



# Ranger's Secret (Untamed Rangers #5)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** One rule: never touch your best friend's brother.

DELANEY

There's one person I swore I'd never be alone with again: Jagger Maddox.

My best friend's older brother. The man I kissed at a party last summer... and ghosted the next day like it never happened.

Now I'm stuck in the forest with him. And all it took was one smoldering glare from him for everything to come rushing back.

JAGGER

She ran from me like that kiss meant nothing.

She was wrong.

Delaney Holt is forbidden. Off-limits. My sister's best friend.

But now fate's delivered her straight to my door. And I'm done pretending I don't want her.

I'm just waiting for the right moment to take what should've been mine all along.

Because I'm not just her best friend's brother anymore.

I'm the man who plans to ruin her for anyone else.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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DELANEY

There's one rule I swore I'd never break. Never touch your best friend's brother. Well, I broke it spectacularly last summer at Maya's birthday party. But I'm pretending it never happened, which should count for something.

Except right now, staring across the overcast clearing at Colville National Forest, I'm remembering exactly why that rule exists in the first place. Maya's brother, Jagger, stands with his back to me, pointing out something on a trail map to the park coordinator. Even from here, I can see the way his biceps strain against his ranger uniform sleeves. He's always been muscular, but this is different. He's broader, more filled out, carved into something harder.

His sandy brown hair is short but messier now, like he forgot to care and somehow got hotter for it.

When he turns slightly, I catch the scruff covering his jaw where he used to be clean-shaven.

My stomach drops, a sudden freefall I can't stop.

This is supposed to be my brilliant career move.

Landing the Trailbound Outfitters account by showing I can walk the walk, not just write killer ad copy about outdoor brands.

Two weeks volunteering with the forest ranger program, getting authentic experience,

proving to the client that Morrison & Associates understands their mission of adventure and conservation better than Sterling Creative.

It all comes down to me versus some guy named Brett from the competing agency who keeps shooting me these intense stares, trying to psych me out. Honestly, he just looks constipated.

The client made it clear: whichever agency can prove they truly "get" the Trailbound spirit will win the account.

And with it, the promotion I've been killing myself for all year.

I need this win. I've earned it through late nights, working weekends, and turning down every social invite for the past six months.

This isn't supposed to be a reunion with the man I've spent eleven months avoiding after he kissed me.

I've worked hard to erase him, to scrub him from my thoughts.

After that kiss, he texted me three times.

I deleted them all without reading past the first few words.

Then came the phone call six months ago.

No message, maybe even a butt dial. I ignored that too.

When Maya invited me to a family party, I suddenly developed a mysterious stomach bug.

The memory of that kiss crashes over me.

Jagger backing me against the bathroom wall after he'd pulled me inside and locked the door.

The taste of mint on his lips. Months, maybe years, of restraint snapped in a single moment.

My knees buckled. I actually went weak, the way romance heroines always do.

I melted into him, my body boneless, helpless against the pull of him.

"You even taste like trouble," he'd growled against my mouth before biting down on my bottom lip, his hand sliding up to wrap around my throat. The sound that escaped me was so needy I barely recognized it. And it had the nerve to be for him.

Then Maya had called my name from the party, and reality crashed back in. I'd pushed him away, mumbled some excuse, and spent the next eleven months pretending it never happened.

"Delaney!" Sarah, the program coordinator, waves me over with enthusiasm that makes me want to hide behind the nearest tree. "Come meet your leader!"

No. No no no. This isn't happening. But my feet are already moving, carrying me across the clearing like I'm walking to my execution.

The other volunteers, a mix of genuine outdoorsy types and obvious fish-out-of-water types, cluster around as Sarah makes introductions.

At least I'm not the only one who looks like I'd rather be anywhere else.

One woman is already swatting at imaginary bugs.

"Everyone, this is Jagger Maddox, our head ranger. He'll be guiding you through the program."

Jagger turns. His eyes sweep over the group and land on me like a sniper's scope. Eyes that see everything. Eyes that are currently glaring at me with the enthusiasm of someone who just found a skunk in their tent.

He wasn't supposed to be here. I know he's a ranger, but Maya said he was assigned to some forest in Idaho.

I never bothered to ask which one because I try not to talk about him at all around Maya.

So how did he end up here? He wasn't listed on the park website when I checked. And I definitely checked. Twice.

I steel myself. I've got a client to win over and a promotion to secure, and I refuse to let my complicated feelings about nature boy and his stupid perfect biceps mess up everything.

"Welcome to Colville National Forest," he says, his voice exactly as deep and rough as when he growled against my lips. "You'll be working on trail maintenance, wildlife monitoring, and visitor education over the next two weeks. Any questions?"

A woman next to me raises her hand. "What kind of wildlife might we see?"

"Whitetail and mule deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and black bear. Occasionally a grizzly." His tone is matter-of-fact, like he's reading from a grocery list. "Standard precautions apply. Stay with the group, never approach or feed any

animals."

"What about those stories of people going missing out here?" someone else asks.

Jagger's eyes find mine again, and the look he gives me is pure ice. "Some people ignore the rules and pay for it."

Heat floods my cheeks. The way he's looking at me, it's like I'm being personally scolded for existing. Which is rich, considering he's the one who kissed me.

"The key," he continues, still holding my gaze, "is following instructions. Paying close attention to everything I say out here and following every order."

He's really emphasizing that last part. Is he seriously insinuating I don't follow rules? The only rule I've broken is kissing him, and that was his doing. I cock my head and give him a confused look, and he glares at me before turning away abruptly.

"All right!" Sarah claps her hands together, oblivious to the tension crackling between us. "Let's head to the trails and get started!"

The group forges ahead, buzzing about trail conditions and team bonding. I hang back, blending into the crowd, doing my best impression of just happy to be here while avoiding all eye contact with Jagger.

"Holt." His voice slices through the chatter. "You're with me. Up front."

A few heads swivel my way. Brett-from-Sterling gives me a smug little side-eye and mutters, "Teacher's pet," like we're in sixth grade and not out here pretending to be wilderness warriors.

Meanwhile, Ms. Chen, Trailbound's CEO and the human embodiment of nail this or

you're fired , watches with the kind of interest that makes my career flash before my eyes.

Perfect. Nothing says "team player" like being singled out five minutes in.

My stomach does a slow, traitorous flip, but I slap on my best professional smile and say, "Of course," like I wasn't just contemplating throwing myself into a ditch to avoid this exact moment.

There's no point arguing. Not with Ms. Chen studying every move. So I fall into step beside Jagger, close enough to catch his cologne. Earthy, woody, coffee and chocolate with a hint of flowers. I remember that scent so well, how it wrapped around me while he kissed me against that bathroom wall.

Stop it, Delaney. I slam the door on that memory and focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

It's fine. I'm fine. Just me, him, and a mile of trail to pretend we're strangers and not former wall-leaning, breath-stealing mistakes. Not my best friend's brother and the woman who should have known better.

The forest is absolutely gorgeous. Towering evergreens shoot up like nature's skyscrapers, while big leaf maples glow butter-yellow against the Douglas firs. Red alder leaves drift down in perfect copper spirals. The air has that rich, musky scent that brands would kill to bottle.

Under literally any other circumstance, I'd be taking mental notes for the Trailbound campaign. I'd be thinking about hashtags, angles, storyboards.

Instead, all I can focus on is the guilt gnawing at my stomach. I kissed my best friend's brother. The one person who should have been completely off limits. I

thought I could avoid this, avoid him. But here we are.

What is he thinking? Is he remembering that kiss too, or has he filed it away as a meaningless mistake?

And why can't I stop stealing glances at the way his shoulders move?

I need to get through two weeks of this without imploding my career or my friendship.

Two weeks of pretending my pulse doesn't race around him.

"Delaney," Jagger says suddenly, his voice loud enough to snap my head up. "Since you're here for the Trailbound account, why don't you tell the group which of these pines is a lodgepole?"

Are you kidding me right now? Of course he'd put me on the spot like this, right in front of Ms. Chen.

I spent hours cramming plant identification guides before coming here, but memorizing pictures in my apartment is apparently very different from standing in an actual forest where every damn tree looks exactly the same.

My mouth opens, but my brain delivers nothing except a panicked slideshow of identical green things.

A few people glance over. Brett from Sterling is already smirking. Ms. Chen lifts an eyebrow like this is the pop quiz portion of the pitch.

"Um... is it the one with the..."



Jagger folds his arms across that annoyingly broad chest. "The lodgepole," he says, gesturing to a tree behind me, "has needles in clusters of two, thin scaly bark, and grows straight up like a telephone pole. Hence the name."

A couple of people snicker. One of them wheezes. Brett actually laughs out loud.

Fire spreads across my cheeks. I force my mouth into what I hope passes for a smile. What the hell is Jagger's problem? He doesn't get to put me on the spot when Ms. Chen is right there taking mental notes.

It continues for the next couple of hours. He singles me out again, asking me to shave tinder from a piece of bark while the entire group watches my clumsy knife work. Then comes the bowline knot demonstration, my fingers fumbling uselessly with the rope.

By the time we make it back to base camp, I'm wrecked. Physically from the hike, sure, but mostly from the mental gymnastics of trying to keep up with whatever forest-themed chess game Jagger is playing.

"Dinner's at six in the main lodge," Sarah calls out. "Free time until then!"

The group starts to scatter toward the cabins, laughing, chatting, already bonding like this is a summer retreat and not some twisted reality show where my accidental ex-hookup is the leader from hell.

I check the assignment sheet. Cabin 7. Just me, my duffel, and two weeks of praying Jagger forgets I exist.

I find the cabin tucked back under a canopy of fiery-orange maples, the porch littered with crisp fallen leaves. It's cute. Quiet. Exactly what I need to get inside, wash the day off, and reset my nervous system.

But the key won't turn.

I jiggle it. Yank it out. Try again.

Nothing.

"Seriously?" I mutter, trying to shove the key in a third time when a large hand slaps against the doorframe beside my head.

Every muscle in my body locks up. Air catches in my throat as I turn.

Jagger.

"Can't manage a key, Holt?"

His voice has just enough bite to make my blood simmer.

I step back instinctively, my shoulder brushing the outside of the cabin. "Maybe if the lock wasn't prehistoric. You're in charge around here, right? Shouldn't stuff like this be fixed on your watch?"

He doesn't move. Doesn't even blink.

"I think I get it now," he says, eyes scanning mine like he's reading fine print. "You didn't come here for the program. You came here for me."

My jaw drops. "You're delusional."

"I just can't figure out why you ran away from me," he adds, voice colder now. "You scared of a kiss? Or scared of what would've happened after?"

"I'm not scared of you or what happened. I just won't do that to my best friend."

His eyes narrow. "So you're scared of Maya?"

I scoff, turning back to the lock. "I'm loyal to Maya. There's a difference."

"Right," he drawls behind me. "That's why you're shaking like a leaf. Why your skin's covered in goosebumps." His knuckles brush down my arm in one slow stroke, and I yank away from him.

I shove the key back in, hard enough to rattle the knob. "You think I came here for you? I didn't even know you'd be here. Maya said you worked in Idaho."

"Sure," he teases, clearly enjoying himself. "Coincidence is cute."

"You're such an ass," I snap, jamming the key again with enough force to probably break the lock altogether.

Still nothing.

"Gonna wrestle that all night, or are you finally gonna admit you need me?" he asks, leaning in so close his voice rumbles against my neck.

"I'd rather eat moss," I mutter, coiling into myself and trying to shrink away from the way he makes my skin prickle.

He takes the key from my hand like I'm a child with a toy, and with one calm flick of his wrist, the door clicks open.

"Wow," I bite out. "What a man."

"Any time, kitten."

My stomach flips at the sound of it. Kitten. Maya used to call me that back in college, said I looked soft and sweet with my messy curls and big eyes, but I'd hiss and claw the second someone pushed me.

It was sweet when she said it.

When Jagger says it? It's not sweet. It's not kind. He's playing with me, like I'm his favorite toy.

I don't even dignify it with a response. I shoulder past him, stomp inside, and slam the door in his face.

Let him find someone else to play with. I've got a promotion to win, and I'm not about to let some brooding forest jackass with a god complex derail my career.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

JAGGER

S he thinks I didn't notice.

The way her breath caught when she looked up and saw me at the trailhead this morning. The way she blinked too fast, gripped her bag like it could shield her from me. The flush that crept up her neck when I said her name.

I've spent years memorizing her face. She thinks I don't know what it looks like when she's trying not to want something.

I knew the minute I saw her.

My sister's freshman year of college. Maya had dragged me to her dorm to help move in some furniture.

I was twenty-two, fresh out of ranger apprenticeship, and still cocky enough to think I had the world figured out.

Delaney was eighteen. Off-limits. But when she opened the door with those messy curls piled on her head and a pencil tucked behind her ear, smiling like I was just Maya's brother and not some goddamn fire that had just found its fuel... I knew.

I knew it then like I know the forest now. Instinct. Certainty. The kind of truth that settles in your bones.

And I've known it every time I've seen her since.

Years of keeping my mouth shut. Years of watching her orbit my life, popping up at family barbecues or celebrations.

The way she'd hold her own against my dad's rants, never backing down even when he got that tone that made the rest of us change the subject.

She'd just tilt her chin up and fire right back.

How she'd slip Maya twenty bucks when she thought no one was looking, because my sister was always broke.

The time she drove four hours in a snowstorm to bring Maya soup when she had the flu, then stayed the weekend to help clean up her apartment.

That's when I knew it wasn't just lust. It was everything.

Don't get me wrong, she's so fucking beautiful it hurts to look at her sometimes.

Those wild curls that have a mind of their own, always escaping whatever she tries to contain them in.

Her green eyes that darken when she's fired up.

Those lips—those fucking lips that pout when she's concentrating, that I want to bite and suck and watch wrapped around my cock.

But it's more than that. It's the whole package.

She's fierce in a way that makes my chest squeeze. Driven in a way that makes me want to pin her against a wall and tell her she doesn't have to fight so hard, not with me.

But she does fight. That's who she is.

Four years of watching her tear through college while working two jobs.

Four years of listening to Maya brag about her best friend's internships, her scholarships, her job offers.

Four years of stroking my cock while imagining her on her knees, curls bouncing, that smart mouth of hers put to good use.

Sometimes I've had another woman under me. Sometimes I've whispered her name anyway.

Delaney Holt.

I'm not stupid. I know she wants me. She always has.

The stolen glances when she thinks I'm not looking. The way she goes quiet when I walk into a room. How she would brush past me in Maya's tiny apartment, reaching across me for the salt at dinner, her fingers lingering just a second too long.

That night at Maya's birthday last year, she finally gave me a sign.

She was wearing a light pink dress that clung to her ass like a second skin, practically see-through, and she knew exactly what she was doing.

Caught me staring and gave me a slow grin over her wine glass, then ran her tongue along the rim before taking a sip, showing me exactly what that mouth could do.

She might as well have said come get me.

So I did.

I cornered her in the hallway, pulled her into the bathroom, and finally took what I wanted. She melted into me, her hands fisting in my shirt, her hips grinding against mine in a way that told me everything I needed to know.

And then Maya called her name, and she bolted.

Didn't answer my texts.

Ran like it meant nothing.

Like I meant nothing.

So yeah, I'm fucking pissed.

But more than that, I'm done playing games. Done pretending she doesn't own every dark corner of my thoughts. Done letting her run.

She's here now, in my forest. My territory. And I'm going to enjoy every second of pulling her apart, piece by stubborn piece, until she admits what we both know.

She's mine. Always has been.

I've been patient. I've been careful. I've played the part of Maya's responsible older brother who would never touch her precious best friend.

But I'm done with that. Delaney put herself in my path, in my world, where I make the rules.

And my rules are simple: no more running, no more games, no more pretending this



thing between us doesn't exist.

She can fight it all she wants. Hell, I hope she does. Watching Delaney Holt come apart is going to be the sweetest kind of reward.

For both of us.

It's day two, and I've got the volunteers working trail maintenance. Axes. Mud. Sweat. Good, honest work that usually clears my head.

Today it's doing nothing but making me watch Delaney try to disappear into the background when she's the only thing I can focus on.

I can't keep my eyes off her. The way those leggings hug every curve of her ass when she bends to grab branches.

How her ponytail swings when she turns her head, exposing that part of her neck that I want to mark with my teeth.

The grunt she makes when she's hauling logs—the same sound I bet she'd make underneath me.

She's positioned herself at the back of the line, trying like hell to blend into her fleece and stay out of my orbit. That oversized jacket is supposed to hide her.

Not a chance in hell I'm letting her hide.

She thinks she's subtle, but I see everything. I always do.

She's already aching. She just doesn't want to admit it.

I'm supposed to be giving some talk about trail safety and conservation.

Instead, all I'm thinking about is what it would take to crack that careful composure.

How many buttons I'd have to push before she gives in to me.

How she'd sound saying my name when she's not trying to pretend she doesn't know it.

"Holt," I bark at her.

She flinches. Head snaps up. Those green eyes go wide.

"You planning to contribute or just stand there taking up space?"

Everyone turns to look. Brett from Sterling snorts like this is the entertainment portion of the program. Someone else chuckles. Her cheeks go pink, but she lifts her chin.

That's my kitten.

I want her mad. Want her rattled. Want her thinking about me every damn second of the day, even if it's just to curse my name. Hate burns just as hot as desire, and I'll take whatever fire I can get from her.

I split the group into smaller teams, making sure to assign her to mine. She glares at me, knowing exactly what I'm doing.

We start hauling logs to reinforce the trail. I make sure to stay close. Brush her shoulder when I pass. Step into her space to point out technique. Guide her over roots with a hand low on her back that lingers just long enough.

Every reaction is a fucking revelation. She stiffens when I get too close. Sucks in air when my fingers graze her skin. Pretends she doesn't feel the electricity that jumps between us. But she does.

She's fighting this thing between us with everything she has, and it's the most beautiful war I've ever seen.

When we're out of earshot, arms full of fresh-cut timber, she finally snaps.

"You're doing this on purpose," she hisses, dropping her log with a thud.

I turn, crowding her against the tree line with a smirk. "What, kitten? You think I'm sabotaging your big opportunity? Or are you just mad I'm the only one here who knows how you taste?"

She exhales sharply through her nose. "You really are such an asshole."

"Maybe." I lean in. "But I'm the asshole you kissed. The one you're still dreaming about."

Her eyes narrow to slits. "Please. If I'm dreaming about anything, it's shoving you off a cliff."

That pulls a chuckle out of me. Fuck, she's even hotter when she's spitting mad.

"You sure about that?" I close the last bit of space between us, backing her against the nearest pine. "Because I can see your pulse jumping in that pretty throat. The way you're breathing. I can see exactly what I do to you."

She opens her mouth like she's about to spit something back, but nothing comes out. Just that soft exhale that tells me everything.

"And I bet if I touched you right now," I say.

I raise my hand slowly, watching her the entire time. She doesn't flinch. Doesn't run. Just stares at me, daring me to follow through.

I place my palm right over her chest, feeling her heart hammering beneath the fleece.

"There it is," I growl. "Racing. Your body knows what it wants, even if your head won't admit it."

Her breath stutters. "Get your hand off me, Jagger."

But she doesn't move or shove me away. She could. She should. But she stays rooted to the spot.

I lean in further, using my body to cage her against the tree. She makes a soft noise in her throat, a weak protest, but I hear the need threaded through it.

"Tell me, kitten," I breathe against her ear, close enough to taste the sweat on her skin. "If I were to slip my hand between your legs right now, what would I find?"

"You two okay?" Sarah's voice chops through the moment.

Delaney shoves me hard in the chest, putting distance between us. "We're fine!" she calls back, voice pitched just a little too high. "Totally fine!"

I step back slowly, letting her go with a look that promises this conversation isn't over. Not even close.

We make it through the rest of the day with Delaney executing a perfect avoidance strategy. She doesn't speak to me, won't meet my eyes, and when dinner time comes,

she's nowhere to be found.

When I pass her cabin later, the windows are black. I knock once, twice. Nothing but silence.

The master key slides easily from my pocket. Technically for maintenance and emergencies, but right now it's for hunting down one particular woman who thinks she can run from me.

I ease the door open. Empty.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

I step outside and catch sight of one of the younger volunteers heading to the lodge, flashlight bobbing in her hand.

I paste on what passes for a friendly smile and call out, "Hey, you seen Delaney around? I've got some paperwork she forgot to sign."

The woman stops, shifting her flashlight. "Oh yeah, she mentioned something about going down to the lake to take photos. Said there's this incredible view of the stars or something."

Of course she did. There's a hidden spot down there where the water goes glass-still on clear nights, stars reflecting across the surface in a way that makes tourists lose their minds. It's also the perfect place to disappear when you're trying to avoid someone.

I take the long path through the trees.

And then I see her.

She's standing at the water's edge, bathed in moonlight, like something pulled straight from my darkest fantasies. Every line of her body is relaxed in a way I've never seen before—shoulders loose, head tilted back to the stars, no tension coiled in that spine that's usually ready for battle.

I watch from the shadows, torn between the urge to announce myself and the intoxicating sight of her completely unguarded. She thinks she's alone, and there's something so fucking thrilling about watching her when she has no idea she's being

watched.

She sets her camera on a flat rock, then glances around.

Her jacket comes off first. One sleeve, then the other. But then her shirt follows, and my pulse kicks up a notch.

The black sports bra underneath molds to her curves like a second skin, and my cock hardens instantly.

She kicks off her boots and stretches, arms reaching toward the stars, and I'm memorizing every line of her body.

Then her hands move to her waistband, and I stop breathing entirely.

She peels those leggings down inch by torturous inch, taking her time like she's putting on a private show just for me. When those tiny black panties join the pile on the ground, I have to grip the tree beside me to keep from charging over there.

There she is. Completely naked. Completely perfect. Completely fucking mine, even if she doesn't know it yet.

She steps into the lake and gasps when the cold hits her skin. Water laps at her thighs, making that pale flesh glisten. Perfect skin that's going to look even better covered in my marks.

Her curls go dark and heavy with water, sticking to her shoulders and trailing down her back. Moonlight cuts across her body, a body that I've been dying to get my hands on since she ran away from me like that kiss meant nothing.

She moves through the water, completely fucking clueless that I'm watching.

Doesn't know I'm standing here getting harder by the second, thinking about how simple it would be to wade in there and show her what happens when you run from me.

Press myself against her back, wrap my hand around that pretty throat, and make her remember exactly who she's been avoiding.

I could do it. Right fucking now.

Join her in the water, grab those hips, and drag her back to shore. Pin her down in the soft mud where the water meets the bank and fuck her senseless while the lake laps at her skin. Make her scream my name so loud it echoes off the mountain.

My hand crushes the bark of the tree I'm gripping, the only thing keeping me from charging into that water.

But I don't do that.

Not yet.

Instead, I move toward the shoreline where she's left everything behind. Her clothes are scattered in a careless pile. Boots kicked off, jacket folded neatly, shirt tossed aside. And right there on top, those fucking panties.

Black lace. Barely enough fabric to cover anything. Still warm from being pressed against her skin.

I crouch down and pick them up, rubbing the material against my fingers. I bring them to my face and breathe deep, and fuck, the scent of her nearly brings me to my knees.



Peaches. Sweet and ripe, clinging to the lace.

Not some bullshit perfume either. This is her scent .

My cock strains against my jeans as I drag the fabric under my nose again. All I can think about is burying my face between her thighs. How she'd taste on my tongue. How she'd sound when I make her come with my mouth.

I fist the panties tight and watch her floating out there like she owns the place. She moves through the water, completely oblivious to my presence.

Until she turns and sees me.

Everything stops. Her body goes rigid mid-stroke, her arms suspended in the water as her eyes lock onto mine. I watch the shock hit first, then the anger that follows, rolling off her in waves.

"Jagger!" Her voice whips across the water as she scrambles to cover herself, arms crossing over her chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

I hold up her clothes, letting her black panties dangle from my finger like a prize.

"Nice night for a swim, kitten."

Her mouth gapes, and the rush of power that gives me goes straight to my cock. She's realizing exactly how exposed she is, how completely at my mercy.

"Give me my clothes."

I cock my head, studying her. "Come get them."

She starts wading toward shore, arms still locked across her chest, water sluicing off her skin. "Stop being an asshole."

"You shouldn't be out here. Naked and alone, practically begging for trouble." My gaze drags over what I can see of her. "Lucky for you it's just me. Anyone else might not be so... understanding."

"You're such a dick." The words hiss out between clenched teeth as she moves closer. "Give me my clothes, Jagger. Now."

That little shake in her voice? That's not cold. That's me getting under her skin, exactly where I want to be.

"You want them, kitten?" I let the question hang between us. "Earn them."

Her mouth falls open, genuine shock replacing the anger. "What?"

"You heard me. You came out here alone. Stripped down to nothing. Slipped into my lake. Tell me you didn't want this."

"You're insane." But her voice cracks on the words. That edge of fear and desire tangling together in her throat.

"Then why risk it?" I press. "Why take your clothes off and wade into my lake like a gift left out in the open?"

She runs her tongue across her lips, and I want to bite that fucking mouth. "Fine," she spits out and starts moving toward me.

The water slides off her body like it knows better than to cling to what's mine. Every goddamn drop catches the moonlight.

Her arms are clamped across her chest, trying to hide from me, but it's useless. Each step brings her closer, the lake giving her up to me inch by fucking inch.

Blood hammers through my veins. My cock strains against my jeans, desperate to break free and claim what belongs to it.

And then... fuck.

Her pussy rises from the water, slick and glistening, and I know damn well the lake isn't the only thing making her wet.

My control splinters by the second. She tries to hide, dragging one hand between her thighs like that's going to save her modesty now.

"Take your hand away. Don't hide from me."

She freezes, eyes locked on mine, daring me to back down.

"You're already naked, kitten. Might as well show me what you came out here to offer."

Her breath stutters. I can see the war playing out on her face. Pride, shame, heat. But slowly, achingly slowly, she drops her hand.

And fuck.

She's perfection, trying so hard not to flinch under my gaze. But her chin is high. Defiant even now. A sweet little contradiction.

"Satisfied?" she spits.

“Not even fucking close.”

I crowd her immediately, stepping into her space so she feels the heat rolling off my body, the size of me, the way I’m holding myself back by a thread.

I lean in, lips grazing her ear. “I want you on your knees, kitten.”

“No,” she says, but it’s frail. A lie she’s trying to sell herself.

I pull back just enough to look her in the eye. “Then no clothes.”

I raise the pile higher, just out of reach, a silent threat hanging between us.

Her eyes flick to the clothes in my hand, then back to my face.

She looks away for a second.

That hesitation? That tiny crack in her defiance? That’s all I need.

“On your knees. Or you’re walking back to camp like this. And who knows who’ll see you? Your competition? The client you’re trying to impress? Might be hard to explain why you’re naked, looking like you just got thoroughly fucked in the woods. Appearances matter here, right, kitten?”

Silence. Tension.

Then, finally... finally... she drops to her knees.

“Good little kitten. But I’m not done with you. You’re going to touch yourself.”

She stiffens. “No. I’m not doing that.”

“No?” I lift her clothes higher, my fingers tightening around the fabric. “Then I guess you’re walking back just like this. Naked. Wet. And dripping.”

She grimaces, trying to figure a way out. Good luck with that.

I crouch, my gaze locked on hers. “Touch yourself, kitten. Right now. While I watch. Or I shred every last piece of these clothes and toss them into the lake.”

She freezes. But I know, I fucking know, she’s considering it.

Her hand trembles as it lowers, testing the heat of a flame. She hesitates at her stomach, fingers splayed over bare skin, then slides lower.

Every muscle in my body tightens as her fingertips trail past her belly button.

Then... they disappear between her thighs.

She cups her pussy like she’s not sure if she’s going to go through with it. But she will. She fucking will.

My voice drops to a growl. “Do it. Show me how you fuck yourself, kitten.”

Her breath stutters, chest rising and falling as her fingers dip lower, teasing her folds. She starts slow, then sinks deeper with a soft gasp.

Her lashes flutter, eyes beginning to fall shut.

“Eyes on me,” I snap.

She startles slightly, her gaze lifting to mine. Her mouth parts in silent surrender, and she keeps her fingers moving, just like I told her.

“That’s it. Now fuck yourself harder. Finger that pretty cunt like you do when you’re alone, wishing it was me splitting you open.”

She jolts like the words hit her physically. Hesitation flickers in her eyes, right alongside desire. It’s beautiful. That perfect conflict.

Her hand moves faster. The soft, slick sound of her fingers fills the air between us. And it’s all for me.

My fists clench. My restraint is hanging by a thread.

“Say my name. Tell me who that pussy is wet for.”

“Jagger,” she gasps, her voice cracking as her fingers thrust deeper, circling just right. Her eyes flutter shut, overwhelmed.

“Keep your eyes on me,” I command, dragging her back into the moment. “Show me what you’ve been keeping from me.”

She’s close. I can see it in the way her thighs quiver, her muscles tensing as if she’s trying to hold back the inevitable. Those desperate little gasps give her away. She’s clenching her jaw, wincing, trying so damn hard not to fall apart for me.

And it only makes me harder.

I want to drag her over that edge. I want her to scream my name like it hurts.

Her body bows. A guttural moan rips from her throat. Her hips jerk once. Twice.

Then my name spills from her lips.

She comes for me. Hard. Shuddering against the ground. I watch her fall apart, watch her legs shake, her chest rise and fall in frantic bursts.

When she finally slumps back, I see it. Rage. Shame. Lust. The rawness of being owned and exposed.

“I hate you,” she breathes.

I step forward, crouching so she sees the truth in my eyes.

“You can hate me all you want, kitten. But you still came for me.”

She doesn’t answer. She doesn’t have to. That silence is the sound of surrender.

I toss her clothes at her feet. “Get dressed.”

She fumbles, scrambling to cover herself. Her hands are shaking as she yanks up her panties, her leggings. The bra twists in her clumsy fingers.

I turn my back and head a few steps into the woods, my cock aching with everything I didn’t do to her. Her moans, her body, the way she said my name already branded into me.

Then her voice cuts through the quiet.

“So that’s it? You’re just gonna leave me out here?”

I stop. Smirk.

Turn.

She's half-dressed, her leggings pulled on, bra barely covering her tits, her shirt clutched in one trembling hand.

I stalk back.

She freezes.

I grip her chin, forcing her to meet my eyes. "You really think this is over, kitten?"

With my other hand, I tug down the cup of her bra. Her tit spills free. I don't touch it. Not yet. I don't have to. She arches into my hand, starving for more.

I lower my head, dragging the edge of my beard down her throat. Over her chest. I pause at her nipple.

Then I bare my teeth and scrape them over that tight, sensitive peak.

She gasps and shudders. Her whole body coming alive under mine.

Then I pull back and slap her tit.

She yelps, but it's not pain. It's need. Her body bucks into mine, her hips catching against my thigh like she can't help it. A moan escapes her lips, and she tries to bite it back.

"I hate you," she says, breathless.

I slap her tit again, this time harder. Her nipple jerks under the force and she cries out, the sound wrecked and ruined and needy.

"Mmm," I say, dragging my knuckles down her ribs. "I like how you show hate,



kitten.”

I lean in, my mouth brushing her ear.

“For the next two weeks, you’re mine. And before it’s over, you’ll be screaming it.”

Then I release her. Step back. Turn away, leaving her half-dressed, shaking, and wrecked.

Exactly how I want her.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

DELANEY

Jagger is soaked into my skin like a secret I can't wash away.

And I don't want to wash it away. That's the part I hate the most.

A piece of me, the deeply shameful piece, wanted him to find me tonight. I can admit that now, standing here, wet and exposed, and furious at myself. I knew skinny dipping was risky.

Maybe I even wanted the risk.

God, I'm such a hypocrite. Another way I've been lying to myself for eleven months.

That kiss rattled me to my core. I've avoided Jagger, sure, in real life.

But not in my fantasies. Not in my bed at two in the morning when I slide a pillow between my thighs and grind against it, imagining him turning me around in that bathroom, pulling up my dress, and taking me right there against the sink.

The guilt eats at me every single time.

Because Maya is my best friend. When Jagger helped us move in freshman year, I couldn't help but flush at the sight of him. There was something there, that unspoken electricity you see in movies but assume isn't real. Except it was real. It was like a movie, all right. A horror movie.

Maya told me about growing up with Jagger, how used she felt when girls would pretend to be her friend just to get close to her brother.

It became a running joke at her high school—befriend Maya, hook up with Jagger.

She was so scarred by it she made me promise, on our very first night as roommates, to never think of him that way.

So I listened. I kept it buried. A little crush that I fed in secret but never, ever acted on.

Until he kissed me.

And even then, it became my dark secret. The thing I replay when I'm alone and hating myself for wanting what I can't have.

Now it's here, in my face, impossible to ignore.

And I just did something unspeakable. Something I caused by going to that lake alone, by stripping down, by giving him exactly what he wanted.

I could have walked away from all of this.

Could have kept my clothes on, stayed in my cabin, been the friend Maya deserves.

What kind of person am I?

Get it together , I tell myself. You have a friend you care about. You have a job to do. A client to impress. Brett's probably already back at his cabin writing notes about how to outshine you tomorrow.

The thought of smug, entitled Brett with his shitty smirk is exactly the cold shower I need. I square my shoulders and pick up my pace, determined to get back to my cabin and salvage what's left of my dignity.

That's when I round the corner and run straight into Brett.

"Whoa," he says, stepping back with that irritating grin, his flashlight flicking up to catch my face. The beam is too bright, making me squint and probably illuminating every tell-tale sign of what just happened. "You okay, Delaney?"

I force my expression into neutral territory. "Yeah. Fine. Just tired."

His gaze drops, taking in my appearance with obvious interest. I can practically see him cataloging details he can use against me later. "You look..." His eyes travel over my damp hair, my flushed skin. "Flustered."

I straighten my spine, channeling every ounce of ice queen energy I've cultivated in boardrooms full of men who think they can intimidate me. "I'm fine. Just got turned around on the way back from a hike."

"Right." His smirk deepens, and I want to wipe it off his face with my fist. "Your hair's wet."

He's probably already planning how to spin this to Ms. Chen, how Morrison & Associates sent someone who can't even navigate a simple walk without getting into trouble.

"Went for a quick swim," I say. "Good for recovery after a long day."

"In the dark? Alone?" He takes a step closer, invading my personal space in a way that makes my skin crawl. "That's either really brave or really stupid."

The condescension in his tone sets my skin on edge. But I'll be damned if I let him see me sweat.

"I prefer to think of it as thorough preparation. Some of us take this experience seriously instead of treating it like a corporate retreat."

His face flushes, and I know I've hit a nerve. Good. He's been coasting on his daddy's connections his entire career.

"Careful, Holt," he says, his voice dropping to what he probably thinks is an intimidating whisper. "Wouldn't want Ms. Chen to think you're not team player material."

Before I can respond with something that will definitely get me in trouble, footsteps crunch on gravel behind me. I don't need to turn around to know who it is, like it's responding to some invisible signal only he can send.

"Everything all right here?" Jagger's voice slices through our conversation.

Brett straightens, clearly trying to look important in front of the head ranger. "Just checking on Delaney. She seems a little... disoriented."

"Does she," he says, and it's not a question. It's a statement loaded with meaning that only I can decode.

Our eyes meet across the space between us, and his gaze is like hands on my skin. He knows exactly what he's doing to me, the bastard.

"I'm perfectly fine," I say, injecting steel into my voice even as my pulse hammers against my throat. "Just heading to bed."

I push past both of them. But as I fumble with my cabin key, I can feel Jagger's eyes burning into my back.

The key sticks, of course it does, and I have to try three times before the lock finally gives. I can hear Brett saying something about early morning starts and wilderness safety, but it's white noise compared to the pounding in my ears.

I get inside and close the door, leaning against it as my heart rockets against my ribs.

I head for the tiny bathroom, splashing cold water on my face and staring at my reflection in the small mirror.

My hair is damp and matted, my lips swollen like I've been thoroughly kissed.

I look like exactly what I am—a woman who just had the most intense sexual encounter of her life without anyone actually touching her.

Get it together, I tell myself again. You need to be professional. Competent. The kind of person who deserves a promotion.

The kind of friend Maya deserves.

I change into an oversized t-shirt and brush my teeth, going through the motions of my nighttime routine while my body continues to hum with leftover arousal.

By the time I crawl into bed, I've almost convinced myself that I can handle this.

That I can spend the rest of my time here around Jagger without completely losing my mind.

I wake with a jolt, my heart knocking like it's trying to escape. The cabin is dark and

silent, moonlight bleeding through the curtains in silver slashes. But something's wrong. The air feels different.

And then I see him.

Jagger.

He's inside my cabin, leaning against the wall by the door, as if he has every right to be in my private space while I'm sleeping. His ranger uniform is gone, replaced by gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt that hugs every muscle I've been trying not to notice.

He's watching me with those dark eyes, perfectly still, perfectly calm. Waiting for me to wake up so we can finish whatever game we started at the lake.

This has to be a dream. Has to be my subconscious playing tricks on me, conjuring him up because I can't stop thinking about what happened.

But the longer I stare, the more real he becomes.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" I call out.

"Told you, kitten. This isn't over."

That name again. Kitten . It makes my pulse spike and my temper flare in equal measure. I scramble upright, dragging the blanket up to my neck like it could somehow protect me from whatever this is. "You can't just break into my cabin, Jagger. This is insane."

He pushes off the wall and suddenly the small space shrinks around me. His presence swallows every corner, making the air thick and impossible to breathe.

"Insane is wanting you for years and pretending I don't," he says. "Insane is letting you run after kissing me."

He starts moving toward the bed with a confident stride that makes my stomach butterfly, even as my brain screams that this is a disaster waiting to happen. My pulse kicks into overdrive, and I can't tell if it's panic or desire making my hands shake.

"Insane," he continues, reaching the edge of the mattress, "is not taking what's mine right fucking now."

His possessive words should outrage me. Should make me tell him exactly where he can shove his caveman bullshit. Instead, they send liquid heat straight to my core, and I hate myself for it.

"We can't," I breathe, clinging to the last shreds of my sanity. "This is wrong on so many levels."

"Wrong? What's wrong is pretending you don't want this. What's wrong is acting like that pretty cunt of yours isn't already begging for me."

I shake my head, but it's a weak denial and we both know it. My body has already voted otherwise. I squeeze my thighs together, chasing relief I'll never find without him.

He climbs onto the bed, and the mattress groans under his weight. I scramble back, my spine hitting the headboard with a quiet, traitorous thud.

"Look at you," he says, his voice threaded with heat. He crawls toward me like a storm dressed in skin. "Already backing away, and I haven't even laid a finger on you."



He stops only when there's no air left between us, when his body swallows the light. One hand grips the headboard above my head. The other sinks into the mattress by my hip, boxing me in with heat and power and inevitability.

I feel it unraveling inside me, the slow, aching pulse of desire that builds with every breath. Heat surges down my thighs.

A smirk lifts on his mouth.

“Just like I thought. Deny me all you want, kitten. But your cunt has already decided.”

Before I can speak, he grabs the edge of the blanket and yanks it down, tearing it from my grip as if it never belonged to me. I gasp, my hands flying up in a useless attempt to cover myself, but he's already there. His fingers clamp around my wrists, pressing them into the mattress.

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He holds me there, wrists pinned above my head, body hovering over mine.

I'm trapped beneath him, every nerve exposed. My oversized T-shirt has ridden up my thighs. His gaze drops, zeroing in on my chest. My nipples strain against the thin cotton shirt as his eyes narrow.

He stole a kiss before. He watched me touch myself earlier. But this goes further. This is a line we cannot cross.

But my body ignores all of it. It arches. It aches. It gives him permission my mind won't.

"Beautiful," he says. "I've been imagining for years, you underneath me, just like this."

A surge of fury cuts through the haze of heat. I twist beneath him, jerking at my wrists, but his grip only tightens, locking me in place.

"You don't get to do this," I snap, trying to yank free again. "Get off me."

His eyes flare. Not with surprise. With satisfaction. He's wanted a fight, and now he has one.

"Not until you're honest with yourself, kitten."

He shifts, pressing his hips into mine, and I feel every inch of him. I bite back a gasp, furious at my body's reaction. He rocks his hips again, slow and unforgiving.

I turn my face away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of another sound, but my body arches against him anyway.

He leans in, mouth brushing my ear. "Keep fighting me, kitten. I like it when you make me work for it."

And the worst part? So do I.

He grinds into me again, rougher this time. "Now open your mouth."

My eyes snap to his. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He releases one of my wrists, hooking his thumb in the waistband of his sweatpants. "Open that pretty mouth for me, kitten."

The command hits like a slap, and suddenly I understand exactly what he wants. I'm not some obedient little toy.

"If you think I'm going to suck your dick just because you said so, you're dumber than you look."

He stills, like he's deciding whether to be pissed or turned on. Probably both.

"You want to play games? Fine. But you're already soaked for me."

"That doesn't mean I'm yours for the taking," I snap, wrenching my other hand free and shoving at his chest. "You don't get to control me."

"You want to win that client, don't you?" he continues, his voice taking on a harder edge. "Then be a good little kitten and do what I say. Because I can make you look really good out there. Or I could make you look really, really bad."

The words hit me like a bucket of ice water. The fog of lust evaporates in an instant. My body's still humming from his touch, but now my blood runs hotter for an entirely different reason.

I shove at his chest, barely moving him. "Don't you dare threaten me, you manipulative asshole."

His eyes glint as if he expected the fight. Maybe even wanted it.

But then he frees his cock from his sweatpants, and every coherent argument dies on my lips.

He's huge. Thick and long and absolutely perfect, with veins mapping the length of him that make my mouth water. But what steals my breath completely is the silver ring pierced through the head, a piece of jewelry that's so unexpected, so deliciously dirty, that I gasp.

"Like what you see?" he taunts, wrapping his hand around himself and stroking once, slowly. The piercing catches the moonlight, winking at me like a challenge.

He grabs my hips and yanks me down the bed, forcing me flat against the mattress. My arms scramble for balance, but he's already moving, climbing over me.

Then he straddles my chest.

And suddenly his cock is right there. Inches from my mouth. My brain short-circuits, overloaded by the sheer size of him, the obscene beauty of what he's offering.

Up close, it's so much worse.

Or maybe it's better.

I can't tell anymore.

My breath goes shallow. Any protest I might've had falters the second he cages me in, one hand braced on the headboard, the other gripping the base of his cock as he angles it toward my face.

"Hands on the mattress," he growls. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

The command sends another spike of heat through me, but I fight it down. I'm not his toy. Not his plaything to order around whenever the mood strikes him.

"Good girl," he groans when I don't immediately move. "Now rub your lips against it. Show me how much you want my cock."

For a moment, I consider it. Consider giving him what he wants. The thought of submitting completely, of letting him use my mouth however he wants, sends a dark thrill through me that I don't want to examine too closely.

But then I remember his threat. The casual way he implied he could sabotage my career if I don't play along. The assumption that I'm so desperate for his approval that I'll debase myself for it.

Jagger Maddox. My best friend's brother. Doing this to me.

Fuck that.

I lean forward slowly, letting my lips brush against the piercing with butterfly softness. He exhales sharply, his whole body going taut.

I open my mouth like I'm about to take him in, like I'm finally ready to give him what he wants.

Then I bite.

Not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to get his attention. Just enough pressure to remind him that I have teeth.

He jerks back with a sharp intake of breath, his eyes going wide with shock. For a moment we just stare at each other, the power dynamic shifting so fast it makes my head spin.

"What the fuck..."

I don't let him finish. Taking advantage of his momentary confusion, I push up, plant my hands on his chest, and shove hard, knocking him off balance. He rocks backward, giving me the space I need to scramble out from under him.

"You want a kitten, Jagger?" I shift upright on the bed, settling on my knees. "Careful. Even kittens have claws."

Before he can recover, I reach down and wrap my fingers around his still-hard cock, not gentle but not cruel either. Just tight enough to show him that I'm not afraid of him. That I'm not going to be intimidated by threats or manipulated by desire.

"This little power trip? It's over. If this is about revenge for walking away after that kiss, get over it. You don't get to control me, Jagger."

His mouth falls open slightly, like he can't quite process what's happening. The great Jagger Maddox, reduced to speechless by his little sister's best friend.

I climb off the bed, tugging my t-shirt back down. "I'm going for a walk," I announce, grabbing a pair of sweatpants from the drawer and pulling them on. "And when I get back, you're going to be gone."

I shrug into my jacket, taking my time with the zipper just to prove I'm not running. Not this time.

I don't wait for his response. I step out into the cool night air and close the door firmly behind me, my pulse finally starting to slow.

The forest is quiet around me, peaceful in a way that helps settle my frayed nerves. I start walking, not caring about direction, just needing to move. To process what just happened.

He thought he could control me. Thought he could use my ambitions to manipulate me into submission. The arrogance of it still makes my blood boil.

But underneath the anger is something else. Something that feels like triumph.

Because for the first time since I arrived here, I was the one in control. I was the one who set the terms.

And judging by the look on his face, Jagger Maddox has no idea what to do with that.

Good. Let him figure it out.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

JAGGER

She thinks she's in control now?

That's the girl I fell for. Wild-eyed and stubborn. Fire in her veins and bite in her voice. She could've clawed my face off and I still would've wanted to taste her again.

Sure, she threw me off last night. Caught me off guard when she flipped the script and walked away with my cock still hard and my pride slightly bruised.

But it was just a moment. A slip. One second where I forgot who the fuck I am.

Maybe, maybe, a small part of me feels guilty. I've been so wrapped up in chasing her, in making her pay for running, that I didn't stop to think how far I'd pushed.

Now she's out there, fumbling with a rope knot in front of the client she's so desperate to impress, and I should be enjoying it. Payback for last night.

But instead?

Watching her struggle does something twisted to me. It makes me want to fix it and punish her in the same breath.

She's trying to fake her way through a bowline knot, pretending she's got it handled. That stubborn little crease between her brows is back. Her ponytail slips, strands falling into her flushed face, and all I can think about is brushing them away.



Delaney came here to win that client. To prove something. But she's floundering. I clock the panic building behind her eyes and something sharp twists in my gut.

She won't ask me for help. I know her too well. She'd rather choke on the rope than admit she's struggling.

But there's another game I can play now.

The hero.

The one who steps in. Fixes it. Saves her from herself and makes damn sure she knows exactly who she's leaning on.

I catch the flash of panic in her eyes the moment her fingers fumble the rope again. The client is watching, taking mental notes that could make or break her career. Everyone else is pretending not to notice, but I can see the quiet satisfaction on Brett's face as he watches her struggle.

I move without thinking, closing the distance between us in three strides.

"Holt. With me," I demand, my voice low.

She jerks at the sound but doesn't budge, pride keeping her rooted in place.

"Now." There's steel in my voice this time, but underneath is something else. Something that says trust me.

She glares. "I'm in the middle of something."

I step closer, dropping my voice even lower. "You want to blow this in front of your client? Or you want to actually get it right?"

That gets through to her.

She follows me behind one of the trucks, her body radiating wounded pride. I don't give her time to build her walls back up. I take the rope from her hands and show her how to tie a clean bowline.

"Watch the loop," I tell her, pushing the rope back into her grip. "You're overthinking it."

"I know how to..." she starts, then catches herself. Her mouth twists as if the words taste bitter, but she swallows whatever cutting remark she was about to make.

Smart kitten.

She tries again. Slowly this time, carefully, without the frantic energy that's been sabotaging her all morning. This time, her fingers move with purpose instead of panic.

This time, she gets it.

Her eyes flick to mine, and I catch that glimmer of satisfaction, the quiet pride that lights up her whole face when she succeeds at something.

"Go. Show them what you can do."

She walks back into the circle with her shoulders square and confidence restored. She ties the knot perfectly and holds it up for inspection. The client nods with genuine approval, and I see Brett's smirk fade into something sour.

She glances my way for just a second, and I catch the shape of her lips forming two words.

Thank you.

I don't nod. Don't smile. Don't give her anything the others might read as favoritism.

But something that's been wound tight in my chest since this morning finally loosens, and for the first time in eleven months, helping her feels more important than punishing her for running away.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of trail work and stolen glances. Every time I catch her looking at me, she turns away fast. But there's something different in her expression now. Less anger, more confusion. Like she's trying to figure out why I helped her instead of letting her fail.

Good. Let her wonder.

By evening, most of the volunteers have retreated to their cabins or gathered around the fire pit, swapping stories and nursing sore muscles. I'm finishing up paperwork in the ranger station when I hear footsteps on the gravel outside.

Delaney appears in the doorway, backlit by the dying light. She's in jeans and a sweater that clings to every curve I've been trying not to think about.

"Can I come in?" she asks.

I lean back in my chair, studying her. "It's a free country."

She steps inside, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"I wanted to thank you," she says, staying near the door like she might bolt. "For earlier. With the knot."

"You already did."

"I know, but..." She trails off, wrapping her arms around herself. "I don't understand why you helped me. After last night, after everything, I figured you'd want to watch me fail."

I set down my pen and really look at her. There's something fragile in her typically guarded expression, something that makes me want to go easier on her.

"Maybe I did at first," I admit.

"What changed?"

I push back from the desk and stand, watching her tense as I move closer. I stop a few feet away, giving her space to breathe.

"You really want to know?"

She nods.

"Watching you struggle..." I run a hand through my hair, trying to find the right words. "It didn't feel like winning. It felt like watching someone I..." I pause again, the words sticking in my throat. "Someone I give a damn about get hurt."

Her eyes widen at my words.

"I know we're fucked up," I continue, taking another step closer. "I know I've been an ass. But seeing that piece of shit Brett smirk while you struggled... it made me want to fix it. Not for revenge or some twisted game. Just because it was you."

A shaky breath leaves her lips, her posture sagging as if the fight in her is slipping

away.

"This is so messed up," she whispers.

That's when I see it. The guilt that's been eating at her, the weight she's been carrying.

"Hey." I close the distance between us, my hands finding her shoulders. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"Everything," she chokes out. "I'm the worst friend in the world. I promised Maya I'd never do this, and here I am, wanting things I have no right to want. Feeling things I swore I wouldn't feel."

The pain in her voice guts me. This fierce woman is falling apart in front of me, and it's because of what's between us. Because of choices I've forced her to make.

"Look at me." I tip her chin up with my fingers. "You're not a bad friend."

"Yes, I am. You don't understand. Maya told me, in high school, girls would pretend to be her friend just to get close to you. It hurt her so badly. She made me promise on our first night as roommates that I'd never, and I swore I wouldn't."

The guilt in her voice is like a knife to my chest. I've been so focused on my own need to claim her that I forgot what this costs her.

"I didn't plan on falling for you. I fought it. But it still happened," I admit.

She goes very still, then lets out a bitter laugh. "You didn't fall for me, Jagger. Let's not pretend this is some grand love story. You just want to fuck me."

The accusation hangs between us. She's building her walls back up, trying to make

this smaller than it is.

"Is that what you think? You think this is just about getting you into bed?"

"Isn't it?" Her chin lifts. "You've been chasing me, trying to get revenge on me, threatening my career. That's not love, that's obsession."

"You're right. It is obsession." I don't back down from the accusation. "But it's a lot more than just wanting to fuck you, kitten."

Her eyes flash. "I told you not to call me that."

"Why? Because it reminds you that you want this too? That you've been thinking about me just as much as I've been thinking about you?"

Something snaps inside me. All this talking, all this back and forth, when what we both want is right here between us.

I don't give her time to think. Don't give her time to build more walls or find more reasons to run.

I haul her against me, one hand gripping her ass, the other tangled in her hair. Then I kiss her. No, I take her. Staking my claim.

She goes rigid for half a second, hands pushing against my chest in token resistance. But then she melts into me with a soft sound that goes straight to my cock. Her fingers twist in my shirt, pulling me closer even as she tries to fight what's happening.

I back her against the wall, my body caging her in, and she arches into me like she can't help herself.

"Let go," I growl against her mouth, my hands sliding down to her hips. "Stop fighting this. You want me as much as I want you."

"Jagger," she starts to protest, but I cut her off with another kiss, deeper this time, my tongue sliding against hers until she makes that sound again.

Her resistance crumbles. She kisses me back with everything she has.

"That's it, kitten," I groan against her lips. "Stop thinking. Stop feeling guilty. This is just you and me."

My hands find the hem of her sweater, sliding underneath to touch warm, soft skin. She gasps as her back arches off the wall. I take advantage, pushing the fabric up and over her head, tossing it on the floor.

I brush my thumbs over her nipples through the fabric, feeling them harden under my touch.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I growl as I roll her nipples between my fingers.

My hands slide down to the button on her jeans, and she doesn't stop me. I pop the button and drag the zipper down slowly, watching her face as I slip my hand inside her panties. The moment my fingers find her, we both groan.

"Fuck. You're soaked. Exactly as wet as I imagined." I stroke her folds, feeling how ready she is. "I can't believe you kept this from me."

She moans, her hips bucking into my touch as I explore her.

"That's it, kitten. Let me feel how much you want this."

My fingers circle her clit, and she cries out, her hands gripping my shoulders. She's so responsive, so perfect, grinding against my hand. We're past the point of no return now. No going back. Delaney Holt is mine, and she's finally going to admit it.

"This is mine," I say against her throat, my fingers working her slick heat. "This pussy belongs to me. Say it."

She whimpers, her hips grinding against my hand desperately. "I can't."

"You can and you will." I slide two fingers deep inside her, feeling her clench around me. "You've been keeping what's mine from me for too long, kitten."

Her head falls back against the wall, a broken moan escaping her lips. "Jagger, please."

"Please what? Please make you come? Please fuck you the way you've been dreaming about?" My thumb presses her clit with just enough pressure to make her shake. "Tell me this is mine and I'll give you everything you want."

She's trembling now, on the edge. "It's yours," she gasps. "Fuck, it's yours."

"That's my good little kitten," I say, my fingers moving faster. "You're mine. All of you."

Her breathing turns to desperate little pants as her cunt tightens around my hand.

"Come for me," I command. "Come on my fingers like the good little kitten you are."

Her mouth falls open in a silent cry, and I can feel her starting to shatter.

Then her phone rings, cutting through the moment. Not just any ringtone. A specific



song. Taylor Swift's voice filling the small space.

She freezes in my arms, her eyes going wide with panic.

"Ignore it," I tell her, my mouth moving to her neck, trying to pull her back into the moment. "Whatever it is can wait."

But she's already pulling away, reaching for the phone in her pocket. The name on the screen makes my stomach drop.

Maya.

"No. No. We can't do this," she says, her voice shaky.

I catch her wrist, holding her gaze. "Yes, we can. This is you and me. We'll deal with everything else later."

The phone keeps ringing, Maya's contact photo smiling up at us from the screen. Delaney looks between me and the phone.

"I can't," she whispers, and I can see the guilt flooding back in, washing away everything we just shared. "I can't do this to her."

She pulls free from my grip, zipping her jeans, grabbing her sweater from the floor and clutching it to her chest like armor.

"Don't leave," I say.

But she's already dressed and at the door, disappearing into the night.

Fuck.

She's running again.

And this time, I'm not sure I can catch her.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

DELANEY

The week crawls by like a wounded animal.

I should feel relieved. Jagger has backed off completely. He's been nothing but coldly professional, treating me exactly like every other volunteer.

Like I mean nothing to him.

I tell myself this is what I wanted. Space to focus on the job, on impressing Ms. Chen, on winning this account without the distraction of whatever twisted thing exists between him and me.

But the relief I expected never comes. Instead, there's this hollow ache in my chest that grows stronger every day.

I catch myself watching him during training sessions, waiting for him to single me out, to challenge me, to pay attention to me at all.

Instead, he looks right through me like I'm invisible.

It shouldn't bother me. It does anyway.

"You seem distracted," Brett says, sliding up beside me as we finish setting up camp after another day of trail maintenance. He's been circling like a vulture all week, waiting for me to slip up.

"Just focused," I reply, checking my knots one more time.

"Right." Brett's smirk is particularly annoying today. "Well, focus on this. Ms. Chen wants to have dinner with both of us tonight. She's got some ideas she wants to run by us."

My stomach drops. A dinner meeting means I need to be on my A-game. It also means spending more time with Brett, who's been increasingly smug as the week has progressed. He thinks Jagger's coldness toward me is a sign that I'm losing ground with the client.

Maybe he's right.

"Where?" I ask, already mentally cataloging what I packed that could pass for dinner-appropriate.

"The main lodge. Seven o'clock. Try to look professional." He gives me a once-over that makes my skin crawl. "Though I'm sure whatever you wear will be... adequate."

I want to punch him. Instead, I smile sweetly. "I'll do my best to keep up with your high standards."

He walks away looking pleased with himself, and I resist the urge to throw my water bottle at his head.

By seven o'clock, I've managed to pull together something that doesn't scream "I've been living in the woods for a week." Black slacks, a cream blouse, minimal makeup. Professional but not trying too hard. I walk into the lodge's small dining room feeling reasonably confident.

That confidence evaporates the moment I see who's sitting at the table.

Ms. Chen is there, of course, looking polished in a way that makes me feel underdressed despite my efforts. Brett is already schmoozing, leaning in with that fake-intimate body language he uses when he's trying to close a deal.

And across from them, looking like he'd rather be literally anywhere else, is Jagger.

He's traded his ranger uniform for dark jeans and a button-down shirt that does absolutely nothing to hide the way his shoulders fill out the fabric. His hair is still damp from a shower, and when he looks up at me, I nearly pass out.

"Delaney!" Ms. Chen waves me over with genuine warmth. "Perfect timing. I was just telling Jagger how impressed I've been with both you and Brett this week."

I force a smile and take the empty chair, which, of course, puts me directly across from Jagger. "Thank you. This has been an incredible experience."

"I invited Jagger to join us because I've been thinking about expanding Trailbound's partnership," Ms. Chen continues, her eyes bright with enthusiasm. "There's so much potential for actual conservation work, educational programs, direct support for national forests like this one."

Brett jumps in immediately. "That's exactly the kind of forward-thinking approach that sets great brands apart.

The marketing opportunities alone are incredible.

Cause-related marketing is huge right now.

Consumers want to feel like their dollars are making a difference.

Very strategic positioning that could really drive sales. "

"Marketing opportunities?" Jagger's voice breaks through Brett's spiel. "Is that what you think conservation is about?"

Brett's smile falters slightly. "Well, no, of course not. But from a brand perspective..."

"From a brand perspective, you're looking at ways to exploit environmental concerns to sell more products." Jagger leans back in his chair, arms crossed. "Let me guess, every purchase plants a tree? Buy a jacket, save a forest?"

The temperature in the room drops about ten degrees. Brett's face flushes red as he scrambles for a comeback.

This is my moment. My chance to step up and show what Morrison & Associates can really do.

"Actually, I think there's a much more meaningful approach we could take," I say.

Everyone turns to look at me. Including Jagger, whose expression shifts from polite disinterest to curiosity.

I pull out my phone and open the notes app where I've been jotting down ideas all week.

"National forests and parks are facing a funding crisis.

They're operating on a budget that hasn't kept pace with increased visitation or maintenance needs.

Meanwhile, outdoor recreation contributes over 887 billion dollars annually to the U.S. economy."

Ms. Chen leans forward, intrigued. "Go on."

"What if Trailbound created a campaign that actually addressed the disconnect?

Not just 'buy our gear to save the planet' messaging, but real action. A dual giving campaign with multiple touchpoints. Customers can add a donation at checkout that goes directly to park conservation. Plus, stores could host quarterly customer events that raise money. Each store would support local businesses while building real community around shared values. Employees can volunteer their time for trail maintenance, educational programs, habitat restoration."

Brett tries to interject. "That sounds expensive."

I don't let him finish. "The ROI is that Trailbound becomes the brand that doesn't just talk about loving the outdoors, it proves it."

Customer loyalty goes through the roof because they're part of something meaningful.

Employee engagement skyrockets because they're contributing to something bigger than profit margins. "

"Plus," I continue, looking directly at Jagger, "partnerships with rangers and park services mean access to real experts. Real stories. Real impact that you can measure in acres preserved, trails maintained, species protected."

The silence that follows is electric. Ms. Chen is practically glowing, and even Brett looks grudgingly impressed despite himself.

But it's Jagger's reaction that stops me cold. A slow grin spreads across his face as he watches me, and after a week of him treating me like I don't exist, the attention feels

like stepping into sunlight.

"I love it," Ms. Chen says finally. "It's exactly the kind of authentic engagement our customers are craving. Jagger, what do you think? Would you be open to that kind of partnership?"

Jagger's eyes never leave my face. "I think," he says slowly, "it's the smartest thing I've heard all week. The kind of program that could actually make a difference instead of just making people feel good about buying things they don't need."

Heat floods my cheeks at the praise, but I keep my expression professional. "It would take careful planning and the right partners, but I think Trailbound is uniquely positioned to lead this kind of initiative."

"Absolutely." Ms. Chen is already making notes on her phone. "I want to hear more about implementation. Timeline, budget projections, potential pilot programs."

The conversation flows from there, ideas building on ideas. Brett tries to insert himself whenever he can, but it's clear the momentum has shifted. This is my pitch now, my vision, and everyone at the table knows it.

Jagger speaks up about technical details for national forest operations and regulatory requirements. When he does contribute, it's always in support of what I'm proposing, adding depth and credibility to my ideas.

We're a team, I realize. We're working together instead of against each other, and the result is something bigger than either of us could have created alone.

By the time Ms. Chen calls it a night, I'm buzzing with adrenaline and possibility. This could actually work. Not just the campaign, but the entire partnership. Trailbound could become the gold standard for corporate environmental



responsibility.

"Excellent work tonight, Delaney," Ms. Chen says as we stand to leave. "I'll want to see a full presentation, but I'm very encouraged by what I've heard."

"Thank you. I'll have it ready by the end of the week."

Brett shakes hands with everyone, his smile tight around the edges. He knows he's lost ground tonight.

Ms. Chen heads toward the exit, Brett trailing behind her like a lost puppy trying to salvage what he can of the evening.

Which leaves me alone with Jagger.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with everything we haven't said all week. He's studying my face like he's trying to solve a puzzle, and I have to fight the urge to fidget under his gaze.

"That was impressive," he says finally. "You really know your stuff."

"Thanks." I aim for casual, but my voice comes out slightly breathless.

"You've been doing your homework. Those numbers, the policy details, you didn't just pull that out of thin air."

I shrug, trying to ignore the way his praise makes my heart flip. "I like to be prepared."

"Is that what you were doing all week? Preparing?"

There's something loaded in the question, something that makes me think we're not just talking about work anymore. "What else would I be doing?"

His mouth curves into a dangerous smile. "I can think of a few things."

My stomach flips, but I force myself to remain calm. We're not doing this. We can't do this.

"I should go," I say quickly, standing and gathering my phone and purse.

I make it three steps toward the exit before I hear his chair scrape against the floor. By the time I'm in the hallway, he's right behind me.

"Delaney."

I turn, and suddenly he's there, backing me against the wall beside a display of old park photos.

"You were magnificent tonight," he says. "Watching you tear apart Brett's bullshit and build something real in its place. Fuck. You have no idea what that did to me."

My throat goes tight. The way he's looking at me makes every rational thought in my head scatter like leaves in the wind.

"I've tried to stay away," he continues, stepping closer until I'm trapped between him and the wall.

"But I want you, kitten. I know you won't say yes because you're too busy being noble, too worried about doing the right thing.

But what if I don't let you say no? What if I take the choice away from you

completely? Then it's not your fault anymore."

The words send a dangerous thrill through me.

"We can't," I say, but dammit, I want to. My body is already responding to his proximity, to the promise in his voice. "This is crazy."

But even as I say it, I'm leaning into him instead of pulling away. My resolve is crumbling with every second he stands this close.

"Meet me at the outpost tonight. Stop thinking. Stop analyzing. Just come to me."

He turns and walks away before I can respond, leaving me pressed against the wall with my heart rocketing against my ribs and my skin on fire.

The outpost. I know where he means—the old ranger station about a mile up the trail, abandoned but still maintained for emergency use.

This is insane. Reckless.

But as his words echo in my head. What if I don't let you say no .

A week of his cold indifference has been torture. Pretending I don't want him, that I don't lie awake thinking about his hands on my body, has been slowly killing me.

He's offering me an escape from my own conscience. A way to have what I want without admitting I chose it.

And maybe I don't want a choice anymore.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

JAGGER

I 've been waiting at the outpost for forty-five minutes.

I should have known better, that no matter what I told her tonight, no matter how much heat I saw in her eyes, Delaney Holt is too stubborn to give in that easily. Too afraid of what she wants to just take it.

It's past eleven now. She's not coming.

But I'm not giving up. Not even close.

Maybe I'll wait until everyone's asleep and slip into her cabin, pin her to the bed and make her admit she wants this. Make her beg for what she's been denying herself.

Or maybe I'll corner her during tomorrow's training, find some excuse to get her alone so I can remind her exactly what she's missing. How good it felt when I had my hands on her, when she was falling apart under my touch.

I'm not backing down. Not when I know she wants this as much as I do.

I lock up, ready to head back and start planning how to make her mine, when I see movement in the trees.

She's standing about twenty feet away, just at the edge of the tree line, caught in a shaft of moonlight. She looks like she's been standing there for a while, working up the courage to either come closer or turn around and run.

Our eyes lock across the distance, and I can see the war playing out on her face. Want versus fear. Desire versus that stubborn need to do the right thing.

She came. She actually fucking came.

"I didn't think you'd turn up," I tell her.

"I wasn't going to."

I don't move toward her and make this easier for her by closing the distance. If she wants this, really wants this, I need to know.

"Remember what I said," I tell her. "This is about me removing your choices. Removing your guilt. This is me controlling you, taking what I want without you having to make a decision you'll regret later."

She takes a shaky breath, and I can see her hands trembling at her sides.

"The only thing I need from you right now is a nod. Tell me you're giving me complete control, and then you don't have to think anymore. You don't have to choose. Don't have to feel guilty about wanting something you think you shouldn't have."

Slowly, she nods.

"Good kitten," I say. "Now turn around."

She hesitates for just a second, then obeys, presenting me with the elegant line of her back. I move toward her.

When I reach her, I don't touch her immediately. Instead, I let my presence wash over

her, let her feel how much bigger I am, how completely I could dominate her.

"You can't change your mind now, kitten," I say against her ear. "You gave me control, and I'm keeping it."

My hands find the hem of her sweatshirt, and I pull it up. She raises her arms without being asked. Instead of yanking it off, I pull the fabric around her eyes, twisting it so it closes off her vision.

"What are you..." she starts to ask.

"No talking," I cut her off. "No questions. When I want you to speak, I'll tell you what to say."

She goes quiet immediately, her breath quickening. I step back and circle around her, taking in the sight of her standing there blindfolded and vulnerable.

Without warning, I bend down and hoist her over my shoulder in one smooth motion. She makes a sharp gasp as I carry her into the forest.

We head deep into the woods, and I eventually set her down where the darkness swallows everything.

"Don't move. Don't speak. Don't touch the blindfold."

Her breath stutters.

"You stay here for five minutes," I continue, circling her. "When the time's up, you can take off the blindfold and run. Make it to the outpost, you win."

I pause, close enough that my beard brushes her neck.

“If I catch you first?” My hand grazes her throat. “Then I get to do whatever I want to you.”

I press a kiss to her jaw. “Five minutes. I’m counting.”

Then I step into the trees, climbing a nearby pine, settling into the branches high enough to see everything. From here, I have the perfect vantage point.

Let her wonder how far I’ve really gone. Let her feel that silence crawl up her spine. Let her imagine me behind every tree.

At exactly five minutes, she tears the shirt from her eyes, gasping as the darkness hits her full force. She spins, eyes scanning the trees, disoriented and alone in the thick silence.

Then she bolts. No hesitation, no second-guessing.

I let her run.

Let her think she has a chance.

From my perch in the tree, I track every frantic movement. The slap of her shoes against the ground. The ragged breath tearing from her lungs. Her curls whipping behind her like a flag of surrender.

My cock pulses at the sight.

She’s fast, but sloppy. Her panic makes her careless. She stumbles over a root, catches herself, keeps going.

Finally, she breaks through a clearing. The outpost is just beyond the ridge.

She won't make it. I won't let her, of course.

I leap down from the branch, landing soft and silent. She keeps running, but her speed's no match for mine. Just like I planned.

I catch up, my arm wrapping around her waist as I drag her back into the trees. I spin her, slam her against the earth, and pin her beneath me. I fist one hand in her hair, yanking her head back. The other braced beside her hip.

"You really thought you could outrun me, kitten?" I let my words scrape along her skin. "Cute."

She thrashes under me and I tighten my grip.

"You lost, kitten. And now you're mine."

She writhes, kicks, claws. For a second, she manages to break free, scrambling upright. She runs, but I'm already moving.

I catch her from behind, one arm around her waist, the other locking across her chest as I drag her back and slam her against the nearest tree. The impact rattles through both of us. She gasps, stunned, and that's all the opening I need.

I strip off her sweatshirt with a hard yank. Her bra goes next. Then I reach for the button of her jeans.

She squirms, pretending to twist away, but I see through it. She wants this. She just doesn't want to say it out loud.

So I'll say it for her.



“Keep fighting me, kitten. You don’t want the guilt, right? This is my choice, not yours. So go ahead. Scratch. Claw. Make it look good. I’ll play the villain for you.”

She kicks out half-heartedly, her fists pushing at my shoulders, but it’s all for show. Her breath hitches as I hook my thumbs in her waistband.

She’s not making it easy, and I don’t want her to.

I grab her by the waist and take her down until she’s on her back in the leaves. I kneel over her, straddling her thighs, then start to peel her jeans down inch by inch, savoring the way her body arches beneath me.

She thrashes once more, a soft gasp escaping her lips.

“Keep fighting, kitten,” I command, biting down on her shoulder. Just enough to mark her and make her gasp again.

“Jagger, no,” she whimpers as her nails dig into my arms, scratching, drawing blood.

I flip her over so her ass is exposed to me and tug down her panties so they’re trapped mid-thigh.

“You ran from me too many times,” I snarl, grabbing a thin stick from the ground. “You don’t get to run anymore.”

I bring the stick down on her ass. She cries out, her body jerking, but she doesn’t tell me to stop. I spank her again, harder. Red welts bloom on her skin, and my cock’s so hard it hurts.

“Count,” I order.

“One,” she gasps, her voice shaking.

“Keep going,” I command.

“Two.”

I spank her again. And again. Three more times. Her counts turn into moans as her body shudders.

I drop the stick and my fingers find her cunt, soaking and ready.

She plays her role, scrambling forward on her hands, crawling like she thinks she can escape me.

I grab her ankles, yanking her back across the dirt, her body jerking under my grip. My knees pin her legs, locking her in place, her squirming only making my cock harder.

I drag my zipper down and free myself. I line up with her perfect cunt and drive my cock into her. Her scream splits the night, her cunt gripping me so tight it's a delicious kind of pain.

I fuck her mercilessly, each thrust slamming her against the ground, her moans blending with the rustle of leaves.

“You're mine,” I growl, fisting her curls, wrenching her head back until her throat's exposed. “You hear me?”

She writhes beneath me, playing her role like she was born for it. Her nails scrape the dirt, her body bucking against mine, fighting even as her slick pussy betrays her.

I fist her curls tighter, pinning her cheek to the earth. “No use fighting, kitten. I’m taking what I want, whether you fucking like it or not.”

She moans but keeps struggling, her hips twisting like she can throw me off.

“No, Jagger, please.”

Her voice is a perfect mix of fear and need, the role-play pushing us both to the edge.

I lean down, my beard scraping her back. “I’m gonna force you to come, kitten. I’ll make this tight little cunt beg for me, no matter how much you scream no.”

I thrust into her again, slow and punishing, my piercing dragging along her walls, hitting that spot that makes her body jerk.

She’s still fighting, her hands clawing at the ground, her “No, no!” ringing through the forest, but her hips tilt up, chasing me even as she plays the part.

“Fuck, I know that piercing’s hitting you where you can’t deny,” I growl, picking up speed, each stroke more punishing. “You’re gonna break for me, kitten. Right fucking now.”

Her moans turn frantic, her body trembling as she tries to hold out. I don’t let up, slamming into her until her resistance shatters.

She finally explodes, her scream echoing through the trees, her cunt pulsing around me as her body bows under the force of her climax. I keep moving, riding her through it.

“Shh, kitten,” I say, slowing just enough to let her catch her breath. “No reason to feel bad for this. I’m making you do this, remember? You don’t get a choice.”

I lean my face closer to her neck. "But I'm not done with you. Not done until I come deep inside that pretty pussy."

"You can't, Jagger, you can't."

"Oh no," I cut her off, smacking my palm against her ass. "You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do."

I pick up speed, fucking her harder. "Take my fucking come, kitten. Now and whenever I want."

Her moans turn to cries, her body shaking as I drive into her until I explode, spilling inside her with a roar. The intensity whiting out everything else in the forest.

Her body's still shaking, her cunt gripping me like it'll never let go. I don't stop, thrusting through the aftershocks, my piercing dragging against her oversensitive walls.

"You're mine now, kitten. Forever."

I pull out and tug her up, turning her to face me, her eyes glassy with pleasure and exhaustion. I scoop her up immediately, cradling her against my chest as her legs give out.

"You okay?" I ask, softening my approach.

She nods against my shoulder, but I can feel how unsteady she is. How completely wrung out.

"Are you sure?" I press, carrying her over to a fallen log and settling down with her in my lap. "Talk to me, kitten."

She's quiet for a long moment, just breathing, her forehead pressed against my neck. When she finally speaks, her voice is soft.

"I've never experienced anything like that in my life."

"Good," I tell her, my hand stroking through her hair. "That should wash the guilt away. You didn't choose this, remember? I took control. I made the decisions."

She pulls back to look at me, and there's something sharp in her eyes despite her exhaustion. "What we just did... it's fucked up, Jagger. You know that."

The criticism stings because she's not wrong.

"Maybe it is," I admit. "But I'm not sorry it happened."

She stares at me for a moment, then shakes her head.

"Let me take care of you tonight," I tell her, meaning it. "Let me just... be here for you."

Something in my tone must reach her because she nods, settling back against my chest. I hold her for a while, listening to her breathing even out, feeling the tension slowly leave her body.

After a few minutes, I shift her gently. "I'll help you get dressed. Then we'll go back to the outpost."

I find her clothes scattered around us and help her into them, my hands gentle now. She's still shaky, still processing what just happened between us, and I want to take care of her properly.

The walk back to the outpost is quiet, my arm around her waist to steady her. Once inside, I guide her to the old wooden chair and dig into the pack I'd left here earlier.

"I brought you something," I tell her, pulling out a small bag of Sour Patch Kids.

Her eyes widen in surprise. "For me?"

"Remember move-in day at college? You had a bag of these in your hand when you opened Maya's door. Said they were your survival food." I shake a few into my palm and offer them to her. "Figured you might need some survival food tonight."

She takes them, and I see her throat work as she swallows hard. "You remembered that?"

"I remember everything about that day." I hand her a water bottle and settle on the floor beside her chair.

She eats the candy slowly, and I can see some color returning to her cheeks.

"I owe you an apology," I tell her finally. "For the way I've been treating you here. For threatening your career. That was fucked up, and I'm sorry."

She looks down at me. "Why did you do it?"

"Because you get under my skin in ways I don't know how to handle. Because watching you try so hard to pretend you don't want this was driving me crazy." I lean my head back against the wall. "That's not an excuse. It's just the truth. You make me lose my mind, kitten."

"That doesn't make it okay."

"No, it doesn't." I meet her eyes. "I was wrong. You deserved better than games and threats. You deserved honesty."

She's quiet for a long moment, turning the candy over in her palm. "So what is this? Honestly?"

"This is me telling you I love you. That I've loved you for years and I'm tired of pretending I don't." I reach up to touch her hand. "You have a week left here. Let me show you how I feel. If you still think it's a bad idea when the program ends, it's over. I won't bother you again."

Her breath catches. "Jagger..."

"One week, kitten. Let me prove to you that this is real. That it's worth the risk."

She stares down at me for what feels like forever, war playing out across her features.

Finally, she nods. "One week."

The relief that floods through me is overwhelming. One week to show her that what we have is worth fighting for. One week to convince her that we can make this work.

One week to make her mine for good.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

DELANEY

I wake up in Jagger's bed with his arm wrapped around my waist. For a moment, I just lie there, letting myself pretend this is normal. That waking up next to this man isn't the most complicated thing I've ever done.

Then reality crashes back in, and I remember exactly how fucked I am.

I slept with my best friend's brother in the woods last night.

Then again back in his cabin. And again after that.

Three times total, if we're keeping score, which apparently my guilt-ridden brain is.

Each time was intense and overwhelming and amazing.

Each time left me feeling more connected to him and more terrified of what that means.

"Morning, kitten," Jagger groans against my neck. "How are you feeling?"

Confused. Guilty. Satisfied in ways I didn't know were possible. Completely and utterly screwed.

"Like I need coffee," I say instead, which is also true.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my ear. "I can make that happen. But first..."



His hand slides down my hip, and I know exactly what he's thinking. Part of me wants to give in again, to lose myself in him and forget about everything else. But the rational part of my brain is screaming that I need to get my shit together.

"I should go," I tell him, sitting up and reaching for my scattered clothes. "People will notice if I'm not in my cabin."

"Let them notice." His fingers trace patterns on my bare back.

"Jagger..." I start, but he cuts me off.

"I know you're scared. I know this is complicated. But what we have is real."

Real. Yes, it's definitely that. So real it terrifies me.

I get dressed quickly, acutely aware of him watching my every move. When I turn to leave, he catches my hand.

"One week," he reminds me. "You promised me one week."

I nod, not trusting my voice, and slip out of his cabin before I can change my mind.

The next few days pass in a blur of professional competence and personal chaos.

During the day, I throw myself into the program with renewed energy, and I can't deny that being with Jagger is making me better at everything.

I'm sharper in my conversations with Ms. Chen, bold enough to share ideas I might have kept to myself before.

I'm getting better at the wilderness stuff too—knots, navigation, even basic first aid.

It's like having him believe in me makes me believe in myself.

"You're on fire today," Ms. Chen tells me after I successfully lead a group discussion about sustainable tourism practices. "This passion is exactly what Trailbound needs."

Passion. If she only knew where that passion is really coming from.

Brett, meanwhile, is getting more desperate by the day.

His ideas are starting to sound recycled and hollow, especially compared to the enthusiasm I'm bringing to every conversation.

I should feel bad about outshining him so completely, but honestly?

After years of guys like him talking over me, it feels pretty damn good.

But the professional high is nothing compared to my secret life with Jagger.

He finds ways to get me alone constantly.

His cabin. Mine. The ranger station after hours.

A secluded spot by the lake where he spread out a blanket and made me forget my own name under the stars.

Each encounter is rough and demanding in ways that should probably concern me, but instead leave me craving more.

There's something about him that brings out a side of myself I didn't know existed. The need to claw at his back, to bite his shoulder, to match his intensity with my own. It's primal and fierce and completely addictive.

But it's the after that really gets to me.

After, when he pulls me close and traces lazy patterns on my skin while telling me things I never knew he noticed.

Like how I never drink my coffee until it's lukewarm.

How I unconsciously play with my hair when I'm thinking hard about something.

How I got a tiny scar on my hand from helping Maya move a bookshelf sophomore year.

"You remember that?" I ask one night, looking down at the barely visible mark.

"I've got a file on you, kitten," he teases.

It's those moments that undo me completely.

When he massages my feet after a particularly long hike, or shows up at my cabin with the kind of protein bars I mentioned liking once in passing.

When he tells me about his childhood, about the pressure of being the responsible older brother, about why he chose to work in conservation.

It's like falling in love with someone I already loved, if that makes any sense.

Which makes the guilt so much worse.

Every night, I text Maya. Just normal stuff, like how the program is going, funny stories about city people trying to be outdoorsy, complaints about Brett's insufferable personality. She texts back with updates about work and her dating life and random

thoughts about everything and nothing.

She has no idea I'm sleeping with her brother. No idea that I'm breaking the most important promise I ever made to her.

"You're thinking too hard," Jagger tells me one evening as we lie tangled together in his bed.

"I can't help it. This is..."

"Perfect?" he suggests, pressing a kiss to my chest.

"Temporary," I correct. "This is temporary, Jagger. You know that, right?"

His arm tightens around me. "It doesn't have to be."

"Yes, it does. We go back to real life soon, and then this has to stop."

"Why?"

"Because I won't lose Maya over this. Because I can't be the girl who breaks up the Maddox siblings."

He's quiet for a long moment, and I can feel him choosing his words carefully.

"What if Maya is more understanding than you think?"

"And what if she's not? What if telling her ruins everything? I can't take that risk."

"So you're just going to pretend this never happened?"

The pain in his voice cuts right through me. "I don't know. Maybe. I haven't figured it out yet."

"I love you," he says, like the words are a talisman against all my fears.

"I love you too," I whisper back. "That's the problem."

Our last official day of the program dawns clear and cold, with the kind of crisp mountain air that makes everything feel possible. We're doing final presentations today, giving a pitch for our proposed Trailbound campaign.

Brett goes first, and his presentation is exactly what I expected.

Slick and surface-level, full of buzzwords about authenticity and connection that ring completely hollow.

He talks about social media campaigns and influencer partnerships and limited-edition product drops that will "leverage environmental consciousness to drive brand engagement. "

It's everything Jagger accused him of that night at dinner. Marketing that exploits environmental concerns without actually addressing them.

When it's my turn, I feel more confident than I have in years.

My presentation is built around the giving campaign I proposed at dinner, but I've fleshed it out with implementation timelines, budget projections, and measurable impact goals.

I talk about building genuine partnerships with park services, about creating programs that will outlast any single marketing cycle.

"The goal isn't to sell more products," I conclude, looking directly at Ms. Chen.

"It's to create a community of people who genuinely care about protecting the places we love.

Customers who become advocates. Employees who become ambassadors.

A brand that becomes synonymous with real environmental stewardship. "

The silence that follows is electric. Ms. Chen takes notes furiously, nodding along with everything I'm saying.

When I finish, Jagger catches my eye from across the room and gives me a small nod. The pride in his expression makes my chest twist.

Ms. Chen asks a few follow-up questions, all positive, all indicating that she's genuinely excited about the possibilities. Brett tries to interject with some last-minute modifications to his pitch, but it's clear where her head lies.

After the presentations, Ms. Chen pulls me aside.

"Delaney," she says. "I have to tell you, what you've presented is exactly the direction we want to go. The authenticity, the real impact, the long-term vision. It's everything we've been looking for."

My heart starts racing. "Does that mean...?"

She grins and gives me a conspiratorial wink. "The account is yours."

I have to bite my lip to keep from squealing like a teenager. "Thank you. Thank you so much. You won't regret this."

"I know I won't. Your passion for this work comes through in everything you do. That's not something you can fake."

She's right about that. My passion for this work is real. It's just tangled up with my passion for a certain park ranger.

After she walks away, I stand there for a moment, letting the reality sink in. I won. I actually won the biggest account of my career. This promotion is mine, and with it, everything I've been working toward for years.

I should be thinking about calling my boss, about strategy sessions and implementation timelines and all the practical details that come with landing a major client.

Instead, all I can think about is finding Jagger and sharing this moment with him.

I spot him heading toward the equipment storage area. I practically sprint across the clearing, weaving between other volunteers who are packing up their gear.

He's alone when I find him, organizing climbing ropes and checking inventory. The sight of him in his element, competent and focused, makes my heart skip.

"Guess who won the account?" I call out.

He turns, and when he sees the grin on my face, his whole expression lights up. I don't think about it, I just launch myself at him, jumping into his arms with enough force to make him stagger backward.

"You did it," he says, spinning me around once before setting me down. "Fuck, kitten, I'm so proud of you."

"I can't believe it. Ms. Chen said my passion came through, that it's exactly what they were looking for."

"Of course it did. You were incredible." His hands frame my face, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones. "You're incredible."

"We should celebrate," I say, pressing a kiss to his lips.

"How do you want to celebrate?"

"I love everything we've done," I tell him, feeling heat creep up my neck. "But that first night we had sex... when I pretended I didn't want it... there was something about that."

His eyes darken immediately. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I nod, suddenly shy but also electric with anticipation. "Is that weird?"

"Not weird at all." His voice drops to that commanding tone that makes my knees weak. "I have an idea."

That night, I turn the key to my cabin with shaking hands. I'm wearing the only skirt I packed, a simple black thing that hits just above my knees, because Jagger specifically requested it.

I push open the door and step inside, looking around the familiar space. Everything looks normal, exactly as I left it this morning.

Until...

Arms wrap around me from behind, and suddenly I'm pressed against the wall beside



the door. I gasp, my heart hammering as I register the dark fabric covering his face.

Jagger is wearing a ski mask. Just like we discussed.

"Don't scream," he growls against my ear, his voice deliberately roughened. "Don't fight me."

This is what I asked for, what we planned, but the reality of it sends adrenaline flooding through my system. The primal part of my brain that doesn't know this is a game kicks in, and I do exactly what we agreed I would do.

I run.

I twist out of his grip and bolt for the door, my heart racing as I hear him swear behind me. I make it outside and down the trail that leads away from the main camp, toward the more secluded part of the forest.

This is insane. This is reckless.

This is exactly what I wanted.

I can hear him behind me, not too close but close enough to keep the thrill alive. I'm fast, but he's faster, and he knows these trails better than I do. It's only a matter of time before he catches me.

When he does, it's at a bend in the trail where the trees grow thick on either side. His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me off the path and pressing me against the rough bark.

"Got you," he pants against my ear.

I take everything I have not to smile as his hands find the hem of my skirt, pushing it up around my waist. This is wrong and dangerous and absolutely perfect. Cool air hits my bare skin, the chill clashing with the heat between my legs.

I hear the scrape of his zipper, followed by the sharp flick of a pocket knife snapping open. My pulse spikes at the rush of what we planned, what I asked him to do.

The cold blade traces my inner thigh, skating dangerously close to my pussy. The steel grazes my skin, never cutting but promising everything.

“You stay still while I fuck you,” he commands, “and you won’t get hurt.”

The knife presses just a fraction harder, making my thighs quake, making me ache for him in ways I can’t untangle.

I turn my head further, curls falling over my face to mask the grin I can’t hold back. Why does this turn me on? With Jagger, it’s safe, exhilarating, like he’s cracked open some hidden part of me. I’ve never felt so free, so alive, letting him push limits I’d never dared to touch before.

His hand shifts, and I feel the thick, pierced tip of his cock brushing against my pussy. My hips twitch in response, dying to feel him inside me. The blade presses harder into my thigh, never breaking skin but so close, the sharp edge creating a delicious, aching need that makes my core clench.

“I’m going to fuck you now, kitten.”

I whimper, caught between the knife’s threat and the torment of his cock teasing me.

Then I hear it.

A scream from somewhere behind us. High-pitched and horrified.

"Get off of her!"

Oh, fuck. Oh, no.

Jagger pulls away immediately, his hands coming up as he spins toward the voice. I yank my skirt down and try to process what's happening.

Ms. Chen is standing on the trail, her face white with shock. Her eyes flick to the knife. She has her phone in her hand, already dialing.

"Get away from her! I'm calling the police," she shouts, her voice shaking.

"No!" I gasp, stepping forward. "Ms. Chen, wait!"

Jagger rips off the ski mask, his hair sticking up at odd angles. He quickly closes and pockets the knife. "Ms. Chen, I'm sorry. It's just us. Nothing is wrong."

She stares between us, taking in my disheveled appearance, his guilty expression, the mask in his hands.

I can see the exact moment she puts it all together.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

JAGGER

The silence Ms. Chen leaves behind feels loaded. The kind that settles right before everything blows up, and I already know I'm at the center of the wreckage.

Delaney stares in the direction Ms. Chen stormed off, pale as bone. I can almost hear her dreams cracking apart, piece by piece.

"We need to go after her," I say, already moving. "Explain what happened."

"Explain what?" Delaney's voice is hollow. "That we were role-playing a twisted fantasy in the woods? That's going to make it better?"

She's right, but I can't just stand here and watch everything fall apart. I catch up to Ms. Chen halfway back to the main camp, Delaney trailing behind me.

"Ms. Chen, please wait," I call out.

She stops but doesn't turn around immediately. Her eyes find mine, and whatever warmth was there before? It's gone. Buried.

"This is exactly the kind of behavior Trailbound cannot be associated with," she says before I get a word out. "It's inappropriate and frankly disturbing."

"It was role play, just two consenting adults who have known each other for years. I promise you."

"Role play." She says with disgust. "In a public place where anyone could have stumbled across you. Including other program participants."

"We were far from camp..."

"You were engaged in sexual activity while serving as the head ranger of this program. She was competing for my company's business." Ms. Chen's voice gets sharper with each word. "The optics alone are completely unacceptable."

Delaney tenses beside me, but I push forward. "Delaney earned that account through her own merit. Her ideas, her passion, her expertise. What's between us personally has nothing to do with her professional capabilities."

"How can I possibly believe that now? How do I know she didn't use your relationship to gain an advantage?"

"Because you know her work," I argue. "You've seen what she can do. You said yourself that her passion comes through in everything."

"Her passion for what, exactly?" Ms. Chen cuts me off. "For conservation? Or for seducing authority figures to get what she wants?"

I step forward, anger flaring hot in my chest. "Don't you dare talk about her that way."

Delaney's hand on my arm stops me. "Jagger, don't."

Ms. Chen looks between us. "You don't represent the kind of people we want to work with. The account goes to Sterling Creative." She pulls out her phone. "And I'll be having a conversation with your boss about tonight's... activities."

She walks away before either of us can respond, leaving us standing in the middle of the trail like the wreckage of a particularly spectacular car crash.

"Fuck," I breathe, running my hands through my hair. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry doesn't fix this. Sorry doesn't save my career."

This is my fault. All of it. I pushed for this week, convinced her to give us a chance, destroyed everything she's worked for.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I tell her. "That puritanical woman has no right to judge what we do in private."

"We were in the middle of the fucking forest, Jagger. Where anyone could find us. Where she did find us."

She shakes her head, backing away like she's trying to physically escape the weight of what just happened.

"It's my fault. I asked for this tonight, but I can't do this anymore. I can't be around you. I don't even know who I am right now. Why I even ask for things like this. This isn't me. It's like I've turned into some unhinged sex maniac."

Her voice cracks on the last word, and shame flickers across her face.

"This is so much more than sex between us. You know it," I say.

"You don't get it." She wraps her arms around herself. "You don't understand what this means for me."

"Then explain it to me."

"I blame myself," she continues, not looking at me. "I should have known better. I should have been stronger."

Each word feels like a knife between my ribs. She's talking about us like we're a disease she caught, something she should have been able to resist.

"What we have isn't a mistake," I tell her, moving closer. "What happened tonight was bad luck, bad timing, but it doesn't change how we feel about each other."

"Doesn't it?" She finally looks at me, and her eyes are full of tears she's fighting not to shed. "My career is ruined. The promotion I've been killing myself for is gone. And for what? A week of good sex with someone I can never have a real relationship with anyway?"

"We could have a real relationship."

"How?" Her voice cracks. "Maya would never forgive me."

"I know my sister. She'll be surprised, maybe upset at first, but she'll come around. She loves you."

"Not enough to forgive me for this." She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "God, what am I going to tell her? How do I explain that I threw away everything because I couldn't keep my hands off her brother?"

"You tell her the truth. That we fell in love."

"Love." She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "More like mutual destruction."

She steps back, creating distance between us. "This can't work, Jagger. It was stupid of me to think it could, even for a week."

"So that's it? You're just giving up?"

She turns to walk away, and panic claws at my chest.

"Delaney, wait..."

"I'm going back to my cabin to pack. The program ends tomorrow anyway." She doesn't look back. "This is over. Please respect that and don't come after me."

I watch her disappear into the darkness, taking my heart with her.

I don't sleep that night. I pace my cabin, replaying the conversation on a loop. Picking apart every word, every look, searching for something I could've said differently. Some way I could've made her stay.

By morning, I've come up with a dozen arguments, a hundred reasons why she's wrong about us being impossible. But when I get to her cabin, she's already gone.

"Delaney left about an hour ago," one of the other volunteers tells me. "Said she had an emergency."

An emergency. That's what I am to her now, some kind of disaster she needs to evacuate from before the damage spreads.

The other volunteers are packing up, getting ready for their own departures. Brett looks particularly pleased with himself, probably already planning how to spend the commission from landing the Trailbound account. The account that should have been Delaney's.

I want to punch something. Preferably his fucking face.



Instead, I throw myself into cleanup duties, trying to work off the rage and frustration and heartbreak that's eating me alive. Physical labor has always been my therapy, but today it's not enough. Nothing could be enough to fill the hole Delaney left behind.

My phone buzzes with a text from Maya: How was the program? How'd Delaney do?

I stare at the message for a long time, trying to figure out how to respond. How do I tell my sister that I fell in love with her best friend? That I ruined Delaney's career in the process? That the life I'm getting back to feels empty without the woman who just walked out of it?

I finally type back. I'll call you later.

Not exactly a lie, but not the truth either. Just like everything else about this week.

By afternoon, the last of the volunteers have left. I finish the final equipment checks and file my report, going through the motions of my job while my mind is hundreds of miles away.

Delaney is probably back to her apartment, her real life, the career she's going to have to rebuild from scratch because of me. She's probably already crafting explanations for her boss, trying to figure out how to spin what happened into something salvageable.

She's probably already regretting every moment we spent together.

The thought makes me fucking ill.

My phone rings, and for a wild moment, I think it might be her. That she's changed her mind, realized we can work through this together.

It's my supervisor instead, asking if I have time for a conversation about some concerns that have been brought to his attention regarding the volunteer program.

Ms. Chen, making good on her threat.

I close my eyes and try to prepare myself for another conversation where I have to defend what Delaney and I shared. Another person who's going to look at our love like it's something dirty and wrong.

But as I walk toward the main office, all I can think about is the look on Delaney's face when she said this was over.

The way she walked away without looking back.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

DELANEY

The call comes the next morning while I'm still in my pajamas, drinking coffee that tastes like ash and staring at my laptop screen without really seeing it.

"Delaney, we need to talk." My boss Edward's voice is carefully neutral, which is never a good sign. "Can you come in the office this morning?"

I know what this is about. Ms. Chen called them yesterday, probably within minutes of catching me in the woods with Jagger. I've been waiting for this shoe to drop since I got home.

"Of course," I manage. "What time?"

"How about ten? Conference room B."

Conference room B. The one they use for firing people because it's tucked away from the main area. Private. Discreet. Easy to escort someone out without causing a scene.

I hang up and stare at my reflection in the black screen of my phone. Yesterday, I was on top of the world. I thought I had won the biggest account of my career, felt more confident and capable than ever before, and was falling in love with a man who made me feel like I could conquer anything.

Now I'm about to lose my job because I couldn't keep my hands off my best friend's brother.

The meeting is exactly as humiliating as I expected. My boss is there, along with Janet from HR and Ms. Chen on speakerphone, her voice crisp and professional as she recounts finding me "engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior with a park employee while representing Morrison & Associates."

"The optics are extremely concerning," Ms. Chen continues. "It calls into question Ms. Holt's professionalism and judgment, as well as her ability to represent Trailbound's values."

I sit there taking it, my hands folded in my lap like a schoolgirl being scolded.

There's no point in defending myself. No way to explain that my relationship with Jagger had nothing to do with my professional performance without sounding like exactly the kind of person who would sleep with someone for career advancement.

"We've decided to award the account to Sterling Creative," Ms. Chen concludes. "Their approach aligns better with our company culture."

Brett's approach. The shallow, exploitative marketing that Jagger called out on the first night. But at least Brett kept his dick in his pants long enough to win.

After she hangs up, my boss delivers the final blow with the kind of practiced ease that comes from years of firing people.

"I'm sorry, Delaney. We can't overlook the professional judgment issues here. We have to let you go."

Professional judgment issues. That's what it comes down to. And they're right.

I never should've given in to that wild, reckless part of me. I played with fire, and now I'm burned.

I made the choice. I crossed the line.

And now I'm paying for it.

I clean out my desk in a haze, stuffing personal items into a cardboard box while my former colleagues pretend not to stare. Sabrina from accounting gives me a sympathetic smile. Marcus from the creative team avoids eye contact completely.

By noon, I'm standing on the sidewalk outside my former office building, holding my box of belongings and wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do with the rest of my life.

The first text from Jagger comes that afternoon.

I'm sorry. I know you're hurting and it's my fault. Please call me.

I delete it without responding.

The second one comes an hour later.

I love you. That doesn't change just because everything else went to shit.

Delete.

By evening, my phone is buzzing constantly. Texts, calls, voicemails, I don't listen to. I finally turn it off and shove it in a drawer, but that doesn't stop the flowers from arriving.

Tuesday: White roses with a note that says I'm not giving up on us.

Wednesday: Pink roses. Just talk to me.

Thursday: A mixed bouquet that probably cost more than my weekly grocery budget. Let me fix this. Let me take care of you.

I throw the notes away, but not before reading every one. Not before pressing my face into the petals and breathing in the scent. Not before hating myself for the way my heart races every time he reaches out.

Maya texts me Thursday night: Haven't heard from you since you got back. Everything okay?

I stare at the message for twenty minutes before typing back: Just tired. Busy catching up at work.

The lie sits in my stomach like a stone. This is what I've become. Someone who lies to her best friend. Someone who destroys everything she touches.

Friday morning, Maya shows up at my apartment unannounced.

"I brought pumpkin lattes," she announces, pushing past me into the living room. "And I'm not leaving until you tell me why you look like someone died."

She's wearing yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt, her hair in a messy bun, just like the college roommate who used to force me to eat actual food and not candy during finals week. The familiarity of it makes my chest tight with guilt.

"I'm fine," I lie, accepting the latte gratefully. "Just a rough week at work."

"Bullshit." She settles onto my couch, pulling her legs up under her. "You've been weird since you got back from that ranger program thing with my brother."

My heart stutters at the mention of him, but I keep my expression chill. "The program

was intense. I'm still recovering."

"That's it? Just tired from two weeks of camping?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

Maya studies my face with the kind of laser focus that made her a good psychology major. "Did something happen out there? With the client?"

The opening is right there. The perfect opportunity to tell her about losing the account, about getting fired, about how spectacularly I've fucked up my entire life. But I can't make the words come out.

Because telling her about the job means explaining why I lost it. And explaining why I lost it means telling her about Jagger. And telling her about Jagger means watching our friendship die in real time.

"The client went with the other agency," I say instead.

"Oh, babe." Maya's face crumples with sympathy. "I'm so sorry."

Her kindness makes everything worse. She's being the perfect friend. Supportive, caring, completely unaware that I've been lying to her.

My phone buzzes on the coffee table, lighting up with a new text message. I reach to silence it, but Maya's faster.

"Why is my brother texting you?" she asks, reading the name on the screen.

My blood turns to ice. "Maya, don't..."

But she's already reading the message, her expression shifting from curiosity to confusion to something that looks like horror.

I can't sleep without you next to me. I love you. Please don't shut me out.

The silence that follows is deafening. Maya stares at the phone like it's a snake that might bite her, then slowly looks up at me.

"This is from my brother," she says quietly.

I can't speak. Can't move. Can barely breathe.

"My brother sent you this message about..." She trails off, reading it again. "About sleeping with you."

"Maya," I try to cut in.

"How long?" Her voice is deadly calm. "How long have you been fucking my brother?"

The words knock the air out of me. I've never heard Maya use that tone before.

"It's not what you think," I say, the lie scraping my throat on the way out.

"It's not what I think?" She stands up abruptly, pacing to the window. "What I think is that my best friend has been lying to me. What I think is that you've been sleeping with my brother behind my back after promising me you'd never even think about him that way."

Tears burn my eyes. "Maya, please let me explain."



"Explain what? How you've been playing the long game? How you pretended to be my friend just to get close to him?"

"That's not true! Our friendship isn't about him. It's never been about him."

"Really? Because right now it feels like everything has been about him."

"She turns back to face me, and I can see tears in her eyes too."

"Do you have any idea what this feels like?"

Finding out that my best friend and my brother have been lying to me?

That while I was worried about you being sad about work, you were actually heartbroken over my brother? "

"I wanted to tell you."

"When? When exactly were you planning to tell me?"

Her anger crashes over me like a wave I can't fight. I swallow hard, staring at the floor. "He kissed me a year ago. I ignored it. Ignored him, until two weeks ago. And then I couldn't anymore. It dragged up everything. Feelings he's had for me since the first time he saw me."

Feelings I think I always had for him, but I didn't want to admit it. "

The admission hangs between us—a grenade with the pin pulled.

Maya stares at me for a long moment. "Jesus Christ, Delaney."

She grabs her purse and latte. "You made me a promise. You swore you'd never think about him that way, and I believed you. I trusted you."

"I tried to keep that promise. I tried so hard."

"Clearly not hard enough." She stops at the door, her hand on the knob. "You know what the worst part is? It's not even that you fell for him. It's that you lied to me about it."

"Maya, please don't leave like this. Let's talk about it."

"Talk about what? About how you chose him over me? About how our entire friendship has been built on a lie?" She shakes her head. "I need space, Delaney. I need to figure out if there's anything real left between us."

The door slams behind her, and I'm alone with her words and the devastating realization that I've lost the most important person in my life.

I sink to the floor and let myself cry. Not for the job or the account or the career that's in ruins. But for Maya. For the friendship I've destroyed with my selfishness and lies.

One of the petals slips from the flowers Jagger sent, landing on the coffee table. Just like everything else beautiful in my life, it's dying.

And it's all my fault.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 7:56 am*

JAGGER

The meeting with my supervisor went better than I expected.

"Look, Jagger," Bill said, leaning back in his chair with the weary expression of a man who'd dealt with too many personnel issues over the years. "What you did was stupid and reckless. Could have put the entire program at risk if that client had decided to make a bigger stink about it."

I nodded, accepting the verbal lashing I deserved. "I understand that, sir."

"But," he continued, "you've been one of our best rangers. And frankly, good rangers are hard to come by. So here's what's going to happen."

He slid a packet across his desk. "Sexual harassment training. Workplace boundaries. Professional conduct. You're going to complete every module, pass every test, and then we're going to pretend this conversation never happened."

Relief flooded through me, though it was tempered by the knowledge that keeping my job didn't fix the real damage I'd caused with Delaney. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down again."

"See that you don't. And Jagger? Next time you want to get involved with someone connected to a program you're running, maybe use your brain instead of what's in your pants."

Point taken.

I spent the rest of the week throwing myself into work, trying to outrun the guilt and regret that followed me everywhere.

I completed the mandatory training modules, filed reports, inventoried equipment, and took on every extra shift available.

Anything to keep my mind off the fact that Delaney wouldn't answer my calls or texts.

It's the end of the week, and I still haven't heard a word from Delaney. Every time my phone rings, I think it might be her.

But this time, it's my sister's name on the screen.

"Hey, Maya."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Her voice is sharp enough to cut glass.  
"Delaney? Really? My best friend?"

I close my eyes and lean against the supply closet wall. "Maya, let me explain."

"Don't bother. I've heard enough," she spits back.

"We need to talk about this face to face," I tell her.

But she's already hung up.

I make the drive in record time, my truck eating up the miles while I practice what I'm going to say. How do I explain years of wanting someone I couldn't have? How do I make my sister understand that this isn't some casual hookup or conquest?

Maya's apartment building is one of those modern complexes with too much glass and not enough character. I find her unit and knock, bracing myself for the confrontation.

She opens the door and it's obvious she's been crying, which makes me feel like the biggest piece of shit alive.

"I told you not to come," she says, but she steps aside to let me in anyway.

Her apartment is bright and cozy, with plants everywhere and photos of her and Delaney covering every surface. The evidence of their friendship surrounds me, making my guilt even heavier.

"Talk," Maya says, crossing her arms. "You've got five minutes."

I take a deep breath and dive in. "I love her."

"Oh, please. You love all my friends. Remember Jessica from sophomore year? Or Sarah from my study group? You've had a thing for half the girls I know."

"That's not true." The accusation stings because there's a grain of truth in it. I did date Jessica. And I may have flirted with Sarah. But neither of them meant anything. "This is different. Delaney is different."

"Different how? Because she held out longer?"

"Because I've been in love with her since the day I met her. Not just attracted to her. Not interested in her. In love with her. For years."

Maya's expression wavers slightly, but her arms stay crossed. "If that's true, then why did you wait so long to act on it?"

"Because I'm an idiot." I run my hand along my beard. "Because I convinced myself that keeping my distance was the right thing to do, until I just couldn't hold back anymore."

"Keeping your distance was the right thing to do," she bites back.

"This is my fault," I admit. "All of it. I pushed for this when Delaney wanted to stay away. I convinced her to give us a chance when she knew it was a bad idea. She's been torn up about this from the beginning. She didn't want to break her promise to you."

She never wanted to hurt you, Maya. She loves you more than anything. "

Maya studies my face for a long moment. "Go on," she says.

"Listen, I'll back off. Completely. If that's what makes Delaney happy, if that's what heals your friendship, then I'll disappear from her life." The words taste like ash on my tongue. "She deserves to have you in her corner, not to lose you because of my selfish bullshit."

"You'd do that? Just walk away?"

"If it's what Delaney needs? Yeah. I love her enough to let her go if that's what's best for her."

Maya is quiet for a long time, processing what I've said.

"She really tried to resist all of this? Resist you?"

"Even when we were together, even when she was happy, she was always thinking about you, Maya."

"And you? How do you really feel about her?"

"Like she's the other half of my soul. Like I'd rather cut off my own arm than see her hurt. Like I want to spend the rest of my life making her laugh and keeping her safe and proving that she's the most important thing in my world."

The honesty in my voice must reach her because Maya's expression softens completely.

"Shit," she says quietly. "You really do love her."

"More than I've ever loved anyone."

She's quiet again, staring at the photos on her coffee table. Pictures of her and Delaney at graduation, at various birthdays, on random adventures. Years of friendship documented in snapshot moments.

"I need to think about this," she says finally. "And I need to talk to her again. Because you're right about one thing, she doesn't deserve to lose me because she fell in love with an idiot."

I can't help but smile at that. "An idiot, huh?"

"The biggest idiot I know. But also my brother. And maybe... maybe I've been selfish too. Asking her to promise something that might not have been fair to ask."

Hope flickers in my chest, but I tamp it down. This isn't about me getting what I want. It's about Delaney getting her best friend back.

"Just be nice to her, okay?" I ask. "She's been through enough."

Maya nods. "I will."

"And whatever happens between Delaney and me, I don't want this to ruin things between us either. You're my sister. I love you."

"I love you too, you massive fuckup. Even when you make decisions that complicate everyone's lives."

I pull her into a hug, relief flooding through me as she hugs me back. It's not complete forgiveness, not yet, but it's hope.

And right now, hope is all I have.

Three days pass in agonizing silence. I give Delaney space, but it's torture. I want to drive to her place, bang on her door, and demand she let me fix this somehow.

Instead, I throw myself into work and wait for her to make the decision. I put the decision completely in her hands.

Tuesday night, I'm finishing up paperwork in the ranger station when I hear a car door slam outside. It's late, well past visiting hours, so I grab a flashlight and head out to investigate.

The sight that greets me makes my heart stop.

Delaney is standing beside her car, looking nervous and so fucking beautiful that I have to grip the doorframe to keep from rushing toward her.

"Hi," she says softly.

"Hi," I say, trying not to sound too eager.



"I worked things out with Maya. Whatever you said to her, it got through."

Relief floods through me. "She forgave you?"

"It took some long, honest conversations. But yes. Mostly." Delaney's eyes shine with unshed tears. "She knows I'm not using her to get to you. She knows this is real."

My phone rings, cutting through the moment. Maya's name on the screen makes me look at Delaney in confusion.

"Speak of the devil. It's my sister."

"Answer it," she says with a small smile.

I accept the call, putting it on speaker. "Maya?"

"I told Delaney that I owe you both an apology."

"You don't owe me anything," I say.

"Yes, I do. I was protecting myself, but I didn't consider that it might prevent you and Delaney from being happy."

I look at Delaney, who's now wiping tears from her eyes.

"The truth is," Maya continues, "I can't think of anyone I'd rather have as a sister-in-law."

Sister-in-law. It's exactly what I've wanted since the day I met Delaney. I know it sounds crazy, but I would have married her that first day if I'd had the chance. I've never been able to picture my life with anyone else.

"Maya... thank you," Delaney says, fighting back tears.

"Don't thank me yet. I fully expect to be maid of honor when you two finally get your act together. And I can't wait to be the cool aunt who spoils your kids rotten."

I can't help but grin, seeing my future with perfect clarity.

I see Delaney in a white dress, Maya crying happy tears as she stands beside her.

Kids with Delaney's eyes and a stubborn streak.

Sunday dinners where Maya spoils them with candy and stories about how their parents were idiots who took forever to admit they belonged together.

"I'll let you two talk," Maya adds. "Have fun kids."

The line goes dead, leaving us alone in the soft glow of the ranger station's lights.

"So," I say, not quite daring to believe this is real. "What does this mean for us?"

Delaney steps closer, close enough that I can see the hope and love shining in her eyes.

"It means I love you," she says. "It means I want to be with you, whatever that looks like. It means I'm tired of running from the best thing that's ever happened to me."

I don't trust myself to speak. Instead, I close the distance between us and frame her face with my hands, staring into her eyes like I'm trying to stamp this moment.

"I love you, kitten," I tell her. "I love you more than I thought it was possible to love another person. You've been carved into my bones since the moment I saw you in

that dorm room.”

When I kiss her, it's taking back every piece of myself I lost when she walked away. She surrenders against me, her arms wrapping around my neck, and for the first time since this whole clusterfuck started, the world makes sense again.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"So what now?" she asks.

"Now we figure it out. Together." I brush a tear from her cheek with my thumb. "No more running. No more pretending. Just us."

"Just us," she agrees, smiling through her tears.

And as I hold her, surrounded by the forest that finally brought us together, I know we're going to be okay. Better than okay.

We're going to be everything.

THE END.

## Page 13

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JAGGER

Tomorrow, Delaney becomes mine completely. My wife, my partner, the other half of my goddamn soul.