



Red, White, and You (Merry Little Midlife #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: Hes wild and untethered, yet the only place shes ever felt truly grounded is in his arms

When Brie and Brady reunite at a summer camp for adults twenty years after their divorce, the fireworks aren't the only things lighting up the night. But though their heat is off the charts hot, will love be enough to bridge the gap between her corporate lifestyle and his carefree existence?

It certainly wasn't enough the first time around, but they'd be foolish to let a connection this powerful slip away from them twice.

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The pamphlet sits on my desk, its color scheme playful and bright against the stark monochrome décor of my office.

It's out of place here, a sore thumb. Which is enough to give me pause even as the advertisement tries to tempt me with images of adults playing—actually playing—in ways I haven't considered in years.

From canoe races to ropes courses, arts and crafts and campfires...

this adults-only summer camp promises to deliver everything I left behind in my search for wealth and power in a man's world.

But don't we all leave those things behind? Everyone stops playing at some age, just as surely as we stop believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. It's normal, natural even.

And yet... the little girl I've tucked away inside begs me to go. There's something so alluring in the concept. Or perhaps they simply have an incredible marketing team.

It's just one week; I can leave the firm for one week, can't I?

God knows, I've hired only the best. If anyone knows what they're capable of, it's me.

I personally trained them to be fierce and in control, both in and out of the courtroom.

Formed them in my image.

Surely, my partners and team can put out any fires that arise while I'm gone .

It's just one week.

I reach for the flier and slide it toward me, tapping my red fingernail against the bright green trees. Sure, it all looks great. On paper.

But what will the actual experience be like? Fun? Or... exhausting?

Do I want to break nails on ropes courses and get blisters from hiking boots that haven't been worn in—or even worn? Can I really spare the time away for an outcome I can't predict? Take a week off on... a gamble?

It's not a crime to take a vacation. The world won't end if I unplug for a few days. At least, that's what the #YOLO crowd is always saying, anyway. Self-care is a necessity, not an option —or some nonsense like that.

Or my favorite guilt-heavy slogan: How can I take care of others if I don't take care of myself?

Easy. I don't have any others to care for.

“Problem solved.”

I shake my head. The fact that I'm even having this inner debate is laughable. And now I'm talking to myself. I push the flier away in disgust. It's not for me.

Relaxation.

Free time.

These are not words in my vocabulary.

I work hard. Hustle even harder.

When given the choice between self-care and companionship or building a law firm that rivals the best in New York, it wasn't a choice at all. All work and no play might have made Jack Torrance a dull boy, but it made Brielle Donovan-West rich as hell and powerful beyond her wildest dreams .

I make grown men cower in the courtroom, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Self-care is a foolish idea created by influencers and companies trying to push eye creams and cucumber masks.

By women's magazines who'd love for you to believe you're doing too much...

while telling you three pages later you're clearly not doing enough.

Mommy bloggers and marketing teams intent on pitting us against one another, doing their best to convince women that choosing careers over children is somehow unnatural or wrong, while simultaneously calling women who choose children over a career lazy and privileged.

Well, screw that and screw them.

My self-care is this career.

My baby is this law firm.

A week spent in the wilderness, getting eaten by bugs, bears, and God only knows what else? Hard pass.

And yet...

The tug in my chest is hard to ignore, annoying as it is.

I stand and pace the office. Why am I struggling with this decision? It's beyond simple; I've already decided not to go.

But the packed duffel bag beside my desk tells me that, for an hour before bed last night, and somehow still into this morning, I convinced myself I should take off a week from work and go have fun. I even reached out to my assistant and asked her to help me gather and pack what I might need.

A few glasses of pinot noir and I was ready to drop everything and... what, go play ?

"Good grief," I say under my breath.

Plopping back down into my leather chair, I slide the flier back to me and stare at the colorful image of grown women playing in the mud. Of all the ridiculous notions. Mud ?

There's a light knock at my door. I look up as Christina opens it and pops her head in before I can even respond, then steps inside, a frown pulling her eyebrows down. "What are you doing here, Brie?"

Pursing my lips, I motion to the paperwork on my desk.

"I thought you left the office hours ago."

I give her a dramatic eye roll and click the mouse to look like I'm working, not talking myself into—or out of —this trip.

My senior partner huffs. “You’re not talking yourself out of this. Andi spent the whole morning shopping for you.”

Right. Shopping for hiking gear and bug spray, things I will never use again. Our poor executive assistant has been off wasting time and money instead of tending to the responsibilities we pay her to manage.

See? Proof that this whole thing is silly.

“Come on .” I groan as I open the brochure and stab at a picture in the center of the tri-fold. “Can you even picture me on an inflatable water slide in the middle of a lake?”

She tilts her head, pursing her lips as she considers the question, then finally says, “No, but—”

“Exactly my point. I don’t belong in a forest. With trees and dirt and bugs and... people.” I shiver dramatically.

She laughs, but quickly covers her mouth. “When is the last time you took a vacation, Brie?”

“ Vacation , Chris? Really? Vacations are in Mykonos or Mo’orea—”

“You’re going. You know I can handle things while you’re gone.” She crosses her arms. “If you stay, you’ll only offend me and hurt my feelings.”

My eyebrows make a slow ascent up my forehead. “You’d have to have feelings in order for me to hurt them... ”

She flashes a wicked grin and her dark eyes disappear briefly with the movement.

“Touché. But that’s why I’m good at my job.

And why you can absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, trust me to run things while you’re gone.

” She picks up the duffel bag and holds it out to me. “Come on. It’s time. Chop chop.”

“You’re being rather pushy. Was it you?” I narrow my eyes, watching my partner for any hint that she’s behind this. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Christina scoffs. “Please. I’d at least have the decency to send you to Mykonos or Mo’orea.”

I laugh, but the sound fades quickly as I realize I’ve risen to my feet and walked around the desk to stand before her. Am I really doing this? I can’t say my curiosity isn’t piqued, try as I might to convince myself otherwise. But I can’t ignore the burning question in my mind.

Make that two burning questions in my mind.

The first: what would it be like to be a kid again?

To play games and... roast marshmallows?

I grimace. Sounds sticky and.... like a stomachache waiting to happen.

So, no marshmallows.

Would I even know how to relax enough to enjoy it all?

Not the s'mores, obviously, but all the other stuff?

I can't remember the last time I relaxed, in the true sense of the word.

Sure, I have a glass or two of wine after work, curled up in my pajamas on the couch as I scan the latest law journal, but even I have to admit that this unwinding ritual of mine feels more like routine than relaxation at this point.

But this is the life I chose, and I stand by that.

Most days.

Chris clears her throat and I meet her gaze .

She raises her eyebrows.

I shake my head. I'm not going.

There's just no way.

I won't enjoy myself.

Corporate America isn't just a blanket term for the working business class—it's an all-consuming machine, a lifestyle that sucks you in, devours and controls you, and if you're not careful, that same machine will chew you up and spit you out.

So I've had to be diligent. Serious. Meticulous.

I've had to work twice as hard and twice as long as the men in my field to prevent this corporate world from bringing me to my knees.

Now it bows to me , not the other way around.

While my friends were having fun, then having babies, I was working my way up the corporate ladder, and now...

My shoulders rise and fall on a heavy sigh.

Well, now , I'm forty-three years old with no social life, no spouse, and no friends. I left those things behind because our life plans—and our schedules—just didn't line up. As I built my firm, it became more and more difficult to keep in touch with people outside of colleagues and clients.

Even my marriage to Brady West was over before our five-year anniversary.

Which brings me to the second burning question, and the one that has me reaching for the duffel bag.

If Brady has anything to do with this, I owe it to myself to go.

I sacrificed friendship and love for this corner office that overlooks Manhattan through floor-to-ceiling glass windows, and a custom walk-in closet that takes up a third of my penthouse and houses Jimmy, Christian, and Valentino—the only men who never question me about my long hours or make me feel guilty about wanting a career over, well, literally everything else.

Something tightens in my chest.

Is that longing... or dread?

It's ridiculous that even a small part of me wants to go to a summer camp for adults. What kind of people will be there? Surely not serious people with careers and

aspirations. Who has the time?

“It’s paid for.”

I snort. As if money is the issue here.

“Someone really wants you to do this, Brielle.”

“Someone,” I murmur. “But who?” The niggling at the back of my mind tells me exactly who .

Chris shrugs. “Beats me. A client?”

I cock an eyebrow.

“A secret admirer?”

I scoff. Not likely.

“A rival firm?” Her lips twitch. “Sweet revenge after losing a case against you.”

The envelope arrived a week ago and I’ve considered every option, from my sister to former clients, to a guy I dated briefly a few years ago. But none of the potential senders fit.

None, save for one.

The only one who could make me consider this for even a hiccup of time.

And it’s that tug in my gut, that deep knowing without truly knowing that decided the outcome long before I admitted it to myself. The signs are all there. From the name of

the camp to the number of the cabin...

The unmarked envelope, hand-delivered by courier. Inside the envelope was the flier and a small, bright green Post-It note attached to it that read :

Paid in full. Cabin 17.

My favorite number. The day I met my ex-husband.

“You’re doing this, aren’t you?” Chris asks.

Of course I am. It’s so obvious why , but I can’t tell Chris.

She doesn’t even know about my marriage, first of all, and second, I don’t want to speak my assumptions out loud for fear that I’m wrong.

For fear that I’ll go there and he won’t.

For fear that I’ll make this leap and Brady won’t be waiting for me within Cabin 17.

But I have to know—and there’s only one way to find out.

Tightening my fingers around the strap of my duffel, I brace myself for what I’m about to do, then give her one curt nod. “I’ve lost my mind, haven’t I?”

But even as I say that, I know it’s not true. Insanity was leaving Brady West in the first place. Returning to him might be the most sound decision I’ve made in my forty-three years of life.

So, on the off chance that this invite is from my ex-husband, I can’t not go.

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With no way of knowing when or even if she'll show, my chest is a tight knot of anxiety—a rare feeling that I'm not a fan of.

But this woman has always been able to make me feel ; whether pleasure or pain, Brielle Donovan-West heightened all of my senses, amplified every experience.

She's a tornado, my ex-wife, a force to be reckoned with.

She changes worlds with a look, alters lives with a word.

She turned mine upside down the second she walked into it.

Then she absolutely decimated it the day she left.

I've never been the same.

And there's absolutely no way she'll show.

The cabin number is way too obvious. Even after all this time apart, choosing Cabin 17 was a dead giveaway, wasn't it? A glaring neon sign that told her exactly who was responsible for the invitation. Add to that the fact that I gave the camp my last name...

Would knowing that I'm behind this make her want to come... or stay away?

It's the unknowing that has me unable to sit still. An itch that can't be scratched.

I groan as I pace the small cabin, scanning the space to make sure I've set everything up perfectly.

I check the cabinet in the bathroom again, ensuring—and not for the first time—that I've supplied her with all of the things she once loved.

Her favorite face cream from La Mer, assuming she still uses it; a plethora of eye masks; a bottle of makeup remover with the little cotton pads she always had tucked beneath the sink...

A vase of fresh flowers sits on the bathroom counter, peonies in various shades of pink...

Brand new linens hang from every towel rod. The bed has been outfitted with bedding and sheets with price tags that made my eyes bulge...

Little touches and details that now make me question myself.

This was a stupid idea.

She's not going to come.

If she's anything like the woman I've read about over the years—a workaholic who eats, sleeps, and breathes success in everything she sets out to do—a summer camp for adults is her worst nightmare.

I can only imagine the look on her face when she opened her mail and saw the brochure.

Surprise, undoubtedly, quickly followed by disgust. She probably thought it was a prank, a poor excuse for a joke made by one of her colleagues.

The formidable Brielle Donovan-West taking a week off to play ?

Unheard of.

Jesus, I'm an idiot. Why did I think this would work? She's not the girl I fell in love with anymore. Chances are, she's not even the career-driven woman who left me because our differences grew too monumental to conquer.

This Brielle is the CEO of a highly regarded law firm. A cutthroat attorney who has never lost a case.

She's not going to frolic in the forest .

And sending the invitation anonymously? Fuck me, that's just creepy. I should have picked up the phone and called. Like a normal, non-creepy person.

“Stupid.” I shake my head and tighten my fists in my hair, then freeze.

She's going to think I need a haircut.

I should have gotten a haircut.

Growling, I tug at the strands, then try to comb them back into place with my fingers.

Just shy of two decades later and the thought of seeing her again has me feeling like a lovestruck boy, consumed with nerves and doubt I can't seem to shake.

What if she's forgotten all about me? Not in the true sense of the word, as people don't often forget their first love—or first spouse—but what if she moved on? What if she was able to find love and happiness like I was never able to?

Brie could be in a serious relationship, something private that I wouldn't have been able to find with a simple internet search, and my little invite to spend the week at Camp West isn't just ridiculous but highly inappropriate.

I groan as I run my hands over my face. I should have shaved. Do I have time?

I glance at my watch as a car rolls to a stop at the base of the exterior stairs. The camp is alive with arrivals today, as it is every Friday afternoon, but this car is right outside this cabin.

My pulse speeds as I peek through the screen door to the sleek, black town car.

Holy shit. She's here.

It takes me a few beats to move. Shock and fear war with the excitement now blooming in my chest, and I find myself frozen in place.

She came .

When I can finally convince my feet to move, I stride to the door and peer out. An older man with gray hair and a bushy white mustache, dressed in a sharp black suit, opens the back door on the passenger side of the vehicle.

I hold my breath.

One slender leg slides out, then the other, two black high heels planted firmly in the dirt. I smile; only my ex-wife would show up to a campground in the Pocono Mountains wearing designer shoes.

As I wait for her to climb out of the car, seconds tick by slowly. Her driver stands beside the open door, patient and still with his hand extended to help her out, but she

doesn't move.

She's having second thoughts. Of course she is.

Brie might be as shocked as I am that she's here.

I'll give her a few minutes, but if she starts to leave, I'm throwing myself in front of her car.

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Just over three hours later—and not nearly long enough to complete my extensive to-do list—I’m forced to exit the vehicle in the middle of a forest in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Well, not forced in the true sense of the word, but if my driver clears his throat one more time, I’m going to be concerned for his health.

With a deep sigh, I ask, “The time for changing my mind has passed, hasn’t it, Clarence?”

“Yes, Ms. Donovan-West.”

“Ten years, ma’am.”

As I slide my hand into his, I say, “You’re never going to call me Brielle, are you?”

Clarence’s thick mustache twitches with the ghost of a smile. “No, ma’am.”

When I rise to my feet, my heels crunch in the dirt and I frown at the sound.

Further, as I breathe in the forest air, it occurs to me that the scent of the earth beneath my feet is stronger than the scent of pine—which certainly isn’t a good sign.

All the arrivals have kicked up a lot of dust in their scurrying about.

But even as I force my upper lip to uncurl, I’m filled with a sense of melancholy.

It's nostalgic, this scent, reminding me of the summers of my youth, when my sister and I would come home from the state fair stinking of the outdoors, with corn kernels in our teeth and brown mucus in our—

Oh dear.

Barely stepped foot back at summer camp and I'm already talking about bodily functions. Gross. I knew I shouldn't have come. Just a few moments here and I'm regressing. Soon I'll be skipping showers in favor of skipping rocks.

Where is the smog? Where is the uniquely Manhattan scent of burnt street meat and garbage?

I can't possibly be expected to breathe here for a whole week.

What have I done?

Gripping Clarence's hand tighter as my pulse begins to race, I scan the area.

I'm surrounded by Subarus and pickup trucks with cargo strapped to their rooftops and bike racks on their trunks.

Their owners wear various shades of khaki and green, hiking boots and sneakers blending in with the surrounding flora and fauna.

Some of them even wear orange. Bright, safety cone orange that hurt my eyes nearly as much as it hurts my soul.

I drop my head and focus on my black pumps. "These were a mistake," I whisper, then force myself to look up at Cabin 17.

Though cabin is an exaggeration. This is a tent . Well, half of it is. The base of Cabin 17 is wood, coming up to about waist high, then the rest of the structure is fabric.

Actual fabric. Will that keep the bears out? The insects ?

As if on cue, something buzzes near my ear. Squeezing my eyes shut, I swat it away and count to ten, then open my eyes again and focus on my lodging for the next seven days.

“It’s not exactly a tent or a cabin, is it?” I ask Clarence, still holding onto his hand for dear life. It’s just an odd hybrid of both... “Is this what a yurt looks like?”

Clarence makes a sound that could be a chuckle, but when I glance at him, he’s a perfect mask of stoicism.

Cabin... yurt... it doesn’t matter, does it? Either way, I’ve made a mistake thinking I could do this.

Clarence clears his throat again and I purse my lips. “Do you need a throat lozenge, Clarence?”

“No, Ms. Donovan-West.”

“Hm.” I look down at our clasped hands, frowning. What does it say about me that my closest friends are my business partner and my driver—who won’t even use my first name when he addresses me?

But if I release the death-grip I have on his hand, he might leave, and that would mean I’d be stuck here, so...

“Is everything all right, Ms. Donovan-West?” Clarence asks slowly. His deep-set

eyes are hidden behind his dark glasses, but I can feel him watching me in that knowing, fatherly way of his.

I shake my head, then decide to answer honestly. “I think I’ve made a mistake,” I whisper. “We should go back to the city.”

His eyebrows rise and he opens his mouth to reply, but he gives me a curt nod instead of commenting about how many hours we’ve just spent in the car, or the fact that he’s fully aware I’ve spent those hours clearing my schedule for the week.

Or that my assistant spent the morning shopping for and filling not one but two massive suitcases and a duffel bag that now wait at my feet.

No, Clarence says none of those things; instead, he gives my hand a quick but unmistakable squeeze and waits for me to climb back into the car. I turn around to do just that when a door squeaks on its hinges as it opens behind me, then closes with a loud bang that makes me jump.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving already...”

I suck in a gasp as my ex-husband’s deep, familiar voice steals my breath.

Memories flood me, a bombardment of happier times. Moments I haven’t allowed myself to think of in years, pushed safely to the back of my mind and tucked away so I could live a life without him, so I could function with only one half of my heart.

Because the other half has always remained with him.

Emotion squeezes my chest. Nearly twenty years without that man and my body still reacts the same way to his presence.

Relief.

Desire.

Desperation .

My pulse speeds.

Tears sting behind my eyes. Fucking tears .

How long has it been since I cried? Years? Decades?

Since we said goodbye?

How long can I stand here? How quickly can I get into the car? If Clarence could read minds, I'd shout at him to hurry up! Get in! Start the car! Go, go, go!

“Stop acting like you didn't hear me, Breezy.”

The familiar nickname causes a lump of emotion to lodge itself in my throat.

I close my eyes on a long blink and fight against the way Brady's voice still makes me want to run into his arms. To find in him the love and safety I have yet to find anywhere else.

Not that I've looked very hard. How could I when I'd already found the one meant for me?

Nodding my head in acceptance—or defeat—I brace myself for what I might see when I finally acknowledge him, then turn in a slow circle to meet his gaze.

I almost weep at the sight of him.

Could he possibly be more beautiful than I remember?

He inhales so deeply his chest visibly expands then deflates with the movement.

Age has only accentuated his good looks, the bastard.

The dusting of gray at his temples makes him look distinguished.

The crow's feet that border each eye give the impression he laughs often.

His smile lines do the same, while emphasizing his full, rosy lips.

The deep tan of his skin makes his cerulean eyes resemble the clearest blue sky reflected off the surface of a lake.

His arms are bronzed, corded steel, and his t-shirt is taut against his biceps.

With his hands tucked into his front pockets, he looks every bit the relaxed, peaceful man I remember.

Only now he's far more beautiful and impossibly sexier.

As I shamelessly ogle him, his eyes devour me in return, drinking me in as if I'm the oasis he's searched for after years in the scorching desert.

"Brady," I finally whisper. "What are you doing here?" As if I don't already know. As if he's not here for the same reason as I am, because I am.

He hooks a thumb over his shoulder toward the cabin behind him. "Seventeen. Our

lucky number.”

We were seventeen when we met .

Which confirms what I’d already assumed but had been too afraid to believe for fear that I was wrong. “You sent me the invite to come here.”

He nods.

We haven’t spoken in almost two decades. Our divorce nearly destroyed us both, and suddenly I have no idea how I survived without him all these years.

Being near him again feels like the first time I’ve actually breathed in decades.

The rest of the adult campers continue to move around us as if the air doesn’t feel different now that my ex and I are in the same place at the same time.

Like the air isn’t charged and sparking with the electricity our bodies create when they are within range of one another.

Everyone is going about their business as if the two of us being here together didn’t just completely knock the world off its axis.

“Why?” I ask.

His lips pull into a sexy smirk and my body reacts accordingly, heat pooling low in my belly. Then he tilts his head, those brilliant blue eyes softening. “When’s the last time you relaxed, Brie?”

Shame heats my cheeks, but I begin to smile and he beats me to it, flashing me that grin that knocked me off my axis all those years ago.

“That’s what I thought.” He nods toward the cabin again. “Stay with me. Give me a week.”

His request, simple as it is, splits me in half.

It’s a harmless request; what’s one week?

But I’ve never loved anyone like I loved this man, not before and certainly not after. It took me years to get over him, years to learn how to function without him. I’ve been able to survive without him, though now I’m not entirely sure how I’ve managed.

While a week together sounds innocent enough, it’s anything but. Because once this week is over...

My heart squeezes painfully and I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“You’re already here, Breezy.” His repeated use of that nickname sinks into my bones and warms my blood. Brady splays his hands. “Getting here was the hardest part.”

Oh, if only those words were true. Leaving him again at the end of this week will be the hardest part.

“It’s just one week,” he adds with a shrug. “Seven days.”

I can’t do this.

I’ve worked too hard to learn how to live without his light.

We stand locked in this battle for seconds that turn into minutes. Camp life continues

around us, no one paying any attention to the way I'm stuck in place, riveted by his gaze and already breaking inside from the knowledge that I have him within my reach again.

And will have to leave him again too.

Tears prick my eyes. Thank God they're hidden behind my sunglasses.

But he doesn't push me, still as patient as ever.

Because my mouth clearly has a mind of its own, it opens. "One week," I finally concede, the words shocking me even as they flow from my own lips.

Again, he shrugs as if we're discussing the weather and not this life-altering decision. "One week."

It's not that simple, but I can't refuse him. Can't refuse this opportunity to get to know him again.

So I nod .

And I think it's a mistake, but I can't take it back. Not when every cell of my being aches to close the distance between us. Not when my lungs beg to be filled with his scent. And my body screams to be wrapped up in his arms.

Smiling triumphantly, he starts down the steps toward me. "All right then, let's get you settled."

Settled? I cringe as I scan the cabin and the surrounding forest, then watch the people clamoring all around us, their voices loud and faces animated. I look back at Brady and raise my eyebrows.

“As settled as you can be,” he acknowledges with a wink, knowing me all too well, as if time hasn’t changed us at all.

Somewhat reluctantly, although most definitely intrigued, I release Clarence’s hand and say my goodbyes. He climbs back into the car and I watch as he drives away, acutely aware of my ex-husband’s presence beside me.

As the black sedan disappears over the crest of a hill, I brace myself. No turning back now.

Deep inhale. Slow exhale. This is it. I’m actually doing this.

Brady hauls the duffel strap over his shoulder then grabs the handles of my two large suitcases, smiling smugly as he walks toward the cabin.

With butterflies kicking up a storm in my belly, I follow this unfairly gorgeous man up the steps.

Once upon a time, I would have followed him anywhere.

I almost chuckle at the thought; seems even two decades couldn’t change that fact.

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I open the door and motion for Brie to enter first. Because it's polite, yes, and because I want to watch her, memorize the sway of her hips, the swish of her blonde hair.

I want to breathe her in, so I do, inhaling her signature scent of orange blossom and lilac as she strides inside.

She's worn that perfume for as long as I can remember, and the familiar aroma kicks up a flood of feelings, memories, and lust. I'm instantly desperate to press my nose against her throat and breathe her in.

But I'm careful not to touch her as she passes, fearful that one touch will lead to more and I won't be able to stop touching her until I've made up for all the years my hands have ached for her.

I tense at the familiar voice, irritated by the interruption even though I shouldn't be. Being accessible is in the job description. Greeting each guest, welcoming them for the first or fifteenth time, is what I do.

But this moment feels sacred, and I realize as I look at my ex-wife, that I want to lock myself in this cabin and not share her with anyone for the entire week that she's mine.

I set the suitcases just inside the door, then offer her an apologetic smile. "Give me just one sec, Brie."

She nods and I step back onto the porch, then make my way down the steps as my old

friend approaches.

Craig is dressed in nothing but swim trunks and hiking boots, a cold beer in his hand and a shit-eating grin on his already sunburned face. He's always been one of the first to arrive, eager to get in as much time as possible for his week at camp.

"Hey, man," he says, extending his free hand to shake mine. "It's good to see you again, buddy."

"Likewise, Craig. Glad you made it back again this year."

"You know I wouldn't miss it." Craig's been coming here once a week every summer since I started the place, occasionally booking multiple cabins for a corporate retreat or just one for himself.

This time he just booked his usual single cabin, and, judging by the woman on his arm, has either brought a date with him or already accomplished what he came to do and found a single-serving friend for his stay.

When I scan the people around him, none of them register as familiar faces. "And it looks like these are all new campers." I give them my best Camp Host smile and begin to shake their hands. "I'm Brady West. Welcome to Camp West."

The brunette woman whose arm is linked through Craig's widens her eyes as she shakes my hand. "Brady West... as in...?" She motions to the surrounding cabins.

I nod.

"Camp West. West Lake. The landing..." Craig motions to everything as he speaks. "Brady owns the whole shebang."

“Welcome to paradise,” I add.

“That’s so cool!” she exclaims.

Craig grins. “I told you I knew the owner.” He looks at me. “You going to come down to the Welcome Party tonight, get acquainted with some of the newbies?” He side-eyes the woman, then leans forward and lowers his voice. “Looks like you’ve got a few Grade A singles this year, Brady.”

“Hey,” the woman chides.

“ I’m not looking, babe. I brought my sand to the beach.” Craig motions to me. “Brady’s the perpetual bachelor.”

I laugh, shaking my head. Though I can’t control the campers, or what they get up to after dark, I at least try to be clear that hooking up isn’t one of the activities Camp West provides.

It’s inevitable, though, at a summer camp for adults.

They’re here for fun and freedom, and there’s no limit to that as long as everything is safe and consensual.

We’ve even had a few couples return a summer or two after meeting here to get married on our dock.

But back to Craig’s question... “There’s only one camper I plan to get acquainted with tonight,” I admit.

As if my words summoned her, the screen door swings open with a loud screech and we all turn toward the cabin as Brie stumbles out onto the porch, eyes wide and

cheeks already flushing ten shades of red, like she'd been leaning against the screen to eavesdrop and hadn't meant to make her presence known.

She squeezes her eyes shut for a brief second, then opens them and gives us a little wave.

Rolling my lips together to keep from laughing, I wave toward her in presentation.

We make small talk for a few more minutes, then they head off toward the dining hall for another round of drinks. I turn toward the cabin and Brie still stands on the top step, watching me with curiosity burning brightly in her hazel eyes.

“Perpetual bachelor, hm?”

Laughing, I shake my head. Craig's statement could be perceived one of two ways: either I'm the bachelor who keeps to himself, or I'm the bachelor who hooks up with as many single campers as possible. “The first rule of Camp West? Never listen to Craig.”

She narrows her eyes as she watches me, questions brewing in that brilliant mind of hers. “You own this place.” A statement, not a question.

Of course I knew this conversation would happen at some point during the next week, but I didn't expect it to be the first topic we discuss.

I nod, taking the steps two at a time until we're eye to eye.

I'm close enough to touch her, and that knowledge has me balling my hands into fists at my sides.

How would she react if I pulled her body against mine and made up for lost time?

Seventeen long years without her has my mouth watering at the prospect of wrapping her in my arms again and never letting go.

She begins backing up into the cabin and I match her step for step.

When we're inside Cabin 17, I close the door behind me. The air sparks between us, ready to combust if we get too close, just as heady and thick with lust as it always was.

"The lake, too?"

I nod. "The whole kit and caboodle."

"Wow."

"And you thought I'd never make anything of myself." I say it half-jokingly, but when her face falls, I instantly regret the words.

"It's not..." Brie pauses, shaking her head. "I never thought that. We just wanted different things."

I nod, but even now, I'm not so sure I agree. Did we truly want different things? All I ever wanted was her .

Licking my lips, I run my hand through my hair, then down to grip the back of my neck. "Breezy, you look..."

Words fail me. I shake my head as I take my time dragging my gaze down her body.

She's dressed for the office, not the forest, in a tight black pencil skirt, white silk blouse, and sky-high heels, but the outfit suits her.

It doesn't matter what she wears or where she stands, she continues to be the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on.

When I finally meet her gaze again, the lust in her eyes makes my breath catch.

"Jesus, Brie, you're even better than I remember."

She pulls in a ragged breath. "So are you."

"Married?"

She shakes her head.

"Single?" I ask.

She nods. "Quite. You?"

"Never met anyone who could measure up to my wife." I step forward until only a foot separates us.

"Ex -wife," Brie corrects.

Semantics. I smirk. "How's the law firm?"

"Amazing."

"Successful?"

"Very." She licks her lips and my eyes drop to follow the movement.

"So, you did it?" I ask, my attention still zeroed in on her mouth. "You made your

dreams come true?”

She nods, but now there’s something else in her expression, something I can’t place. My chest tightens in response to the emotion glistening in her hazel eyes. The desire to pull her into my arms burns like an inferno, so much so that my fingers twitch and I have to clench them into fists again.

She starts to raise her hand, then drops it back down to her side .

The desire to touch is mutual, and that’s all I needed to know.

Closing the remaining distance between us, I take her chin in my hand and hold her gaze as I trail my thumb over her plump bottom lip. “How does it feel, Breezy, to have everything you ever wanted?”

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My chest is tight, a vise around my lungs that makes it difficult to breathe, because when this man asks me how it feels to have everything I've ever wanted, the answer is a resounding, loud and painful one.

I don't have everything I've ever wanted.

Because I don't have him .

He waits for me quietly, letting me sort through my thoughts like the patient man that he is. But the way his eyes search mine makes my chest ache with longing.

Brady sees me; he knows my response before I even say it aloud.

He was always so relaxed, so... opposite me.

I had plans and ambition; he had sleeping in, working odd jobs only to pay the bills, and weekly games of pool or poker with his friends.

I've always been of the 'if you're not first, you're last' mindset, while my ex has always been about 'stop and smell the roses'. The tortoise and the hare.

Somehow, we managed to make our differences work, even if only briefly.

But eventually, the shine and allure of new love couldn't outweigh our differences, couldn't compete with my ambition.

And now the man owns an adult summer camp—and an entire lake!—where the

theme is playing, relaxing, and smelling the goddamn roses. It's almost comical how perfectly this place suits him.

And how differently our lives turned out.

But the answer is obvious, nonetheless, a Brady-shaped hole in my chest that has never been filled.

Finally, when I can deny him no longer, I answer honestly. "Lonely."

He flinches, as if my admission physically pains him, but before I can take the word back, Brady's lips crash against mine, and when something between a sigh and a sob parts my lips, his tongue slips between them to tangle with mine.

I drag my hands through his unruly dirty-blond hair, then down his neck and across his shoulders, digging into him, feeling him, making sure he's real. It's too much and not enough all at once.

He wraps his arms around me and hauls me closer, one hand splayed across my back and the other gripping my ass. He presses our hips together, reintroducing me to the hard ridges of his body, the thickness of his cock as it swells for me.

I moan and Brady deepens the kiss, teasing my tongue with firm, searching strokes as his hand tightens on my ass.

He drags his mouth down my neck, then presses his nose against my pulse and breaths deeply.

He nips at my flesh as he makes his way down to dip his tongue into the little depression in the center of my collarbones, then his hands move to the sides of my blouse, tugging it out from my skirt.

He slips his hands beneath the silk, palming my breasts and drawing my nipples into stiff peaks that press against their lace prison almost painfully.

“Brady,” I say on an exhale.

He makes a low growl, deep in his throat. “Say it again, Brie.”

“Brady,” I comply, the word becoming a desperate plea.

A flash of pain pinches his features. “You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to hear my name on your lips again—”

A knock on the cabin door interrupts us, followed by a woman’s voice calling, “Boss? You in there?” She pauses and Brady curses under his breath, closing his eyes on a long blink. “We have an issue with payment from that couple in twenty-seven again.”

“Again?” I raise my eyebrows.

Brady shakes his head. “I’m sorry. Duty calls.”

I nod in understanding even though I don’t really understand. “What do you...?” I pause, trying to figure out what I’m asking when my brain is a lust-addled jumble of thoughts. “What exactly are your duties?”

He laughs, then places a kiss on my nose. “All of them.” He pats my bottom playfully. “Go get changed into camping clothes, and I’ll meet you out front in five. Cool?”

Nodding, I say nothing as Brady leaves me to answer the door, adjusting himself as he goes. He’s careful not to swing the door open as he steps outside, allowing me

much needed privacy. I must look like a nearly-ravished, disheveled mess.

Once he's outside and the door is closed, I exhale. Bringing my hand to my lips, I trace over the remnants of his kiss, the rawness left behind by his beard stubble, and smile against my fingertips.

How will I leave him again when the week is over?

Giving my head a quick shake, I push the thought aside. Better to cross that bridge when it comes. I retrieve my luggage and roll it toward the...

Oh. Hmm.

There's no walk-in closet. I'm sure I'm silly for expecting one, but there's not even a regular closet or wardrobe .

I scan the small room, assessing what my lodging will be for the week.

There's a full or possibly queen-sized bed in the center; its plush white bedding and an assortment of fluffy pillows make it seem out of place in the rustic cabin.

To the left of the bed is the doorway to what must be a small bathroom, and to the right, two wooden luggage stands lean against the wall, each of them looking as old and worn out as the rest of this place.

Nightstands sit on either side of the head of the bed, complete with mismatched brass reading lamps on each.

A pitcher of water and glass sit on one, and an alarm clock sits atop the other, beside a bouquet of my favorite flowers.

Thick shag rugs that appear to be brand new line the floor on each side of the bed, and something tells me that this is not how every cabin is furnished. No, this has Brady written all over it, and I smile at the thought he must have put into my comfort level.

What other surprises will he have in store for me?

I place first one suitcase and then the other onto the luggage racks, then open them both and sift through the contents until I find a pair of blue jeans and a simple white t-shirt.

I certainly didn't own hiking boots before this trip, but thankfully, my assistant thought of everything, and a brand-new pair is tucked inside one of the suitcases.

I dress quickly and head out to join Brady on the porch. I'm uncomfortable in these clothes, nervous about mosquitoes, fearful that I won't be able to relax, but one look into his gorgeous blue eyes pushes all of my concerns aside.

He rises to his feet, the porch swing he just vacated swinging softly behind him.

"Wow," he breathes .

Grinning, I spin in a slow circle. "Apparently I own jeans and hiking boots."

"They look good on you."

"Debatable."

"It's been way too long, Brie."

I give him a sad smile, but I don't know what to say. It has been too long, but

admitting that changes nothing.

My life is in New York; his is obviously here in Pennsylvania.

One week together won't alter those facts.

Brady gives a subtle nod, as if he follows my thoughts, then extends his hand toward me. "Come on. Let me show you around."

Sliding my hand into his, I'm struck with the familiarity of this simple gesture. Decades apart, and we're touching as if no time has passed at all. Easy and familiar, holding his hand feels like the most natural thing I've done in years.

He motions to the lake, then glances at me with amusement in his eyes. "That's the lake."

I chuckle and nod. "I see that."

"Play your cards right, and I might invite you skinny dipping later."

The prospect of being naked with this man—even if it is in a public lake—sends a shiver of excitement skittering down my spine. "Quite bold of you to assume I'd accept that invitation."

He squeezes my hand. "We have water skiing, a pair of jet skis, a fishing boat, a couple of pontoons, and some inflatables"—he pauses to glance at me again—"you should have seen those in the flier. Big selling point."

Inflatable water toys wouldn't be the selling point for me, but what would be? Other than the camp's owner, obviously .

As we walk, he points out various activities, or directs me to the signs that would lead me down trails toward various places.

“We have all the things a typical kids’ summer camp has: archery, zip line, crafts, bonfires, theme nights, water guns and water balloons...

” He motions toward a large outdoor amphitheater.

“Concerts and open mic nights.” I try to hide my grimace but he catches it and laughs. “Nothing is mandatory.”

“That’s a relief.”

Brady leads me to a large swimming pool, already packed with people. A bachelorette party poses for photos on the far end, complete with matching pink bathing suits, save for the bride who’s in a white bikini with a sheer veil that hangs over her rump.

It hadn’t occurred to me that this might be a destination for something like that, but Camp West is slowly growing on me.

People wave to Brady as we continue walking. He waves back, but still grips my hand tightly, his fingers intertwined with mine. It feels good to be by his side again.

He leads me to a small cabin with a large sign above the door that reads Main Office , holding the door for me to enter first. “On the other side of West Lake,” he continues as we step inside to the air conditioning, “there’s an adventure course, basketball court, beach volleyball, dodgeball, tennis, rock climbing...

” He trails off as he reads my expression.

“All right, that does probably seem like a lot.” He winks and I melt, then he reaches up and traces my cheekbone with his thumb.

“You’re not going to have time for all that anyway. ”

“I’m not?” Thank God.

Brady shakes his head. “I don’t plan on letting you leave my arms, Brielle. ”

Butterflies kick to life in my stomach in response to the promise of his words and the heat in his eyes.

He leans forward—

“Oh, good, you’re here.”

Brady grins, then turns us toward the woman standing in the doorway at the back of the office. He motions toward her as he says, “Brie, meet Duffy, my right hand.” The girl beams and Brady adds, “Duff, this is Brie. My wife.”

My heart skips a beat, but I quickly clarify, “Ex-wife,” as I extend my hand and step toward the young redhead.

She smiles and rushes to shake my hand, clearly excited to meet me, as though...

I narrow my eyes and look back at Brady over my shoulder.

He grins proudly, standing tall.

As though he’s been telling her about me. As though he’s proud to introduce me.

“It’s nice to finally put a face to the name,” Duffy says, shaking my hand vigorously.

My heart soars at the thought of him telling people about me, about us, then sinks heavily at the realization that it will only be harder to say our goodbyes at the end of the week.

I swallow hard, emotion thickening my throat. Forcing a smile, I try to get through the next few moments of awkward introductions without breaking into a million pieces.

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The summer night hangs heavy with anticipation as the camp comes alive with the sound of laughter and the clinking of glasses.

The Welcome Party is in full swing, and the atmosphere is electric.

My favorite night of the week, Fridays hit a little differently.

There's just something about the energy of the first night of Camp West.

It's intoxicating. Thrilling.

But tonight, it's so much more. I'm torn between my duties as the camp host and the magnetic pull of Brielle Donovan-West, who stands across the room, a glass of her favorite pinot noir in hand and bright, curious eyes that follow my every move, completely oblivious to how many sets of eyes follow her every move.

The way people watch my wife, naturally gravitate to her, hasn't changed a bit.

She's as magnetic as she was twenty years ago, possibly even more so.

Brie is stunning, her honey-blonde hair cascading down her shoulders in gentle waves, and her hazel eyes sparkling with promise every time our gazes meet.

Time has been kind to her, and the years apart have done nothing to diminish the fierce attraction I still feel for her.

We've spent the past few hours reacquainting ourselves as I showed her around camp

and introduced her to staff and guests both new and old, but as much as being with Brie feels familiar and natural, she still has her walls up.

I'd be foolish to expect them to crumble within the first few hours of our reunion, but I am determined to show her that even after all this time, there's no stronger love than the love we have between us.

I don't have much of a plan after this week; I'm not even sure I believed I could get her here.

I don't know how we'll manage once we have to say goodbye again, but she came, and that was the first step.

Hell, that might even have been the most important step.

Everything after will fall into place. It has to.

Regardless of our vast differences, no two people have ever been more meant for one another than we are, and that has to count for something.

Time apart has only strengthened my resolve.

She's it for me, and I don't want to waste another moment of this lifetime without her.

With a determined stride, I navigate through the throng of campers, the soft strains of live music guiding my way.

The air is filled with a mixture of laughter, conversation, and the clatter of cutlery against plates.

The aroma of grilled food wafts through the air, teasing my senses.

I haven't had time to sit down and eat yet, too determined to get through my duties as quickly as possible so I can sneak away with my wife.

As always, the gathering is a diverse mix of new and returning guests, their faces a blur as I move from group to group.

I shake hands with newcomers, share hugs and stories with returning campers, all while keeping an eye on Brie as she begins to relax in the presence of Duffy and Jarron, two of my longest employees and closest friends.

I stop at the beer pong table to sink a ball with Craig and his crew, order them all a round of Jell-O shots on the house, then use the distraction to slip away and make a beeline for Brie .

She smiles as she watches me stride toward her, and my chest tightens around my heart. How have I existed without that smile all these years?

"Dance with me?" I extend my hand toward her.

Brie tilts her head, brows furrowing, and it occurs to me that the song isn't really a dance number. Shrugging, I curl my fingers and raise my eyebrows in question.

Brie finishes her glass of wine and sets it on the table, slips her hand into mine, then stands. "I've never found 4 Non Blondes to be particularly romantic, but I do appreciate a good feminist anthem."

Chuckling, I pull Brie against me and slide my arm around her waist, nuzzling my nose against her throat. "I've never known you to say no to a dance."

“I didn’t say no.”

Twining our fingers together, I spin us in slow circles toward the dance floor. I’m vaguely aware of the watchful eyes of all the campers following our movement, but I ignore them.

They don’t matter. Nothing matters but the woman in my arms, and the way our bodies still fit together perfectly.

As if seeing our approach and sensing what needs to happen next, the band switches seamlessly into a different song, setting the mood for a slow one.

Brie looks up into my eyes and allows me to lead her around the floor in a simple two-step, our hips just inches apart, our bodies syncing as we move together to the beat of an old Johnny Lee ballad.

“You’re quite popular around here,” she says. “How long have you owned this place?”

“Eleven years.”

Brie’s eyes widen. “That long? ”

I nod and swing her away from me, then pull her back, holding her a little closer this time. With no space between our hips, I can feel every move of her legs as we dance.

“When my father died—”

Brie winces. “Yes, about that—”

“Don’t,” I say, shaking my head. “I know why you didn’t call.”

She smiles sadly, but nods.

It's the same reason I didn't call when I heard about her brother's passing.

We couldn't .

Any contact, even just the smallest acknowledgment of loss or grief, and we'd have undone the hard work we'd put into our separation, into building our lives and finding success—whatever that meant for each of us.

“His life insurance, plus some savings I'd had no idea about, came my way, and with them...” I motion around me. “A land deed.” Laughing, I add, “You should have seen how run down this place was when I showed up to claim it.”

“Really? It's so beautiful now.”

“Thank you. I've never worked so hard on anything in my life. This place is full of blood, sweat, and tears.”

Brie's eyes widen. “You built this?”

“Not entirely,” I admit. “I hired people, of course, professionals who knew what they were doing, but I designed it. And I worked beside the construction crews every day.”

Her mouth opens, but no words come out, hazel eyes sparkling with a mix of wonder and pride.

Each stride of our dance presses her hips against mine. I ache for her in ways I can't act on with all these people around.

She releases my hand and wraps both arms around my neck, as if I'm not the only

one feeling the need to be closer, to eliminate both inches and years that separate us. Her fingers slide into my hair and she licks her lips.

Everything else falls away. The music. The band. The campers.

I lower my lips to hers, kissing her slowly as we rock in place.

When I pull back, her eyes remain closed for a minute and I study the soft spray of her eyelashes on each cheek.

“Come on,” I finally say. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She opens her eyes slowly. “You’re allowed to leave?”

Smiling, I reach down and squeeze her ass. “It’s my camp, Breezy, I can do whatever I want. And right now, I want to kiss you without all these onlookers.”

She bites her bottom lip and her cheeks pinken as her gaze flicks around the grand hall, then she nods. “Probably a good idea.”

She slips her hand into mine and we stride quickly to the doors, then out into the night.

There are campers everywhere, mingling outside the hall, smoking cigarettes and whatever else on benches near the lake, splashing in the pool or sitting in the jacuzzi, but I have only one place in mind, and it’s usually empty.

My secret hideaway behind the Camp Office.

I lead Brie through the campground, miraculously avoiding being pulled into any conversations, then we sneak along the side of the office cabin and find the trail out

back.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks, the playful lilt of her voice unable to hide the underlying nervousness.

“We haven’t had a bear sighting in years, Breezy, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Brie laughs self-consciously. “How did you know?”

I stop and turn around, tugging her into my arms. “Because I know you.”

She pulls in a shaky breath. “You always did.”

I kiss her nose and turn to continue leading her up the moonlit path. We reach the top of a small hill and the trees open up to my favorite spot. A park bench sits between two massive trees, overlooking the camp, the lake, and the mountains beyond.

“Wow,” Brie sighs behind me. “It’s beautiful up here.”

I turn to watch her take it all in, the moonlight reflecting silver in her eyes. Finally, she turns to me and smiles. “Thank you for bringing me up here to see this view.”

That’s not why I brought her here, but I nod as I settle onto the bench, patting the place beside me in invitation.

Brie looks at the bench, then straddles me to sit on my lap. She wraps her arms around my neck; I slide mine around her waist.

“Kiss me,” she whispers, then leans down to press her lips against mine.

I kiss her hard, sliding my hands up into her thick hair and holding her head to mine as my tongue parts her lips and crashes with hers. She moans into the kiss and her hips rock against me, desperation and need obvious in the way her body speaks to mine without words.

We have years to make up for and only a week to do so; patience is not a virtue I can entertain right now.

I tug her t-shirt free of her jeans and Brie raises her arms so I can pull the shirt off, then I reach behind her to unclasp her bra.

The lace falls between us and Brie arches back until her breasts are within my reach; I pull one into my mouth, sucking hard and smiling around her flesh when she moans and her fingers tighten in my hair.

Her body has changed some, as mine has. It's been nearly two decades since I've touched her.

She's fuller now, softer in all the best places.

The body of the young woman I remember has matured, becoming this voluptuous, thick creature sitting before me now.

I've been desperate to reacquaint myself with her curves since the moment she stepped out of her car this afternoon.

I switch to the other breast, pulling the nipple between my teeth and teasing it with the tip of my tongue.

Brie's hips buck and she presses herself toward me, forcing more of her breast into my mouth.

I need to get this woman naked, need to hear her scream my name.

I need the bite of her nails in my back, need to be trapped within the cage of her legs.

I need her.

All of her.

I release her breast and find her mouth again, and when we kiss this time, each thrust of her tongue is desperate, searching.

Hungry .

“Brady, I—”

Her words cut off and she goes rigid in my arms.

The sound of a woman giggling and a loud male voice quickly follows.

“We’re about to be interrupted,” I say, stating the obvious.

“Where’s my shirt?” she whispers.

I lean forward and she quickly wraps her arms around me so she doesn’t fall backwards. I retrieve her shirt, then help her pull it on, tugging it down with seconds to spare.

“Oh! Whoops!” a woman says, giggling loudly.

A man gives a low whistle, then chuckles as he says, “We didn’t think anyone knew about this spot.”

Craig . I shake my head, then swivel it toward him and raise an eyebrow .

“Ah hell, sorry, Brady.” Craig rubs his hand over his mouth. “I didn’t think anyone else knew about this spot.”

I should have never told him about the bench I dedicated to my Pops. “No worries, man.” I return my attention to Brie, shaking my head. “Cabin?”

She nods.

I incline my head, then unhook my arms from around her. She stands, and the light from the moon displays her nipples against the thin fabric of her t-shirt. I clear my throat and motion toward her breasts.

Brie quickly crosses her arms, her pink bra dangling from one wrist. As soon as she realizes, she tugs it up and wraps her hand around it. “Oh my god,” she murmurs, hanging her head.

Doing my best not to laugh, I grab her by the hand and lead her back down the trail.

Craig and his guest step out of the way, quiet as we pass, but as soon as we are out of view their loud voices resume.

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My body is abuzz with desire, but Brady's popularity has derailed us again.

The crackling flames of the campfire dance before my eyes, its warm glow casting shadows on the faces of the campers gathered around.

The air is filled with laughter and the sickly-sweet scent of toasted marshmallows, but I can't think of much past the euphoria still humming through my veins or the tenderness of my breasts from Brady's earlier assault.

Wrapped in his flannel shirt, his scent surrounds me even though he's across the bonfire talking with some of the campers.

If someone knew what to look for, the outline of my underwire bra tucked into the pocket of his jeans is obvious, but a secret only the two of us share.

We were on our way to the cabin to continue what we started on the bench when he was called over to the campfire, but the distraction is a welcome one; it gives me time to collect my thoughts.

I stand at the edge of the fire circle, watching as campers eagerly skewer marshmallows onto long sticks, their eyes aglow with excitement.

Even as he's trapped in conversation, Brady steals glances my way every few moments.

He seems completely at ease, effortlessly blending into this tranquil atmosphere.

I envy his ability to relax, to fit into whatever situation, wherever he may be .

I haven't sat around a campfire since my early teens.

Already, I know the smell will be tough to get out of my hair, and the thought of having to wash and blow dry it tonight before bed adds a level of discomfort to the evening.

It's a time-consuming task, and I'd hoped to not have to do it on the very first night.

"Hey, Brie, you don't have any s'mores," Jarron says, joining me on this side of the fire.

His voice is laced with enthusiasm as he holds out a bag of marshmallows and a metal roasting stick.

Brady's head of operations is a bearded brute of a man, his sheer size enough to intimate me into eating a roasted marshmallow against my will, even as his eyes hold nothing but kindness and joy.

I glance across at Brady, catching him watching me expectantly.

I straighten my shoulders and smile. Take the marshmallow. Show him you're not uptight.

With a deep breath, I reach out to accept the marshmallow, sliding it onto the stick. The sharp metal ends are black from marshmallows past, and I try to ignore the thoughts that spring to mind. How clean is this thing?

The heat of the fire kisses my face as I hold the marshmallow above the flames.

It begins to singe the sugary treat, searing the edges into a deep golden brown.

Then it catches fire, a blue orange flame licking at the marshmallow, and a familiar scent wafts through the air, bringing back memories of my youth.

Days spent at the beach or weekends at the lake, vacations with my family, my beloved sister, then later, when I reached adulthood, vacations with Brady...

My eyes blur as I watch the marshmallow slowly burn, its edges crisp and bubbling.

When I was a kid, I liked them dark, burned to a crisp.

My sister would tease me for letting them sit on the fire so long and, more often than not, I'd lose them to the flames, but there's just something about a burned marshmallow.

I lick my lips.

Stomachache be damned, I'm eating this thing tonight.

Startling me with a gentle nudge of his elbow, Brady joins me on this side of the fire. His eyes crinkle at the corners when I look up into them. "You still like them barely edible, I see." He grins.

"I'll have you know, this is the only way to eat a marshmallow."

He holds up a graham cracker in one hand, and in the other, another graham cracker with a square of chocolate on top.

I blow out the flame on my marshmallow and carefully set it onto the chocolate, then Brady covers it with the other graham cracker and smooshes the layers to combine

them into one sticky mess.

“Perfect,” I whisper, gazing down at it. My stomach rumbles.

“Yes, you are,” Brady says.

My eyes flick up to his. The fire dances in his deep blue gaze, but there’s so much more in his eyes. Love. Desire. Appreciation.

An unspoken promise.

He blows on the s’more, then lifts it to my mouth.

Lost in his eyes, I take a bite.

The sweetness of the chocolate combined with the richness of the burnt marshmallow and the crunch of the graham cracker takes me back. I close my eyes and revel in the sensation, the memories. An earlier time. An easier time .

Brady’s fingers grip my chin and I open my eyes as he leans forward.

His tongue flicks against the corner of my mouth, sending a current of sensation through my cheek.

My body rocks toward him and he runs his tongue over the sticky seam of my lips, pulling a whimper from my throat.

The brief contact tightens my belly and I have to bite back a groan of frustration.

We share the s’more, and when we’re finished, Brady slips his hand into mine and politely excuses us from the bonfire.

We walk quietly and with purpose back toward Cabin 17, the air growing thicker with the sexual energy snapping between us. By the time we reach the cabin, I'm practically panting—and only partially because of the uphill walk.

We step inside.

Brady closes the door.

Locks it.

Then he spins me toward him and rips the flannel shirt open. Buttons fly everywhere, hitting the cabin walls and floor.

I gasp, but he tugs my t-shirt up, and when his mouth closes over one of my breasts, his hot tongue teasing my nipple with firm strokes, his flannel shirt is the last thing on my mind.

He nips at my breast, then sucks my nipple into his mouth with a hard pull, and a shot of lust shoots down into my core, pulling my muscles tight.

“Oh god.” I tighten my fingers in his hair as he teases my nipple into a painful peak that has a direct connection to the desire building between my legs. He bites down and that tether pulls taut, sending a rush of liquid heat to my center. “Brady...”

He yanks the flannel from my arms, then pulls my shirt up and over my head, sliding it down my arms in a way that pushes them behind me.

With my wrists trapped in the cotton fabric, he holds them behind my back and claims my mouth again in a fierce, hungry kiss.

He pulls back to look down at my breasts and his eyes darken with lust. He takes

them both in his hands, then splits his time between the two, licking and nipping and suckling them until my breathing is ragged and loud, and my body rejoices in anticipation of what this man can do with his tongue.

I tug free of my shirt and slam my hands into his hair, massaging his head as he suckles my breasts.

When he's satisfied that both nipples are painfully erect, the dusty pink tips flushed to a deep rose and swollen from his mouth, Brady unzips my jeans, then slides them down my legs.

He unlaces my hiking boots and helps me step out of them.

My jeans quickly follow, leaving me in nothing but a thin strip of lacy red panties.

He looks up at me with a boyish smirk. "I didn't plan this."

I laugh. "You sure about that?"

He stands and reaches his hand over his head to tug his shirt off, a sly smile pulling at his lips.

"Well, I planned this, I just didn't plan for it happening the very first night.

" He tosses his shirt onto the bed behind me, then flashes a mischievous grin.

"There's only one bed in this cabin, Brielle; I'd absolutely planned on sharing it with you. "

I lick my lips and glance toward the bed in question, then back into his eyes. "Well, here we are."

“Here we are.” He starts to work on his jeans, and I drag my gaze slowly down his firm chest now dusted with dark hair, over the ridges of his abs, then down his happy trail to his fingers unbuttoning his jeans.

Far too slowly .

“I thought we’d have some playtime first, you know? Maybe some water sports... I know how you used to love being in the water—”

“Brady?”

His fingers still on the final button of his fly. “Yeah?”

I look up into his eyes. “You talk too much.”

With a wicked grin, he grabs me quickly, lifting me into the air, and as he steps toward the bed, he claims the breast closest to his mouth, flicking his tongue over the sensitive tip.

He stops to lower me onto the bed, then quickly steps out of his jeans, freeing his cock.

It juts out before him, hard and thick. He leans over, then slides his hands between my skin and lace to tug my panties down.

I scoot to the middle of the bed and open my legs for him.

Brady’s eyes darken as he looks between them, then he climbs onto the bed and slides his arms beneath me, wrapping them around each thigh and opening me up further.

His hot breath hits my center and sends a shiver through my heated body, then his

mouth closes over me and he suckles my clit, flicking his tongue back and forth against the sensitive bundle of nerves.

My fists tighten in the bedding. My back arcs, pressing my pussy more firmly into his hungry mouth. He moves down, teasing my lips with his tongue until I begin to buck, desperate for more than just gentle, teasing strokes, then he plunges his tongue inside me.

The sounds he pulls from me are carnal, animalistic sounds, but he doesn't stop, just feasts on me hungrily until my legs start to shake, then everything tightens at once, and my thighs try to squeeze together against the barrage of pleasure.

He forces them open, holding me captive while he massages my clit with his tongue until I'm gasping his name, bucking hard against each stroke, fucking his face, riding each movement of his mouth until my orgasm grips me, claims me, rolls through my body with spasms and sparks, heating my veins and setting off fireworks behind my eyelids.

He paces the rhythm of each tongue stroke to match my breathing until I come back to earth, slow and steady, gently lapping at my flesh until I've unclenched my fists and my legs are boneless on the bed.

Then he moves on top of me, pressing his cock firmly between my legs.

I jerk at the sensation, so sensitive still from my orgasm, and Brady smiles.

"I still love making you come."

My eyes close on a contented sigh. "Me too."

Brady chuckles, then the bed dips as he climbs off of it. "Hold that thought." He

rummages through his jeans, then the bed moves again as he climbs back onto it.

I open my eyes and look up at him. He's kneeling between my legs, opening a foil packet. I look down at his beautiful cock as he slides a condom over it, then smile as he lowers himself over me again. He presses his tip to my opening and a new rush of desire floods my core.

His blue eyes dance over my face, looking at me everywhere all at once, like he's taking me in, really seeing me after all these years. The differences, the age. I'm not the fresh-faced girl he knew back then... and yet, his eyes hold nothing but appreciation in their depths. Appreciation and...

Love .

I reach up and cup his face. "It's been almost twenty years, and you still look at me like..." I shake my head, emotion tightening my throat.

"Like you're the love of my life?"

My breath catches, and my response comes out almost a sigh. "Yes. "

Brady leans down and kisses me. Gently. Slowly. Reverently .

He kisses me with care, with purpose. Each gentle stroke of his tongue tightens that ball of desire between my legs as much as his hard, hungry kisses did earlier.

He pulls back to look at me once more. "You are the love of my life." Lining up his cock to my entrance, he eases into me slowly, allowing my body to welcome him at its own pace. "And it's been seventeen years, Brie, not twenty."

My eyes widen. That's why he reached out. It's been exactly seventeen years since

our divorce was final. Our lucky number.

And still, we're single, neither of us able to move on. Of course we couldn't.

Seventeen years wasted without one another, and for what? Because I couldn't slow down to appreciate his pace of life?

The thought squeezes my chest in a vise, but he pushes deeper, distracting me from anything other than reconnection, distracting me from seventeen years' worth of regret.

My walls stretch around him, a slight hint of pain mixed with unbelievable pleasure. We always did fit together deliciously. He pulls back slowly, then plunges in, deeper each time until my body has fully enveloped his length.

He slides his arms beneath me, then pulls me up as he sits back on his heels.

I brace my legs on either side of him, then wrap my arms around his neck and use him as leverage to guide myself up and down his thick cock.

My breasts rub against his hard chest, teasing my nipples back into taut little peaks, and his mouth finds my throat, sending waves of lust through my veins with every graze of his teeth.

I lean back and press my palms into the mattress, tipping my hips so he can hit that special spot inside of me that tightens my core. With each thrust, Brady claims me, making me his again after all this time.

Who am I kidding? I've always been his. No man has ever loved me, fucked me, or seen me like Brady West.

He tightens one arm around my hips to fuck me harder while his other hand settles between us to massage my clit with his thumb in rhythm with each powerful thrust of his cock.

My body trembles with need. Aching.

Starving for him.

As he begins to pick up the pace, and my walls tighten around his thick shaft, and his thighs clench beneath me, twitching as his orgasm moves to take over his body, I push up and wrap my arms around his neck so I can kiss him again.

Because I've been wanting to kiss him for... well... seventeen years, it turns out.

What a lucky number indeed.

We kiss almost as desperately as we fuck, claiming one another with desperation.

Each tangled movement of our tongues cleanses us of those years we spent apart, erasing each lonely moment, and bringing us back where we belong, even after all this time.

Together.

His thrusts become faster, more demanding as he drives deep. My orgasm slams into me and I jerk in his arms, breaking our kiss to drop my head back and cry out his name.

Brady curses as his hands tighten on my hips, holding me still as he drops his forehead to my chest and comes with a final, violent thrust. Then his cock stops pulsing within me, he kisses across my sweat-slick chest, murmuring praise against

my skin as we float back down to earth.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, pulling me out of the deepest sleep I've had in some time.

We stayed up too late, unwilling to sleep for fear of missing out on even a moment of reacquainting ourselves.

I once knew this woman's body with my eyes closed, had memorized every inch of her frame, from the curve of her toes to the lone freckle behind her left earlobe, and though the years have changed her in some ways, she still feels like home to me.

Brie stretches out beside me, moaning softly as I reach to silence my phone's alarm, then I curl back around her and pull her body against mine. Pressing my nose against her temple, I whisper, "Good morning, my love."

"Mm," she hums. "Good morning."

I nudge her temple with my nose, then place a gentle kiss there.

"What time is it? Feels way too early."

"Seven."

"Ugh. But I'm on... vacation." She says the word as if it leaves a funny taste in her mouth.

"You are."

“I’m not getting out of bed.”

“That lines up with my plans perfectly.” I glide my hand down her naked torso and up over her hip, then dip down between her legs. “Although, unfortunately, I do have to tend to some things before I can spend the rest of the day in bed with you.”

Brie rolls over onto her back, spreading her legs to allow for my searching fingers, and opens her sleepy eyes. “Tend to me first,” she murmurs with a playful whine.

“I plan to.”

“Good.” Her eyes close again and she sighs. “I think I like vacations.”

I laugh as I circle her opening with my middle finger. “Are your vacations always like this?”

“If they were, I might have taken one in the past fifteen years.”

I pause my exploration of her, waiting for her to tell me she’s kidding. “Breezy.”

She opens one eye.

“You haven’t taken a vacation in fifteen years?”

She closes her eye again and shakes her head.

With a sigh, I resume trailing my finger through her growing arousal. “They could always be like this. Going forward.”

Brie’s face tightens briefly, then she opens her eyes. “Don’t do that, Brady.”

I slip one finger inside her. “Don’t do what?”

“Don’t talk about what could be. We’ve been over that before.”

“Not in recent years.” I pull my finger out, then slide two back inside. She stretches, opening her legs wider, and I begin to pump my fingers rhythmically, leaning down to pull her earlobe into my mouth. “I could wake you up like this every morning, baby. ”

Her lips part as her breathing quickens, but her eyes remained closed. Whether too focused on the way it feels to be touched by me or shutting me out, I don’t know.

I press my thumb against her clit, then flick it back and forth. “Think about it. Every morning.” I lick the shell of her ear and she whimpers.

Truth is, I’ve been thinking about selling the lake. I love this place. It’s everything I envisioned and more.

But there’s always been something lacking, something missing that made me feel like a piece of the puzzle was absent.

Now that Brie is here, I am sure of what that something was.

Is.

It’s her.

What good is having everything I ever dreamed of if Brie isn’t here to share it with me?

I push up onto my elbow and lean down over her, slanting my mouth over hers as I

bring her to the edge. I kiss her with slow, deliberate strokes, coaxing her orgasm from her with matching pulls of my fingers between her legs.

I've spent years wondering if I made a mistake when I let her leave, almost two decades contemplating what life could have been if I'd fought to remain at her side.

And though I know that who I was back then, that young kid without a plan or even an inkling of drive, would have only held her back, it pains me that letting her go was the right thing to do. Because in what world is being without Brie ever going to be right ?

It certainly never felt right.

But now, as I pull back to watch her slowly unravel for me, memorizing the planes of her face all over again, soaking in the soft sounds that spill from her lips, I'm convinced that the time we spent apart was exactly what had to happen to bring us back together.

To bring us to this moment right here.

I don't understand it, but I believe that everything happened for a reason, and everything led us right back into each other's arms.

My wife comes quietly this time, still half asleep, and I kiss her tenderly through each tremor, dropping soft kisses on her cheeks, her eyelids, her lips, then slowly guide her back down to earth with gentle strokes of my fingers between her legs.

She sighs, smiling softly as she opens those beautiful eyes and looks up at me. "I could get used to that." As if realizing what she said, she quickly closes her mouth.

I wait for her to make the next move, letting her set the course. I've all but told her I

want more of this after this week is over, and she's been quite clear about not wanting to discuss anything past next Friday.

"Do you really have to leave me?" With an emphasized pout, she rolls onto her side and stretches her body along the length of mine. "What will I do in this big ol' cabin all by myself?" A flash of worry crosses her expression. She's truly unsure of what to do with herself while I'm gone.

That worry makes my chest ache. I wish I could stay with her every moment, show her how to relax and have fun, but my financial planner is scheduled to arrive shortly, and I can't miss this meeting.

I slide my hands down to grasp her waist, then turn onto my back and haul her on top of me. She fits so perfectly against me; my cock is already a heavy weight between us, hard and pressing against her center. "Maybe I'll wear you out so you can sleep in a little longer. "

"Good thinking." Pressing her hands against my chest to push herself up into a seated position, she wiggles her hips, teasing me as her slick folds slide along the length of my erection. "I see now why you're the boss," she murmurs, "with brilliant ideas like that one."

I make her come two more times, then race to my first meeting with a smile on my face and a content, settled feeling in my soul.

Like I'm finally whole again. At peace.

Like Brielle was truly what was missing from my life.

Now, when I sell the camp and move to the city, I'll have more to offer her than the kid she walked away from seventeen years ago.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

After Brady left me this morning, I slept for another good hour, then showered, took my time drying and styling my hair, applied a hydration mask to counteract the dryness of the forest, and then did my full face of makeup.

I slowly decided what to wear, unfolding and refolding my clothes to see all that was packed, then dressed in new teal yoga pants and a matching sports bra.

By the time I check my phone for the time, I'm hopeful that I've taken long enough and he'll be close to done with his meetings—

I huff.

Time mocks me. It's only ten o'clock.

Brady will be busy until at least two o'clock this afternoon.

My stomach growls, and I have the beginning throb of a caffeine headache blooming in my temples.

I can hide out in this cabin no longer.

Pulling a white linen button-down shirt over the sports bra, I grab my cell phone and my laptop and step outside. Brady informed me that the only Wi-Fi can be found in his office, which he gave me permission to enter and told me his staff knows I'm coming.

Sure, I may have convinced myself to take the time away, but the work doesn't

stop—so neither can I .

When I step into the bustling dining hall, every bit of relaxation Brady's presence provided me seeps out of me instantly.

I should have just stayed in the cabin. It's noisy and overwhelming to be surrounded by a mess hall full of strangers and, if I'm not imagining things, they're all staring at me.

But the air isn't only thick with curiosity and conversation, it's heavy with the scent of freshly brewed coffee and the delightful aroma of sizzling bacon, so instead of turning on my heels and hightailing it back to the cabin, I drift further into the room, driven by my caffeine addiction and my undying love of friend food.

I make my way to an empty table near the window, casting a curious glance at the tables of campers around me as I pass. They seem so carefree, so at ease in their sun-kissed skin, as if they possess a secret to happiness that has eluded me for far too long.

As I sit down, I sense the weight of their gazes upon me, dissecting me.

No doubt they've seen me with Brady, who is very obviously highly admired around here, but even more than that, I stick out like a sore thumb.

Not only are my clothes new and expensive, they're brightly colored.

Not an ounce of vomit green or cowpie brown in either of those suitcases.

I force a smile, then focus on my personal email inbox from the app on my phone, pretending that their questioning looks and blatant whispers don't bother me.

But beneath my facade of confidence, I'm a bundle of nerves. It's been a very long time since I last indulged in a leisurely breakfast. Can they tell? Is it so obvious that I don't belong, that I'm not one of them?

Building my firm has taken every minute of free time, sucked the life out of every day.

And now, in the midst of this camp, where time seems to slow, how can anyone expect me to just let go of that responsibility ?

How have all these people just... unplugged?

After a few moments without a server, I look up from my phone and scan the room to flag one down, quickly realizing that the other campers are serving themselves.

Wonderful.

Leaving my laptop and phone at my table, I stand and make my way to the long buffet line, scanning the food on display. I can't recall the last time I ate at a buffet, but I can't make a stink about that now when this is the only option for food and my stomach growls angrily.

Once I locate the plates and silverware, I grab a few slices of bacon, a biscuit and butter, and a spoonful of fresh fruit, then head for the coffee station and pour myself a cup.

When I return to my seat, I bring the mug to my nose and breathe in the rich aroma, then take a tentative sip.

The warm liquid caresses my tongue, awakening my senses as I observe the campers around me, their laughter and easy banter simultaneously intriguing and intimidating.

There's a sparkle in their eyes, an air of freedom in the way they interact.

Each moment I spend here brings me closer to relaxation, even as my basest instinct is to work. Hustle. There's an itch at the base of my neck, a pull. I've managed to enjoy my coffee without checking my work inbox, but the struggle is growing more difficult with every passing moment.

By the time I finish my breakfast, the need to open my laptop and check my work emails is a relentless itch I cannot scratch. But still, I refrain. Not a single screen or handheld device in the entire room. Just smiling faces, connection...

I want that.

So I gather my courage and, instead of making my way to Brady's office to connect to his Wi-Fi, I turn left and head toward the yoga studio .

Work can wait.

Besides, it is Saturday, and unplugging for the weekend shouldn't be that difficult. Everyone does it.

Or so I'm told.

The yoga room is set up to put campers at ease.

From the soft music to the essential oils, everything is muted and quiet.

I grab a mat and a bottle of water, then find a place at the edge of the room and begin to stretch.

I've taken a yoga class or two, but it's been years.

I find I don't have the time for exercise, so I get in as much cardio as I can on the treadmill desk during my lunch hour.

The instructor enters the room, dressed in the same muted earth tones the rest of the room is decorated with, and positions herself on her mat. She speaks so softly I can't hear her from my position in the back, so I just wait, watching the others to gauge my next move.

As their bodies bend and stretch with graceful ease, every move I make feels stiff and awkward, a stark contrast to the fluidity that surrounds me. Shocking, I know. Just another example of why I don't belong here.

I stumble through the poses, my muscles protesting against the unfamiliar motions.

A part of me longs to retreat, to seek solace in the familiarity of my structured life.

But another part, a voice that has been silenced for far too long, urges me to keep going, to embrace the discomfort and find my own rhythm.

The one-hour class ticks by slowly, but I stick through it, and though I am already sore by the end of the class, I do feel, strangely, lighter .

Maybe this is what relaxation feels like?

With my computer and cell phone still in hand, and my work emails still unchecked, I head back to the cabin in hopes that Brady has returned early. Instead, I find a note on the bed. He came by to check on me but had to return to his office.

He'll be back this afternoon.

Once I change out of my yoga clothes and into a swimsuit, I venture toward the

glistening swimming pool, a sanctuary of cool, blue water.

The sun caresses my bare shoulders, its warmth seeping into my very core.

God, I miss the sun. It's not that we don't have sunshine in New York—we have some truly excruciating summers—but I don't find myself basking in it like I did when I was young.

My skin hasn't been naturally bronzed in ages.

Just a quick airbrush tan every few weeks has sufficed for the past decade or so.

I locate one of only a handful of empty lounges and settle into it. Closing my eyes, I allow the gentle breeze to carry away my worries, embracing the idleness that has eluded me for far too long.

Time drifts by, and as the midday sun warms my skin, I close my eyes, and... just breathe.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

After most of the day without her, I'm anxious to return to Brie.

I knew seeing her again would be an emotional journey, but I had underestimated the way she completely consumes my every thought.

All these years away haven't dampened the memory of our time together, but knowing she's near, within my grasp, is more distracting than I'd planned for.

And my meetings took longer than expected, which has me checking my watch every few seconds.

A few hours ago, I sent Duffy to get Brie from the pool and let her know of our plans tonight so she'd have time to get ready. Then, as soon as my afternoon appointment was finished, I grabbed a quick shower at my place, and now I'm hurrying down the path toward the dining hall.

The sun has set, and the dining hall is lively and loud with the sounds of laughter and chatter as campers prepare for their meals, but I pass the entrance and continue to the small, inconspicuous door on the side of the building.

One thing I knew had to be included in Camp West was cooking, as I've always loved everything about food.

There's a culinary class each night, with rotating chefs hailing from all over the world.

From London to New York to Oaxaca. Though the classes are included in the price of

the camp, guests must book them in advance.

Tonight, I've reserved the room for just the two of us.

I walk into the cozy kitchen, a mix of nerves and anticipation swirling inside me. It's the second night of camp, and even though our physical connection is still very much alive, I'm wary of the years apart and what they might mean for the future I want with Brie.

Because I do want a future with my wife, and I'm hoping that by the end of this week together, she'll want that, too.

My bringing her here wasn't simply because I missed her, but because I want her in my life. I've lived without air for far too long.

Getting her here was the first part of the plan. Selling the camp, I've now decided, is the second step, and after today's meetings, a step I feel confident and positive about.

Brie stands by the counter, her posture slightly tense, as if she's struggling to relax.

Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I catch a glimpse of vulnerability flickering within them.

She's always been guarded, even during our marriage, but here, in this moment, there's a glimmer of something more.

Dressed in a simple black shift dress, with only mascara on her eyes, she's a knockout.

Her skin is sun-kissed, slightly pink across her cheeks and nose, with matching redness on each shoulder.

Her hair is wet, waves already forming messily at her shoulders as her hair curls into its natural state.

I can't remember a time she skipped drying her hair or taking the time to style it.

Maybe Camp West is rubbing off on her.

She smiles and it takes me a split second to remember how to breathe .

"Ah, you're here," the cooking instructor, Chef Javier, says as he enters the kitchen. "I've enjoyed getting to know your beautiful wife."

I raise my eyebrows.

Brie shrugs, then drops her gaze.

I finally convince my feet to move and stride to join her on the other side of the large demonstration island, sliding my hand into her hair and tilting her head back so I can look down into those striking golden eyes. "You look beautiful tonight, wife."

She blushes, shaking her head as she whispers, "I told him we were no longer married, but—"

"A silly little detail," the chef exclaims. "You're here together, aren't you?"

We both laugh and nod. He has a point.

"Then it is settled. Let's get started," he says, his accent thick with his Spanish heritage. "Tonight, we're going to create a delectable three-course meal that will leave your taste buds dancing."

The class begins with Chef Javier guiding us through the intricacies of each recipe.

Brie listens intently, her attention focused on every word he says, while my focus is on her.

She's always had a keen eye for detail, a quality that both intrigued and frustrated me during our time together.

Now, I realize it's what has gotten her to the top of the food chain back in New York's law community.

It's also, likely, what got her through all these years without me.

We both had to make do. Her with intense focus, me with distraction.

When Chef Javier has finished explaining the recipes in great detail, we move onto prepping for the meals. I watch her nimble fingers as she chops vegetables with precision, her brow furrowing in concentration. She's a perfectionist, my wife, and this cooking class is no exception.

As the evening progresses, a shift occurs. The tension in Brie's shoulders gradually melts away, replaced by a lightness in her demeanor. Maybe it's the gentle rhythm of the cooking process, or the shared experience of creating something together, but something magical is happening.

She's relaxing before my eyes.

We move onto the main course—a succulent rack of lamb, cooked to perfection.

Brie and I work side by side, our hands brushing against each other accidentally on purpose.

A spark ignites between us each time we connect, a familiar bond that time and distance could not erase.

It's as if the past fades into the background, leaving only the present moment, brimming with possibility.

Chef Javier steps away momentarily, giving us a moment of privacy.

I seize the opportunity and lean closer to Brie, my voice a low whisper. "You remember the first time we cooked together?"

Brie's eyes meet mine, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "How could I forget? We set off the smoke alarm, and the kitchen was a mess."

We share a laugh, and the air feels lighter, charged with a renewed sense of familiarity. The memories flood back, washing over us like a gentle wave, transporting us to a time when our love was simple and unburdened.

If I have my way, we will find that again.

This afternoon's meeting with my real estate agent went well, and though I know in my heart that selling the lake and moving to the city to be with my wife is the only possible future I want to create, I struggle with who might buy Camp West. It's naive of me to think I have any say in the matter, but I want someone who will continue to run the camp, someone who sees this place for the wonderful experience it is and continues the legacy.

The most promising potential buyer this early on is a developer from Washington D.C. who wants to raze the place and build a resort—complete with golf course and time shares.

It just doesn't sit right with me, but at the end of the day, I may not have the luxury of choice.

"Hey," Brie says, gently touching her fingertips to my cheek. "Where are you?"

I blink, bringing her into focus, then look around the small kitchen and realize the chef has left us alone to enjoy the meal we prepared.

"Sorry, Breezy. Just lost in thought." I pull out a chair for her and wait for her to sit down, then settle into a seat beside her.

"This looks amazing. You did a great job."

"Me?" She laughs as she lays her napkin across her lap. "We both did this."

"Nah. I couldn't take my eyes off you the whole night."

She looks over at me and holds my gaze for a few seconds, then opens her mouth, closing it quickly as she shakes her head and focuses on her plate. "Let's eat."

"I love you," I say, because it's what she wants to say. So I'll say it for both of us.

As many times as it takes.

Brie nods, sucking in a breath, but doesn't look at me. I focus on the bob of her throat as she swallows, then tear my gaze away from her and cut into the lamb.

I'll continue to say it for both of us until she can say it again for herself.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

Caffeinated and sated, I stand on the edge of the dock, looking out over West Lake.

The mid-morning sun casts a warm glow on the water's surface.

It's my second morning waking up in Brady's arms in our private cabin at Camp West, and I'm buzzing with a mixture of nervous excitement and looming dread.

Each new sunrise brings me one day closer to leaving.

Reuniting with my ex-husband after all these years has been like diving into uncharted waters, unsure of what lies beneath, while somehow also knowing that I am supported and safe. Brady will always be there to catch me.

It's a beautiful juxtaposition of feelings and I don't want it to end.

But end, it must. I know that as surely as I know my own name. If we were worlds apart back then, time has only deepened that divide between us. The proof is in our careers; they couldn't be less alike if we tried.

Brady stands beside me now, and, as if he senses my thoughts have taken a turn, slides his hand into mine and gives me a gentle squeeze.

Always there to catch me.

The camp bustles with activity, but in this moment, as I look up into his eyes, time stands still, leaving only the two of us.

A gentle breeze ruffles my hair, and I pull my gaze away from Brady, turning my attention to the shimmering lake. I've been so caught up in the excitement of Brady West that I somehow allowed him to convince me to do get back on skis.

As we approach the dock, the sound of laughter and splashing water fills the air. The lake teems with life, adults of all ages enjoying the summer sun. They float on inflatable unicorns and drink margaritas pulled from coolers floating beside them, or scream as they plunge down the waterslides.

Brady squeezes my hand, his touch sending a wave of electricity through my body. It's a familiar sensation, like finding a long-lost piece of myself, and I allow it to remind me that this, too, is a long-lost piece of myself.

A long-forgotten piece, sure, but I grew up on the water; returning to it should be second nature.

We secure our life vests and approach a beautifully restored wooden boat bobbing in the water.

"Ready?" Brady asks.

"Hardly."

He laughs, then jumps into the ski boat. "It's like riding a bike, Breezy."

"I doubt that," I grumble as slip off my sandals, feeling the warm wood planks beneath my feet. And truthfully, who knows if I even remember how to do that .

Brady helps me onto the boat, then we sit side by side on the wooden bench.

The boat surges forward, and a rush of adrenaline courses through my veins. The

wind tousles my hair as we glide across the lake's surface. Brady's hand grazes mine, and I instinctively curl my fingers around his.

When we reach the middle of the lake, far away from the swimmers and the other water sports, we slow to a stop and Brady slips into the water with ease, then jerks his head toward the water, eyes narrowing as he holds my gaze.

"You didn't develop a fear of lakes when you moved to the city, did you? "

I scoff. "No."

Maybe a little. But I'm not telling him that.

I slip in to join him and the water envelopes me, cooling my skin and washing away any apprehension. Like an old friend's embrace, it calms me. Centers me.

Like he does.

I drop down, dunking myself completely under water, and when I resurface, I grin and Brady returns my smile.

"You good?" he asks.

"I'm fine." I'm more than fine; I'm practically vibrating with energy. Less than a minute back in the water and I'm desperate to stand on my skis, the spike of adrenaline in my veins proof of that.

After getting our skis strapped securely to our feet, Brady and I grip the vee handles and steady ourselves in the water, waiting for the boat to pull us into standing positions.

As the boat picks up speed, the ropes grow taut, tense, and the force of the water fights against our bodies. Briefly, we're suspended between two worlds, but then the boat speeds, lifting us up to the water's surface.

The world blurs as we skim across the glassy lake, the rush of adrenaline overpowering any lingering doubts. The wind tugs at my hair. I am weightless, unburdened by thoughts of what could be, the demands of my career, or the imminent sadness of goodbye. Carefree and wild, if only for today .

I glance over at Brady, who grins as we ski side by side. It's as familiar now as it was back then, and I'm struck with how natural it feels to be beside him. Why did I ever let him go? Surely nothing, not even a career, is more important than being by this man's side.

It's in that moment of hesitation that I wobble, then lose my balance entirely and crash to the surface.

I hear Brady's voice before my head goes under, but then I quickly push myself up, gasping for air and laughing at my mistake.

Brady swims toward me on his back, looking absolutely ridiculous as he fights against his skis.

"I'm fine, Brady," I call out. "Relax."

The irony of me telling him to relax is not lost on me and sends me into another fit of laughter. I gulp down a mouth full of water, then sputter as I choke on it.

"Woman, shit," he says, panting when he finally reaches me. He pulls me back onto his chest, letting his life vest hold up the both of us as if mine alone isn't enough.

“I’m fine.” I cough a few more times, then relax in his arms as the boat slowly turns around and returns to us.

The water ski instructors haul us both back into the boat, and as I plop back down onto the bench, I feel Brady’s gaze on me.

“I’m fine,” I insist. “Let’s go again.”

Brady’s grin is so bright it gives the sun a run for its money. He motions to the driver of the boat. “Well? You heard her, Randy, let’s go again!”

We spend hours on the lake, skiing and falling, laughing and doing it all over again.

By the time the sun has begun to set over the western mountains, we sit side by side once more, our bodies now damp and weary but our spirits renewed. I haven’t thought about work in hours.

My body aches. My limbs are tired.

And my cheeks are sore from smiling.

We’re sunburned, windburned, and exhausted—and I haven’t felt this good in years. As I step into the cabin with Brady at my heels, the sun setting behind us over the lake, I laugh softly and turn around to face him. “I can’t believe you got me on skis again.”

“I can’t believe you doubted yourself.” Brady grins as he closes the cabin door and clicks the lock into place. “You looked good out there.”

“I felt good out there.”

He takes a deep breath and nods. “Good.”

“I won’t be able to walk tomorrow,” I say with a laugh.

“Then don’t. We can stay inside all day.”

The silence stretches out between us as we stand in the middle of the cabin, locked in each other’s gazes. So much to say, so much catching up still to do, but talking about the past only proves how empty it’s been without him, and talking about the future, well...

That’s pointless and painful.

“The shower isn’t really built for two, but I think we could make it work.”

I bark out a laugh, then cover my mouth. “I’ve been in that shower, Brady, and there’s barely room for one person.”

He inclines his head. “Ladies first.”

Without moving toward the bathroom, I unwrap my cover-up and let it slip to the floor.

Brady gives a low whistle. “That whole Baywatch thing...”—he waves toward my red one-piece—“it’s pretty spectacular.”

“Thank you.” I pull one strap down off my shoulder, then the other, leaving the bathing suit at my waist, and smiling at the way his eyes flare with lust. “We rinsed off at the dock. I guess we could always shower... after.”

Brady’s gaze flicks up to my eyes, then he charges toward me, bends at the waist, and

scoops me into his arms. I squeal as I wrap my arms around his neck, holding on as he strides into the small bathroom.

He reaches past me to turn on the water, then carefully places me beneath the stream once it's warm.

I sigh and lean my head back, enjoying the hot water on muscles that are quickly becoming quite sore.

Brady peels my swimsuit down and helps me step out of it, then positions himself in the doorway of the shower. It's not built for two, but as I watch him kneel, I realize his plan and my breath catches in my throat as desire pools between my legs.

"Open up, baby," he commands, looking up at me with those deep blue eyes.

I do as I'm told, leaning back against the opposite wall and spreading my legs for him.

The warm water hits my shoulder and cascades down my side, filling the bathroom with steam and quickly removing any chill from the air .

Or maybe it's just that my skin is heated, flushed beneath Brady's gaze.

He runs his hands from my knees to my hips, massaging my tender thighs, and I moan, closing my eyes. The pressure is perfect, enough to ease the tension in my muscles but not so much that it hurts.

Brady lifts one leg and props it over his shoulder, then he presses his face between my thighs.

He runs his tongue up the seam of my lips, and I whimper, opening my eyes to look

down at him as he does it again, in a teasing, slow lick.

When he winks and sucks my clit into his mouth, I buck in response to the sharp jolt of pleasure he sends to my core.

Brady hums against my skin, pressing his face harder against me as he begins to work his tongue, quickly working me into a heated mess of need and desperation.

He grasps my hip with one hand, then brings the other between my legs, slipping a thick finger inside me.

He slides in and out, slowly massaging me and working my opening until he can slip another finger inside.

He pushes them deep until his knuckles fight against my opening, then curls them, brushing against the sensitive spot that will soon have me shaking around him.

He licks and sucks my clit as he rhythmically pulses his fingertips against my g-spot, and I brace myself with a palm on each wall of the small shower.

Brady's fingers increase speed, pumping into me quickly now, pushing me—no, pulling me—to the edge with rapid demand. Each curl of his fingers drags me closer, closer to the edge. Each flick of his tongue threatens to undo me where I stand.

My legs begin to shake. My muscles tense. Tremble.

He slips his fingers out and grabs my thigh, lifting my left leg up to join my right, holding my weight on his shoulders.

I press my back against the wall as he grips my ass, plunging his tongue into my pussy.

He presses his nose against my clit and moves his head back and forth ferociously as he tongue-fucks me to the finish line.

I shake and shudder as the orgasm claims me, flexing my palms against the walls to keep from falling into a heap on top of him.

“Brady,” I breathe. Beg. Plead .

He moans against me and the vibration sends electricity rocking through my core.

“Oh God,” I cry out, “oh my God !” My body jerks with each wave of pleasure. Tenses, then relaxes, then tenses again. Stars burst behind my eyes.

My thighs flex around his head, stealing the very air he breathes, and still he pumps harder with his tongue, feeding on me like he no longer needs air.

As the tremors begin to subside, he licks me slower, each leisurely stroke of his tongue now a gentle caress rather than a command.

I’m practically comatose when Brady places first one of my feet on the ground, then the other, then stands up to kiss the tip of my nose.

He squeezes into the tiny shower stall and maneuvers me under the flow of water.

I lean forward and rest my head on his chest while he pulls the rubber band free of my hair, then slowly and delicately unravels my braid.

He washes my hair, then gingerly washes my body, and when he begins to massage conditioner into the ends of my hair, I look up at him.

His gaze meets mine and he smiles. “You look exhausted, Breezy.”

I nod. "I am. "

"Let's get you to bed." He runs his fingers through my hair, rinsing out the excess conditioner, then reaches behind me to turn off the shower. He slips out of the shower and dries off quickly, then wraps me up in a towel and carries me to the bed.

Once I'm tucked between the sheets, I force my eyes open in time to see him strip out of his swim trunks. When he steps closer to the bed, I reach for him. "I need to return the favor."

Brady chuckles, and it's a sexy sound that seeps into my body and curls around my heart. He climbs into the bed beside me, turns me onto my side, and curls around me. "Later," he whispers against my temple. Then he places a gentle kiss there and pulls me close.

I sigh, settling into the warmth of his body, the safety of his arms.

"Later," I promise.

"I love you," he says as I drift off.

I should say it back. I want to say it back. I think maybe I do say it back, but I'm too sleepy to know for sure.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

The bed dips beneath me, pulling me out of a dream I can't remember, and I hold perfectly still, keeping my eyes closed as Brie slides down beneath the sheet and positions herself between my legs. She cups her palm around my cock, then trails her tongue from base to tip.

“Good morning,” I mumble, then remember what day it is. “Happy Fourth.”

She murmurs a response, then pulls the head of my cock into her mouth.

I suck in a breath as she trails her tongue around the tip.

Blood rushes to meet her mouth, and I harden in her hand.

She makes a little mewl of approval, then closes her mouth over the head and tightens her fist around my shaft.

I stretch, opening my legs so she can position herself more comfortably between them, then look down, frowning at the sheet blocking the view of my beautiful wife as she sucks me off.

The early morning shows lavender through the blinds, and I need to see her framed in that light.

I grab the sheet and toss it back, and the sight of her makes my breath catch.

Her eyes are closed, that determined crease appearing between her eyebrows as she sinks down onto me, taking as much as she can. Her blonde hair is mussed from the

shower and sleep, and it's somehow far sexier than I've ever seen it.

My fingers flex and I slide them into her hair, gripping her head, not to guide her—she's quite fine on her own—but to hold her, to move with the motion of her mouth.

“Fuck,” I groan, tossing my head back.

She hums hungrily, and the sound vibrates down my cock. She reaches down to cup my balls, then rolls them softly in her palm until they grow tight, heavier as she leads me closer and closer to release.

Saliva drips from her mouth, coating my cock and dripping down to my balls. The sucking, slurping sounds that fill the silence push me over the edge as she takes me hungrily.

“Baby,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’m going to come.”

Her cheeks hollow out as she sucks hard, increasing her speed as she bobs up and down.

She wraps both hands around my shaft, using her mouth to focus on the head as she pumps with firm, hard strokes.

She trails her tongue in a circle, dips into the center to lick the precum, then closes her mouth around me once more with a hungry moan.

And that dirty sound from her is all it takes.

My thighs spasm, twitch.

My cock swells to bursting, straining against her tongue.

“Fuck,” I growl, then tighten my hands in her hair and hold her head still as I come down her throat in fierce bursts of pleasure that tense every muscle in my body and make me see fucking stars.

When I’ve finished, I relax my hands in her hair and lift her head. She swallows as she looks up at me with still-sleepy, sexy eyes, and when she licks her lips, I shake my head. “You’re perfect. ”

“You’re welcome.” She runs her thumb across her lips and a pang of longing tightens my chest.

“Come here.”

She climbs slowly up my body and stretches out on top of me, then props herself up with one elbow on each of my shoulders. Smiling down at me, she says, “Well, now that you have me here, what are you going to do with me?”

Running my hands down her back, I breathe deeply. “Never let you go.”

Brie’s expression darkens. “Don’t do that.”

I sigh. “I know, I know. Don’t talk about what could be.”

“I’m here now, Brady.” Her eyebrows furrow and I reach up to rub my thumb between them.

“I know.”

She moves her hips and my cock twitches between us.

Brie's eyes light up. "Now you're getting it."

Laughing, I slide my hands down to her hips and grip them as she rocks up and down along the length of my cock, slowly coaxing it back to life.

She brings her lips to mine in a gentle kiss that quickly turns into more.

Deeper, hungrier, she kisses me harder as her pace increases, sliding her wet warmth along my shaft until she's panting, then pushes up to reach between us and wraps her hand around my cock.

As she lines us up, she meets my gaze. "I'm on birth control."

Ignoring the way that statement makes me ponder who else she's been with since we said goodbye, I nod because it doesn't matter. She's here now. "Me too."

Her brows furrow and I laugh as I realize I just told her I'm also on birth control, then quickly clarify. "I always use protection. "

Brie's lips curve into a slow smile as lowers herself onto my cock.

"Oh, fuck," she says, the words almost a sigh.

"I know, baby."

I breathe deeply and fold my hands behind my head, closing my eyes as she settles onto me, stretching around me until I'm sheathed to the hilt. The way it feels to be inside her again, skin to skin like this, is indescribable.

Heaven is Brielle Donovan-West.

She sighs as she begins to rock, setting the pace for her own pleasure, and the fact that this woman has always set the pace is not lost on me. I've missed the way she takes control, the way she rocks my world by rocking her own.

Her fingers flex on my biceps and I open my eyes to look up at her.

With her blonde hair hanging down around her head in messy waves, her hazel eyes are bright with lust and wild with need, but there's something else in her eyes, something darker.

And as I search them, a tear falls to my chest. I reach to cup her face and another teardrop falls, breaking my heart because I know what that means.

I know the grief she's struggling with, the regret.

The worries about the future and what will happen at the end of this week, the way those concerns squeeze her chest and try to push away the joy we've found in this moment, this connection.

I know her pain because it mirrors my own.

But I know something else, and as I whisper her name and pull her down to me, brushing my lips against hers to soothe the ache, I grab onto this knowledge and I cling to it like a lifeline.

She's everything I remember and so much more.

And I'm never letting her go again.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

The sun peeks through the dense foliage of the towering trees, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor.

The air is filled with the scent of pine and anticipation as Brie and I stand at the base of the zipline platform.

It's the start of our third full day together, and though Brie seems to have enjoyed herself all weekend, there's a change in her this morning.

Monday is the start of the work week for most people, yet she's here in Pennsylvania instead of sitting at her desk in Manhattan.

And though the Fourth of July is a national holiday, and most people would have the day off, my wife is not most people.

If I know Brie—and I do —she'd likely not waste a day sitting poolside or barbecuing with friends when she could be getting work done instead.

So she's on edge—even after the multiple orgasms we shared this morning.

Her desire to get home is almost palpable even though she hasn't voiced those thoughts.

But I'm determined to take her mind off things, and if fucking her senseless didn't do the trick, then maybe soaring through the trees nearly a hundred feet above the ground will work.

Her hazel eyes flicker with uncertainty as she gazes up at the towering platform that will launch us into an exhilarating journey through the treetops.

She's always been the responsible one, the epitome of a Type A personality, and watching her step out of her comfort zone fills me with an overwhelming sense of joy.

Each moment she stays at Camp West makes me fall for her that much harder.

I know she'll leave me on Friday, but what she doesn't know, is that I plan to follow her.

I'd follow this woman anywhere.

I tried life without her, and though I've found success and mostly found happiness, without her, nothing is quite as good as it could be. The world has less shine when we're apart.

I take a step closer to her, reaching out to gently squeeze her hand. Her fingers intertwine with mine, her touch warm and familiar. "You ready for this?" I ask. I've always admired her tenacity and dedication to her work, but seeing her let go, even for a little while, is something else entirely.

Brie bites her bottom lip and nods. "Does it matter if I am?" she replies, her voice laced with a hint of uncertainty.

"Of course it matters."

She meets my gaze, then gives a curt nod. "I'm fine."

"It's completely safe."

She shoots me a look that says she doubts that.

“Trust me, Breezy.”

She huffs. “You know I do.”

I don’t take that lightly. Trust, coming from a woman as in control as my ex, is something sacred and special. She doesn’t give of it freely. I brush my thumb across the back of her hand, a silent reassurance that I’ll be right there with her every step of the way.

As we climb the wooden steps to the platform, Brie’s nervous energy radiates from her.

She hesitates at the top, her grip tightening on the railing.

Getting her to relax in the water was one thing; she’s always loved the water.

She grew up on water skis. But this? Forcing her to face her fear of heights?

I’m not asking anything small of her, that’s for sure.

I climb up behind her, my body pressed against hers, offering support and a sense of security. “Take a deep breath, Brie,” I whisper, my lips grazing her earlobe. “You’ve got this.”

Her exhale is shaky, but she takes the next brave step up.

She reaches the top of the platform and I watch as she’s harnessed up, the instructors explaining the safety precautions with professionalism and a touch of humor.

Brie listens intently, her brow furrowed in concentration, determined to conquer her fears.

I strap into my own harness, the cool metal buckles pressing against my skin.

The instructor gives us one last round of instructions, checks both of our harnesses one final time, then steps back, allowing us to take the plunge into the unknown when we're good and ready to do so.

Brie's hand finds mine once again as we step onto the launch pad, her grip tight.

"Hey," I say, tugging her hand.

She side-eyes me.

"I've got you." I squeeze her hand for reassurance.

Brie breathes deeply, then nods. "I know."

"I love you."

The faintest ghost of a smile touches her lips. "I know that, too."

"We just have to go for it, Breezy. All in."

She swivels her head toward me, searching my eyes, then whispers, "All in."

Her words are simple enough; we're discussing the zipline, nothing more. But the look in her eyes says it's not just the zipline. It's so much more. It's everything .

It's us. Our future.

All in .

“Ready?”

She nods.

“One... two... three !”

There’s a rush of wind against our faces, the thrill of adrenaline coursing through our veins as we step off the deck in tandem. Brie’s scream echoes through the forest and the trees become a blur of green as we fly through the air, our laughter mixing with the chorus of birds and rustling leaves..

I steal glances at Brie whenever I can, her smile infectious and radiant. She catches me looking and playfully sticks her tongue out, a gesture that elicits a chuckle from deep within my chest.

She’s something to see in a suit and expensive heels.

Stunning in a simple dress and flats.

Damn near the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in the morning when her hair is mussed and her eyes are puffy with sleep.

But this Brie, the one with wind in her hair and a wild expression on her face might be my favorite version of her.

We land on the first platform, our bodies swaying slightly as we detach ourselves from the zipline. Brie turns to me, her eyes shining with a newfound light. “That was amazing,” she breathes, her smile wide and eyes bright.

With a soft chuckle, I lean in and capture her mouth in a lingering kiss, savoring the taste of freedom and possibility on her lips. I have no doubt in my mind that selling this place and moving to New York to be with her is the right decision.

She can continue to dominate in every courtroom she enters, and I'll be waiting for her at home, ready to remind her when it's time to unwind.

And if she ever forgets how, I'll be there to remind her of that, too.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

I stand at the edge of the outdoor dance floor, my heart pounding rapidly in my chest. The night sky above is black behind a canopy of neon lights that have been strung up in a crisscross pattern across the open space, casting a soft amber glow upon the sprawling dance floor.

Laughter drifts through the air, accompanied by people speaking too loudly, shoes shuffling around clumsily, and heels clicking against the wooden facade.

But there's no music .

Each camper wears headphones, but without them, I can't hear the song or follow the beat. They look ridiculous, and honestly, I can't say I understand the allure.

Frankly, I just don't get it.

My shoulders are tense as I watch, my fingers gripped tightly around my glass of wine.

I've taken time off to be here. I've waterskied. Today, I even ziplined, for God's sake. I've gone as far as taking a break from blow-drying and styling my hair.

But a silent disco? Dancing around to music no one else can hear?

The very thought of it fills me with dread .

I sip my wine and watch as couples and groups of singles twirl and sway, their bodies moving to the rhythm of only God knows what song.

Could be Calvin Harris.

Could be The Wiggles.

Is it all the same song or does each person have something different streaming into their ears?

The wireless headphones Brady gave me hang around my wrist—and that's as close as they'll get to my ears. Unless... could I connect to my cell phone and pull up a podcast? Catch the latest episode of Lawyerist ?

Now that I might be into.

I scan the campers, searching for my ex-husband amidst the kaleidoscope of colors and movements. He stands across the dancefloor, and when our eyes meet, the air leaves my lungs in a whoosh. He smiles, and everything else disappears.

Almost.

There's still a sea of people dancing around like fools.

They part as he steps onto the dancefloor, making room for the man they all adore as he strides toward me. With every step he takes in my direction, my tension eases.

He's dressed in a snug black t-shirt tonight, a pair of black jeans sitting low on his hips, and dark chestnut chukka boots. He fits in here, obviously, but could just as easily be the center of attention at a nightclub in the city.

I lick my lips as he approaches me and his eyebrows rise playfully.

Blushing, I drop my gaze.

His fingers find my chin and tilt my head back up. “Dance with me,” he mouths.

“You’ve got to be kidding. ”

“What?” he mouths, pointing to his headphones. “I can’t hear you.”

I cross my arms.

Brady steals the wine glass from my hand and finishes the last sip, then sets it down on a nearby wine barrel-turned-table. He begins to sway to whatever music he hears and, God bless him, he looks damn good doing it.

But doubts swirl within me. What if I make a fool of myself? What if my movements are out of sync with the rhythm that only I can hear?

A knowing smile curves his lips, his gaze full of nothing but love and acceptance. And maybe a little mischief. I could break into the African Anteater Mating Ritual and this man would still look at me like I’m the love of his life.

Maybe I’ll do just that, teach him a lesson.

He reaches for my headphones and I allow him to pull them from their resting place on my forearm, then he presses a button on the side and gently places them on my head. He adjusts the volume, watching me for a reaction.

A sultry rhythm flows through the headphones. It has a heady, underlying bass beat that seeps into my bones. Slow and sexy, it doesn’t take long for the music to weaken my defenses.

Brady raises his eyebrows.

I shrug. Fine. It's not... awful .

He sways his hips again, dancing to the music that now we both can hear, then steps toward me and wraps his arms around my waist. Reluctantly, I let him move my body in tune with his until I can no longer fight the need to move with him, to feel him.

I unfold my arms and wrap them around his neck, line my body up with his because that's what it wants. That's all it wants.

"Good girl," he mouths .

I roll my eyes and shake my head, but can't help the smile that pulls at my lips.

With every movement, his devotion wraps around me like a protective shield, urging me to let go of my fears and surrender to the man who loves me.

The world around us fades into a blur of moving bodies, a sea of glowing neon, leaving only Brady and me. I close my eyes, breathe him in, and let him take control. He moves us around the dancefloor, slowly and sensually. Within this dance, time stands still.

The song changes. Again and again. The dance remains the same. We're as close as two people can be without being naked.

It's not close enough.

We laugh, twirl, and sway, lost in a realm of our own creation.

With every step, every movement, I shed my self-consciousness.

He pulls me closer, curling over me and nudging my nose with his own, then his lips

are on mine, parting them, and he kisses me slowly, matching the rhythmic beat of the music.

We kiss and rock, making this moment our own.

When he pulls back, his eyes are dark, hooded with desire.

My belly is taut, a knot of longing twisting tighter with every step we take, his leg pressed between mine as he guides me around the floor causing friction that is almost as intoxicating as the man himself.

Our dance is erotic and private, yet out in the open for all to see.

The thought makes my heart skip a beat, but when I look around, no one pays us any attention, lost in their own lives.

Laughing and dancing and making memories beneath the stars, they're completely oblivious to the foreplay happening between Brady and me .

Brady clasps my chin and runs his thumb across my bottom lip, then grips my chin firmly as he ducks to kiss me once more, harder this time, more demanding. He claims me with each stroke of his tongue, turns my limbs to jelly and melts my insides with the heated passion of his kiss.

He pulls back and smirks, then takes my hand, leading me away from the pulsating energy of the silent disco with quick strides, damn near dragging me behind him as he heads down the hill toward the lake.

I don't mind this caveman side of him. I giggle and realize I still have my headphones on, but don't move to take them off. The music still flows through the speakers, and I'm kind of used to it now, kind of... liking the way it makes me feel like we're in

our own little world together.

The moon casts a radiant glow upon the tranquil lake. The night sky is ablaze with stars, sparkling confetti strewn across an ebony backdrop. He leads me to the dock, positions himself behind me.

The soft sigh of the wind caresses my cheeks, carrying with it the scent of summer blooms. Brady's presence behind me is both comforting and electrifying. The warm night air wraps around us, but has nothing on the heat of his body.

With a gentle pull, Brady draws me closer, until our bodies are pressed firmly together, my back to his chest.

His lips, soft and warm, find my throat, and I close my eyes on a sigh.

We rock to the music, slower now, barely moving.

He reaches up to cup my throat, holding me firmly against his body as his other hand trails down to the top of my skirt.

He skitters his fingertips across the exposed flesh of my midriff, sending goosebumps out over my flesh.

He runs his tongue up the side of my throat as he dips his hand beneath the fabric of my skirt, down beneath the lace of my panties.

He teases my mound with feather-soft strokes, then reaches down until he can push two fingers inside of me.

I gasp, but he tilts my head, sealing his mouth over mine.

He kisses me through every whimper, every moan, silencing the sounds I make as he coaxes my body toward my next earth-shattering orgasm beneath the starlit sky.

Anyone could be watching us. People could have surrounded the dock behind us, and we wouldn't have heard a single footstep approach because of these damn headphones.

And I should care about that; really, I should.

The threat of getting caught should scare me into pulling away from him. But it feels too good to be wrapped in his arms, and the demanding strokes of his fingers are too damn delicious. I don't want to deny myself.

Brady breaks the kiss and turns us more fully toward the lake and the display above us, shielding my body with his as he tilts my head upward and rests his chin on my shoulder.

As the first few Fourth of July fireworks light up the sky, painting the blackness of night with a vibrant display of color, he coaxes each wave of pleasure from my body as we sway to the beat of the song playing in our ears.

And I don't think I'll ever view fireworks the same way again.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

Tuesday morning comes all too fast, and with it, a sense of dread.

I wake in my ex-husband's arms, but even his comforting presence isn't enough to shake the feeling that I shouldn't be here.

I know I've created this monster, this all-consuming need to be in control, but even as relaxing as these last few days have been, with a permanent grin on my face and a sense of childhood excitement still buzzing in my veins, I know that something is wrong at the firm.

I can feel it.

The phone ringing on the nightstand beside me confirms it.

Chris wouldn't call unless she absolutely had to. She wanted me to take this time off more than I did.

With my heart in my throat, I slip out from Brady's grasp and slide to the edge of the bed, careful not to wake him.

Clutching my phone tightly in my hand, I sneak to the front door and slip outside. The relaxed, cheerful energy of Camp West that embraced me since my arrival here suddenly feels suffocating.

I press the green button to answer the call.

Christina's voice is strained, her words rushed as she begins speaking before I can

even say hello.

“Oh, thank God I reached you. I’m so sorry.

I told you to go, that I could handle things without you.

And I could. Of course, I could. But this...

” She sighs, then quickly continues. “Brielle, we need you back in New York immediately. There’s been a break in. ”

I grip the balcony, my knuckles turning white. I knew I shouldn’t leave New York. I knew it! What was I thinking going against my better judgment? “What happened? Is everyone okay?”

There’s a momentary pause on the other end of the line as Chris takes a deep breath and my heart beats loudly in my ears. “Everyone is fine, but...” Another pause. “The entire place has been ransacked—”

“What?” I shriek, and a bird takes flight from a nearby tree. Swallowing hard, I realize what she’s saying and lower my voice as I ask the question I already know the answer to. “What did they take?”

“The Hargrave files.”

“Shit,” I say on a heavy exhale. My mind races, trying to process the severity of the situation.

I poured months of hard work and dedication into that case, one nobody else wanted to touch.

I knew it was risky, but that's what fueled my desire.

I knew the people involved were shady—dangerous on both sides—but I wanted that win, hungered for the status that would follow. The respect.

I balked at the risks because I wanted the glory.

I shake my head, squeezing my eyes shut. And now, because I took time off, the ground beneath me is crumbling.

“Chris, this is... How could this happen?”

“I don't know, Brie. We're all in shock here. They went through everything, but the only files missing are Hargrave's. It looks like they specifically targeted that case.” Chris sighs.

Of course they did.

“And the digital files?” I ask, even though I know .

“Wiped.”

My chest tightens until my lungs feel ready to pop. “It's like I never even took the case.”

“Worse,” she whispers “It's like the case never existed in the first place. He's gone.”

I curse under my breath and hang my head, rubbing my knuckles over my breastplate to relieve the pressure in my chest.

“We've been trying to do damage control without you, but we need you to come back

and coordinate with the authorities. They want to speak to you directly.”

“What do you mean you’ve been trying ? For how long? When did this happen?”

“Saturday night.”

“Saturday night?” I snap at just above a whisper. Running my hand over my forehead, I begin to pace. “You should have called me immediately, Christina.”

“I know.” Chris is quiet for a moment, then adds, “But there’s nothing you could have done. It was the middle of the night; you wouldn’t have even been in the office—”

“I might’ve been!” Breathing deeply, I shake my head.

I might’ve been. I should’ve been.

Losing that file could cost me the biggest case of my career.

“You could have been hurt, Brie. If these guys made Hargrave disappear, what would they have done to you?”

I grit my teeth, shaking my head. It doesn’t matter because I wasn’t there. We’ll never know if I could have done something to save those files because I wasn’t there .

“Send Clarence to collect me.”

“Already on his way. ”

“Okay.” I nod, even though she can’t see me. “See you this afternoon.”

I end the call and haul in a stuttered breath. The serenity of the lake in the early

morning light mocks the turmoil in my life, mocks me . Thinking I deserved serenity has cost me the biggest case of my career.

My chest is a tight ball of anxiety, undoing three days' worth of relaxation.

This unexpected turn of events has shaken me to my core.

I had finally allowed myself to embrace the happiness that Brady and I were rediscovering, to let go and relax, and now, it feels like a cruel joke.

Like I'm being punished for giving myself this week to reconnect with the love of my life and enjoy a moment of goddamn peace.

I turn my back to the lake and walk slowly toward the door, the weight of the situation heavy on my shoulders.

I have to face Brady, explain everything to him, and cut our reunion short.

The thought fills me with a deep ache and the heavy weight of guilt, as if fate is mocking the fragile happiness I had dared to hope for.

The summer camp, once a place of joy and reconnection, now feels like a fleeting dream. And as I prepare to shatter the idyllic bubble Brady and I had begun to build together, I have a sickening thought:

Will life ever allow us to truly find happiness in each other's arms again?

He's still sleeping, unaware of the bomb that was just dropped into my lap, and I can't bring myself to wake him just yet.

Maybe it's cowardly, but I'm struggling enough for both of us. Let him sleep

peacefully for a little while longer before I break both of our hearts all over again .

The morning sun casts a warm glow across the room as I carefully fold my clothes and place them inside the open suitcase.

My heart is heavy with a mixture of sadness and duty.

This decision weighs on me like an anchor, tugging me in opposite directions.

Part of me wants to stay here, to revel in the joy of rediscovered love, to immerse myself in the sea of passion that Brady and I have awakened.

But reality beckons, reminding me of the life I've built, the responsibilities that demand my attention. I have to return to the city.

As I zip up the suitcase, Brady stirs. I glance over my shoulder as his eyes flutter open, confusion flickering in their depths as he takes in the sight of me preparing to leave.

He sits up quickly, rubbing his eyes as if he's hoping what he sees is a mirage, a lingering fragment of a dream.

But it's not a dream; it's a nightmare.

"What's going on, Brie?"

I turn to fully face him, my heart aching at the sight of his tousled hair and drowsy eyes. I should be climbing back into bed with him to start the day the way we have every morning since my arrival. Instead, I'm going to break his heart.

"Brady, I..." My voice wavers as I search for the right words, the ones that will

convey the impossible choice I'm forced to make.

"I received a call from Chris—Christina. My partner," I begin, my voice barely a whisper. "Something urgent has come up, and I have to go back. It's... it's a mess." My voice cracks on the last word.

His brows furrow, a mix of concern and disappointment etching lines on his forehead as he tries to process the news. I can see the hurt in his gaze, the realization that our reunion has been cut short by the merciless hand of fate .

"Can't someone else handle it? Can't you take a few more days?"

I take a step closer, my hand reaching out to caress his cheek, to touch the roughness of his unshaven skin. The warmth of his face sends ripples of longing through my veins, but I steady myself, knowing that this goodbye is inevitable.

It always was.

"I wish I could, Brady. I truly do," I whisper, my voice laced with regret. "But this is my firm, my career, and I can't abandon it. I've worked so hard to build something meaningful."

He reaches up, placing his hand over mine against his cheek. His eyes search mine, as if hoping to find a different answer buried within their depths, but then he nods. "I understand. Go take care of things back home."

The ache in my chest intensifies, threatening to consume me whole.

It hurts to see the sadness in his eyes, to know that he, too, is torn between his love for me and the reality of our differences.

We were always polar opposites, two souls dancing on opposite ends of the spectrum, but we've both hoped, even foolishly, that we could cross that divide.

And now, he's not even mad at me. Yelling would be easier to take. A fight, easier to drive away from.

But he's calm. Resigned. As if...

I sigh.

As if he, too, knew this was always the inevitable end of our love story. Because it quite literally always has been, hasn't it? Togetherness and happily ever after were just never in the cards for us.

"I love you, Brie," he whispers, his voice tight with emotion. "I love you more than I can put into words. "

A solitary tear escapes the corner of my eye. I hold his gaze, my heart breaking with every truth he speaks into existence.

Brady pulls me into an embrace, his arms encircling me tightly, as if trying to hold onto the fragments of our love that slip through his fingers.

"I'll always love you, Brielle," he murmurs against my hair, and my heart shatters into even smaller shards.

It's a goodbye that cuts deeper than any wound, a farewell born from love and understanding. We both know that this is the right thing to do, the only path forward.

Apart has always been the only path forward.

This isn't a fairy tale, and sometimes love simply is not enough.

"I'll go to my place so you can pack the rest of your things and leave without me lingering and..." He grimaces. "Making it harder."

As I pull away from him, our eyes meet for one last time. The weight of unspoken words hangs heavy in the air, a testament to the love that lingers between us, even as we say goodbye.

Again.

He dresses quickly, and I watch his every move, memorizing each pull of muscle in his back as he tugs his shirt on, the way his fingers move with each button of his fly. He runs his hands through his unruly dirty-blond hair and I almost change my mind.

When he reaches the door, he pauses to look back at me. "Bye, Breezy."

I squeeze my eyes shut and tears stream down my cheeks. The sound of the door opening and closing echoes in the room. His footsteps grow quieter the further down the steps he gets.

And then he's gone.

"Goodbye, Brady," I whisper. "I'll always love you, too."

This time around, that man doesn't just have a piece of my heart, he has the whole goddamn thing.

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Two Months Later

I step into my office, the familiar scent of leather filling my senses.

The sun casts a golden glow through the windows, illuminating the polished steel and glass furniture and the stacks of files waiting for my attention.

The room feels the same as it always has, but that ache in my soul grows heavier with each passing day.

A giant, gaping hole in my chest where my heart used to be.

If time heals all wounds, why isn't it healing this wound?

As I settle into my chair, my mind wanders back to those few precious days at Camp West. I find myself drifting back there more and more, no longer able to distract myself with work or lose myself to the job I once loved.

They never found Hargrave—or my files—the case of a lifetime disappearing with the man I was meant to defend.

And nothing has felt the same since.

No case has been as thrilling—or as dangerous.

But I know that Hargrave's disappearance and the fallout after the robbery are only a small fraction of why life has lost its luster, why all the things I once enjoyed now

feel... dull.

Life feels dull.

It's been eight weeks since I last saw my ex-husband, and the ache in my chest has only grown stronger.

The memories of our reunion play on a loop in my mind, the way his eyes sparkled with joy when he first saw me, the way his laughter echoed through the woods, and the way his touch sent shivers down my spine.

We were like magnets drawn together, unable to resist the pull that fate had laid out for us.

But then reality came crashing back, as it always does. I had to return to New York, to my career, and to a life that suddenly feels empty without him. The city that once held so much promise now feels gray and lifeless. A city with over a million people, and I'm completely alone.

The demands of my job, which I once found thrilling, now seem trivial in comparison to what I left behind. What's the fucking point without him?

It was one thing to convince myself that my memories of Brady West were tinted by the rose-colored glasses of youth.

That the passing of time had distorted my version of events.

For years I told myself that the fond memories of first love somehow morphed and distorted the truth and made him out to be more than he was.

But now I can't lie to myself anymore. I can't pretend I imagined how wonderful he

was, or that the young girl I used to be turned him into something out of a Disney movie.

Because now I've seen him through the lens of adulthood.

I've loved him, touched him, tasted him—and he's so much more than perfect.

He's perfectly made for me .

And I'm miserable without him.

I've achieved everything I set out to and then some.

I have success. Wealth. Respect. Power .

Everything I ever dreamed of, I have.

Yet I am so dissatisfied, I can barely get out of bed some mornings .

I try to focus on the task at hand, flipping open the first file on my desk.

It's a complex corporate case, one that would have once excited me with its challenges and intricacies.

But today, the words on the pages blur together, my mind unable to grasp their meaning.

All I can think about is Brady, his smile, his touch, the way he made me feel alive again.

It's like someone showed me the sun, let me bask in its warmth, then tucked me away

in the shadows.

It's a longing I can't put into words. A physical ache inside my soul.

The phone rings, jolting me out of my reverie.

I pick it up, my voice automatically slipping into professional mode.

It's a client, seeking advice on a property dispute.

I listen intently, offering guidance and reassurance, but my mind wanders back to Brady, wondering what he's doing at this very moment—and if he's thinking of me too.

After the call ends, I lean back in my chair, staring at the ceiling, and I can't remember a thing we just discussed. Is this what my life has come to? A successful career, a prestigious law firm, and yet I'm incomplete without him.

Unable to stop myself, I finally do what I've held back from doing since I left him again.

I open my internet browser and search for Camp West, praying I'll find even just a glimpse of the man who has my heart.

The first listing that pops up on the search results page is a sale announcement.

Gasping, I bring my hand to my mouth. "No."

He can't sell Camp West.

I scan the article in its entirety, then click out of it to see what else I can find. It

appears that he's been trying to sell the land for a couple months. Eight weeks, in fact. The initial sale listing went live around the same time I said goodbye.

My personal assistant knocks on the door, then steps into my office.

"Good morning, Brie. I just wanted to let you know that the partners are requesting an update on the Thompson case," she says, her voice filled with a mix of concern and hesitation.

This is how Andi sounds these days, how everyone sounds.

They all see the change in me, but they don't know what it means.

Only Chris knows the true extent of my pain.

And though she's been picking up my slack since I returned from Pennsylvania and told her everything—about my marriage to Brady, reconnecting, then saying goodbye and leaving my heart in his hands—I wonder how long she'll do so before she finds a way to push me out and take full control of the firm.

And with my mind so out of the game these days, I'm half-tempted to let her.

I click into another article about Camp West, trying to get to the bottom of this. How can Brady sell something he loves so much? How can he walk away from the camp he designed and built? He said it himself, his blood, sweat, and tears are all over that place.

Andi lingers for a moment, her eyes filled with sympathy. "Is everything okay, Brie? You seem...different lately."

I manage a weak smile, trying to dismiss her concern. "I'm just going through a

rough patch. Nothing I can't handle."

She nods, backing out of my office quietly, though the suspicion in her eyes tells me she clearly doubts I can handle much of anything.

As the day drags on, I find myself staring out the window, lost in memories of Camp West. Below me, the city buzzes with activity, people rushing to and fro, their lives intertwined in a tapestry of routine. I used to feel a part of that energy, a part of those New Yorkers.

Now it just feels... foreign. Detached.

There's no connection.

In the three days I spent with Brady at Camp West, I felt more connected—to a person, a place—than I have anywhere else or any other time in my life.

He can't sell it.

I pick up the intercom and say, "Andi, come back in here, please."

She pops her head into my office quickly. "Yes, Brie?"

"Um..." I frown, trying to gather my thoughts before they spin out of control.

"I need..." Biting my bottom lip, I create the list of steps rapid-fire in my mind.

"My accountant, get him on the phone first. And I'll need my real estate agent; do you still have Ryan Harris' number?"

If not, Betty in HR can get it for you. She's the one who referred me to him back

when I bought the penthouse. ”

I extend my hand toward her, wiggling my fingers as I try to make sense of what it is I’m about to do. My pulse speeds as the plan falls into place, filling me with an electric energy I haven’t felt in, well, eight weeks.

I chuckle as I say, “I’m going to email you a link to a property in Pennsylvania.” I turn toward the computer to begin that task.

“Okay.” Her brows furrow as she continues scribbling notes on a notepad.

“I’m going to buy it.”

“Okay... you’re going to...” Her pen stills on the page and I look up to find her staring at me with comically wide eyes. “What? ”

I splay my hands out. “I’m going to buy Camp West.”

Andi frowns. “Camp West?”

“Yes.” I huff. “That’s what I just said. I’m going to buy Camp West.” The grin stretching across my face is probably wild, judging by the stunned look in my assistant’s eyes, but I can’t help it. This might be the best idea I’ve ever had.

Andi glances over her shoulder like she’s looking for backup, but then she nods and makes another note. “Camp West. Pennsylvania. Got it.

“Ryan Harris,” I add.

She nods again, scribbling the name down. Eventually, she tilts her head, eyes narrowed as she meets my gaze again. “Are you sure you’re okay, Brie?”

With a deep breath, I nod and rise to my feet. Resting my fingertips on my desk, I lean forward, and say truthfully, “Andrea, honey, I’ve never been better.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

The setting sun casts a warm glow over the sprawling grounds of Camp West as I step out onto the wooden porch. The familiar scent of pine trees and fresh air fills my lungs, but today, like every day, my thoughts are far from the beauty that surrounds me. Instead, they are consumed by one person.

Two months have passed since I've seen my ex-wife, and those precious days we spent together feel more and more like a dream, like the conjuring of a lonely, broken man.

The second goodbye was agonizing, like tearing open an old wound that had only just begun to heal, and in the weeks since her departure, I've realized what I knew all along: none of this matters if the woman I love isn't by my side.

Camp West is my life's work, sure, my passion, but now it feels empty without Brie.

As I expected it would.

I had no doubt that bringing her here would taint this place forever. And how right I was. Nothing is unscathed. The lake reminds me of her laughter as she water-skied across it. The trees that surround the camp and loom above remind me of the way she gripped my hand as we soared down the zipline.

We kissed on my favorite bench.

Made love in my favorite cabin.

Watched fireworks from this very dock .

She is all over every inch of this place, and it's just not the same without her.

But I knew that would happen. I needed it to.

Because I needed to know that selling the camp to be with her in New York was the right move.

My future is a different life—a life where Brie and I are together, sharing a home in New York. She loves her career too much to leave it behind, and I love her too much to force her to make that choice again.

So, I made the decision for both of us; it's just taking longer than I anticipated to put my plan into motion. But once Camp West sells, I'll be able to find my way to her.

Though the thought of parting with this place is bittersweet, if it means building a future with Brie, it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. Love has a way of reshaping our priorities, and mine now lie in the arms of the woman I never stopped loving.

I've had multiple offers, but none of them felt like the right fit. I've trusted my gut thus far, and will continue to do so, but this morning's phone call might have been the one I was holding out for.

Finally, someone has shown interest in the camp , and not just the lake and surrounding acreage. If I'm correct in my perception, this buyer will maintain the camp and continue running it as I have for the past eleven years.

A car pulls up the gravel driveway, breaking the silence of the quiet afternoon. Camp West has concluded for the summer, so it's just me up here until Spring. I turn around and watch the car roll to a stop at the end of the dock.

A man not much younger than myself steps out of the sleek, black SUV, his dark

gaze sweeping across the grounds. He's dressed in a three-piece suit, so out of place among the pines. Upon first glance, he reeks of wealth, and my heart pinches.

Was I wrong about his intentions with the lake and Camp West?

Did I misunderstand his goals on our phone call?

Maybe I was too distracted to give the discussion the full attention it required.

My hope plummets as I realize I might be forced to turn down his offer and spend more time away from the woman I love.

I make my way toward him, praying this isn't just another developer who wants to tear down my hard work and replace it with timeshares.

The weight of the decision I'm about to make hangs heavily on my shoulders.

To him, it may just be a property, a business opportunity. But to me, it's been a labor of love.

"Mr. West, I presume?"

"Yes." I shake his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." He looks around as he says, "Ryan Harris, Harris Group."

Clearly, my mind wasn't one-hundred percent invested in the phone call because I have no idea who sent him here.

"My client is a big fan of Camp West. I've come to make sure everything is in order as far as your financials, paperwork, transfer of sale, et cetera."

Nodding, I ask, “And your client, they want to keep Camp West as it is?”

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. “From my understanding, between you and me, the camp itself is special to my client, not just the lake and surrounding land. But I’m not at liberty to disclose any plans for the property once the transfer of ownership has been completed.”

I exhale a breath and the tightness in my shoulders begins to ease. “Understood. ”

We take a stroll through the camp, the man asking questions about the facilities, the number of cabins, and the financials. I answer everything to the best of my ability, but he’ll need to spend some time looking over the paperwork before he informs the potential buyer.

We reach the edge of the lake, and I pause to take in the breathtaking view. The water sparkles under the sun, and the gentle breeze carries the scent of moisture on the forest floor, the beginning signs of winter creeping around the bend.

Sensing my hesitance, Mr. Harris speaks up. “It’s a lovely property you have here. The potential for development is immense.”

I nod, my gaze still fixed on the lake. “Yes, it’s a special place. But it’s time for me to move on.”

He looks at me curiously, perhaps sensing that there’s more to this decision than meets the eye. “If you don’t mind me asking, why sell such a beautiful property?”

I take a deep breath, my heart heavy with the weight of my confession. “There’s a woman waiting for me in New York.”

A flicker of understanding crosses the man’s face, and he nods knowingly. “They

have a way of turning our worlds upside down, don't they?"

Chuckling, I slide my hands into my pockets and gaze out across the lake. "This one certainly does."

"And she's worth it?" He extends his arm toward the lake. "She's worth giving up all of this?"

I turn and meet his gaze. "She's worth everything."

Mr. Harris nods, then we continue the tour in silence.

As we reach the end, he extends his hand toward me. "I hope you find the happiness you seek," he says sincerely.

I shake his hand firmly. "Thank you. I hope the next owner of this place will cherish it as much as I have."

"Barring anything below bar in your financials, I think you have a deal, Mr. West."

We shake on that and Mr. Harris climbs back into his car, leaving me with a heavy sense of finality. As he drives away, I stand alone by the lake, the decision practically made but the road ahead uncertain.

With renewed determination, I head back toward the camp, my heart filled with hope and the promise of a future with the woman I love.

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Friday morning drags on like molasses. The deal has been made. Money has been exchanged. The final paperwork still needs to be signed, but I have instructed my real estate agent to send the notary to Camp West so I can surprise Brady and sign the documents in front of him.

As soon as this inexplicably long day is over.

The clock ticks slowly, signaling the approach of noon. How is it only midday? With a huff, I reach for my phone and press the intercom button. “Andi?”

“Call Clarence, please. I can’t wait until five o’clock. I have to get to Pennsylvania”

She giggles and I frown as I stare at the intercom. What’s so funny?

The door to my office swings open and Brady steps inside, a smirk pulling at his full lips. “What’s in Pennsylvania, Breezy?”

My heart skips a beat at the sight of him.

The air shifts, as it always does, when we’re within reach of one another.

“Brady...” I quickly push my chair back and rise to my feet. “What are you doing here?”

His deep blue eyes take me in slowly. “Breezy,” he breathes, “you look even better than I remember.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “You say that every time.”

“It’s true every time.”

I shrug. “Well, they do say absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“That’s a crock.”

My heart sinks. “Oh?”

“Absence is brutal . It doesn’t make the heart grow fonder, baby, it beats the ever-loving shit out of the heart.”

I roll my lips together to hold back the smile, but nod in agreement. “Why are you here?” I ask again, my voice barely above a whisper, bracing myself for his answer.

He takes a step closer, his gaze unwavering.

“Because I can’t live without you,” he confesses, his voice filled with conviction.

“My heart belongs to you. It’s always been yours.

I want to be with you, Brielle. I want to make a life together, no matter the challenges, no matter the place.

Our differences are nothing we can’t handle.

We’ll make it work.” He takes a deep breath, then adds quickly, “I’m moving to New York. ”

My heart not only beats again, it slams itself against the cage of my ribs, desperate to

get to him.

“Brady,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “I was about to come to you. I’ve packed my suitcases.

” I motion to the bags sitting beside my desk, laughing awkwardly as my brain tries to make sense of the situation.

“There’s... there’s nothing here for me.” I laugh sadly. “There’s no reason without you.”

His eyes widen, a mixture of surprise and elation lighting up his face. “You... what?”

I snort, shaking my head as his brain tries to make sense of the situation.

“You were coming to me? ”

I nod.

“That’s what’s in Pennsylvania?” His smile lights up the room as he strides toward me, coming around the desk to take my face in his hands. “All in, baby?”

Grinning, I nod. Because no matter how high the jump, he’ll always catch me. “All in.”

“I hope you have room for me at your place.”

“What?” My brows furrow.

“I sold the camp.” Brady shrugs. “I’m technically homeless.”

My lips twitch, and soon I'm unable to hold back the laughter, because he doesn't have a clue what I've done. I reach up to cup his face. "You silly man. I bought the camp."

Brady's smile falls. "You... wh—what?"

"Yes," I whisper, laughing even as tears cascade down my cheeks. "You sold the camp to be with me; I bought the camp to be with you."

"You're kidding." Brady's mouth drops open as he searches my gaze, then he shakes his head. "You're not kidding. You bought the lake."

"I did."

"To be with me."

"Every second of every day, if you'll let me."

Brady laughs. "You're fucking perfect."

I tilt my head. "Debatable, but thank you."

He drops to one knee and tugs a diamond ring from his pocket. My diamond ring. The same one he bought me all those lifetimes ago. "Marry me, Brielle."

"Absolutely." I give him my left hand, watching through blurry eyes as he slides the ring into place. "Took you long enough to ask."

With a laugh, he stands and wraps his arms around me, presses his lips to mine, and for once, for the first time since we said goodbye seventeen years ago, I know what home feels like.

It's in his arms.

Whether in a penthouse in Manhattan or a yurt in the middle of the Pennsylvania mountains, home is Brady West.

And though I have no idea what the future holds for us, the only thing that matters is that it's a future that has us exactly where we're meant to be: together .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

Ten Months Later

Mid-morning on Friday, I find Brielle Donovan-West where I always find her: in her element.

Tucked behind her desk and surrounded by a mountain of paperwork, with the little crease between her brows that tells me she's deep in thought.

There's a pencil securing her hair into a messy bun atop her head, and her reading glasses have slipped down to the tip of her nose.

She's on a conference call with her partner, on speakerphone of course, so she can tackle ten other tasks at once.

On any given day, any normal day, I'd keep my distance. I usually just stand in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb as I watch her for a moment, then leave her alone to continue kicking ass and taking names.

I do this most days, anyway, as I've found myself unable to stay away, sneaking in here to drink her in because I can.

Because she's mine.

But today isn't any regular old day.

So I lurk in the doorway to watch her only briefly before I step inside her office and close the door behind me, locking it quietly before I make my way around her

massive desk. We have about ten minutes, and I intend to use them wisely .

Brie hums as she clocks me in her peripheral but doesn't look up from whatever she's working on until I step into her space, nudging her chair back with the toe of my boot.

With a huff, she blows her bangs out of her eyes, takes her reading glasses off and sets them on the desk, then she leans back and looks up at me with a smile that knocks the wind from my lungs.

"I have to go, Chris," she says, those hazel eyes locked on mine.

Then reaches past me and presses the button to end the call while her partner is mid-sentence. "Hello, husband."

"Hello, wife." I lean forward and press a kiss to her lips as I grip the armrests of her chair and push her backwards so I can maneuver between her and the desk.

Breaking the kiss, I pull back and kneel before her.

Brie's eyes flash with desire and I smirk as I unbutton her khaki shorts and begin to unzip them.

"You're not just going to lurk in the doorway today, I see."

Smirking, I shake my head. "No, ma'am." I tug at the hems of each shorts leg until she lifts her ass, then I pull the shorts down her tanned legs until I can yank them off of her and push them aside, quickly following suit with her panties.

I wrap my hands around her knees and spread her thighs apart, baring her to me. I lick my lips and look up at her. "Scoot closer, baby, let me see that pretty pussy."

“You saw her this morning,” she teases as she scoots forward.

“That was hours ago, wife.” I lean forward and exhale against her, smirking when she shivers, then I reach behind her knees and tug her even further still, bringing her right to the edge of the seat.

I drape her legs over each of my shoulders, then lean in and lick up the seam until I can flick my tongue against her clit. “Mm, that’s better.”

Brie sighs contentedly as she drags her fingers through my unruly hair, tugging my head between her thighs, and I chuckle as I give her what she craves.

I lick her with firm strokes, lapping at her hungrily, getting her nice and wet and ready for me, a mixture of saliva and arousal coating my tongue and her pussy as she whimpers and bucks against my face.

My cock throbs angrily against my jeans, so I press down on her lower belly with one hand and bring the other between my legs, giving myself a firm stroke over the denim, then I unbutton my fly.

My cock bounces free, falling heavily to rest on my thigh, and when Brie starts to whimper, her thighs beginning to tense, quaking with the foreshocks of her orgasm, I stroke myself firmly, then stand, scooping her into my arms as I rise to my feet.

She squeals, eyes wide and hungry as she wraps her arms around my shoulders and her legs around my waist, I rest my ass against her desk and position her heated center above my cock, then slide into her slowly.

She moans as we join, dropping her forehead to my shoulder.

“I’m so close, Brady,” she murmurs, the words strained as she tries to keep her orgasm at bay.

“Show me, baby.” I lift her gently so I can rock back in with a deep, firm thrust of my hips.

She murmurs my name, a repeated prayer, and I increase the pace, lifting her up just so I can slam her back down again, fucking my wife fast and hard, each drive of my hips sinking my cock deeper inside her where it belongs.

It doesn't take long for her to come undone for me, her body tightening around mine like a vise. Brie bites into my shoulder to stifle a moan and I shout a curse, following her right over the edge, coming quickly as she trembles around me.

I hold her while we both unravel, then rub my hand up and down her spine as we drift back down to earth, coaxing her back to me with whispered praise.

“I love you, baby,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple, then repeating those three words I'll never grow tired of telling her.

Eventually, she sighs, that sated and satisfied sound that tells me she's floating in that just-fucked, blissful subspace.

Looking at the clock on the wall, I realize our ten minutes are up, so I settle her back onto the chair and pull out of her slowly.

She pouts as we disconnect and I chuckle at that precious look on her face as I tuck myself into my jeans and button them up, then brush my thumb over that jutting bottom lip.

“Up you go, baby,” I encourage, and she takes a deep breath, then stands so I can help her back into her panties, then her shorts, zipping them up as she watches my hands.

And, because I can't help myself, I slip one hand beneath her shirt to cup her breast,

teasing her nipple with firm strokes of my thumb until she squeaks and pushes my hand away.

Shaking her head, Brie runs her palms over invisible wrinkles on her blouse, then she drags her fingers through her long, blonde waves.

When she smiles up at me, I fall in love with her all over again.

“Is it time?” she asks, still a bit breathless, and those beautiful hazel eyes still slightly hooded.

“It is.” I cup my wife’s face and press my lips to hers in a slow, tender kiss. When I pull back, I smile and slip my hand into hers. “Come on, boss. Let’s go meet the first batch of this year’s campers.”