was going to kiss him in front of every single goat on this mountain.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Willa

I heard the truck before I saw it.

That low rumble, steady and strong, rolling up the gravel drive like a promise kept.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest.

I dropped the basket of freshly cut lavender soap—didn't even care that it hit the porch with a thud—I stood there waiting for him to open the door and step out when he did. I ran to him.

Barefoot.

Hair a mess.

T-shirt covered in flour because I'd been stress-baking goat cheese biscuits.

Didn't care about that, either.

Because he was home .

Standing there in jeans and a gray T-shirt, dusty, tired, and more beautiful than I remembered. His eyes locked on mine, and he smiled, slow and warm, like he'd just spotted the only thing in the world he wanted.

I didn't even slow down.

I launched myself into his arms.

He caught me with a grunt and a laugh, lifting me off the ground like I weighed nothing.

“Hey, baby,” he said, voice rough. “Miss me?”

I buried my face in his neck and nodded, already crying. “Yes, I don’t like you taking chances with your life.

He held me tighter. “It’s my job, it’s what we do. It wasn’t supposed to be dangerous. But we never know what will happen when we leave for a job. That’s why they call our team for help.”

We stayed wrapped around each other like that for a long time. Long enough for Pancake to come trotting up, head tilted, suspicious as always.

Nate looked down at him. “Don’t even think about it.”

Pancake snorted and circled behind him, like he was debating a stealth headbutt.

I pulled back just enough to look into Nate’s face. “Are you okay? Really?”

He nodded. “Tired. Hungry. Sore. But yeah. We got all of them out. Every kid. Fraiser and the team showed up just in time.”

“And the little girl?”

“She’s back with her sister. Safe. They’re being flown home today.”

I kissed him then.

Right there, on the gravel, with the goats watching and flour on my shirt and tears on my cheeks.

Because I loved him.

Maybe I hadn't said it yet. Maybe I didn't have to.

But I did.

I loved this man. I'm not going to say anything to him about that. I didn't want to scare him off.

I would enjoy what I had, and not overthink it. I'd kiss him like it was the first time and the last time all at once.

"Come inside," I whispered against his lips. "I made biscuits. Goat cheese biscuits."

"I don't believe I've ever had Goat cheese biscuits," he said.

"You'll love them," I said as we entered the house.

Nate

I was falling hard for Willa, and it scared the hell out of me.

I was obsessed with keeping her by my side.

I loved that woman more every day, and I didn't want to scare her off.

I'll play it cool for a couple of days. I'll stay at my place, so she won't think I'm weird.

Max and Tessa are having a barbecue on Saturday.

I'll invite her so she can meet everyone.

"I want you to fix her. I don't want anything replaced. Baby Blue is my darling, and I don't want her replaced," Jeb tried explaining.

"What if I can't keep putting her parts back together? Sometimes, you need to replace parts to keep going—a knee, hip, heart, or liver. Everything and everyone needs new parts."

"If you put it that way, then go ahead, but let me know first. I have to walk over to Junior's and get some groceries. Shirley is giving me a ride home. She wants to be my girlfriend. I told her we could play, but there wouldn't be any marriage."

"I'll call you when your car is ready."

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll be busy tonight.”

I laughed as he walked out the door. I heard the Harley before I saw it. Axel forgot his helmet again. When he stopped and walked over, I looked at him. “How is everything at the B&B?”

“It’s great. Max and Tessa are getting ready for the barbecue.” Axel leaned against the frame of the garage door and crossed his arms. “You inviting Willa?”

I wiped my hands on a rag and nodded. “Yeah. I want her to meet everyone. I think... I think I’m falling for her, man.”

Axel’s eyes narrowed, but a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You think ?”

I shook my head and exhaled. “No. I know . I’m in love with her. But I don’t want to freak her out. She’s been through too much, and I don’t want to rush anything.”

“She’s tough. She wouldn’t have survived Derek if she wasn’t. Just be real with her. Don’t pull back so far, she thinks you’ve lost interest.”

“I was thinking about not seeing her until the barbecue.”

Axel raised a brow. “Yeah? And how long did that plan last?”

“About an hour.” I tossed the rag on the workbench and ran my hand through my hair. “I miss her goat. Pancake keeps climbing on her porch and staring at me like I’m an idiot.”

Axel chuckled. “Go see her, man. Or bring her a pie. Women love pie.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“My grandma,” he said with a grin.

I thought about Willa’s laugh, her hair blowing in the wind on her porch, the way she looked at me like I might be worth trusting. I’d never had that before.

“I’ll invite her tonight,” I said. “Maybe she’ll come early, help Tessa set up. That way, it’s not a big deal.”

“Or maybe she’ll show up, fall harder for you, and you’ll stop acting like a lovesick teenager.”

I flipped him off with a grin. “You bringing anyone to the barbecue?”

“Nah. Just me. I want first dibs on ribs before the couples start acting mushy and ruin my appetite.”

I laughed and watched as he hopped back on his bike and peeled out. The second the rumble of his Harley disappeared down the road, I reached for my phone.

I stared at Willa’s name, thumb hovering over the screen.

Play it cool, Nate. Just ask her to the barbecue.

But when I hit “Call,” and she answered with that sweet, warm, “Hey, Nate,” all my cool went right out the window.

“Hey,” I said, clearing my throat. “So, there’s a barbecue this weekend at Max and Tessa’s. I’d really like you to come. You’ll get to meet everyone. No pressure. Just... I’d really like to see you there.”

There was a pause. Then she said, “Only if I can bring Pancake. You know how she

is if I leave her. She'll try to hang herself."

I grinned. "Deal."

And just like that, the tightness in my chest eased. Maybe I didn't have to play it cool. Maybe I just had to be me.

Willa

I 'd never been to a Navy SEAL barbecue before. I didn't even know that was a thing, but leave it to Nate to casually invite me to something that had my nerves doing cartwheels.

He said it was low-pressure, that it was just his friends—guys he trusted with his life, and their wives or girlfriends. But still, it felt like a big step. Like meeting the family, only with more muscles and tactical gear.

I looked down at the floral sundress I'd pulled from the back of my closet. It wasn't fancy, but it was clean, and I didn't smell like goat, so that was a win.

Speaking of goat...

"Pancake," I muttered, glancing out the screen door. "What are you doing?"

She was in her usual spot—on the porch roof—balanced precariously like she was the queen of the kingdom. I'd tried to keep her off, but she always found a way up there. Nate thought it was hilarious. I was starting to think she did it just to impress him.

"I swear, if you eat one more plant, I'm putting you on time-out."

Pancake snorted, then did that sideways hop thing that always made me laugh even when I didn't want to.

I sat down at the kitchen table with a glass of lemonade and stared out at the

mountains. It was peaceful here. Quiet. Safe. Now that Derek was gone.

Nate had a lot to do with that.

I wasn't sure how it had happened, but somehow this man—the one with the grease-stained hands, kind eyes, and the world's slowest drawl—had wormed his way into my heart. He didn't push. He didn't pry. He just was .

And he made me feel seen.

The part that scared me most was how fast it was all happening. I'd barely caught my breath from the last mess in my life. Sure, I had broken up with Dereck two years ago, but getting him out of my life was hard. But with Nate... it didn't feel messy. It felt right.

Still, I'd seen what I thought was love before, and it went wrong. I'd lived through it. So, while my heart flipped every time he smiled at me, my brain kept yelling, “ Be careful, you need to slow down.”

I took a deep breath and rubbed my palms on my dress. I'd already said yes. I was going.

And if I chickened out now, Pancake would probably follow Nate to the barbecue without me.

There was a knock on the door. I jumped, then peeked out the window. Speak of the devil. Nate stood on the porch, holding a paper bag and wearing a sheepish grin.

I opened the door, and Pancake bleated behind me like she was annoyed I beat her to it.

“I brought you a peach pie,” he said, holding it out. “Axel said women like pie. I wasn’t sure what kind, so I got the kind I liked.”

I stared at him, fighting a smile. “Are you bribing me to show up tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Is it working?”

I think it is. Don’t even look at my pie, Pancake.

He looked down at the goat, then back at me. “She can lick the plate.”

“Deal.”

He handed me the pie, and our fingers brushed. My heart did that stupid flutter again.

I wasn’t sure what tomorrow would bring. But I had a dress, a goat, and a man who brought pie to my porch.

And for the first time in a long time... I was hopeful.

Nate

The smell of grilled ribs and fresh cornbread hit me the second I stepped into Max's backyard. Tessa had the picnic tables decked out in red-checkered cloths, and someone—probably Axel had already opened the cooler and was handing out beers like it was a mission.

“You sure she's coming?” Max asked, flipping a burger with one hand while cradling a bottle of barbecue sauce in the other.

“Yeah,” I said, glancing down the long gravel driveway for the fifth time. “She said she'd be here.”

He smirked. “You've only checked your phone twelve times in ten minutes. You wanna go sit on the porch and stare at the horizon like a golden retriever?”

“I might,” I said, but the words barely left my mouth before I saw her.

Willa stepped out of her old pickup in that flowy sundress—the one that did dangerous things to my heart—and standing proudly in the bed of the truck like she owned the world was Pancake the goat, leashless, of course.

Axel nearly choked on his beer. “You brought a date and a goat?”

“Damn right I did,” I said, already heading her way.

She smiled at me like I was the only person here, and hell, if that didn't feel good.

“You made it,” I said, taking the pie tin from her hands.

“Pancake insisted,” she said, then added under her breath, “And I didn’t want to spend the whole day wondering what it would’ve been like if I’d said no.”

I leaned in. “You look beautiful.”

She looked away shyly. “You clean up okay too, grease monkey.”

“C’mon,” I said, touching the small of her back. “I’ll introduce you to the circus.”

And they were exactly that—Max, Axel, Jack, and the rest of the guys all lined up like they were evaluating new recruits. Tessa grinned, arms crossed, clearly amused.

“Everyone, this is Willa,” I said. “And that’s Pancake. She goes where Willa goes.”

The goat promptly trotted across the yard and tried to climb the picnic table.

“I’ll get her,” Willa said, but Max waved her off.

“She’s fine. She can have Axel’s seat.”

Axel frowned. “Why me?”

“Because the goat are less likely to make sarcastic comments during grace.”

Willa laughed, and just like that, she fit in. Eloise stepped out on the patio, looking like she was ready to pop. I took her hand and walked with her to Willa.

“Willa, this is my sister Eloise Raider; she’s married to Jack.”

“Eloise, I’m so happy to meet you. I have seen you at the Farmers Market before.

“I’m so happy to meet you, too, Willa. I always buy from your stand. I love your soap and candles. Let’s help Tessa.”

She helped Tessa set out food, asked Max about the garden, and didn’t even flinch when Jack asked if she could wrangle a loose chicken from the coop.

But then I noticed her smile falter. She was talking to a woman I didn’t know.

Blonde. Pretty. A little too friendly.

“Who’s that?” I asked Axel, who was munching on cornbread like he hadn’t just swallowed a rack of ribs.

“Kaitlyn. She’s Frasier’s cousin. She had just returned from Florida and was already trying to hit on Jack, Max, and me. Pretty sure you’re next.”

I watched as Kaitlyn laid her hand on Willa’s arm and said something that made Willa shift back slightly.

I didn’t wait. I made my way over, slid an arm around Willa’s waist, and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Everything okay?” I asked her quietly.

“Fine,” Willa said. “She was just telling me that girls like me don’t usually last long around here. That Navy SEALs don’t do well with... quiet types.”

I turned to Kaitlyn. “Good thing Willa isn’t quiet. She just hides it better than most.”

Kaitlyn blinked, smiled tightly, and wandered off toward Axel—poor guy.

Willa looked up at me. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I did,” I said. “Because you belong here. And anyone who can’t see that can go choke on a hotdog.”

Her eyes shimmered, and I saw it—that little crack in her guarded heart starting to open up.

Pancake let out a dramatic bleat like she agreed, then promptly knocked over a cup of lemonade.

“She does that when she wants attention,” Willa said.

I grinned. “So do I.”

She laughed, then leaned in and kissed me, soft and certain.

And in that moment, under the strings of porch lights and the sound of friends arguing over ribs, I stopped worrying about moving too fast.

Because I wasn’t falling anymore.

I’d already fallen.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Willa

The stars were clearer here. Like someone had wiped the sky clean and hung them one by one just for us.

Nate had driven me home, walked me to my porch, and now we sat on the steps like teenagers who didn't want to say goodnight yet. Pancake was asleep in the grass beside us, snoring faintly like an old man in church.

"You were a hit," Nate said, nudging my knee with his. "Everyone loved you. Even Axel. And he's basically allergic to emotion."

I smiled. "I think it was Pancake. She won them over first."

"She always does. It's annoying."

We sat in a comfortable silence, the kind that only happens when nothing has to be said but everything is felt.

Then Nate turned his head and looked at me, really looked at me, like I was a puzzle he wanted to keep solving forever.

"I meant what I said earlier," he said quietly. "You belong here. With us. With me."

My heart thudded against my ribs, slow and heavy. "I'm not used to belonging anywhere."

“You do now,” he whispered. “And if you ever doubt it, I’ll remind you. Every damn day if I have to.”

He leaned in, slowly, like he was giving me every chance to pull away. But I didn’t want space. Not from him. Not tonight.

Our lips met, soft at first, then deeper. I felt the warmth of his hand against my cheek, the brush of his thumb as he kissed me like I mattered. Like I was already his.

I slid my hands under his shirt, fingers brushing warm skin and hard muscle, and felt the tremble in him. He pulled back just enough to look into my eyes.

“Willa... if this is too fast, tell me. I don’t want to rush you.”

I smiled and curled my hand behind his neck. “Nate, I’ve lived through slow, and I’ve lived through fast. What I haven’t lived through is right .”

He exhaled like he’d been holding that breath for days. “You’re killing me, sweetheart.”

“Then kiss me again.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice.

He scooped me into his lap, my legs draped over his thighs as he kissed me like the world had narrowed down to just the two of us and the whisper of night. His hands roamed my back, my hips, every touch reverent but hungry.

“You feel like home,” he said against my skin as his lips found the curve of my neck. “You taste like summer.”

“Is that a compliment?” I teased breathlessly.

“It’s a damn declaration.”

We didn’t make it past the porch swing that night. Just tangled limbs, laughter, kisses stolen between whispers. Nothing rushed. Nothing forced.

Just us.

He held me until the moon moved across the sky, and when I finally leaned my head on his shoulder, I knew—deep down, where truth lives—

I was in love with Nate Hayes.

And I wasn’t afraid.

Not anymore.

Nate

She kissed me like she already knew. Like she'd been waiting to say it without words.

I stood, holding her hand. "Come with me."

Her fingers curled around mine without hesitation. No questions. No fear.

sI helped her into my truck, our eyes locked the entire time. The drive was short but quiet—heavy with want, with things we hadn't said yet but were about to.

When we pulled up to her little farmhouse, the porch light flickered on like it knew what was coming. I set Pancake out, and Willa took her where the other goats were. She didn't even stir when we walked past her.

Inside, the door clicked shut behind us, and suddenly she was in my arms again, soft and warm and completely mine.

Willa's hands slid up my chest, clutching the fabric of my shirt as I pressed her against the wall. I kissed her like I needed her breath in my lungs. Her lips parted with a sigh, and her fingers tangled in my hair as she arched toward me, desperate for more.

"Tell me to stop," I whispered.

"I'll kick you if you do," she breathed.

That was all I needed.

I lifted her, and her legs wrapped around my waist as I carried her down the hall. Her laughter, breathless and bright, spilled into my neck. We made it to her room, but barely. I couldn't stop touching her—her skin, her hair, the soft swell of her hips under my hands.

She tugged my shirt off, eyes wide and greedy. “God, Nate...”

I cupped her face, slowing, grounding us. “Willa, I need you to know something.”

She blinked up at me, cheeks flushed, lips kiss-bruised.

“I love you. I’ve been trying not to say it. But I do. I love you, Willa Mae Jensen.”

Her breath hitched, and for a second, I thought I might’ve ruined it—might’ve scared her.

Then she reached up, touched my chest, and whispered, “I love you too. I think I did before I even knew what this was.”

My mouth crashed down on hers, and all the space we’d tried to keep between us shattered.

I undressed her slowly, worshipfully. Every inch of her was a revelation—soft curves and sighs and sweet little gasps that drove me wild. When I finally slid inside her, we both stopped, breathless.

She held on like she never wanted to let go.

And I moved with her, deep and slow at first, savoring the feel of her wrapped around

me, the way she whispered my name like a prayer. Her hands gripped my shoulders, nails dragging across my skin as our bodies tangled in a rhythm that felt older than time.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't about release. It was about us .

I whispered everything I'd never said—how I wanted her, how she was mine, how I wasn't going anywhere.

She cried out when she came, shaking under me, and the sound of my name on her lips broke something wide open within me. I followed her over the edge, groaning into her neck, holding her like I'd never let her go.

After, we lay tangled in the sheets, our bodies slick with sweat and our hearts pounding in sync.

“I meant it,” she said quietly, fingers tracing lazy circles over my chest. “I love you.”

“I'll never stop loving you,” I whispered into her hair. “Even if Pancake hates me.”

She laughed, tucked tight against me. “She tolerates you. That's basically goat love.”

We fell asleep wrapped around each other like we were made that way.

The Next Morning

The light streamed through the curtains in soft golden beams. Willa was still in my arms, her thigh thrown over mine, her breath warm against my neck.

I didn't move. Wouldn't dare.

But then we heard it—an angry bleat outside the window. Then another. Then something that sounded like hooves on the porch.

Willa groaned and buried her face in my chest. “Your fans are here.”

“Correction,” I said, rolling her onto her back with a grin. “Our fans.”

She laughed, but it turned into a moan when I kissed her neck.

“Again?” she asked, breathless.

I didn’t answer. I just slid my hand down her body and showed her.

We made love again—slow and sweet, with the sunrise painting her skin gold and the sound of impatient goats protesting in the background.

And when she whispered, “I still love you,” I kissed her until she forgot everything else.

Nate

I couldn't remember the last time I woke up this happy.

The kind of happy where your body aches in all the best ways, your heart feels too full for your chest, and the woman lying beside you smells like sleep and sunshine and everything you never knew you needed.

Willa was tucked under my arm, hair a wild halo on the pillow, her hand resting on my stomach like it belonged there.

"Pancake's going to break down the door," she murmured, eyes still closed.

"Let her. I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"Falling in love with you all over again."

Her eyes opened—bright and warm and sleepy—and she smiled. "You're a sap."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's not." She kissed my shoulder, then groaned and stretched. "But if I don't feed those goats, they'll riot."

"I'll come with you."

She raised an eyebrow. “You know how to feed goats?”

“Nope,” I said, tossing the covers off. “But I know how to follow you around and pretend I do.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were both in sweats and boots, Willa scooping feed while Pancake stared at me like she was still waiting for an apology.

“Stop glaring at him,” Willa told her. “He brought pie.”

We walked back to the house hand in hand, the cool morning breeze brushing across our skin.

Once inside, Willa put on coffee, and I rummaged through her fridge. “Do you always have this much butter?”

“I make my own butter.”

“I bake when I’m stressed.”

I looked over my shoulder. “You gonna be stressed today?”

She laughed. “Are you asking for biscuits?”

“I’m just saying if love tastes anything like the peach pie you made me, I’m about to fall even harder.”

Soon the kitchen smelled like butter and brown sugar. Willa moved around like she’d done it a thousand times—me in her kitchen, barefoot and shirtless, stealing sips of her coffee and kisses in between.

She leaned against the counter while the biscuits baked. “This feels dangerous.”

“Because you made something with bacon fat or because you’re falling for me?”

“Both,” she said, laughing.

I crossed the room, took her hips in my hands, and kissed her like we hadn’t just spent the night tangled together.

“I want more mornings like this,” I said into her hair. “All of them, if you’ll let me.”

“I want them too,” she whispered. “Even the ones with goat riots and burnt toast.”

“Deal. As long as we eat breakfast like this.”

She looked up at me. “Together?”

“Half-naked and in love.”

The oven timer dinged. Pancake bleated. And Willa just shook her head.

“Welcome to the rest of our lives,” she said.

And I couldn’t wait for every messy, sweet, heart-full minute of it.

Willa

The Farmers Market was buzzing, the scent of fresh bread and kettle corn dancing in the air, and the chatter of locals filling every corner of the little town square.

I had my homemade soap display set up under the blue-striped canopy, Pancake tied loosely to the post, chewing hay and pretending she didn't love attention.

Nate was helping unload more baskets from the truck. He looked sinfully good in jeans and a faded black tee, his ballcap turned backward like he'd just stepped out of a country music video.

It had only been a week since the barbecue and the night we fell into bed and out of fear—and I still couldn't stop smiling.

But that smile grew a little tight when I saw the group approaching.

Nate's family.

Three women and one sharp-eyed man.

One of them—his grandmother, if the “World's Toughest Grandma” T-shirt was anything to go by—walked with a cane. Her friend Mable walked next to her with a walker. Nate told me all about his family. About how close they were.

Beside her was a tall, stunning woman with a no-nonsense ponytail, wearing black jeans, aviators, and a leather jacket in 80-degree weather, as if it didn't faze her. Nate

had warned me she was “intense.”

And flanking them both was a woman I recognized from photos—Maggie, who was Eloise, and Nate’s sister. Delicate features, a bold mouth, and a little smirk like she was sizing up every living creature within a ten-foot radius.

Trailing slightly behind them was Axel, who looked like he’d rather be punched than dragged through an herb stand.

They stopped in front of the table, and I wiped my hands on my apron.

“Willa, meet the crew,” Nate said, suddenly behind me, one arm slinging around my waist. “This here’s Grandma Hayes, her best friend, Mable, and my Aunt Jen, and that’s my sister, Maggie.”

Grandma stepped forward first. “You’re the one who wrangled his heart, huh?” She looked me up and down. “At least you look strong.”

I smiled nervously. “I lift goats daily.”

She laughed and smacked Nate’s arm with her cane. “She’s got wit. Keep her.”

Mable hugged me. “You’re lucky. Nate is hot, I’ve always thought so. But is all of his buddies.”

“Mable, don’t start talking like that again,” Grandma said, frowning at Mable.

“Oh, for crying out loud. I’m eighty-four, I know what a hot guy looks like.

Every one of these SEALs is hot and you know it.

Just because I'm old doesn't mean I have to be quiet, you know how much I enjoyed Henry coming over and spending the night with me.

He may not have been able to get it to work right, but he knew how to make me enjoy my orgasms."

"I am going to cut my ears off if she doesn't stop talking," Maggie said.

"Mable, Henry has been dead for over a year. We are no longer talking about that drunk. Look at Nate, his face is all red."

Maggie quickly changed the subject. She tilted her head slightly. "You made this soap?"

"I did."

She picked one up and sniffed it. "Smells like clean rain and good decisions. Weird. Not sure I've ever smelled either. But I love it."

Axel choked on a sip of lemonade.

"You okay?" Grandma asked, slapping him hard on the back.

"Fine," he wheezed. "Just... swallowed wrong." But his eyes flicked back to Maggie, and I didn't miss the way she raised one brow in his direction.

"Well," Aunt Jen said, "we've been hearing a lot about you, Willa. My nephew doesn't usually smile this much."

"Probably because I'm finally sleeping," Nate said, kissing the side of my head.

Grandma made a noise. Lord save us, he's soft."

Maggie snorted. "Guess this means I can't interrogate her now."

"I mean," I said, folding my arms, "you could try. But you'd have to go through Pancake first."

At her name, the goat gave a majestic bleat from where she lay, unimpressed by the drama.

"You bring your goat to market?" Grandma asked.

"She's the bouncer," I said with a wink.

Nate laughed, and his family all smiled genuinely. Even Axel looked like he might have enjoyed himself.

"Well, darling," Grandma said, patting my hand, "you fit better than I expected. We're sticking around for dinner tonight. You'll come?"

I glanced at Nate, who nodded. "Only if I can bring dessert," I said.

"Done," she said.

As they wandered off, Maggie walked slowly past Axel. "Try breathing next time."

"I'll work on that," he muttered.

And just like that, the day got a whole lot more interesting.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Willa

Dinner was at Max and Tessa's B&B, where the family was staying.

The place was nothing short of controlled chaos—with more casseroles than I could count, one loud, opinionated Grandma, and a table full of stories that made my cheeks hurt from laughing.

The entire gang was there, including Mable, who told some hilarious stories, but Tessa and Max were gone for the night. They were smart.

I sat beside Nate, who sat beside Axel, who sat way too close to Maggie to be accidental. They seemed more like brother and sister than two people who wanted each other.

The table was covered in mismatched dishes—fried chicken, scalloped potatoes, green beans, deviled eggs, fresh biscuits, and something Grandma kept calling “mystery surprise” that no one had the courage to try first.

Grandma plopped down at the head of the table and pointed her fork at Nate. “You brought a girl to dinner. A real girl. Not one of those wannabe models you used to date who talked about kale like it was religion.”

Nate groaned. “Grandma...”

“What?” she said, eyes wide with innocence. “She deserves to know you used to be shallow.”

“I like vegetables,” I offered, trying not to laugh.

“Vegetables are fine,” Mable said. “As long as they come with butter and regret.”

The entire table burst out laughing.

Maggie reached for the pitcher of sweet tea. “You’ve got a goat, you make soap, you don’t wear high heels in dirt... I gotta say, I’m impressed, Willa.”

Axel cleared his throat, and Maggie glanced at him. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he muttered, suddenly fascinated by the contents of his plate.

I leaned closer to Nate and whispered, “Do you think he likes her?”

Nate smirked. “I think he’s terrified of her, which is almost the same thing. Truthfully they are more like brother and sister, most of the time.”

Aunt Jen brought out my peach cobbler, which was beautiful I forgot what stress tasted like. I had just taken a bite when Grandma started in again.

“So, Willa, you planning to marry my grandson or just keep him soft and smiling until he forgets how to shoot?”

I choked on the peach and reached for my water, laughing. “I didn’t know there was a test.”

“Oh, there is,” Grandma said. “But so far, you’re passing. Just don’t let him win arguments. He gets cocky.”

Nate groaned. “She’s literally never let me win anything.”

“Good. You’ll live longer, Mable said.”

The rest of the night passed in a blur of stories and laughter. They made me feel like I belonged, like I wasn’t just someone Nate was seeing—but someone they wanted around, too.

After dessert, we stepped out onto the porch. The sun had dipped low, painting the sky in golds and pinks.

Nate wrapped his arms around me from behind and kissed my temple. “How’d you survive that?”

“I think your Grandma wants to adopt me,” I said, leaning back against him.

“She can’t have you,” he murmured into my hair. “You’re mine.”

I turned to face him, my arms sliding around his waist. “You okay? That was... a lot of family.”

He nodded. “It’s weird. They’re a lot, yeah, but... it feels different with you here. Feels right.”

We swayed there for a moment, the warm night settling around us.

“Do you think your sister’s always like that?” I asked.

He glanced through the window at Maggie, who was laughing as Axel tried to explain why he didn’t like lemon bars.

“Oh yeah,” Nate said. “She’s just getting started. For a school teacher, Maggie is the one in the family who is rather quirky, and she likes to tease you.”

I smiled and rested my head against his chest.

“Good,” I said. “Because I think she’s very funny.”

And as laughter spilled out of the house behind us and fireflies danced across the yard, I realized I hadn’t just fallen in love with Nate.

I was falling in love with his world. His people. His family. And it felt good.

Nate

We drove home in comfortable silence, Willa's hand resting on my thigh as I navigated the familiar road back to her place. The stars were out again—clear and bright, like they were rooting for me.

She had no idea what I was about to say. And I wasn't sure how to start.

I pulled into her driveway and turned off the truck, but I didn't move.

Willa noticed immediately. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said, then paused. "No. I mean... I will be."

Her brows furrowed as she turned in her seat to face me, her hand gently squeezing mine. "Talk to me, Nate."

I stared out the windshield, watching a light flicker on inside the barn. Pancake, no doubt making a late-night round.

"There's something I haven't told you yet," I said quietly. "Something big."

Willa didn't say anything. She just waited. Patient. Steady. God, I loved that about her.

"A few years ago, I went on a mission in Iran with my team. It was supposed to be routine—get in, get out, secure the target. But it went to hell fast."

I finally looked at her. “We got ambushed. They took me.”

Her lips parted, eyes wide.

“They kept me there for eight weeks. No sunlight. Barely any food. A cell made of stone and chains. I didn’t know if I’d make it back. Some days, I didn’t want to.”

Willa’s hand flew to her mouth, eyes brimming. “Oh my God... Nate...”

“I wasn’t alone. One of my buddies was with me for a while, until they separated us. I kept thinking about all the things I never did. Never said. That I’d never fix the crap with my family. That I’d never have a life outside missions and metal doors and violence.”

He took a deep breath, voice rough. “I swore that if I ever got out, I’d find something good . I wouldn’t waste it. I’d stop running.”

Tears slipped down Willa’s cheeks as she reached across the seat and touched his jaw. “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

He leaned into her palm. “When I got home, I was different. I didn’t sleep. I didn’t talk about it. I flinched every time someone knocked on a door too loud. I didn’t think I’d ever feel normal again.”

Her other hand joined the first, cradling his face. “You hide it well.”

“I was hiding it from myself too.”

He exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. “But then I met you.”

Willa’s breath caught.

“You were out there with soap in your basket and a goat tied to your truck, looking like you had your own world and didn’t need anyone. But you let me in anyway. You were patient. Kind. You never made me feel broken. And without even trying, you made me want to be better.”

Tears slid down her cheeks freely now. “Nate...”

He unbuckled and stepped out of the truck, walking around to her side. When she opened the door, he pulled her into his arms and held her like she was air in his lungs.

“I don’t want to waste any more time, Willa. Not a single second. I’ve already lost too much.”

She looked up at him, eyes shimmering. “What are you saying?”

Nate dropped to one knee, right there under the stars in front of her farmhouse, with the soft sound of crickets and goats in the background.

“I’m saying I love you. I want all your mornings. All your soap scents. All your goat-related chaos. I want you. Will you marry me?”

Willa didn’t hesitate. She dropped to her knees too and kissed him, cupping his face, their tears mixing between soft laughter and the sweetest kiss of his life.

“Yes,” she whispered against his lips. “Yes, Nate. A thousand times, yes.”

From the back of the truck, Pancake bleated dramatically.

“I think she approves,” Willa said with a watery smile.

“She’d better. She’s in the wedding.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Willa

The next morning, I woke up with Nate's ring on my finger and Pancake snoring in the doorway like a bodyguard who'd clocked out.

By noon, the entire mountain knew we were engaged. I hadn't even posted about it—Grandma Hayes did.

The caption read:

"My grandson is finally getting married. Took him long enough. The wedding's happening. Try to behave."

We hadn't even picked a date. But that didn't stop the wedding train from rolling in hot.

"I'm thinking mason jars," Tessa said, spreading out swatches of lace and greenery across my kitchen table like she was preparing for a military op. "And twinkle lights. Lots of twinkle lights."

"I was thinking simple," I said. "Maybe just a few—"

"Oh honey," Grandma said from her perch in the rocking chair. "Simple is what you do when the bride is plain and the groom is forgettable. This ain't that."

"I second the twinkle lights," Nate added as he walked past with a sandwich in one hand and Pancake in the other. "She wants in on the rehearsal dinner, by the way."

“She can be the flower goat,” Tessa said without looking up.

“She’s eating the napkin samples,” Nate replied.

“Perfect. She has taste.”

Over the next few days, the chaos continued to escalate.

Max volunteered his land for the ceremony. Jack offered to cook and DJ—until Grandma banned him from both roles after he attempted a test playlist titled “Love, Whiskey, and Questionable Choices.”

Axel stood quietly in the background until Grandma handed him a clipboard. “You’re in charge of keeping Maggie and Eloise from murdering the florist. Or anyone else. I like you. Don’t screw it up.”

Maggie, overhearing, casually flipped a butter knife in her hand like she was ready for combat. Axel never blinked but definitely stayed within arm’s reach after that.

Nate

Willa looked beautiful even when she was overwhelmed, her hair a mess from wind and her cheeks pink from stress. Every time I saw her glance at that ring on her finger, my chest squeezed. She was mine.

And no matter what went wrong—when the chairs didn’t match, when Eloise cried over tablecloths, when Pancake ate half the unity candle—I kept thinking the same thing:

I’d go through all of it ten times over just to get to the part where I got to call her my wife.

One night, after a full day of chaos, I found her outside on the porch, barefoot, holding a glass of lemonade and staring up at the stars.

“Thinking of running?” I asked.

She smiled. “Only if you’re driving.”

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, pressed a kiss to her temple. “Everything’ll be perfect.”

“Even if Pancake headbutts the pastor?”

“Especially then.”

She turned in my arms, eyes soft and full of everything I’d ever wanted. “I still can’t believe I get to marry you.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” I said. “And I’ve eaten street tacos in the middle of a war zone.”

She laughed, then pulled me down for a kiss that made every plan, every detail, every goat-related mishap worth it.

The night before the wedding, Grandma gave us her version of a toast: They all agreed that Mable didn’t get to give a toast in public, they were afraid of what she would say.

“If you two can survive wild animals, soap-making, and the mess that is this family, then you’re already ahead of the game. Now don’t screw it up. Also, I brought whiskey.”

She held up the bottle like a trophy, and the room cheered.

Tomorrow, I would marry the woman who taught me how to breathe again.

But tonight, I was just a man sitting on a porch swing with the girl who said yes.

And I already felt like the luckiest husband alive.

The Wedding

Willa

The sky was the kind of blue you only get once in a lifetime—the soft, dreamy kind that made everything below it feel like magic.

I stood barefoot in the grass behind the arch Tessa and the girls decorated with wildflowers and twinkle lights, my dress swaying in the breeze.

I never wanted anything fancy. But this dress?

It was mine. Simple, soft cream cotton and lace with a neckline Nate wouldn't be able to stop staring at.

I'd made it myself, with fabric I'd been saving for years—waiting for a reason.

I had one now.

“Ready?” Tessa whispered, adjusting the flower crown on my head.

I nodded, heart thudding.

The music started—soft guitar strings played by Jack (who was allowed to play music as long as he stuck to the approved list). And then... I saw Nate.

He stood under the arch, wearing a navy vest and rolled-up sleeves, hair tousled,

hands nervously clenched at his sides. When his eyes found me, they softened, lit up, and then... he smiled.

The kind of smile that made my knees forget how to work.

Grandma Hayes and Mable sat in the front row, whispering something to Nate's parents, who had just gotten back from a month's cruise. Maggie stood beside me as my maid of honor, because, surprisingly, she'd offered—and even more surprisingly, I said yes.

Pancake trotted down the aisle ahead of me, a basket of flower petals strapped to her back like a furry little parade float. She stopped halfway to chew on some grass, then finally moved along after Tessa clapped from the front row.

I walked toward Nate with my heart in my throat and tears already in my eyes.

When I reached him, he reached for both my hands and held them like they were the answer to every prayer he never thought he deserved.

“You’re breathtaking,” he whispered.

“And you’re stuck with me,” I whispered back.

The ceremony was a blur of laughter and sniffles. The officiant was an old friend of Nate's—an Army chaplain who read a passage about second chances and soul-deep love that made my heart ache.

When it came time for vows, Nate took a shaky breath and looked at me like I was his beginning and end.

“I’ve seen darkness,” he said, his voice raw.

“I’ve seen fear and doubt and what happens when you don’t believe you’ll make it out.

But I also found something stronger. I found you.

And you brought me back. I promise to be your safe place, to love you in every moment, especially the hard ones.

To never run. To never doubt what we are.

You’re my peace, Willa. You’re my home.”

I wiped a tear from my cheek as I spoke mine.

“You’ve seen me broken. You’ve seen me brave. And somehow, you loved both. I promise to keep loving you fiercely. To make you laugh on your worst days and hold you on your quiet ones. You’re not just the man I love. You’re the life I never dared to dream of.”

The moment the words “You may now kiss the bride” were said, Nate didn’t hesitate. He kissed me like the world had stopped.

And honestly... maybe it had.

The reception was held under string lights and mason jars, with long picnic tables and mismatched chairs. There was dancing, cornbread, fried chicken, and one very determined goat who kept trying to sneak into the dessert table.

Axel and Maggie danced once. Just once. But we all noticed. Especially Grandma. She winked at me like she knew something the rest of us didn’t.

Nate spun me in circles under the stars, holding me close, never letting go.

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” he murmured.

“You always had me,” I said. “Even when you didn’t know it yet.”

He kissed me again. And again. And again.

That night, in the soft glow of candlelight, Nate carried me over the threshold of our little farmhouse and whispered every promise into my skin. We made love like it was the first time—slow, reverent, full of laughter and tenderness.

And in the early hours of the morning, as Pancake scratched at the door and the sunrise painted us in gold, Nate curled around me and whispered—

“Mrs. Hayes... we’ve got a beautiful forever ahead.”

I smiled, kissed him back, and whispered back—

“Forever doesn’t feel long enough.”

Willa

The farmhouse was louder than usual.

Not with people—just with life . The kind that hums through your bones in the best way.

The kitchen smelled like cinnamon rolls, wildflowers bloomed outside the window, and Pancake was currently trying to shove her head into the laundry basket I'd just folded.

“Get out of there, you menace,” I muttered, gently nudging her with my knee.

She snorted at me and then bleated like I was the problem.

Nate walked in a second later, sweaty from the garage, a smudge of grease on his jaw and a smile that made my heart hiccup.

“Did Pancake eat the burp cloths again?”

“She’s thinking about it,” I said, rubbing my very-round belly.

Nate crossed the kitchen and dropped to one knee in front of me. He pressed a kiss to my stomach, then one to the inside of my wrist, and finally stood to cup my face with both hands.

“You okay?” he asked. “Still feeling that weird pressure?”

I nodded. “She’s just active today. Or mad I wouldn’t let her eat pickles for breakfast.”

Nate grinned. “She’s definitely yours.”

“She kicked you in the ribs at three a.m.,” I said with a smirk.

“Still worth it.”

The door swung open and Axel walked in, carrying a box of baby supplies and looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“I swear, if one more person calls me ‘Uncle Axel,’ I’m moving to Canada,” he muttered, dropping the box by the door.

“She’s not even born yet,” I said. “Calm down.”

“Tell that to Grandma Hayes. She’s already crocheting a tiny goat cape. I don’t know what that’s for, and I’m scared to ask.”

“She said it’s for the ‘Goat and Baby Welcome Parade,’ ” Nate added helpfully.

Axel looked physically pained.

But before he could escape, Maggie sauntered in behind him, sunglasses on, latte in hand, and smirk firmly in place. I’m so happy we bought a place up here.

She looked at Axel. “You forgot the organic wipes.”

Axel’s jaw ticked. “They’re just baby wipes, Maggie.”

“They are not . I’m not putting chemical garbage on my niece’s butt.”

“She’s not even born yet—”

“Which is exactly why we’re planning ahead .”

I looked at Nate. He looked at me. We both grinned.

Some things never change. And thank God for that.

Later that night, after everyone had left and the house was quiet, I curled into Nate’s arms on the porch swing.

The stars stretched endlessly above us. Fireflies blinked through the grass. Pancake snored softly in her usual spot near the steps.

“I never thought I’d get all this,” I whispered.

Nate kissed the top of my head. “I never thought I’d deserve it.”

“You always did,” I said. “You just had to find your way home.”

He placed a hand over my belly, feeling our daughter shift beneath his palm. “You are home.”

And just like that—under the stars, wrapped in love, laughter, and the scent of cinnamon rolls and goat fur—I knew we were ready.

For anything.

Forever had officially begun.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Axel

Frasier Mountain was used to wild things. But not like her.

I was halfway through my protein bar, sweat dripping down my spine, when my radio crackled.

“Axel, you copy? We’ve got a situation out past the south ridge—someone parked an Airstream in the open field. Looks like they’re filming. Ignored two warnings. Weather’s rolling in fast.”

Great.

I tossed the weights I had, climbed into my truck, and floored it down the service road. The sky above was already turning gunmetal. Thunder grumbled over the ridge.

Fifteen minutes later, I crested the hill—and slammed the brakes.

Silver trailer. Middle of the damn field. And standing on top of it? A woman.

Barefoot. Arms stretched to the sky. Wind was whipping her hair around like she was trying to summon the lightning.

What in the hell—

I jumped out and cupped my hands. “Hey! Get down from there!”

She turned, hair in her face, wearing a mic and a GoPro strapped to her chest.
“You’re ruining my shot!”

“You’re gonna get fried!”

She didn’t move. I didn’t think. I climbed the ladder up the back of the trailer, just as a crack of lightning split the sky.

I lunged, wrapped my arms around her, and tackled her to the roof. A second later, a tree branch came sailing past where she’d been standing.

She blinked up at me. “Well. That was dramatic.”

“You nearly got yourself killed.”

“You nearly broke my ribs.”

“You’re welcome.”

When I hauled her off the roof and into my truck, she was still filming.

“Name?” I asked.

“Lark Bennett,” she said, brushing her gorgeous, wild red hair off her face. “You always tackle women off rooftops, or am I just a special case?”

I growled. “Next time you want to fly into danger, don’t do it on my mountain.”

She smirked. “Then maybe you shouldn’t look so good while rescuing people.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Axel

The road out of the south ridge was underwater.

I cursed under my breath. Lark leaned forward in the passenger seat, totally unfazed.

“Ooh. Flash flood?”

“This isn’t a sightseeing tour.”

She shrugged. “Depends who you ask.”

I turned around and took the backup route toward one of our emergency cabins. Secure. Off-grid. Stocked.

“You have family nearby?” I asked.

“Nope. Just me and Eggs.”

I frowned. “Eggs?”

“My drone.”

Of course it was.

By the time we reached the cabin, the wind was howling. I got the fire going while she wandered the place like she was shopping for a vacation rental.

“You live like this all the time?” she asked.

“I train like this.”

She grinned. “You’re uptight.”

“You’re reckless.”

“Touché.”

She moved around the room, barefoot again, hair drying in waves. There was something about her—this wild calm—that got under my skin.

Then, out of nowhere, she said, “I’m not afraid of storms. But sometimes I get tired of chasing them.”

She told me about her dad. The accident. The reason she ran into danger with open arms.

I sat down beside her. “Control’s an illusion, Lark. All we can do is prepare for the worst and hold on to the people who matter when it hits.”

She looked at me. Really looked.

“You always talk this deep?”

“No. Just with you.”

Then the lightning hit again. And I didn’t let go of her hand.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Axel

The storm howled all night.

I sat by the fire, sharpening a knife I didn't need to sharpen, listening to the wind lash against the cabin walls.

She'd gone to bed an hour ago. No more teasing. No more jokes.

Just silence.

Until the door creaked.

She stepped out, wrapped in one of the wool blankets, bare feet silent on the floor. Her hair was damp, skin flushed from the heat.

She didn't say anything. Just stood in front of the fire like she belonged there.

Then, quietly: "I'm not afraid of storms, Axel. But sometimes I get tired of chasing them."

She told me the rest of the story. She was waving to her Dad as he was in a boat. One moment he was there, and then a freak storm came in and he was gone.

And I saw it then—the reason she ran headfirst into danger. If she was the one running toward the storm, then at least she wasn't waiting for it to take something from her again.

I got up and stood beside her. “Control’s an illusion,” I said. “All we can do is be ready. And hold on to the people who matter.”

She gazed up at me, something quiet and fierce in her eyes.

Then lightning flashed again. The cabin lit up like daylight. Thunder cracked.

She flinched.

I reached out, steadying her hand with mine.

And I didn’t let go.

Axel

By morning, the storm was gone—but the tension it left behind still clung to the air like mist.

Lark stood at my kitchen counter wrapped in my oversized hoodie, the sleeves swallowing her hands, her messy bun looking like it had lost the will to fight gravity. She was humming.

I sat at the table, sipping my coffee like it was part of a combat ritual.

“You’re staring,” she said without even turning around.

“You’re in my sweatshirt.”

“Technically, you threw it at me.”

“You weren’t wearing pants.”

“I was wrapped in a blanket,” she shot back, grinning over her shoulder. “You’re welcome, by the way, for keeping the mood PG.”

I grunted, but the corner of my mouth twitched. I couldn’t help it.

She poured herself a mug and slid into the seat across from me, one bare foot tucked under her leg like she belonged there.

“Thanks for last night,” she said after a moment. “For not pushing. For listening. I have never told anyone about my Dad.”

I didn’t answer right away. Just watched her—messy, unpredictable, too damn comfortable in my space. She wore no makeup. She didn’t need it.

“You were right,” I finally said. “You do talk a lot when you’re nervous.”

She laughed softly, her eyes crinkling. “Guess you’ll have to keep me calm then, mountain man.”

Before I could respond, the front door flew open.

“Axel?” a voice called. “You alive?”

Cooper stepped in, followed by Rush and Jack—three massive, wet, dirt-covered SEALs who stopped in the doorway like they’d just wandered into a romantic comedy set.

Lark blinked.

“Whoa,” she said, eyes bouncing from one muscled frame to the next. “Is there, like... a cloning facility in this forest for muscular men? Now I feel wildly underdressed.”

I set my coffee down with a sigh. “Guys, this is Lark Bennet.”

“Is she your cousin or something?” Rush asked, already grinning.

“She’s the woman who parked a trailer on a lightning magnet and danced on the roof during a category two thunderstorm,” I deadpanned.

Jack arched a brow. “So... she’s your type?”

Lark raised her mug. “Hi. I chase storms. Axel says he saved my life, so we are here.”

All three of them stared at her, then at me.

“She’s leaving as soon as the roads are clear,” I muttered.

“Unless I decide to stick around,” Lark added, tilting her head. “I hear there’s good lightning here.”

Cooper leaned toward Rush. “He’s so screwed.”

Rush nodded. “Totally.”