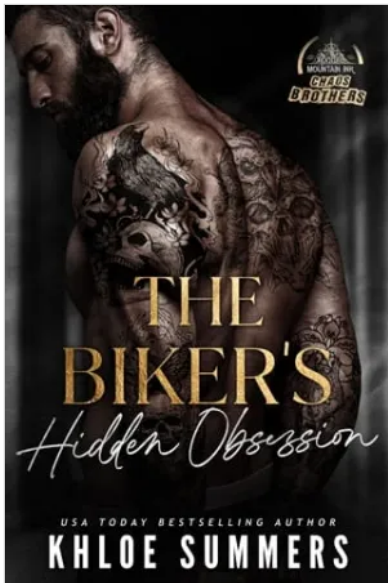




The Biker's Hidden Obsession (Chaos Brothers MC #3)

Author: *Khloe Summers*

Category: Romance

Description: Can an older bad boy biker fake a relationship with a curvy beauty without falling for real?

Sienna

I never mix business with pleasure.

Until now.

Apparently, desperation makes fools of us all.

Tennessee is all grit and shadows, the kind of man who leaves chaos in his wake.

I'm supposed to keep my distance.

But every forbidden glance and electrifying touch blurs the line between fake and forever.

Now, I can't tell where the lies end and love begins.

Tennessee

I've lived a hard life.

Reckless choices, heavy regrets.

But when a buddy says a woman needs a last-minute fake date, I figure it's my shot to repent.

Then I meet her.

Sienna is sweet curves and sharp fire, and from the moment I see her, I know I'm in deep.

But theres something familiar about her name... a family Ive tangled with before.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

“My buddy says you’re looking for a date.” A giant biker with a long beard and tattoos stands at the front door of my shop. He looks like the type of guy you’d hire as personal security, but who also moonlights as a stripper on the weekends.

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a man this built. His biceps are the size of... well, bigger than anything I can think of at the moment. He steps inside and suddenly the thousand square feet I’ve been using as an event shop shrinks immensely.

His eyes lock onto mine. They’re sharp and dark, as though he’s waiting for a response.

Oh yeah, I need to talk back.

“Umm... yeah.” I smooth down the fabric of the floral dress I ordered a few months back. I haven’t had a chance to wear it yet, and I’m not sure how I feel about the A-line cut, but it’s rocking every shade of pink, which makes it my new favorite dress. “I wasn’t aware that you’d be dropping by.”

“Well, I was down here grabbing a few things and figured I’d stop in and say hello.” He drags his massive hand down over his face and stares at me with the same hardened look he was rocking before.

“Yeah. I... you’re here, so lets...” I have no idea why I’m stammering.

I’m not a stammerer. I’m a talker. Ask anyone.

I'll talk a stranger's ear off about anything. Heck, I once spent twenty minutes in line at the grocery store talking to the woman in front of me about ketchup brands. She was impressed by how much I knew, and truthfully, so was I. Apparently, it's not mainstream knowledge that ketchup is used for polishing metal and the rest can be used to bake a cake.

"Is this a bad time?" the giant continues.

"No, not at all. It's not a bad time. It's... I'm a little shook up this morning is all. My cousin sent all these texts last night with last-minute changes to the guest list, and there's a fountain issue. So... distracted."

"Is this the same wedding you're looking for a date to?"

Somehow, this idea sounded less humiliating when I was abstractly talking about it with a friend and thinking about finally losing my virginity instead of valuing rational decision making. Now, in real life, it's just ... weird .

"I mean," I pause and close my eyes, trying to conjure up the words to answer his question without sounding like a complete loser, though I'm thinking that's exactly what I'm looking like, "I guess I don't really need a date. I was just being crazy and weird. I'll... it'll be fine."

The giant watches me closely, weighing my words as though he's deciding whether I mean them or not.

His stance is relaxed, but the way he stares at me makes me feel all kinds of gooey inside.

"So you were looking for a date, and the second you see me, you're not?"

” He laughs under his breath as he crosses his massive arms over one another. “You’re giving me a complex.”

“No, I’m sorry. You’re great. I mean, look at you. You’re so big. I mean... you’re good looking.” Why am I still talking? “You seem like a nice guy, but, ugh, I’m... I don’t think I need a date. It’s complicated.”

Wow! What the hell was that? I never act like this.

He pulls a chair out from the table and lowers himself down carefully until the seat disappears and it looks like he’s floating in thin air. “I’ve got time.”

Oh, great. He’s got time.

I don’t know why I thought maybe he’d be a little less attractive. This guy is like action-movie attractive.

I lean back against the counter awkwardly.

“Umm... weddings are weird. My assistant quit a few days ago to run off to California, I’m missing a bunch of flowers, I have an issue with a fountain, and my family...

especially my mother. She didn’t believe in this whole business venture thing of mine, and now I’m putting on my cousin’s wedding and everything is going wrong.

I didn’t want to show up without a date too.

So, I figured a big, rough, tough, biker dude would keep her quiet.

But... I was overthinking it. She’ll see straight through all this, anyway. I’m better

off just biting the bullet.”

He grins and I swear I hear the smirk in his voice as he says, “You sure? I’ve been told I clean up really nicely.”

I’d love to see how well this man cleans up, but going to a wedding together would mean acting normal around each other, and clearly I’m not as capable of that as I thought I was.

“Trust me, you wouldn’t want to deal with my mother. She’s an evil witch from Planet Zargo, and she has no remorse for anything or anyone.”

The man laughs. “Planet Zargo, huh? Sounds like a challenge.”

I widen my gaze. “More than a challenge. She’s got a perfected side-eye that destroys souls on contact. It’s a mess.”

“No offense, but I’ve handled far worse than a perfected side-eye.”

I wrinkle my nose and glance toward the action star at the front of the store. “Oh, you haven’t felt her side-eye. It’s deadly, trust me.”

“Look,” he stands from the chair and steps toward me, one heavy boot at a time, until he’s so close that I can smell the motor oil and leather that surrounds him, “I gotta be honest with you. I’m backed up on good deeds, and this one’ll count for like eight...

at least. You gotta let me do this.” He shifts his weight to the right and flexes his arm, showing off a horseshoe tattoo with an eagle in the center.

“Think of me like an assistant. These are workin’ muscles.

I can lift and carry whatever you need, including your mother, to the door if necessary. ”

I smile and stare down at the ground at thoughts of this massive man protecting me from everything, especially my mother, but now I’m a little concerned by the hard sell.

I mean, why does he want to be at this wedding so badly?

I know who these bikers are. There’s chatter all over town that these guys are ex-hitmen. That said, I really could use the help.

“I don’t know... you have a reputation.”

“My buddy told me that’s why you wanted me there. I’m here to scare the questions away.”

That is true. I did say those exact words.

“Besides,” he continues, “I thrive in chaos. Point me to the soul-crushing, side-eying mother from Planet Zargo, and I’ll perform accordingly.”

I narrow my brows. “Accordingly... how? I’m not sure we have the same idea of accordingly .”

A flicker of a smirk lifts his face. “Intimidation is a language I speak fluently. Also, for your personal knowledge, I’m more than whatever shit this town is saying.”

“Oh yeah?”

He nods and readjusts his baseball cap. “I was a military medic for years.”

I tilt my head to the side, studying this big, rough, massive man in front of me. That wasn't in the rumors going around town. Truthfully, it's hard to believe this is the kind of guy that would care about anything enough to save it.

"So... when did you change out the scalpel for a switchblade?"

"Oh, you're a smart-mouthed one. I like it."

A shock of energy presses between my legs as his deep voice rumbles through the air.

What the hell is wrong with me? This man is in his late forties and he's clearly pretending to be a doctor.

I need to steer clear. Really, really clear.

Or... jump on him now, get it out of my system, and move on with my life.

I think I like the second option better.

"I have family that was in the military. What branch did you serve?" This should make him nervous.

"Army." He says it with a pause, and I swear his shoulders tighten. Maybe I've caught him in a lie. "I started out in pursuit of medical school, but it didn't work out the way I'd planned."

My phone rings, interrupting my full-scale operation to catch this guy in a lie.

I glance down at the screen instinctively.

It's my cousin. I'm sure she's freaking out.

We're two days from her wedding, and I know what's on the other end of that line is a bomb.

A bomb I need to let explode over the phone or it'll come crashing into my shop.

"Sorry, it's my cousin. I have to take this. "

"You do your thing." He scratches his number down on the back of a pamphlet for the inn that I keep sitting on the counter. "Text me later and we'll work all these details out."

I answer my phone as I stare the man down. I knew he was a big, rough guy when I asked my friend to set me up with him. This is what I wanted. But now that he's standing here, this whole thing is a little more intense than I expected.

"Hey, Mae. What's up?" I say, as the giant who scribbled Tennessee over his number leaves the building. Is that his name or is he telling me what state he's from?

This guy is weird.

"Have you gotten any of my texts?" Her voice is biting, and though it's not an abnormal sound to hear from a bride two days before a wedding, I'm not as prepared for it this morning as I should be.

"Yeah, sorry. This morning was weird. I had this guy in here and—"

"I don't care!" she shouts. "I just need you to tell me that everything is going to be okay."

"Why wouldn't everything be okay?"

“Because I’m making so many last-minute changes, my dress won’t be ready from the tailor until the morning of the wedding, and I have like three hundred million things on my mind. Not to mention your assistant quit, didn’t she?”

“What?”

“You weren’t going to tell me?”

“How do you know?”

“She sent me an apology text last night.”

My cheeks heat with fire. “It’s not that I wasn’t going to tell you. I just hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Plus—”

“No! I don’t want you to wrap this in some pretty little bow, Sienna! This is bad. Really bad.”

It’s not great that I don’t have an assistant anymore. In fact, it’s kind of horrible. Now I’m responsible for everything all at once, at the most important event of my career, and since I stepped away from my parents’ fortune, I have a whole lot of nothing, with everything to prove.

My heart hammers hard against my chest and my throat goes dry. What the hell am I going to do?

“Hello?” Mae presses. “I can call your mom. She’ll hire someone to help and—”

“No!” My mother is the last person I’d ask for help. She’s sitting on her mountaintop waiting for me to fail. I glance down at the number the biker scratched on the pamphlet for the inn. “I just hired someone. That’s who I was talking to.”

I can almost hear the wrinkle in her forehead. “What?”

“Yeah. It’s a, ugh, my boyfriend. He’s really big and strong, and he offered to pick up the job for me. So... we’re good.”

“Your boyfriend? This is the same biker guy you’ve been talking about for a month now?”

“Yup. Same guy. He’s the best!” Why is my voice so sunny? “I’ve gone over everything with him this morning and we’re solid gold.” I clear my throat to make room for another lie. “He’s on his way to fix that fountain issue right now.”

“Seriously?” Mae’s voice finally relaxes. “Oh my God, I love you! I’m sorry. There’s just so much going on.”

“It’s cool. Trust me. It’s tough being a bride, but I’ve got everything under control. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sighs. “Thank you. I appreciate you so much. Sorry for the way I—”

“Girl, don’t worry about it. I’ll update you later, okay?”

“Okay,” she echoes. “Thanks again.”

The second she’s off the line, I stare blankly at the wall, and my lungs seize like they’ve forgotten how oxygen works. Why did I lie? What was I thinking? What the hell am I going to do?

I stare down at the biker’s number that’s daring me, begging me to press it, taunting me to set this whole circus into motion.

My thumb hovers over the call button. Maybe he won't answer. Maybe he walked outside and felt like he dodged a bullet. Then again, maybe that would be for the best. Maybe that's the universe's way of throwing a wrench into my chaos before I get the chance to mess everything up.

That said, he answers on the first ring.

"Damn. You cracked fast. I thought I'd have to show up again tomorrow." His voice is impossibly deep, and the gritty rasp behind it only lends to more throbbing between my legs.

Clearly, I need to get a grip.

"I need to hire you. You said you'd be my assistant. I need that." Complete sentences would be nice, but like I said, my brain isn't functioning right now.

"Assistant. Sure. You tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"There's pay involved. It's not much," I sigh. I should've thought all this through before I picked up the phone. "It's about five hundred for the event. I can go over the details with you tomorrow if you have time."

"Sounds good." He pauses for a second and I hear the low hum of an engine on his end of the line. "Breakfast by the lake? I'll bring the pastries. You can tell me everything you need."

The lake? I love the lake, but this is a business transaction... sort of.

"Breakfast here at the shop is probably best. I need all my materials to show you. You do coffee?"

“Black with two sugars... if you’re trying to butter me up.”

That was easy enough. Maybe I should tell him he’s my date, too. It’ll be a lot easier to say that over the phone than to explain it in person. Then again, I can’t summon boldness more than once a day.

“Two sugars it is. I’m thinking eight a.m.”

“Perfect.” He settles into the role steadily without teasing or commentary, easing the anxiety that’s been sitting on my chest since this morning. “I’ll be there.”

The line disconnects and I sit there, my phone still pressed against my ear with silent anticipation. What kind of hell did I just summon?

I only know it wears leather and boots, and tomorrow morning, it’s walking through my door.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Tennessee

Red leans against the doorframe with a toothpick waggling between his teeth like he's got something to say.

He's always had that look that's half amused, half ready to burn the place down just for fun.

His cut's more worn than mine, patches barely clinging on, and grease stains that've been there longer than the chip on his shoulder.

"Still babysitting that hunk of junk?" he nods toward the bike I've been working on like it's personally offended him.

I grunt, not bothering to look up. "You finish your work? There's plenty to do around here."

He chuckles, the sound low and rough, like gravel under tires. "Shit, I just finished two bikes last week. You've gotta catch up."

Red's one of the last real ones. We've seen hell together. Miles of bad roads, bar fights, cold nights under open skies. He's the kind of guy who'll bleed with you, laugh at your pain, and still knock back a beer like he's got nowhere to be in the morning.

I finally sit back, wiping sweat from my brow with the same rag I used on the engine. "You here to help, or just stand there looking pretty?"

Red smirks. “I came to hear about your date with the girl in town. The guys won’t shut up about it. A little young for you, ain’t she?”

I roll my eyes and lean back into the bike, twisting the wrench harder around the rusted bolt above the exhaust pipe. “It’s not a date. She needs an assistant for the wedding she’s putting on. No big deal. I need some goodwill, anyway.”

He leans against the doorframe as he fiddles with the toothpick in his mouth. One of these days, he’s gonna choke on that thing. “I heard through the vine you went down there. Almost like you were lookin’ for trouble. Girl that age, you’d have to be.”

I blow out a sigh and narrow my gaze toward him for a moment before redirecting to the stuck bolt in front of me.

“I owe a buddy a favor, and you know I hate letting that shit sit. That’s all.

Besides, she doesn’t want a date anymore.

She wants an assistant. I guess everything has gone to hell with some wedding she’s planning for her cousin. It’s no big deal.”

“Right, so she’s not pretty?”

“What?”

“Dude, you’re here alone all the time. I’ve seen you struggling since we got out here.”

“I’m not alone. You’re standing right there, annoying the shit out of me day after day.”

He pulls the toothpick out of his mouth, holds up his palms, and settles onto a workbench, thumbing through a pack of smokes without lighting one. He knows better than to push too hard. That fucker also knows when there are cracks in my story.

I grab a stool, flip it around backward, and drop down onto it, wiping my hands on that same damn rag. “You ever wonder what we’re doing out here?” I ask, not looking at him.

Red lifts a brow. “We’re fixin’ bikes.”

“Not what I’m asking. After everything we’ve seen and done, do you think we’ll ever balance the scales?”

He doesn’t answer right away, which is how I know he understands what I’m saying.

I sigh. “We’re far from virtuous, and I wonder when I reach my maker, how will I be judged?”

“You were a medic in the desert, fighting for a just cause,” Red says softly. “Depends on who you’re judged by, but in my book, you were righteous. If you’re not, then none of us are.”

I nod, jaw clenched. “Guess so. I’m preaching to you guys about how we all need to move on while I’m still sitting here all fucked in the head.” I glance at the bike, half-finished like everything else I start these days. “I just... don’t know who I should become with what’s left of my life.”

Red stands and lands a hand on my shoulder. “Then it makes sense that you’ve decided to take up wedding planning. Nothing helps embrace godliness like a choice between eucalyptus or baby’s breath. You’ll be fitted for wings in no time, man. Lord

knows it's not about anything else."

"It's not about the girl, if that's what you're getting at."

"Oh, so it really is about the love of signature cocktails?" He laughs. "Just admit you like a girl who's way too fuckin' young for you, we'll all laugh, then support you like we have the rest of the idiots around here."

I stare down at my oil-stained hands and let his words sink in. Considering I jerked off to thoughts of her in her pretty pink dress the second I got home, Red isn't completely off base.

That said, she really is too young. Too young, too damn put together, too sweet. A guy like me would ruin someone perfect like that.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Suppose I don't belong at this wedding thing either, but it'll get me out of my head for a few days, and outta this shop. I need a change of scenery."

Red leans his elbows forward on his knees before scrubbing his hand over his face as his gaze drifts off. "I ever tell you about this gas station out in Amarillo?"

I narrow my brows. "Amarillo? No, why?"

He leans back, stretching out his legs. "When I was seventeen, I ran with this crew that thought stealing gas and raising hell was purpose. You know where I came from, so I was broke, stupid, and filled with piss and vinegar, like the other assholes I was with. One night, we were at the usual station, stealing gas. My only job was to drive. Got cocky, ran in for beers."

He pauses and narrows his gaze like he's back in that moment.

“Sirens started blaring, the crew took off, and I ran. I got clipped by a truck off the west side of the interstate and spent two months in the hospital with a busted leg and a nurse who damn near adopted me.” He laughs under his breath.

“I realized that night I was just another hothead with a record. A disposable piece of shit.”

“Uplifting,” I laugh.

“That nurse gave me a job sweeping floors in the hospital when I got better. Wasn’t nothing great, but she told me every day that I didn’t have to be who they all said I was.

” He laughs as he says, “That’s when I joined the military.

It felt honorable, like I was really doin’ something with my life.

” He lets out a sigh and shakes his head as though he’s getting lost in his own story.

“I’m trying to say a change of scenery will be good for you, and maybe that young girl, who you shouldn’t be talking to, sees somethin’ in you that you forgot was in there. ”

I shake my head and stand from the bench. “Look at you, out here reciting poetry. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re a fuckin’ idiot.”

“That’s the perfect quote for the end of your stanza.

It has such a good ring to it... fuckin’ idiot, ” I snap sarcastically, uncomfortable with

the show of emotion between us, though thankful for the conversation.

I've known Red for the better part of my life, and I've never heard him talk like this.

Maybe we're all getting soft in our old age.

"I'm usually the one giving out advice. You're usually handing out beers. I appreciate it, man."

"Speakin' of," he stands and pulls open the door to the fridge that sits in the garage, "you need a cold one?"

I laugh. "Yeah, wouldn't hurt."

He hands a long neck bottle toward me. "I gotta say, I'm a little jealous."

"Jealous? Of what?"

"Watching the guys run off with those girls, starting these meaningful lives ... I never thought I wanted that. I figure you always did, though."

"Fuck yeah." I lower my head, staring at the old boots I've been meaning to replace for years now.

"I thought that was part of the plan a long while back." I lean against the toolbox and take a sip of the beer.

"I'm nearly fifty, man. I thought I'd have a couple of kids in college by now, a woman next to me to take care of..."

I don't know where life fuckin' goes. One day I'm twenty-five, out in the field, trying

to save the world, and the next my knees are locking up and my back is aching.

My body's tired, man. Head's not far behind.

"I take another sip of beer. "What about you? I never hear about you dating."

He laughs under his breath and looks away before glancing back again. "I don't know what I got to offer anyone."

"Well, you're an undiscovered poet. Shit, isn't that what women want?"

"Apparently not," he laughs and takes a swig of beer before glancing at the bike I should be working on.

"Maybe I'll try that online shit, see what I can find.

"He drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

"Anyway, I better get movin' so you can go back to all those wholesome thoughts of signature drinks and flower arrangements.

"He turns to walk away, but glances back again.

"This girl... her last name sound familiar?"

I know where he's going with this because I've thought the same thing. "It doesn't check. She's not his daughter."

"How do you know? She's about the age of a girl that would be his daughter, and she has the same last name."

“Yeah, but Victor lives in Miami now.”

“So, his daughter grew up and moved to the mountains?” He lifts his hands in the air as though he’s not trying to shake things up, but we both know he is. “Just sayin’ I’d want to know if I were into my best friend’s daughter.”

“He hasn’t been my best friend in nearly thirty years, and she’s not his daughter. White is a very common last name.”

“Makes sense,” Red groans before tapping the doorframe and heading out to do God knows what.

The screen door creaks behind him, leaving me in the silence with my lukewarm beer. I finish the rest and set the bottle down with a hollow clink, trying not to let my thoughts run wild.

There’s no way Sienna is my old buddy’s daughter, right?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

I pace across the white and gold parlor floor as the scent of eucalyptus attempts to soothe me. It's not working.

I spent all night making lists for lists that needed lists. In fact, I passed out on a pile of lists and forgot to set an alarm. Thankfully, my body woke me up on time. Almost on time . I was a few minutes behind, but I still had time to curl my hair and find the perfect dress for today's date.

No, not a date. Today's a business meeting. A professional meeting between two people who are conducting business.

God, help me with this.

I hear the deep rumbling of his motorcycle before I see him. He's so handsome. I'm not usually attracted to older men, but Tennessee is different. He's tall and hulking, with huge muscles, and he's way more mature than guys my age.

Plus, how does he make basic blue jeans and a fitted black T-shirt look so impossibly good? He's hot without trying. I swear a grizzly would run in the opposite direction after one quick blink.

The door pushes open, and he smiles and nods. "Sorry I'm a minute late. I got held up by a few deer on the mountain."

I glance down at the clock. It's just one minute past eight, though I lean into the

mistake to confess my own discretions. “No worries. I got overwhelmed last night, slept terribly, and forgot to grab the coffee this morning.”

“Oh!” He straightens and grins. “Let’s take a walk then. I don’t know about you, but I need a jolt in the morning to get me going. My treat.”

I would let this man treat me to all kinds of things. At least that’s what every dream I had last night was telling me.

I almost can’t look him in the eye this morning after all the filthy things I was doing to him with my eyes closed, but I make do... barely. “Yeah, coffee sounds good, but I’ll get it. You’re helping me, after all, for extremely low pay, given the hazardous working conditions.”

“Hazardous working conditions?” He laughs. “Shit. What the hell did I sign up for?”

“Misery.” I grin, stepping out into the sun-drenched street with him. “Absolute misery.”

We walk side by side, our bare arms brushing against one another as we pace toward the coffee shop.

I try to focus on anything else in the street, like the early morning shop owners setting up for the day, the way the sun lifts up above the mountains in the distance, the smell of pastries that drifts into the street from the bakery, but my mind keeps getting stuck on the massive man standing beside me.

I feel so small. At five foot eight, I never feel this small.

“So, why do you call yourself Tennessee? Is that your real name?”

He grins. “No, real name is Tenson. No one’s intimidated by a Tenson. It’s kind of dorky, but it’s a family name.”

“And people are intimidated by a Tennessee?”

“Nah,” he chuckles, “probably not, but my buddies started calling me that as a play on words back in the day and it stuck. You always go by Sienna?”

“Yeah,” I grin, “no one’s ever called me anything else, though I guess I could start calling myself Sedona or something.”

“There’s that smart ass I like so much.” He bumps my elbow playfully. “You like having a shop here on Main? It’s pretty quaint.”

“Yeah, it’s amazing. Rugged Mountain has the best people!” I point up to the street sign that intersects before us. “Like these petunias, the town puts so much effort into making everything gorgeous. What about you? You like it out here?”

He clears his throat as we walk, and I can’t help but feel like I’m with the biggest, baddest guy around.

Everyone looks at him. Some like they want him, others like they want to be him.

“Ya know, I never thought the mountains would be my thing, but it’s been surprisingly great.

Still getting used to the wildlife, but taking the bike out for a ride has a whole new meaning now. ”

“Yeah? What’s your favorite place?”

A woman passes us by, dragging her gaze up and over Tennessee as though she's eye fucking him. Damn lady, calm down.

"The lake is pretty great. Can't remember the name, but it's the turquoise one with all the wildflowers."

"That describes about every lake up here, but yeah... it's one of my favorites too. West Lake has great fishing, if you're into that."

"You into fishing?"

"Never been. I always thought it looked fun, though. A quiet afternoon with a pole in the water, it just sounds peaceful."

He brushes his massive hand down over his beard as we climb the little sidewalk hill toward the bakery. "I wouldn't have expected that from a girl like you."

"What's that mean? A girl like me? "

"No, I don't mean it offensively. You're just," a soft breeze blows between us, carrying sweet scents, "you're very..."

"What?"

"You're put together, and you wear these really nice clothes. I can't imagine you doing something like fishing."

"You realize I change my clothes for the occasion, right?"

He laughs. "Sure. You always look really put together is all. I can't even imagine you in a pair of sweats."

“Well, you should. I live in them at home. Fishing always sounded fun, but my dad wasn’t exactly the outdoor type. He loved money, and talking about money. I think he took me fishing once to say he did it, but that’s—”

“Ahh!” A loud screeching sound fills my ears as my cousin makes her way toward me. She’s in sweats and a T-shirt, her hair tied on top of her head in a loose bun.

Maybe she’s the type of girl Tennessee prefers. Ugh, I need to stop doing this to myself. It doesn’t matter what he prefers. What matters is that I’m staring at my cousin. Why am I staring at my cousin?

“I wanted to surprise you!” She crashes into me with a hug then redirects her energy toward the giant beside me.

The giant that’s supposed to be my boyfriend.

“This is a surprise!” I say, stomach clenched. “What are you doing here? You’re a bit early for the wedding.”

“I know, but I was freaking out, and I thought I could help somehow instead of sitting on my butt, expecting you to do everything.”

“That’s what I’m for.” I’m not sure why I’m offended that she’s here, but I am. I don’t need anyone’s help. I can do this on my own. That, and I wanted this time alone with Tennessee... for business purposes of course.

Mae drags her gaze up and over the goliath standing next to me. “Damn, cousin. You really killed it with this one. He’s hot!”

“Oh my God, Mae! He’s right there.”

“What?” she laughs. “I’m sure he knows he’s hot.”

I’ve totally gazed past the part where she’s mentioned how I’ve killed it, implying that Tennessee belongs to me. Maybe he missed that part.

I cross my fingers behind my back. Please let him have missed that part.

“So, where are you two off to?” Mae stands back and crosses her arms over her chest. “Can’t be time for a break already. There are like a thousand things to do for the wedding.”

Dear God, this is a nightmare. I make a mental note to never help my family again.

Ever again.

“She’s been working all night.” Tennessee wraps his arm around my lower back and tugs me into his orbit. “We’re taking a break.”

He’s touching me. His big, rough hand snags on the fabric of my dress and my clit reminds me it’s there.

I lean into his chest instinctively, then pull away again, but he tightens his grip until I’m snuggled up against his chest.

This makes total sense.

“Oh, a coffee break sounds deserved then.” Mae seems to take everything easier when a big, grumpy looking biker says it. “I guess we could all get coffee and then get started on the list of things to do.”

“Actually,” Tennessee continues, “Sienna and I have everything covered. We had a

small hiccup but we're back on track. We were going to spend the rest of the morning fishing."

"Fishing? Really?" Mae looks as confused as I feel. "You figured out the fountain issue and got the chair thing sorted?"

"Finished," he continues with a straight face as though I don't have a zillion things on a list in the pocket of my dress. "We'd invite you to join us at the lake, but I think I've gotta give this one some peace and quiet for a while. She's pretty burned out. You understand, don't you?"

Mae lifts a smile onto her face and leans into me slowly.

"Yeah, of course I do. I need my quiet time, too. Things have been hairy with Rick lately. I'm sure it's just wedding day jitters but the whole thing is driving me crazy.

He hasn't been home all week, and," she exhales slowly, "it doesn't matter.

You two go have your relax day. You've earned it.

I don't know how you finished everything so fast! "

I glance toward Tennessee, widening my gaze. "I don't know how we did either. You focus on getting relaxed and ready for the wedding. I'll catch up with you tonight?"

"We can bring her to the clubhouse for a bit. A little pre-wedding party," Tennessee offers.

"Yeah, Rick would kill me if I were at a motorcycle clubhouse with a bunch of handsome men the night before my wedding," she smiles, "fairly so."

“Then we’ll have a girls’ night,” I continue. “Drinks at the bar in town. They have a band playing at Mullet’s.”

She leans in and kisses my cheek. “I’ll text you. Have fun today. You’ve earned it.”

With that, she leaves, and I’m left standing in the street, wondering what the hell is going on.

I glance up at Tennessee, a wide grin on his face as though he’s pleased with his performance. “Sorry. I’m sure I overstepped, but I could tell you weren’t interested in the intrusion.”

“Yeah, no. I appreciate it. Sorry about the boyfriend thing. I, ugh, I might have told everyone about someone like you that may or may not be my boyfriend.”

“It’s okay,” he bites back a smile, “I figured. I can be the boyfriend for a weekend. It’s not a big deal. In fact,” he smiles, holding the door to the bakery open for me, “it would be an honor. I do have one request, though.”

I stand before the bakery glass, but for once, I’m not looking at the giant bear claws calling my name. I’m looking up at the giant beside me. “What’s that?”

“We go fishing today, for real.”

“Fishing?” I laugh. “Maybe you missed the part about how desperate I am. You do realize the list of things to do isn’t actually done, right?”

The wedding is in one day. I’m totally screwed if I don’t get a fountain fixed, find sixteen more matching chairs, get the caterer up to date with the new headcount, and—

“That’s exactly why you need some relaxation. You’re about to cry over folding chairs.”

“And fishing is going to make sixteen people disappear?”

“Nope, but it’ll remind you to breathe. You need that right now. The rest can wait.”

He glances toward the girl behind the counter and orders two coffees, four bear claws, and a picnic special to go. Clearly, he’s not listening to me. “Do you have your phone?”

I nod. “Why?”

“And the list?”

I nod again. “Why?”

“Can I see them?”

I’m not sure what he’s trying to pull, but I hand him my phone and the list anyhow. “What are you doing?”

“You stay here.” He hands me his credit card. “Pay for our food and the breakfast. Give me ten minutes, and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Ten minutes? Really?” I laugh, a little annoyed that he thinks he can take care of my entire list of problems in ten minutes.

“Ten minutes,” he repeats. “You sit down and relax while you wait for our food.” He’s talking as he walks, and soon he’s outside on the sidewalk pacing back and forth as he takes one call after another.

His brows narrow as he talks, and though I can't hear what he's saying, I can tell by the way his shoulders flatten and his back straightens that he's taking charge of whatever's going on.

I can't decide if I'm horny or pissed off.

I've been struggling with these people for weeks. If he comes in having magically found sixteen more chairs, I might just hug him and lose it all at once.

"Your dad is handsome," the barista says with a grin. She's an older woman, with short gray hair and tight curls, probably the same age as Tennessee.

My stomach twists and knots. "My dad?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you don't see it, but he's a catch. Your mom is a lucky woman."

I think I might die now.

Tennessee walks through the door just as the barista winks at me smugly, like she's just handed me a winning lottery ticket I'm too dumb to scratch.

He's got that relaxed swagger that only comes from being wildly competent and infuriatingly calm.

"Got the chairs," he says, like he just picked up milk on the way home.

"Caterers squared away. Florists are on board. Oh, and I got a guy going to look at the fountain. He can fix anything so I'm sure it'll be finished in the next few hours. "

I'm still reeling from the dad comment when he hands me back my phone like we do this every Saturday.

I take the list and my cell, biting back every self-preserving stupid comment that rolls into the front of my brain while simultaneously ignoring how impossibly warm it feels to have someone take care of me for once.

“Well,” he asks with a crooked grin, “do I get a gold star?”

I blink at him. “Oh no,” I say slowly, “you’re getting way more than a gold star.”

His brows lift. “Yeah?”

“You’re being promoted to hot dad.”

He pauses, looks between me and the grinning barista, then deadpans.

I’d love to say the comment stops my pulse from quickening, or my clit from throbbing, but it doesn’t. Not even a little.

That’s how I know I’m in trouble.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Tennessee

The moment she swings her leg over the bike behind me, everything shifts. The weight of her mood has lifted and whatever's happening today is spread out in front of us like the beginning of a movie we're about to press play on.

A PG rated movie. No, a G rated movie. I have the barista to thank for that. The hot dad comment was just what I needed to feel like a pervert. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to live that one down.

That said, it was a fair observation. Sienna is young. Too young for me. I have no business letting this go any further than the little bit of pretend we're playing. At this point, even that feels too far.

Her small hands hold tight around my waist and her head rests gently against my shoulder blade as I throttle up and tear through the forest. The world around us blurs in a smear of green and blue, and the scent of pine fills my lungs.

Lately, these trips have been great, but today, with the bit of warmth of her breath on the back of my neck as we slow for turns, the ride is a whole new experience.

Why does this feel so damn good?

The lake comes into view as we top the mountain, and I make a pact with myself to work the rest of what I'm feeling through my head before we settle into our fishing spot.

I can't have these thoughts ruining my fucking life.

What could even come of it? We're not getting married, we're not having kids, and she's not into me, so whatever I'm feeling is void.

I downshift and coast the rest of the way to the edge of the lake, gravel crunching under the tires the closer we get to the turquoise water.

It's a quiet day, as are most days up here.

Thankfully, today we're alone. There isn't another human in sight, like we own the lake for ourselves. Our own personal, private sanctuary.

We're as far as the road takes us when I fire off the engine and stare out at the turquoise expanse.

Her arms don't move when the engine cuts.

She stays still in the moment, her small hands still wrapped around my waist, clinging as though she doesn't want to let go.

Maybe it's all in my head. Either way, it undoes me, and there's a second that's quiet and suspended, where I think maybe she'll stay right there, holding on forever.

A moment later, she slides off the bike, and the moment's gone. I watch her walk toward the lake, loose and unguarded, like this place peeled off a layer she didn't know she was wearing.

I swing my leg over the bike, boots hitting the gravel before I grab the folding fishing pole and the tackle box out of the saddlebag on my bike. I keep it there for impromptu fishing stops. It comes up more often than you'd think.

Today, we're fishing. That's it. I'm showing her something slow and relaxing. I'm giving her a morning she deserves. Nothing sexual. Nothing emotional. Nothing personal. It's just a day at the lake with a girl who needs a break.

I step toward her, repeating the mantra in my head. ' Don't do anything dumb. Don't do anything dumb. Don't do anything dumb. '

She turns as I get close, the wind tugging her hair, her eyes impossibly clear. I should stop looking at her. I need to stop looking at her.

"You okay?" she asks, feathering her fingers back through her long blonde hair as a soft breeze blows between the pines.

"Yeah," I clear my throat and step into the sand, "just grabbed the fishin' gear. You ready?"

She holds her gaze on mine. "Thank you for getting me out today. I really needed it."

God help me! I want to kiss her more than I want my next breath.

"Yeah, no problem. You work hard and you deserve a break."

A sweet smile lifts her cheeks softly, and I swear to fucking God it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I shift the tackle box in my hand, not trusting myself to speak. She steps closer. Close enough that I could trace the freckles on her cheek or the curve of her jaw, but I don't.

I can't.

Her hand rests on my shoulder, and she leans in slowly, pressing her soft, tiny frame against mine. “I mean it. I appreciate you. I’ve been alone out here since I ditched my insane family, and... it’s nice to have someone to count on.”

My cock stretches hard down the inside leg of my jeans, though there’s a red flag waving around in my head.

She ditched her family and moved here?

“Where did you move from?” My heart slams heavy against my ribcage as I wait for her response.

“Miami. My parents are total assholes.”

“Miami?” My voice barely escapes my mouth. This can’t be a coincidence. “Your dad,” I stop myself but the name burns my tongue, “is your dad Victor White?”

The air thickens as a hawk screeches on the other side of the lakeshore.

“How do you know my father?”

I drag in a deep breath as my heart is replaced with a cinder block anchor. “It’s a long story.”

She crosses her arms across her chest and narrows her brows as the hawk calls again. I’m starting to think it’s an omen.

“I’ve got time. How do you know him?” Her eyes widen. “Oh my God! You said you were going to medical school. Is that where you met him, in some medical thing?”

I nod slowly, pinching my lips together as I try to keep the terrible things I want to

say about her father to myself.

“Why did you quit? I thought you were lying back at the shop.”

“It was just a thing,” I say, breaking our stance to tread toward the lake with the pole.

The girl follows. “Wait. You can’t leave me hanging like that. You know my dad. That’s... weird.”

“Why is it weird?” I ask, setting the box on a downed, waterlogged tree. “It’s just a thing that happened.”

“It’s not, though. You’re upset about something,” she presses, standing between me and the lake with her dress blowing in the breeze. “What happened with my father? If you fought with him, I’d understand. He’s an asshole.”

I hook the shiny lure to the end of the wire and step to the side of the girl I most definitely need to forget before casting my line.

“Hey, are you ignoring me?” she continues, stepping into the turquoise lake. Snow-capped mountains rise up behind her and I take a mental picture of the moment. “Oh my God! What—” She steps to the side and trips on a rock, landing herself splat in the water beside my fishing line.

I drop the pole and go in after her, immediately feeling guilty that she’s soaked her pretty pink dress and drenched the hair it looks like she spent all morning primping.

“You okay?” I ask, crouching next to her in the freezing shallows.

“Soaked, but I’ll live,” she laughs, sinking her hand into mine, allowing me to help her up from the rocky shoreline.

I should say something, but the words won't come, not when she's looking at me like that. Cheeks flushed, dress clinging to every curve, nipples hard and pointed.

Fuck! My cock betrays me!

She grins, noticing the betrayal. "Oh, is this why you don't want to talk about my father? You're embarrassed that you've got the hots for his much younger daughter?"

"I don't have the hots for you, little girl. I'm just helping you out."

"Little girl?" She grins, and her voice stays playful as though the lake water has washed away the last of her inhibitions when she says, "That's hot... and your cock is really hard for a guy who's not into me."

I'm not sure what's happening. It feels like a dare, like a tear in the fabric of reality, like a second skin I step into, like the beast I've been holding back cracks the code and steps out of his cage. Without thought, I pull her close, lean into her lips, and kiss her hard and fast.

She gasps but doesn't pull back. Her hands fist into my shirt, and that's it... all the permission I need.

"This is wrong," I mutter against her mouth, the words barely hanging on my breath.

"Then stop," she whispers.

But I don't. I can't.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

It's like someone scratched a match across my skin.

Tennessee's mouth is on mine, hot and hungry, like he's been starving for years.

I melt into him, ignoring the fact that we're standing ankle deep in freezing lake water.

I'm nearly forgetting a lot of other things too, like how he knows my father.

Right now, though, I don't care. He could've been best friends with my father, and I'd still want him.

His giant hand moves like sandpaper across my wet skin, and he groans low in my ear as though he's trying to stop himself from feeling, but it's not working.

"Little girl," his tone is rough and graveled, "this is dangerous."

A prickly warmth travels through me and buzzes against my thighs before settling on my clit. I love the way he calls me 'little girl.' It shouldn't undo me the way it does, but it's so sweet sounding, like he'd take care of me above all else.

"How is this dangerous? We're two consenting adults," I say, my lips nearly touching his. "We're allowed to have fun."

He leans into my neck with rough kisses as he moves toward the lobe of my ear.

He's careful where he puts his hands, though a few times they've been fantastically close to my breasts.

"We can have fun at what expense?" he swallows hard as though he's stamping down his feelings again.

"I can't take you and walk away like nothing happened. I'd want all of you."

"All of me?" My voice cracks as I speak. I've never heard words like that before from anyone.

"All of you," he repeats, his hand on the side of my face, warm against the chill in the air.

"I want to know your favorite flavor of ice cream, what you do in your free time, what movie makes you laugh so hard you snort, and your awful high school haircut stories. I'd want you for more than today.

I'd want all your Friday mornings. All your fears and all your happiness... I'd need it all."

The wind stirs, lifting the ends of my hair. No one has ever shown this much interest in me. I mean, sure guys have tried being physical, but no one has ever really wanted to know me. Not like this.

"I like strawberry ice cream." I step closer until there's barely an inch between us, my voice shaking as I say, "I crochet little vegetables and sell them online in my free time. In high school, my mom hacked off all my hair in some attempt to teach me that I need to take care of it better. I'm terrified of being alone, and right now, this moment is making me happier than I've ever felt in my life.

” I let out a breath, desperate for him to bend. “I want to know you in the same ways.”

He growls low in his throat, a slow, crooked smile flickering across his lips.

“I like butter pecan, always a triple scoop. I spend most of my free time fixing motorcycles. In high school, my mom was famous for giving actual bowl cuts, where she sat the bowl right on my head. And I never much thought I was scared of anything... until I met you.”

My brows narrow as I breathe in the scent of leather and pine that surrounds him. “You’re scared of me?”

“Terrified.” His thumb brushes across my cheek. “You make me want things I thought I’d never get a chance at.”

The lake is somehow still now, as if even the world is pausing with bated breath.

“So take me. Let’s see where this goes.”

His hand slips from my face toward my hips with a groan as though he’s losing the battle with himself. “I can’t touch you, little girl. But...” There’s a dark shatter in his voice as he speaks. It’s as though he knows what he’s about to ask for is wrong, which makes me want to say yes even more.

“What?” I manage, willing my heart to stop beating in my throat.

He looks down at the water, scrubbing his hand over his beard before meeting my gaze. “Nothing. I’m losing my mind.”

“You can tell me,” I press, desperate to know the filthy things he’s clearly struggling

with. “We don’t have to tell anyone, anything. Whatever we do, it’s just between us.”

Another battle-ridden groan settles into his throat as a darkness drifts over his gaze. His voice shakes as though he’s on the edge of his limits. “I need you to be a good girl, sit back against that tree, and put on a show for me.”

Oh damn! My heart slams against my chest as I stare at the massive man. I know exactly what he means, but I play dumb so I can hear his demands. “What kind of show?”

He grins, scrubbing his oil-stained hand against his beard. “I need you to touch yourself, little girl. I can’t touch you, but I can listen... and I can watch.”

My clit throbs as warmth spreads between my legs. I’ve never been this turned on in my life.

“Go on,” he nods his head toward the downed tree behind us, “let me see that pretty pussy. Show me how excited you are.”

Oh God! I suck in a slow breath, heart thudding like it’s trying to break free. I feel like a doll. Like his sweet, innocent little doll. A doll he wants to go slow with and get to know before he devours it.

Clit swollen and throbbing, I sit against the downed pine, feeling the scratch of the bark against my shoulders and the sand beneath my feet.

He’s watching me, pupils dilated, his chest rising and falling like a wild beast, desperately trying to control his urges.

I lift my soaking dress and brush my hand across my soft slit, spreading my lips gently before sliding a finger inside with a moan.

“Such a good girl.” He sits in front of me, watching with a hazy gaze as his hand strokes slowly over his denim covered dick. “You’re so pink, so ready. You want to come for me, don’t you?”

My hips move, rocking against my palm as I dig my feet into the cool, wet sand. I’m so juicy that my fingertip slips easily over my nub, and every circle is another rotation closer to orgasm.

“Slide your fingers inside,” he growls. “Pull all that sticky juice out for me and rub it on your pretty nipples.” There’s roughness in his tone, a desperation of a man possessed.

I do as he’s asked, sliding two fingers deep inside of my soaking pussy. I curl them instinctively and squirm as I hit a spot I’ve never hit in this position.

“Oh,” he groans, stroking his hand against his cock, “that’s my good girl. Make that little kitty feel good.”

I pump my fingers in and out a few more times before drawing the sticky mess out with a sigh.

“Good job. Now rub it on your nipples.” His voice is breathy and deep, as though the further we go, the more out of control he’s feeling.

Watching his reactions, I tug each strap of my dress down slowly, exposing my hard nipples one at a time before rubbing my silky excitement all over them.

“Fuck, look at those big, puffy tits.” He leans closer as though it’s instinctive, his breath warm against my skin, though he doesn’t touch.

“You’re excited, aren’t you? You want me to fill that tight little pussy up, don’t

you?”

I circle my nipples as he watches, trying to gain control of my breath, but it's impossible.

“Touch yourself again, princess. Let's see that sopping pussy come.” His voice shakes when he speaks, and though his dick is still tucked away in his jeans, I'm not sure I've ever seen a bigger, harder one.

Waves lap against the outer edges of my hip as I tuck my hand back between my legs.

“Good girl. Keep your eyes on me. I want to watch that pretty mouth drop open when you come.”

I do as he's asked and watch him, watching me. His primal gaze. His broad shoulders. The way his giant hand moves across his hard cock as he watches me.

I'm a goner.

I twist my fingertip over my clit one final time before my thighs tense, my butt clenches, and I scream out in a breathy, blinding explosion that has me convulsing against the bark of the downed pine.

A soft breeze blows, tickling my nipples as Tennessee growls and moves closer, taking hold of the hand that's still touching my clit. Without a word, he slides my fingers into his mouth with a groan, licking them clean.

Oh damn!

Electricity travels into my spine and down again, and I swallow hard as his hot tongue twists around my fingertips. His gaze never leaves mine as he licks.

“You taste like heaven, little girl, and you looked so fuckin’ gorgeous. I’ll never forget that.”

I let out a breath as I stare back at the giant in front of me. “Neither will I.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Tennessee

My face is hot, my palms ache, and my cock is hard and ready. I shouldn't kiss her again. I know sure as fuck that's the wrong thing to do, but I can't stop myself.

She's too soft, too sweet, too supple.

I thread my fingers back through her soft hair and cup my hand around her throat as I push down the primal urges that threaten my sanity. It's not an easy task after the show she just put on.

"I don't know how I'm going to look at you all day tomorrow and not bend you over and make you mine. Hell, I don't even know how I'm going to get you home without ruining you."

"Well, I'm happy to let you pop my cherry anytime you'd like."

What the fuck did she just say?

An instinctive groan works its way up my throat. "Pop your cherry? You're a virgin?"

"Is that weird?" She wrinkles her nose as though she's embarrassed.

"No, little girl, not at all. It's sweet.

"I stop there before I say anything dumb.

My head is spinning like a water wheel, telling me to take her, claim her, fuck her sweet, tight little hole until she's filled with my come and crying for more.

My soul wants to ruin her for every other man from here to eternity, though I'm not sure that needs to be put into words.

I lean down against her ear, nibbling on the lobe as I try to gather control.

She smells like honey and lake water, like the sweetest little fish I've ever caught.

I need her now!

"Howdy, folks. Any luck catchin' supper?"

"A man in his late seventies wanders through the pines with a pole on his back and a tackle box in his hand.

"I was out here yesterday. Didn't catch nothin' but a nap.

"He seems oblivious to the tension that's sitting between Sienna and I.

"I used to love days out on the lake with my dad. You two come out here a lot?"

Oh my fucking God!

Sienna steps back, her breath catching like she's been yanked from a dream.

"He's not my father," she snaps. "He's my boyfriend."

The old man pauses and blinks like he didn't quite hear her right, as pines sway in the light afternoon breeze. "Well now, that's somethin' new. Didn't mean to interrupt

anything.” He shifts the pole on his shoulder and glances down at the ground like he’s mapping the best escape route.

Sienna’s cheeks are flushed, her chest rising and falling quickly. I can’t tell if it’s shame or defiance crackling off her skin. It might be both.

“Just figured y’all looked close,” the man mumbles, backing away. “Didn’t mean nothin’ by it. You kids take care now.”

He disappears between the trees, leaving behind a silence that roars.

Sienna glances toward me. “I don’t care what people say about our age difference or that you know my dad. I like you. I feel safe with you. That’s more than enough.”

I love her innocence and the way everything looks half full, but it’s not realistic and the evidence of that keeps stacking up.

“Look, I like you too, a whole fucking lot. I mean it when I say I don’t know how I’ll stand next to you tomorrow and not want to tear your clothes off. Sure, it’s sick ‘cause you’re young, but your dad adds another layer.”

Her eyes narrow as a breeze blows across the beach. “What happened between you guys?”

I let out a sigh and climb onto the bike. “Not now.”

“Why not?” She crosses her arms over her chest, brows drawn sharp like the peaks behind her.

I twist the throttle just enough to hear the engine roar. “Another time. Not right before the wedding. You’ve got enough on your mind.”

The sun slants through the clouds, setting the lake on fire with fractured light

Sienna shifts her weight in the sand beside me. “Why? Is it ‘cause it’ll make me hate him? I hate him already.”

“No,” I groan, “it’ll make you hate me .”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

I stare at Mae through a half-drunk pint of beer that's still foaming. It's the night before her wedding and I'm trying my best to be upbeat, but all I can think about is Tennessee.

"So, that dude is hot as hell. How was fishing?"

I think back to my legs spread in the sand while he begged me to touch myself, and a chill runs up my spine. "It was good. We had a good time. Didn't catch much." My voice sounds flat as I tip-toe around the reality of how the day ended.

She grins widely but there's a thread of something dark behind it, like something isn't right.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh," she takes a sip of beer as we watch the local indie band play a Morgan Waylon song off-key, "it's nothing. I just... things have been weird with Rick."

"How so? You guys were so excited last week during the video call. Did something happen?"

"No, I... sort of. I mean, no." She tilts her head to the side, then brushes her dark red hair back away from her face.

"It's not a big deal. I just... I found this text in his phone from some girl who was

talking about how great dinner was, and when I questioned him, he said it was a work lunch and that I was worrying over nothing.

But... I don't know. I'm all in my head about it now. I'm so insecure."

"What? No, you're not. You're human. Did you tell him you didn't want him going to lunch with women from work? I mean, that's weird."

"Is it, though? I mean, it's just lunch and they work together."

"It's weird. I'd be pissed if Tennessee were going to lunch with other women, especially if they were texting him about it afterward." I realize after I've said his name that I'm talking about him as though he's actually mine. He's not.

I don't know where we stand. He didn't say much on the ride back and I walked away before he could speak when he dropped me off. Looking back, it was childish. He's trying to protect me and I'm throwing myself at him like some desperate virgin.

In my defense, I actually am a desperate virgin.

"I'm not saying cancel the wedding, but maybe tell him how uncomfortable it makes you."

"Oh, I did. Trust me. He thinks I'm being insecure, too." She shakes her head and takes another sip of beer. "You have it so good with an older man. Is it true that they know how to treat a woman?"

I think about how hard he tried to hold back.

Any guy my age would've just fucked me. They wouldn't have struggled to be honest about their truth because they would've lied about it.

On top of that, they'd bail on helping me tomorrow, because most twenty-five-year-old boys don't have any grit whatsoever.

"He's pretty great. A little strict," I smile, thinking of the demands he made earlier on the sand again, "but I kind of like it."

She leans back and takes another sip of beer. "Strict, huh? Like how? Giving you curfews or tying you up to the bed and giving you spankings?"

I laugh too quickly. "You've had way too much beer."

"And you're blushing," she says as she smirks.

"He knows my dad somehow." I blurt the truth out before I think it through.

"What?" Her eyes widen. "How?"

"I don't know. We figured it out this afternoon. I guess they knew each other from college or something. He's blaming himself now."

"Ask him."

"I did. He didn't want to make things weirder for the wedding. I don't know, I guess we'll see my dad tomorrow and hopefully it'll go smoothly."

She hides her amusement behind her pint of beer.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. I just... I can't imagine seeing my dad after I did all kinds of sexy things with his old buddy. That's going to be weird."

“Yes! This whole thing is weird. I’ve said that a thousand times. It’s weird, it’s weird, it’s weird.”

“Okay,” she slurs, setting her glass back on the bar. “I gotta know, how big is the giant’s cock? I mean, it’s gotta be huge. He’s what, six and a half feet? Tell me he’s swinging! Tell me you’re having the best sex of your entire life!”

“Oh my God! What?” I burst out laughing. “What are you even asking me?”

Her eyes widen like I’m dumb for having not caught on. “I’m asking you how big his cock is.”

“We haven’t done it yet.”

“What?” She shakes her head back and forth as though she’s trying to comprehend what I’m saying. “You haven’t fucked that fabulous beast yet? Why?”

I shrug. “Virgin. I mean, we’ve done a few things, but I haven’t seen... it. I mean, I’ve seen the outline of it, and I’ve touched it through his jeans. It feels huge, but I haven’t seen it yet.”

“You’re a virgin?” She takes another sip of beer. “I thought I was the last of the Mohicans. I told Rick I was waiting for marriage. Half of me wonders if that’s why he sneaks off to lunch with his coworker.”

“No, he wouldn’t do that, right?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t think so, but who knows?”

“You do. Listen to your heart. You want this wedding, right?”

“Yeah,” her tone lifts though there’s anxiety behind it, “of course. You’ve gone to all this trouble, we’ve paid for all these expenses, and it’s time to settle down. I’m twenty-four. I need to start having babies and doing the things.”

“Wait, you love him though, right?” Suddenly, I wonder if the stress Mae’s been transferring is about the wedding or her failing relationship.

“Of course I do.” She slides from the booth and takes another sip of her beer.

“We should get home. We need to rest up before the wedding.” She stumbles as she stands, and I help steady her as she moves.

“You should stay with me tonight. We’ll head over to the venue early tomorrow morning.

The bridal suite should be all set up and ready by seven. ”

She leans into my side and stumbles her way out the door. “You’re the best cousin ever. I’m sorry I gave you such a hard time about the wedding. Whatever happens tomorrow, I’m just thankful you planned everything. I know it’ll be so pretty.”

I appreciate her words, even if she is a little drunk, but even trying as hard as I can to stay in the moment and enjoy them, all I can think about is Tennessee.

What happens tomorrow when my dad is around? What happened between the two of them back in the day? And why do I want my father’s ex-best friend to touch me again so badly?

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Tennessee

Red leans over the kitchen counter, finishing off the last of a piece of sky high pie from the diner. “Heard from Duke today. He’s talkin’ about coming home in the next few weeks. I guess he’s almost finished with whatever shit he had going on.”

Duke is our club Prez, but he’s been out of the picture for a while now. Not sure what the fucker is up to. No one is.

“Yeah, well, you tell him we’re doing just fine without him?” I gulp a glass of milk like it’s a shot of bourbon and set the glass on the counter with a clink. Some days, milk just hits the spot.

“Nah. Didn’t want to rile him up. Besides, it’ll be good to have him back. With everyone gettin’ hitched, and you off romancing some girl, I’m not sure what I’m gonna do with myself.” He leans back against the kitchen counter, looking more worn than wicked lately. “How’d things go today?”

I’m not sure how to answer him. My mouth opens and shuts half a dozen times before actual words come out. “It was messy. Messy but really fuckin’ nice.” My chest tightens at the thought of having ruined whatever half chance I had with Sienna. “She’s Victor’s daughter.”

Red stares toward me like he’s seen a ghost. A real nasty one. “Shit, dude. That fuckin’ sucks. You backin’ off?”

That’s a good fucking question. “We left things weird. She wanted more answers

than I could give her right then. Plus, I didn't know how to tell her things I've done.

"I hold my breath as I try to connect the thoughts I'm having with the feelings pressing at my chest. "I have no right to fuck around with this girl. Not only because of who she is, but because of her age. I know it looks ridiculous. Two people today thought I was her father." I pause, letting it sink in, then offer the number again. "Two."

He bursts out in a short bout of laughter. "Fuck... that's rough."

"Yeah, you're telling me." I sigh and scrub my hand over my face as the refrigerator hums beneath Red's amusement.

"The trouble is, I don't think I can let her go.

I mean, I can pretend I can, but the truth is, she's everything I want.

Sweet, smart, hardworking, a smart ass, and yeah, she's gorgeous. "

He shakes his head and tosses the small bakery box in the trash. "If you want her, I say go get her. Never known you to let some asshole stand between you and what you want."

"This is different."

"It's a lot different. This isn't some hit you'll forget about in two weeks.

It's not some mission you're being ordered to take.

This is the kind of thing that'll eat through your insides.

You'll think of her some fuckin' sunny day when you're out with some other woman.

Maybe you'll tell everyone you're happy, but deep down, you'll still be thinking about the girl from the wedding shop.

"He claps his hand on my shoulder. "I see it in your eyes. She's the one, man.

It's got roots. Whether you dig 'em up or let 'em grow... they're there."

Fucking hell, this man is making too much sense lately. I'm a little worried about him.

"You've given me a lot to think about, man. Thanks."

He nods and leaves me with thoughts quiet enough that I can feel them, without regard for anyone but the two of us.

Red is right. No matter how hard I try to twist this in my head, she'll always be my obsession.

I'll think about her every fucking time I go fishing for the rest of eternity.

I'll think about her every time I climb up onto my bike.

I'll think about her whenever I see a wedding, or a girl, or feel the fucking wind.

Fuck!

I have to tell her what happened between me and her father. I have to tell her the bad things I've done. I have to lay every ugly piece of my story at her feet and pray she sees something worth holding onto. Then, I have to make her mine.

No questions. No doubts. Sienna belongs to me, and I'm taking her.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

The wedding venue is already bustling with folks getting everything on track for today's event. The caterer is setting up in the lodge, the bakery just dropped off the cake, the rental company brought us sixteen extra chairs, and the fountain is set up behind the altar overlooking the mountains.

It's perfect, and the second I see Tennessee I know why.

He stands in the archway in a tailored black suit, slate-gray shirt beneath, and shoes polished to a mirror sheen, but it's the dichotomy of the fancy threads and the ink on his hands that draw me in.

Tattoos sprawl across his knuckles like a warning and a promise, proof that beneath all that sleek civility lives something untamed.

It's official, I'm not going to make it through today. In my defense, I'm not sure who would. I mean, the man is a god in his own right.

I really should've given him some space yesterday. Why was I pushing so hard? I don't care what happened between him and my father years ago. What matters is right now.

I linger on the back patio, half-hidden, watching him work, unsure of what to say after the strange end to things last night.

On one hand, I want to run into his arms until our bodies are pressed together so tight

that I feel him in my bones.

On the other, I want to wait here patiently until he comes to me.

Still thinking over my next move, I continue to watch as no one interrupts him.

No one dares. He moves like he owns the air around him.

Hell, he moves like he owns everything around him.

I don't think I could exude that boldness if I wanted to.

I don't have that thing about me that he does.

The vibe that's deep inside of him that makes everyone else jump and listen to his every whim.

He adjusts the floral arch just right, then turns back toward the lodge, making eye contact with me immediately. So much for my secret hiding spot. My fingers go numb and my heart slams against my chest as I stare back at him.

"Morning, little girl. You're looking extra gorgeous today." His eyes drag down my frame.

Okay, this is a good start.

"Thanks," I say, my breath on alert. "You were right, you do clean up nicely."

He brushes his wide palm over his trimmed beard and stares at me. "We should talk before your family arrives. We've got a lot to sort out."

“Yeah? Like what?” I plead to the heavens that, ‘I have to fuck you before I lose my mind,’ are his next words.

He grins, reaches toward me, and tucks me against his chest. “I need to tell you more about who I was, sweetheart.”

A huge part of me wants to sit and listen to that story, and someday, I’m sure I will, but right now, I say without hesitation, “None of that matters. Whoever you were back then, you’re not that guy anymore. I want you, Tennessee. The man you are today.”

He groans under his breath, stares at me for a long moment, then scoops me up in his arms in one wild motion. “I don’t deserve you, little girl.”

“That’s too bad,” I whimper against his lips as he holds me close to his chest, “because I need you.”

His eyes tell a story he can’t seem to find the words for. They’re soft but intense, deep and longing, locked on mine as though I’m the only thing in the world he’s ever wanted.

For a moment neither of us speaks as the air between us hums with the weight of what’s to come next. Then, he decides for us.

“Where are we going?” I pant between kisses as he carries me up the stairs of the lodge where I’m supposed to be getting a wedding ready. “I don’t have a room here, do you?”

“Fuck,” he groans. “No, I thought you did.”

My body’s still hooked to his waist like a monkey, he turns back and forth, searching

the hallway until he sees a door flung open with a maid cart outside.

I think I know where this is going, and I think I know how crazy this little town is going to buzz when they find out what I'm doing in someone else's hotel room with a man twice my age, but I don't stop the momentum.

I'm over that. Last night was the last night I'll spend alone in my bed ever again.

So, I let the giant man with the salt and pepper beard carry me past the pine door into someone else's room. I let him lock the door behind us, then lay me out on the freshly made bed of white linen, and I revel in the way he looks down at me like a wild animal who's just caught his prey.

"You're going to have to forgive me for the things I'm about to do to you, little girl."

Oh damn!

"Okay," I pant, staring up at him like an innocent deer, unsure of what comes next.

"I know I should be easy on this little virgin body, but fuck..." He pulls me close to the edge of the bed and sinks between my legs, burying his bearded face against my pussy with a groan.

"Fuck." He breathes me in, tucks his thick fingers inside of me, and eats like he's been hungry all his life, like nothing has ever satiated him the way I do.

I grind up against his face, scrubbing onto his soft beard again and again as a heavy knock hits the door.

I should've known this was coming.

“Housekeeping.”

“Occupied,” I shout, hoping the girl goes away.

“I’m going to get the manager,” she mumbles through the door.

The manager! I had to work with him to get the event situated. Most every event in Rugged Mountain happens at this lodge so that’s going to be awkward, but I’m not stopping.

I couldn’t if I wanted to.

“No one can stop this now, little one. You’re mine.” He growls like a wild beast unchained from reality as he tucks my hips up against his and slides his hard, thick cock against my seam.

Breathing through my nose, I focus on the way he stares, at the way his sandpaper hands feel against my skin, at the scent of leather emanating from him, at the way his hard cock slides inside and spreads me so fucking wide.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he moans, “and so fuckin’ wet.”

I’m not sure what I expected, but the pain is not terribly bad. It’s more of a pressure in the pit of my stomach and a pinching that seems to be subsiding.

“You okay, baby?” he grunts, slowing his thrust a little. “Your little virgin pussy getting stretched too far?”

I pant as he thrusts into me over and over again. “I think I’m bleeding.”

“Do you want me to stop?” He slows his movement as he speaks.

“No, I just wanted you to know, just in case...”

“In case what? In case I didn’t want your blood on my dick?”

I nod slowly, embarrassed when I see streaks of red swirling in the creamy white excitement pooling between us.

“Oh, princess, I want all of you, remember? Besides, I’ve been thinking about what your cherry would feel like on my cock all night.”

Why does he have to be so insanely hot?

“Moan for me, little girl. Come on... I want to hear you.” He thrusts into me harder and faster. I have no idea how deep he is, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to poke through to the other side of my stomach.

My legs rest on top of his shoulders and his big hand reaches toward my breasts, tugging them free before leaning in further to suckle each one with a quick scrape of his teeth.

His warm, wet breath tickles my skin. “Tell me you’re mine. I need to hear you say it.”

A knock hammers on the door, but we ignore it.

“I’m yours.” I swallow hard and drive my hips into him further as I grip the edge of the sheet. “Come inside me! Fill me up!”

“Oh fuck, baby. I’ll fill that little pussy up. I’ll fill you so fucking full, you’ll be dripping for days.” He groans. “You want my seed? Tell me again. Tell me what you need.” His voice is more fevered now, like he’s gone completely feral.

“Fill me up! Please!” I circle my clit as I pant out the words.

“Fuck, baby. You’re getting tighter. You’re about to come. Do it! Come on my cock! Give me all your juices.” He thrusts into me harder and harder as I hear the words ‘final warning’ through the pine door. I’m too absorbed with the giant cock piercing through me to care.

A moment later, the door creaks open and I explode, coming all over his thick cock as his name falls from my lips over and over again.

He thrusts into me twice more, hard and fast. Then all at once, he groans, “You’re mine.” Instantly, the feeling of his warm come coats my insides.

There could be forty wedding guests staring at us right now, but I’d never see them. I’m too enthralled with the look of pleasure on his face as he continues to thrust.

“Fuck.” He leans into my lips and kisses me hard, his voice low in my ear as he says, “I’ll take care of you, little girl. Always. I promise.” The words spill from his lips like he was meant to say them.

My core heats as he kisses my forehead and pecks sweet kisses all over my face.

“Umm... hate to interrupt your...”

“Christ!” another voice interjects. “What in the name of Saint Peter is going on?”

And just like that the air shifts and my stomach drops. It’s my father.

Tennessee

“Out!” I bark as I tie a sheet around my waist and step toward the door, herding folks like sheep. Sure, we’re in the room without permission, and now her father is staring me straight in the face, but I’m not letting the first intimate moment between Sienna and I end like this.

She deserves better. Something sweeter, softer.

The man I haven’t seen in nearly thirty years pushes through the small crowd of people and barrels forward like the selfish fucking asshole he is. “What the fuck is going on here?” he hollers, face dark red, suit still crisp. “No, I know what’s going on here. Sienna, get up. We’re leaving.”

“No,” she whispers low in her chest, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You planned this wedding, and you’re making a fucking fool of yourself in front of the hotel manager and all these guests,” he scoffs and glances back toward me, “with a man twice your age!” There’s disgust and disappointment in his tone, and I want to knock him the fuck out for every unkind word he’s ever said to her.

A woman nearly the same age with short, unnaturally black hair and a long black, sparkling dress steps into the room. I assume it’s the mother from Planet Zargo. “Sienna, are you kidding me? You’re an embarrassment. Clean yourself up and get back to work.”

Too bad none of these fucks tell her what to do anymore.

“Get the hell out, both of you, or I’ll carry you out.” My words are firm and rooted in honesty. There’s not a thing I wouldn’t do to keep this girl safe.

“Oh, high fucking day coming from the fucker who’s fucking my twenty-five-year-old daughter in a stolen hotel room.” Her father laughs under his breath and shoves me back. “You haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“Not enough,” I groan, landing a punch square on his jaw.

The woman in black gasps and steps in, holding her husband’s arm as though he’s permanently damaged. Dramatic, everyone is so fucking dramatic. If I wanted him permanently injured, he would be.

Sienna lands her hand on my back and a rush of guilt swells my chest.

Fuck! I don’t want her to see me like this. I’m supposed to be a better man.

“It’s okay.” She rubs my back softly and holds my hand in hers, guiding me toward the bathroom. “Let’s go take a break.”

The second the door closes between the two worlds, I apologize. “I don’t know what happened. I’m so sorry. They interrupted us, and there’s all that past shit, and it just came rushing back. I—”

“It’s okay.” She tips up onto her toes and kisses my lips gently as though she’s the softest baby bird that ever lived. “He’s hurt me enough times, too.”

Blood pokes at me from beneath my skin. “What do you mean? He hurt you?”

“He’s not a good man. I put a lot of blame on my mother because she’s the puppet master, but my father goes along with it.

I've never been good enough for either of them.

Never pretty enough, never smart enough, and they let me know.

I spent years saving money to start this business, and I thought I wanted their approval," she drags in a deep breath, "but I was wrong. They'll never change. "

I sweep my fingers through her hair and kiss the top of her head. "I need to be honest with you, sweetheart. I'm not a good man."

"Yes, you are." Her eyes meet mine as though she wants me to hear her, but I know I can't leave the room until she knows the truth.

"Your dad and I were in our junior year of college. We had this thesis to write," I round my shoulders, "and I had everything to prove. I was raised by a single mom, and I was at school on a scholarship. Your dad and I became friends. We were always fuckin' around together, until one day, late in the semester, I found out he stole parts of my thesis and turned it in as his own.

I lost my scholarship, went home, joined the military, and well... ended up here."

She shakes her head, twisting her long blonde hair to the side. "Why would you lose your scholarship? You didn't do anything wrong."

"Honey, your dad is rich. Your family is rich. Rich people get what they want. It's that easy. They always do."

She huffs out a heavy breath and wrinkles her brows. "Why would I have thought you were the bad guy for that story?"

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“When I got kicked out, and he got to stay enrolled, I got really bitter. My mom had worked so fuckin’ hard to keep me in all the best programs at school so I’d get that scholarship.

I hated your dad after he did what he did.

So, I followed him out to the bar one night, dragged him out into the street, and beat the shit out of him.

He was in the hospital for a few months.

It was before cell phones, so no one had any proof it was me, but he knew. ”

She bites the inside of her lip as though she isn’t sure how to take everything I’m saying. I don’t blame her. This isn’t my highlight reel.

“I don’t know what to say,” she finally whispers.

I scrub my hand across my beard, the scent of her body still on me. “I’m not proud of myself for any of this. I’m a different man now.”

She stands from the bed and walks toward me slowly as though she sees parts of me that I no longer do. “I know you are, Tennessee. You don’t have to live in the past anymore. We can build a future together.”

I land my hand on her face, my chest warm from the words of understanding she spills from her innocent heart.

“I’m not a good man, Sienna. I’m not. I think that punch a few minutes ago proves it.

But I’d never lie to you, I’d never hurt you, and I’d burn the whole fuckin’ world

down to make sure you're safe. ”

“Sienna, we're taking your father to the hospital. That beast broke his jaw!” her mother hollers through the bathroom door.

I stare down at her. “Do you want me to handle them?”

“No,” she kisses my chest and opens the door slowly, “I've got it.”

The door is barely open when I see her father staring at us. His jaw is definitely not busted. It's red and bruised, but it's not busted, and he doesn't need a fucking hospital. He should know that with the medical degree he has.

“Does she know who you are?” he groans, staring up at me with heavy, untamed eyebrows.

“Of course I know who he is. I know who you are, too,” Sienna says, landing her small hand in mine as she steps beside me. “You're a monster. You steal money from the hospital, you lie to people who care about you, you ruin lives, and you smile while you do it.”

“And you think your trash boyfriend is any better?” her father says with a smirk.

Fuck this guy!

Sienna smiles and leans against my chest. “Yeah, I do. I think he's the best thing that ever happened to me, and if you and Mom walked out that door right now, I'd be just fine with never seeing either of you ever again.”

Her mother laughs. “If you cut us out Sienna, don't think you're getting a cent from us ever again. Not even a penny. You could be struggling at our doorstep, begging for

a cracker and a glass of water, and I'll remind you of this moment."

Her head tilts to the side as she stares back at her folks.

"I've lived in your wreckage since I was a kid.

You built it brick by brick. Your threats, your violence, your selfish pride.

" She squeezes my hand tighter. "I'm done pretending silence is love.

Tennessee may not be perfect, but he sees me. He sees me like you never did."

Her father's mouth opens, but the words catch somewhere he can't reach. For once, he's not the loudest voice in the room.

I watch my girl with pride. Not only for standing up to her father, but for standing up for herself, for giving herself freedom from their ways.

"You ready?" she asks without looking away from her parents.

I nod. "Always."

Finally, we step past the man who used to control everything, past the woman from Planet Zargo, past our history and into the future... and no one says another word.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Sienna

Well, this is a mess.

“I’ll handle the hotel manager. You talk to Mae.” Tennessee kisses the top of my head. “We’ll make all this better. I promise.”

I know he didn’t mean for this to happen. Given the choice again, I’d gladly let him shove me into every room in this place and fuck me just like he did, over and over again.

“Sounds good. I love you.”

“I love you more,” he murmurs, brushing a thumb across my cheek before heading for the hallway like a man about to go to war in a peaceful, woodland lobby.

Mae is tucked into a corner at the bottom of the stairs with her face buried in her hands.

My stomach churns as I make my way toward her.

I really wanted today to be special. It still can be.

No one really saw what happened except the manager, my parents, and the cleaning lady.

Sure, people will talk, but if we don’t make a big deal out of it, no one else will

either, right?

I tuck down next to Mae and lower my tone to a soothing whisper as I say, “I’m sorry about all that. I don’t know what came over me.”

She glances up, tears rolling down her face. “I do. That dude is hot. I’m glad you finally had your way with him. How big was it?”

I can’t figure why she’s crying if she’s also playfully excited for my very public romp. “Wait, what’s going on? Why are you hiding and crying? I thought you’d be mad at me or something. I mean, I did screw up. The manager is pissed.”

She grins widely and wipes away a tear. “He sure is. But if my next romance isn’t pissing hotel managers off, I don’t want it.”

My heart tightens. “What?”

“I went through Rick’s phone. He’s got like three nudes of some girl at his office in this text chat thing. I don’t know. I called the wedding off.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m not even sure I’m comprehending what she’s saying yet. “What?”

“My thoughts exactly. He’s such a fucking asshole. He threw a bunch of money at me to pay for the wedding, so I guess it’s his loss, right?”

I stare at her, mouth half-open. “Wait... you actually called off the wedding?”

She nods, letting out a laugh that’s half relief, half chaos. “Yup. Right after I screen-shotted the receipts and emailed them to his mom, ‘cause I’m classy like that.”

My jaw drops. “You did not.”

“Oh, I did, and I wore white while doing it.” She wipes a tear with the bottom of her dress. “Honestly, it felt kind of amazing.”

I let out a long breath, half in awe, half ready to high-five her into next week. “Damn. I thought I was the drama.”

“You are the drama. I’m just catching up.”

There’s a beat of silence, then we both burst out laughing the kind of laugh that hurts your ribs a little, but feels like letting the light back in.

“Okay,” I say, grinning wider. “So, what now?”

She lifts her chin. “We go out there and party. We’ve got to run up that bar tab he’s paying for.”

Tennessee walks down the stairs, his shoulders relaxed as though he’s fixed this problem too.

“I’ll let you do your thing,” Mae says, wiping away what looks like the final tear. “I’ve gotta go tell the masses we’re here for a hoedown, not a bridal march.”

“Wait and I’ll go with you.”

“No, it’s okay. I need to do this myself.” She squeezes my hand before heading into the other room.

I can’t help but smile at how strong she is. I’m not sure I’d have had the same reaction, though I guess sending the pictures to his mom let off some steam.

“How’d that go?” Tennessee asks, kissing the top of my head.

“Well, turns out the fountains and the chairs weren’t the problems after all. It was the cheating fiancé. So... wedding is canceled, and the party is on.”

“Oh shit! What the fuck?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. She seems okay. She kind of had an idea, I think. How’d the manager thing go?”

“Money. Money solves every problem, remember?”

“You paid him off?”

“This won’t haunt you. That’s all I’m saying.” He smiles softly and kisses the top of my head.

I could question him further, but I don’t. Now’s not the time. Instead, I lean into his chest and tuck my hand against his calloused palm. “Thank you.”

“Always, little girl. I told you, you’re mine. I protect what’s mine.”

The words wrap around me like a shield, and for the first time in my entire life, I genuinely do feel protected.

My hand in his, we step out into the courtyard overlooking the tall, snow-dusted mountains as a band plays soft music. Mae is talking with some guests, and though her day has been pretty awful, she seems to be in good spirits.

A crooked smile plays at Tennessee’s lips. “Dance with me.”

I don't hesitate. I slip my fingers into his and let him lead me onto the floor. You wouldn't guess that a wedding was canceled. The flowers are where they should be, the towered cake is in place, and the fountain spills water at a perfect rate beyond the arch.

He pulls me in slow and sweet, like I'm something breakable and precious, as his hand presses warm against my back, and we move gently, like the world hasn't been upside down all day. I rest my head against his chest and listen to the steady beat behind his ribs.

"I don't deserve you," he whispers lowly as a warm breeze passes around us.

I smile into his shirt. "Too bad. You're stuck with me."

He leans down, his lips brushing the top of my head. "Then I'm never letting go."

And just like that, the noise fades. It's just the two of us. A not-quite-wedding, a first dance that no one planned, and a day no one saw coming.

The day ends here, but it feels like the start of something so much more.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Five Years Later

Tennessee

The woods are alive this morning with the sounds of birds, the crackling creek, and our two-year-old girl who seems to have stumbled onto something she shouldn't have.

"Junie-Bug," Sienna's voice rings out with something that sounds half warm, half warning from behind the chicken coop. "If I find worms in your pocket again, I swear on Planet Zargo I'm going to—"

"She's harvesting for science," I say, scooping the little blonde princess up into my arms.

Sienna rounds the corner of the coop, a bundle of eggs in her basket and a smear of dirt across one cheek.

"And science can stay out of the laundry." She leans in and drops a kiss onto my cheek before blowing a raspberry on Junie's belly.

"Who's going to be brave and wake Esme? We need to get her ready for the church meeting.

We don't want to be late for Uncle Red's famous chili. "

Life has changed quite dramatically over the past few years.

Sienna and I had a private little wedding ceremony near Balsam Creek Lodge, we built this cabin on a few acres west of the clubhouse, and we fell more and more in love every second of every day.

It wasn't long before that love started sprouting little woodland fairies who seem to be covered in glitter and dirt no matter how hard we try to keep them clean.

"I've got her!" Junie-Bug manages through some form of a broken language. "I waked her up right now." She wiggles down out of my arms and shuffles into the house, a secret worm hanging out of her pocket. I'm not sure Sienna sees it, but I don't point it out.

The door swings shut behind her, and for the first time all morning, the world exhales with just the two of us standing in the hush that follows the storm of tiny feet and undomesticated joy.

Sienna tips up onto her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. "You still down for helping me next week with that wedding out at the pine groves?"

"Looking forward to it. I hunted down that chocolate fountain you were looking for. They had one at the bakery in town. The woman at the counter said we could borrow it for free."

Sienna rolls her eyes with a playful smile. "Sure, she did. Anything for my hot dad."

I grin, pulling my girl a little closer. "I mean, if she's handing out deals to silver foxes, who am I to turn them down?"

Sienna lets out a snorty laugh against my shoulder. "Is that what you're calling yourself now? A silver fox?"

I give her an exaggerated wink. “Silver fox, DILF, hot biker, sexy mysterious hitman. The titles keep piling up.”

“Oh God.” She rolls her eyes as the scent of juniper breezes across the yard. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Keep me?” I grin, kissing her lips softly.

“I mean,” she smiles, “you are a hot dad.”

“Ma’am, please stop! I’m someone’s husband!”

“Yeah, mine!” She leans into my lips hard and fast, kissing me the same way she has for five years. The way I hope she does for years to come.

It’s funny how life goes. I never imagined I’d be married to the daughter of a man that I thought had ruined my life.

I never thought I’d have three beautiful girls to love and care for.

And I never thought I’d be doing it here, in the wilds of Colorado with my past so far behind me.

But here we are, building a life we’ve stitched together with laughter, worm filled pockets, second chances, and a family we chose.

A family I’ll protect with all my heart, for the rest of my days.

THANK YOU FOR READING.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:40 am

Mae

I lay across the sun-bleached seat of my old Chevy pickup and close my eyes.

I'm not sure why I drove out here in this thing.

Sheila is about as ancient as they come, and she loves breaking down at the most inopportune times.

That said, she's a member of the family.

Hell, she's probably the only member that understands me.

The cracked, vinyl seat clings to the sweat on my back as the scent of baked dust and warm motor oil settles into my nose.

Come on, Sheila. Haven't I endured enough this week? I mean, just yesterday my wedding was canceled. I figured that would buy me some karma for at least a month or two.

A breeze sneaks in through the cracked window, bringing with it the scent of juniper and moss from the nearby lake.

You'd think a lake would be a high traffic area, but it's hidden deep on one of those seasonal roads no one really knows about.

Heck, I wouldn't know about it if I hadn't gotten lost the first time I drove up to

Rugged Mountain.

At first, it was scary being back here with no people or cell service.

Then, it was kind of nice to be alone with my thoughts and I'd make the trip up here from Miami just to seek the solitude.

The drive became a ritual, a mecca I'd set out on every few months.

Windows down, playlist humming, the city disappearing behind me as concrete highways turned to one lane roads.

Thoughts and noise from everyday life disappeared on those drives, and by the time I was tangled with the pines, I had clarity about whatever was going on in my life.

I lean my head back against the seat, close my eyes, and let the silence stretch over me. I may be stranded in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a bottle of water and a granola bar, but it's still better than yesterday.

Yesterday was a complete nightmare, though I think I did save face pretty convincingly.

Thank God. I can't imagine my emotions spilling out in front of all those people.

I'm lost in flashing memories of the white dress that took too long to choose and the vanilla cake with raspberry filling that went home with wedding guests, when I hear a low rumbling sound threading its way through the trees.

At first, I figure it's my imagination trying to shake the horrific day out of my mind.

Then, the noise becomes louder, more tangible.

I sit up and squint through the dusty windshield as a shape emerges from the tree line. It's some guy on his motorcycle. Leather jacket, broad shoulders, T-shirt flying back in the wind, tattoos streaking down both arms.

I've never been happier to see a stranger.

I jump out of the truck and stand on the opposite side of the narrow dirt road, signaling like traffic control in a town of one. The man slows his bike, stirring a cloud of dust around him.

Even in the dust, I can see the man is huge. I'm not talking huge as in large. I'm talking huge as in not from this species.

Suddenly, every bit of advice my mother ever gave me about stranger danger echoes through my head. 'Not everyone who smiles at you is your friend, Mae.' She liked that one best. I'm sure it's because I made friends with everyone and everything that smiled at me.

Thankfully, this guy isn't smiling.

"You lost?" he groans under his breath, as though he's annoyed at the fact that I've stopped him.

"I'm broken down, and there's no cell service out here." I try to keep my energy light but it's a little annoying that he can't manage a friendly tone. I'm the one who got left at the altar yesterday. Doubt his day was as bad.

He leans his head back slowly, dragging his gaze over me as though he's sizing me up.

This makes the most sense. Of course, I'm going to be murdered. I mean, what else would've capped off this week?

I fold my arms across my chest and straighten my back, looking as wide and tall as possible in the hopes it will scare him away. I don't need a ride this badly. One water bottle or not, I'll survive on rainwater and berries.

Unfortunately, my attempt at outsizing him doesn't work.

He exhales through his nose, kicks down the stand on his bike, and swings his long leg over the seat, barely looking at me as he steps one heavy boot after the other toward my truck.

"What's wrong with it?" He still sounds miserable, like his dog and his grandma ran off together to start a punk band. It's that or his best friend married his ex and invited him to the wedding via group text.

"It's the alternator." I clear my throat. "It's always the alternator."

He stares toward me for a long moment as though he's surprised I know the word alternator, strokes his massive hand down over his beard, then pops the hood without asking.

How rude!

I pinch my lips together and stand beside him, climbing up onto the front bumper to see into the engine block.

He skims an eye toward me. His voice is so deep I swear it shakes my chest as he says, "What are you doing?"

"I'm helping."

"Helping me look?" He still sounds so damn annoyed.

“Yeah,” I snap, no longer willing to offer this man pleasantries. “She’s my truck... so I’m helping.”

“You’re not helping, you’re blocking the light.” I glance back at the sun, letting it blind me for a moment instead of trusting that he’s, in fact, correct about me blocking his light.

I hate admitting I’m wrong, especially to this stranger of five minutes, apparently.

“Oh,” I jump down off the bumper, trying to ignore the burning in my cheeks, “there’s no reason to look, anyway. It’s the alternator. Sheila does this all the time.”

He doesn’t say anything right away, just grunts low and non-committal, as he fiddles with something under the hood. “You named your truck?”

“Yes, don’t pretend like you don’t. I’m sure your pretty little bike over there has a first and last name.”

He laughs under his breath and wipes his hands on his jeans before turning toward me. “It’s not a little bike, and it doesn’t have a name. It’s a machine. Machines don’t have names.”

“Well, aren’t you a ray of joyful masculinity?” I toss my empty water bottle into the truck with a soft thud. “Next, you’ll be telling me feelings are optional and how soap is a government conspiracy.”

I swear I watch his jaw tighten. “Alternator’s definitely not happy.”

“Really? Is that right?” I land my hand on my hip and twist to the side. “It’s almost like I said that already.”

“You could fix the corroded wires, and you’d stop having this problem, but maybe

first start with your attitude. This a Bridezilla thing?”

“Bridezilla?” I narrow my brows. “What are you talking about?”

“The wedding gown hangin’ out in your backseat.”

“Oh, God.” I roll my eyes and lean against Sheila for support. “Yeah, that’s going to Goodwill. I’m officially no longer engaged.” I probably shouldn’t tell this man anything, but I feel an urge to set the record straight.

He steps back from the truck and slams the hood back in place like it owes him a steak dinner. “So, you’re one of those runaway brides... like on TV?”

I narrow my brows, taking the bait. “No, I’m not a runaway bride. I’m a woman who came to her senses.”

“Right,” he groans, smirking.

Smirking? The man smirked!

“I’m sorry, did someone die? Is your entire family being held hostage by forest trolls with sharp spears and poisonous mushrooms, or were you raised by a pack of wolves up on the darkest part of this mountain?”

He laughs under his breath. “Wolves would’ve been friendlier than my parents. Pretty sure about that one. And forest trolls,” he straightens his back as though he’s showing me how enormous he is again, “I’m pretty sure I could take ‘em.”

“Of course you could,” I say with a sarcastic tone so intense it rattles my bones.

“Look,” he groans as he brushes his hand down over his salted beard, “I’m tired, I’m sweaty, I’ve got a million things on my mind, and then you pop out of nowhere like a

Disney side character, desperate to judge every facial expression I have.”

I hold up my finger. “Okay, first of all, I’m the main character . Second, you could’ve just waved and kept riding.”

“And miss getting insulted by a runaway bride with a sharp tongue and a truck full of trauma?” he says, the corner of his mouth tilting into the hint of a sneer. “Nah, this is way more fun.”

I stare at him, part furious, part flustered, and maybe, just maybe, a tiny bit charmed in spite of myself.

“Okay, grumpy pants. What’s the plan, then? You just gonna keep roasting me until the sun goes down, or can you drive me into town?”

He stares at me, then up toward the darkening sky. “You notice the clouds rolling in, princess? There’s a storm blowing in, and it’s supposed to be real bad. Hail, wind, buckets of rain. I’m gonna hole up in a cabin a few miles west of here until it blows over.”

Of course there’s a storm coming. That’s the start of every murder mystery. Stupid girl goes back to a woodsy cabin with a strange man. “Don’t call me princess.”

“Okay,” he does this half laugh, half groan thing, “so you prefer Bridezilla instead?”

I roll my eyes. “Or... you could call me Mae, ‘cause that’s my name. What’s yours?”

“Red.”

“ Red? Your mother named you Red? ”

“What my mother named me isn’t what you’re going to call me, so it doesn’t matter.”

Now I'm the one laughing. "Yeah, I think I'll call you Grumpelstiltskin."

He lets out a long, weary sigh. "Grumpelstiltskin, really?"

"Really." I grin, pleased with myself for thinking of such an accurate name.

"So that means I get like three wishes, right?"

"No, you get a sarcastic nickname and a hitchhiker strapped to your back."

The corner of his mouth twitches like he might actually smile, but he doesn't.

I can't tell if he thought my joke was funny or if he's happy his murder strategy is working out as planned.

"Keep talking, princess." There's an edge of threat in his tone, but it feels playful despite his massively terrifying shell.

A rumble echoes in the distance and a drop of rain wets the tip of my nose.

I could wait around for someone else to come.

There's water dropping from the sky. I'll be fine to hole up in the truck.

Then again, this is a small town and we're miles from cell reception.

It could be days before someone comes out this way.

I doubt I could survive off berries and sky water for that long.

He climbs onto his bike as though the decision has already been made. "Come on, princess. We've gotta beat this storm."

Dear God, help me.

I lean my head to the side, studying his bulky frame so I could give a description to the cops or pick him out of a lineup... if I make it back.

He's tall. I'd guess nearly seven feet, with dark black ink winding down both arms and onto his hands. Skulls, lots of skulls. Skulls, playing cards, and a symbol of some sort. It's probably the gang he's in. All these biker guys are in one, right?

His beard is dark red with heavy streaks of silver, and he wears torn jeans, a black T-shirt, and a leather vest with patches sewn into the front and back. This must be the gang thing. The back lettering is stitched with the words 'Chaos Brothers.'

How... promising.

"Come on, princess, I don't have all day." He starts up the engine, twisting the throttle like it's personally insulted by me.

I sigh as I glance toward Sheila. "Hopefully, I'll be back for you, old girl. Hopefully."

She doesn't answer because she's a truck, but I pretend she huffs out in solidarity anyway.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I walk around to the side of Grumpelstiltskin's bike and stand there like my body is still deciding if this is a good idea.

He glances back, arching a brow as a strong wind whips up behind us. "You planning on climbing up or issuing a formal declaration of disdain first?"

I step closer, eyeing the seat cautiously. "I've never been on one of these before."

“It’s not a spaceship. You sit, you hold on, and you try not to scream in my ear.”

“Great,” I mutter, mostly to myself. “Just casually trusting my life to a man who names nothing and empathizes with no one.”

“You keep talking like that, I’ll start charging for emotional labor.” He seems humored by his own comment.

Grumpelstiltskin would.

I swing my leg over, nearly kicking him in the ribs in the process, then settle in behind him like someone making peace with her poor life choices.

At least he smells good. Something like leather, motor oil, and the whisp of a campfire.

I breathe him in, pushing away the tiniest bit of arousal that knocks between my legs as I shrink behind him.

The bike roars, and we’re off, dust rising, trees blurring, and Sheila shrinking in the rearview of a weekend that just keeps getting weirder.