



The Biker's Savage Desire (Chaos Brothers MC #4)

Author: *Khloe Summers*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Mae

I knew leaving my wedding would be hard.

But now that Im on the other side, who am I?

Then I see him

Tall, massive, gruff, inked, and silent.

His gaze cuts through every wall I've built.

He sees me. Wants me. Protects me.

And suddenly, I'm not sure what kind of trouble I've found

Or how deep I'm already in.

Red

People are distractions.

Names, faces, pointless conversations... none of them matter.

My world is built on silence, on strength, on staying sharp.

One look at Mae and I know I'm screwed.

Her sweet green eyes don't belong in my world.

But when the past comes hunting and trouble finds her, she learns
real fast there's no safer place to be than my arms.

I have to make her mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:52 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 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 coming, 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 wisp 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.

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Red

The girl talks too much, has too many feelings, and names her truck like it's a rescue animal.

I should've kept driving, but I didn't, and now I've got five-foot-something of attitude sitting on the back of my bike, thighs pressed up behind me like she belongs there.

She doesn't, of course. She doesn't belong out here either with that dress crumpled on the seat.

I'm sure I could be a little nicer, but I suck at social gymnastics, so I focus on driving instead.

It's not long before the road blurs beneath us, and my mind flicks to business. It's the space where I'm most comfortable.

The place in my head where I don't usually make mistakes or second guess myself.

Lately, though, we've been having a hell of a time with our club Prez, Duke.

I'm not sure what to do about it. One thing I know, he'd lose his damn mind if he knew I was bringing an outsider to the cabin.

Technically, it's my place, but we do a lot of clubhouse business there come summer months.

Then again, he hasn't exactly been around to set the rules.

He vanished a few months back, chasing shadows and half-heard names.

Last we spoke, he was buried deep in something he wouldn't talk about.

I just hope we're not the ones who end up paying the price for whatever fire he walked into.

I shake the thought off and shove it down deep. No use digging into things I can't fix tonight. I've got enough on my mind with this runaway bride nonsense.

We ride for miles, the forest closing in around us dark and dense.

If I were alone, I'd open the throttle and let the night swallow me whole, but she's behind me, small and silent, dress wrinkled, and pride hanging by a thread.

So, I ease off the gas, slower than I like, not wanting to spook her more than the night already has.

I guess I'm not all bad.

Then again, maybe it's the rain that's slowing me down. It's gotten heavier over the past few minutes. Thankfully, we're close to the cabin tucked into the pines.

I pull up in front of the small, rugged house and kill the engine of the bike. I haven't been up here in months, but I like using the place for weekend fishing and hunting trips when I get the chance.

"So, this looks like it could use some work," the princess says, climbing off the bike. "How many bodies do you have hidden underneath it? Were they all as dumb as

me?”

I laugh. If she only knew. “I keep my kills clean. I’d never be dumb enough to hide a body under a house, then go back to it.”

She scoffs, as though my answer is playful.

“I’m not going to kill you. We’re here for—” A crack of lightning echoes overhead and she jumps, barreling into my arms. I hold her there for a second, not hating the way her smooth skin feels against my hands.

She smells pretty good, too. Like some kind of flower or maybe fruit.

It’s a short-lived pleasure, though. Once she realizes she’s there, she narrows her brows and pulls away.

“Oh God. That’s embarrassing. I’m on edge. Sorry.”

“Jumping right into your captor’s arms?” I grin. “You’d have to be on edge.”

“Thought you weren’t gonna kill me.” She smirks and twists her pretty red hair back.

“Yeah, doesn’t mean I’m not going to toy with you a bit.”

“Oh, so you’re like every other man on the face of the planet?”

“I like to think I have a unique spin on the whole thing.” I laugh under my breath as I unlock the cabin door and slip inside.

Her emerald eyes roll to the side. “Yeah. Sorry, buddy. Whatever spin you think you have isn’t as unique as you think. I’ve been holed up in plenty of cabins with

handsome men.”

I glance back over my shoulder. “Handsome, huh? This is escalating quickly, princess.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Grumpelstiltskin. Looks don’t buy you personality.” She leans against the back wall of the cabin, pleased with her own comment as she looks the place over. “This isn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Very rustic, but it’s charming. Who’d you say owns it?”

“I do, but I share it with everyone in the MC. I bought it a few years back and traveled up here when I could.”

“Ah, the Chaos Brothers. I saw the patch on your back. I assume that’s your big, bad, family of mechanics that run on gasoline and poor impulse control?”

The patch on my back gives away a lot of lore in this small town.

I wonder how much she thinks she knows. Clearing my throat, I push open the bathroom door, not allowing her to get under my skin.

“Not blood family, but family none the less. This is the bathroom. There’s a bedroom to the left there if you need to take a nap. ”

“I bet you’d like it if I took a nap, wouldn’t you?

” Her tone lands harshly between us as she moves to sit on a hard stool by the back window and stares out at the pouring rain hammering the forest. “Sorry. Maybe I could use a nap. Sleeping in the truck last night was rough. I love camping, but by choice.”

“A princess like you must’ve been scared out there all alone.”

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes as though she’s defending some invisible hill. “I wasn’t scared. Just cold.”

“Yeah, it dipped down pretty low last night.” I grab a few logs sat by the fire and the lighter from my pocket.

“What are you doing?”

When the lighter flame catches, I glance toward her. “Casting a spell?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Her retort is sarcastic and breathy. “We don’t need a fire. I thought we were leaving when the storm passed.”

“Princess, you looking outside? That storm is huge. We’ll be here for the night.”

“The night?” She drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I can’t be here for the night with you. I don’t even know you.”

Rain drums a heavy rhythm on the tin roof. Usually, I love that sound. Today, it’s testing my patience, though I’d guess it has a lot to do with the sharp-tongued princess perched in the corner with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

I don’t do well with talkers. Don’t do well with people, period, and the way she rolls her eyes like a punctuation every time she speaks is driving me to the edge. An edge her beauty alone can’t resolve.

“So, let’s get to know each other then.” It’s not first on my list of things to do, but I figure if she’s at ease, the evening will go much better.

I mean, I'm not into epic, deep dives about our darkest secrets, but skating around on the surface might be entertaining for a while.

"What really happened with the wedding dress?"

"I'm starving. Do you have any food in your bag?"

Damn it. I should've thought about how she'd be hungry. "You want me to cook a meal? I keep the place stocked. Got venison, duck, some bear—"

"Granola bars?"

I push my backpack toward her. "Plenty in there. If you change your mind about the protein, though, let me know."

She nods and pulls a bar from my bag and inhales it before unwrapping another. "The dress," she sighs, "the whole wedding was a mistake. I saved myself. That's all."

I bite back the sarcastic comments I'm thinking and try to have this empathy thing everyone's always talking about. "Why'd you need to save yourself from your own wedding?"

She narrows her brows and shakes her head. "You really want to know, because you don't seem like the curious type."

"I'm asking. Tell me or don't." Fuck! I need to work on this.

She studies me for a second like she's checking for cracks, then exhales as though whatever happened has been sitting heavy on her chest. "I found pictures of a naked girl on my ex's phone."

They were of this woman he was working with.

Apparently, saving your virginity for marriage wasn't slutty enough for him. ”

Fuck. Did she just say virginity? This is why you don't ask questions. People start talking. They don't know the line.

I drag in a deep breath as my mind reels over ways to manage this strange piece of truth I know about her now. I could ignore the fact that she even said it, which seems like the best option right off the top of my head. Or I could ask questions, be curious, and have an actual conversation.

“You okay?” she presses, chewing her bottom lip as though maybe she's uncomfortable. “I didn't mean to overshare.”

“No, it's fine.” I brush my hand back through my hair. “You didn't overshare. It's a thing. You're... that's a lot to go through. For the record, I don't think holding your virginity for the right person is a bad thing. I'm sure whoever you end up with will appreciate the gift.”

Who the fuck am I?

“Yeah, well... I'm done saving it.” She bites into another bar. “All I want now is fun. I want to throw caution to the wind and go crazy, fuck the pain away. People say it works.”

My heart hammers against my chest as I listen to her words. She's not fucking the pain away with me, so I need to get that shit out of my head, but still, what the hell do I say?

“I'm sure another man would make you feel better for a while, then you'll hate

yourself for giving pieces of you away. Pieces you can't get back." I poke at the log crackling in the fire.

"I don't think so." She rubs her hand down over her shoulder like she's trying to ease something off her skin.

"I'm ready to feel something. I'm ready to throw caution to the wind for once and be wild.

I thought about this long and hard last night when I was trapped with Sheila.

I'm tired of holding back and being careful.

I want to make a choice that's mine. Not because it's smart or safe, but because it feels free . I want to feel wanted, desired."

She shrugs and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I don't know... I'm not looking for forever.

I just want to feel something." Her eyes roll to the side, and she leans back.

"I probably sound like an idiot, and you're thinking 'please stop talking,' but you can't tell me sexual healing isn't a thing. "

She's definitely saying something.

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I stare toward her as though the words I need will materialize in time, but they don't. Instead, my cock thumps at the edge of my zipper, reminding me that I'm, in fact, a man who's available for sexual healing.

Christ. I need to get out of this conversation.

"I mean, this is what people do. They get hurt and they find someone else to fill the cracks, right?" she continues, and I'm pretty sure I have to respond now.

"I haven't dated in a decade, so I'll be no help, but you've gotta pretty face. I'm sure you'll bounce back." Yeah, not sure that applied at all to what she said.

She glances at me in the dim light of the fire. "That supposed to be a compliment?"

"I think so." I adjust the crackling log with the poker. "Not in a creepy way, though. It's just an observation."

"Phew." She tucks down next to me at the fireplace, another granola bar already in her hand. "As long as it's not creepy."

"Not creepy," I repeat, doing my best to keep my eyes on the fire and away from her curved frame.

"So why haven't you dated in a decade?" She sips from a bottle of water she found in the bag. "Is there a tragic heartbreak backstory, or are you just wildly unlikeable?"

I huff out a dry laugh. "There's no tragedy or dramatics. It's worse. I let time slip.

The club took priority, and the silence was easier than trying to figure someone out.”

“That’s tough, especially for a guy your age.”

My chest tightens. “My age, huh? What the fuck does that mean?”

“Calm down, Grumpelstiltskin. I didn’t mean to offend you.

I just... I don’t know. You’re old. You’ve been through a lot of shit.

I’m sure you’re tired.” She shrinks a little, as though she didn’t mean for her words to come across as harshly as they did.

“I’m tired and I’m only twenty-four. I can’t imagine what I’ll feel like at what... fifty-five?”

I sigh. “Forty-nine, but thanks.”

“Shit,” she drags in a deep breath and brushes her fingers back through her hair, “I’m sorry. Maybe I should take a nap. I’m exhausted and my brain is completely fried from all the drama yesterday. I could use like twelve years out here relaxing and I’m not sure that would be enough.”

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause love fuckin’ sucks. Not just love, feelings in general. That’s why I don’t see you handling the one-night thing very well.”

“What?”

“I mean, sure... it sounds good in theory. Screwing some stranger, having a wild night of fun and craziness, but, I don’t know, I think you’d have a hard time walking away after that.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Her tone is defensive.

“Okay... you wouldn’t. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I really wouldn’t,” she presses as though she’s trying to convince me. “I don’t even want to know the dude. I just want him to take control of me, show me a good time, and send me on my way.”

There’s that cock again, reminding me I’m the man for the job.

Fuck!

“Seriously,” her tone lifts, “I mean, what do I do with myself now? Am I supposed to go on like my ex didn’t cheat? Pretend like I don’t feel completely unlovable, unattractive, and unworthy?”

“Jesus, that how you’re feeling?”

“Yeah,” she nods with raised brows, “I can’t shake it. What’s so much better about the other girl? I mean, everything judging by the nudes, but... that’s why it sucks.”

“Okay, you need to stop. What he did isn’t a reflection of you. It’s about him. He’s empty. He’s seeking something you couldn’t have filled even if you wanted to. This other girl won’t fill it either.”

She blinks and her voice drops as she says, “So then, why does it feel like I have no value, like I got thrown away?”

I think over her question as I grab another log to toss into the flames.

“Reckon it’ll feel like that for a while, but throwing your virginity out the window

and having a fun night with a random guy isn't going to fix anything.

You'll feel better when you stop lettin' some asshole determine your worth. "

She tilts her head to the side, her long crimson hair illuminating in the light of the fire. "Insightful, for a big, rough, inked-up biker man. I should listen, but my heart says the only thing that'll pull me out is taking the power back."

I narrow my brows and laugh under my breath. "And the power is..."

"Wild sex on my terms. Rough, crazy, out of this world, no holds bar, fucking. The dominant kind, where I can let go and enjoy myself. Feel adored and needed." Her voice is breathy as she speaks, and I swear I'm about to volunteer as tribute.

"What about you? I saw that patch on your back. I'm pretty sure you know a thing or two about crooked decisions. "

I stare at her for a long moment, unsure of what to say. Part of me wants to make some shit up and hide my past, but people talk. I'm sure she knows enough already. "And you're not scared of me?"

She shrugs like it's nothing, but her fingers worry at the edge of her dress, tugging, releasing, and then tugging again.

"I figure if you wanted me dead, you'd have done it already." A flash of a smirk, quick and crooked appears. "You'd have done it before I got back to the cabin. I mean, the woods would've been cleaner. It was a prime opportunity."

I huff out something between a scoff and a laugh. "You think that's how it works?"

"I don't know how it works." She pauses, then softens as she says, "But if you were

the kind of man I should be scared of, I think I'd feel it. I mean, your size is kind of intimidating, and your attitude earlier was giving off murderer vibes, but now, you seem kind of harmless... to me anyway .”

I don't move. I just watch her and the way her eyes narrow slightly, like she's trying to match puzzle pieces with missing edges.

“You should be scared,” I say finally. “I'm definitely fucked up.”

The air between us tightens, pressed heavy by an honesty that's harsh but real.

“What made you start... killing people ?” she asks, still fiddling with the end of her dress.

“I don't know... desperation, probably. I grew up poor.

Real poor. The kind of poor that leaves you invisible.

My ma and I lived in an old cabin west of Amarillo.

Soon as I was old enough, I started taking care of us.

Robbing stores to get food, sometimes a beer or two.

Spent some time in the hospital for a robbery gone bad, and found myself in the military after that, but I sent every penny back to my ma.

” I scrub my hand down over my beard and grab a toothpick out of my shirt pocket, chewing on the end as I say, “I watched good people do horrible things my whole damn life. That kind of violence brands itself on your bones.”

I shift the toothpick at the corner of my mouth and stare toward Mae, hoping maybe she can see past the broken parts of me, though I'm not sure why I care. The second this storm stops, we'll go our separate ways.

"That sounds difficult, growing up like that." Her voice is soft. "I bet feeling like you have no choice in life makes you do things you never thought you'd be capable of."

"Ah, I don't make excuses, but I didn't wake up wantin' to be a killer.

Truth is, I did what I had to. Got back from war, was offered big money for going after the scum of the earth with the MC, and I took it.

Set my ma up real nice, and she lived out her final days in luxury.

It wasn't right, but it's a part of who I am.

"I pull the wooden stick out of my mouth and toss it into the fire, watching as the flames snap and throw light across the cabin walls.

There's a low hum behind my ribs. The kind that shows up when the truth lands and there's nothing left to hide behind.

She didn't bolt, didn't recoil. That's good. She just listened. Not sure what to do with that. That said, she isn't saying much.

"You probably think I'm a monster now, huh?"

Her hand slides from her sleeve and slowly lands on my arm. "You're not a monster. You're a man who's had to carry too much all alone."

For a second I don't say anything. Instead, I watch the flames coil around the newly

placed log as heat spills into the room and something tighter coils around my chest. Something unfamiliar.

“Where’d you go?” Her voice is nearly a whisper.

“Ah, just watchin’ the fire.” I risk a glance her way.

It’s deadly.

She shifts closer, the soft fire glow warming her perfectly smooth skin.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe. I don’t speak. If I do, the cage doors will swing open, and I’ll be doing things animals do. Things that’ll wreck us both.

The resolve doesn’t last.

I lean in slowly, instinctively, without thought, as though she belongs to me, as though she always has.

Her breath catches as her hand fists into my shirt, and her eyes search mine.

I’m frozen in the moment, tangled between something not earned but offered. Lord knows I’m not a smooth talker. I’ve lived horribly, but this... this isn’t about charm. It’s about need, and heat, and the quiet desperation of two people trying to forget the world outside this cabin.

Her lips press against mine, slow and deliberate, and damn if I don’t feel it in every worn-down part of me.

What the fuck is happening?

I shouldn't be touching her.

I definitely shouldn't feel a damn thing about it, but I do.

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Mae

The fireplace crackles and heats the small space though I'm not sure we truly need any more warmth. I've never been so hot in my life.

How did I spend years with Rick and never feel anything like this?

How did I ever trust a man who never held me?

I mean sure, I'd lean against him, he'd lean against me, but it wasn't like this.

He never wrapped me up this tight. He never looked at me while he did it.

He never made me feel safe... not like this.

Yet somehow, in two hours with a stranger, I'm feeling all the mythical fairytale feelings I've dreamt about.

All, in spite of the fact that Red is a contract killer.

To most, he'd be a warning. To me, he's a heavy metal love song.

Dangerous, yes, but real. And after years of pretending love was supposed to be safe or soft, I'm starting to wonder if maybe this kind of raw honesty is the only thing that ever really counts.

I moan and bend into Red's touch, desperate for him to keep going. Desperate for his

big, calloused hands to move freely. Desperate for him to take me to places I've never been. Places I didn't think I was ready for... until now.

How is that possible?

Maybe there's some kind of hormone getting pumped into the cabin. Maybe I'm high on whatever honest connection feels like. Maybe I'm so desperate and mentally unstable that I'm letting a wild man with horrible intentions mess me up.

Who knows? The only thing I'm sure of is that I don't want it to stop.

He leans into my neck with a dark growl, sending a tickle down my spine and up again. "You're gorgeous and I'm really into this, but we should stop."

"You're right," I huff, barely leaning off his lips as I speak. "We should totally stop."

He stares toward me as though he's battling a headful of demons, his hand hovering on my waist like he wants to pull me closer and push me away all at once.

I tilt forward slightly, eyes burning into his without thought. "I want you to take control of me, Red. If you're willing, I want to have a night I won't forget."

He growls low under his breath, his lips pressed against my neck. "You don't know what you're asking for. I'm an animal, princess. You know how long it's been since I've been with someone?"

I shake my head. "A while?"

"A long while," his eyes widen, "and whatever comes out tonight won't be as polite or careful as I want it to be. You deserve kindness."

“I want real.” My mouth hovers over his, hungrily.

“Last warning,” he mutters, voice rough and breaking.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whisper. “Touch me.”

He growls lowly. “Oh, princess, your little virgin pussy can’t handle the ways I’d ruin you.”

A shot of electricity strings through me like a live wire, and my panties soak. He must see the rope snap in my eyes because his mouth instantly finds mine. This time, it’s not as gentle, not as careful. It’s sharp, with an ache and a relief so surrounding that my breath catches.

My fingers curl into his shirt as the rain pounds on the roof and the fire crackles behind us.

He backs me up against the cabin wall, a growl low in his throat as he says, “I’m going to wreck you.”

My palms are clammy, and my thoughts spiral, but my body leans forward without asking permission, drawn in like he’s gravity and I’ve finally stopped pretending I’m not falling.

His lips touch mine, soft for half a second before his palm digs into my throat and a groan leaves his hot and hungry lips. It’s aggressive and hard, biting and rough. He’s unapologetic as his teeth scrape against my lips and mine against his.

He lifts my arm up against the wall and laces his fingers into mine, growling as he thrusts forward and devours me. His tongue in my mouth, his lips on my neck, his teeth on the lobe of my ear. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

The tips of his fingers meet the strap of my sundress, and he pulls it down in one quick yank, exposing my breasts. "I won't hold back." He leans in like an out-of-control animal, sucking each nipple into his mouth before dragging his teeth across. "This is dangerous."

"I like dangerous," I pant, my head tipped against the wall to allow his rough kisses room to scatter all over my chest. "Touch me." My hand drives down the leg of his pants, following the long, thick, hard rod that pokes there.

He groans, a feral look in his eye as my hand brushes his giant cock. "Oh, little girl. If you let me out of this cage... you'd better run."

I nod slowly, hiding the smirk that keeps trying to surface. "You like a good chase?"

His eyes flash with primal heat as the muscles in his jaw tighten. "Run."

My heart beats wild against my chest as I stare toward the dark gaze in his eyes. Is he serious? Does he really want me to run? Where do I go? There's no space to move in this small cabin.

"You want to test me?" His voice is so low that I feel it rumble between my legs. "Would you rather I take you over my knee right here?" He raises one arm, solid and deliberate, his bicep cutting off my only escape like a wall of flesh.

Grinning with excitement, I tuck beneath his grip, swing open the front door, and run out into the rain, stomping through puddles of mud with bare feet as I sprint through the forest floor and round the house.

I have no idea what comes of any of this.

I always imagined sex as soft and slow, but this is so much better!

My heart races as I hear the sloshing of his heavy steps behind me. “Little princess,” he calls, his voice thick with dark amusement, “I’m gonna catch you.”

Heat waves up through my toes despite the cold mud squishing between them and the heavy wet rain soaking my sundress.

A branch snaps behind me, and I flinch. Not because I’m scared...

because I’m not. I don’t want to escape.

I want the chase. I want to be hunted. I want the jolt of life that comes from nearly being caught only to escape again.

I want to feel him close in, his breath on my neck, his hands finally on my skin when he claims me.

I veer off the path and dart into a nearby bush, breathing heavily as I watch him stalk around the edge of the cabin and back again. His deep voice calls for me as his biceps flex and his shirt clings to his soaking, sculpted body.

Lord, the man is hot.

Before I get lost in a trance of abs and biceps, he disappears. I can’t see him. I have no idea where he went.

My heart races and rain pours heavily. Maybe I should move. What if he’s behind me?

Then, his hands clamp down around the back of my neck, his fingers tightening with primal force. He doesn’t say a word. He only growls low and hot against my soaking throat.

Dear fucking God, what's happening?

"My little princess thought she was hiding," his voice drips with dark, playful mockery, "but you know I'd catch you, right? You had to know."

I whimper under his touch. Desperate for him to lay me out and spread me open. Desperate for him to fuck the virginity away. Desperate for his big, thick cock to erase all the pain that Rick ever caused me.

He shoves his thigh between my legs, his gaze never leaving before he plants two thick fingers inside of me with a groan. "Oh," his rough voice shakes, "my baby girl is tight."

A jagged bolt of lightning splits the sky, bathing the darkness in a flash of eerie violet.

A heartbeat later, thunder tears through the night deep and violent like the earth itself is groaning in protest of our premature escapades.

It rattles the windows, hums in my bones, and leaves the air charged with something wild and electric.

My hips thrust forward in tandem with the night, in dance with this touch.

"Tell me you need my cock, little girl. Say it loud."

I moan, barely able to keep my eyes open as he hits pressure on a spot I've never felt before. "I want you," I moan. "I want your cock so bad."

"Say it louder," he growls. "Tell me you need me."

Why is this so fucking hot?

“I need you,” I pant, my back scraping against the bark of the slippery pine. “I need you.”

“Good fuckin’ girl.” His teeth bite down on my shoulder as his thick fingers thrust inside of me, hitting a spot that makes it impossible for me to move.

I rock against his touch, moaning, as a pine scented rain drips on my face.

His giant frame leans up against mine. Then all at once, like a shot of lightning straight through my core, I come, hard and fast, sucking in air as though my lungs aren’t getting it fast enough.

Time stutters, noises dim, and for a second, it’s the two of us here without regard for anyone or anything.

I collapse forward like a rag doll into his arms, breathing heavily, chest heaving. He holds me then tips me back again, taking my face in his massive hand, his voice deep and raspy as he says, “Fuck, baby. You sound so fuckin’ good.”

I sigh under my breath as I try to suck in air, feeling more alive than I have in ages.

His gaze holds on mine like I’m something holy, like he can’t get enough, like he’s hooked on whatever we’ve unlocked. “Good girl. Now run up to the cabin and get warmed up.”

“What? I thought we were going to...”

“Do as I’ve said,” he growls. “Go up to the house and get warmed up.”

I don't know why I want to listen.

Maybe it's the way he says it. Not as a command, but as a tether. Like he needs me safe, warm, and cared for. It's more intimate than anything else he could've done.

I linger for a moment longer, my body buzzing, my flesh flushed as a cool breeze blows sharp rain against my bare skin.

He doesn't look away. He watches me, jaw tight, something fierce burning in his eyes like you matter to me more than this moment. And somehow, that's exactly why I turn.

I slick through mud, rain sliding down my neck, heart pounding like it's memorizing the echo of his voice. I don't know what we've started, what storm we've invited in... but I know this. When he tells me to go, I'll go. Not because I'm weak, but because for some reason, I trust him.

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Red

Fuck. I stare at her curved body as the warm shower water washes down over her frame.

“Seriously?” She bites back a grin as steam rolls up around her. “You’re just gonna stare?”

“I am.” I say the words like a fact.

“Why? You’re soaking wet. You should get in too.”

“Don’t trust myself. Not with your pretty, pink pussy on display like that. I’d wreck you.”

She smiles. “Isn’t that the point?”

“You really want to be split in two, don’t you, princess?”

She grins, her cheeks turning pink as she squeezes shampoo into her hands and lathers it into her long hair. Bubbles stream down over her chest, onto her breasts, and tuck into the crease of her thighs.

I drag in a deep breath and scrub my hand down over my hard cock the moment her eyes close. This entire afternoon felt like a bubble in time. Hell, I’ve never forgotten about work this long. I don’t want it to end.

“You’re still staring, aren’t you?” She smiles and steps out of the shower, twisting a towel around her chest. “I could help you with that, you know.” Her gaze drops toward my cock and up again.

“I bet you could, sweetheart.” I tuck her small hand in mine and lead her down the hallway toward the small bedroom at the back of the cabin where I keep a short stack of flannels and a few T-shirts.

I probably should’ve kept my head on and just used her, fucked her little virgin pussy like a bad man would.

If I had, maybe I wouldn’t be feeling all this warm shit that I can’t seem to stop.

I wrap her in the flannel, strip off my wet clothes, and pull her close, brushing my arms up and down her small frame to generate heat.

“This rain is relentless,” she murmurs, her eyes soft as she looks up at me. “I think we might be stuck here forever.”

“Would you like that?” I ask, my voice low.

She grins. “Yeah, I could kind of see it now. A stack of firewood on the porch, a few chickens, a hill of wildflowers, and a buffet of granola bars.”

I smile, pulling her down onto the creaky bed with me. “I told you I could make you some protein.”

Her tone is light and playful as she says, “Yeah, maybe tomorrow. I’m kind of exhausted after the run.”

“You like that?” I grin and pull her close to me.

“Umm... yes.” I can’t see her smile anymore, but I hear it. “That was the most fun I’ve ever had. Thank you.”

“No, don’t thank me. That was all my pleasure. I’d do it again right now, if I thought you could handle it.”

“Oh, I can handle it.”

“Really, ‘cause you look pretty relaxed in my arms.”

Fuck. My cock twitches at the softness of the moment, except this time, my heart swells too. She said she wanted one night. One crazy night to feel wanted. Not a clingy madman who’s suddenly craving her heart over her pussy.

Fuck!

“You ever wish you had a family?” Her voice is soft, nearly a whisper.

“Would it be weird if I said yes?”

“No. I think you’d make a great husband and father. You seem like you’d be really protective.” The tips of her fingers weave through the hair on my chest as she talks.

“You?”

“I want a big family. Two, maybe three kids, and a little house somewhere. Nothing crazy, just simple.”

I stare at the ceiling for a second, trying to breathe through the sudden weight in my ribs. “That sounds perfect.”

“I always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom while having a little side business that the kids could help with.”

“Yeah, like what?”

She shifts a little, her head resting against my shoulder, her fingers lazily sliding across my chest like she's drawing roots beneath my skin.

“I don't know... maybe making candles or soaps,” she says with a small shrug. “Something creative. Something the kids could get messy with and still feel proud of. Maybe I'd even sell them at a little farmers' market every Saturday.”

I chuckle. “You picture 'em in matching aprons or what?”

She laughs. “Obviously. Tiny ones, with their names stitched on them.”

Damn, this moment... feels like home.

I need to shake it off. I need to stop holding her. I need to climb up out of this bed and will the rain to stop. I need to drive her back to town and let this night end.

Instead, I tuck her in closer to my chest like it's the most natural thing in the world. I breathe in the sweet scent that lingers on her skin even after the shower. I kiss the top of her head like she's mine, like I don't know how the world goes on without tiny fucking aprons and homemade candles.

A beat of silence. The kind that says everything words would ruin.

“I'm scared,” she whispers.

I nod. “Me too.”

We sit in silence as neither of us moves away.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:52 am

Mae

The morning feels unreal. Too soft and too still, like the kind of peace people write about but rarely live.

The birdsong is gentle, drifting in like it's trying not to disturb us, and I stay perfectly still, tracing lazy circles against the warm rise and fall of Grumpelstiltskin's chest, though he's not nearly as grumpy as he was when I met him twenty-four hours ago.

How has it only been twenty-four hours? It's like we're in some kind of worm hole or time machine. It's like the universe has slowed time and given us this storm to show us what real love should've felt like all along.

Listen to me... love. I need to get a grip.

His hair's course beneath my fingertips, and the rhythm of his breathing anchors me.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't wake up to a jolt in my chest or a list of things I've failed to fix.

Just this moment... the weight of his arm around me, the golden light melting through the curtains, and the quiet.

I know I should get up. I should think. I should assess what this night meant and what it didn't. But instead, I press my cheek a little closer to his skin and close my eyes again, just for a second.

I'm not ready for the world yet. Not when this moment still feels untouched by it, though I'm not sure I ever will feel ready for the world again. Not after a night like last night. I've never felt anything more genuine in my life.

My body makes every attempt at holding onto the peace, but it doesn't last. A buzzing breaks the trance. It's sharp, persistent. There's a phone tucked somewhere on the floor beneath discarded clothes, vibrating against the hardwood like it forgot we aren't supposed to have service up here.

I don't open my eyes right away. I let the hum of it coil in the back of my mind, hoping maybe it'll stop if I stay still enough, but it doesn't. It keeps going, insistent, like a reminder that we don't live here in this sliver of sunlight forever.

He shifts beneath me, tension returning to his body, like even while sleeping he knows something's reaching for us.

I finally lift my head from his chest. The room feels different now, like the air itself knows the spell we've been under is breaking.

This must've been what Cinderella felt as her dress returned to rags.

"It's my phone," I whisper. "Everyone's probably worried about me. I didn't call or update anyone after I left the wedding. I thought we didn't have service up here."

He doesn't answer right away. He just cracks one eye open, lashes still heavy from sleep.

"We don't. You're probably getting a random ping off the tower to the north.

Don't matter either way. Lay back down. We don't give a fuck about any of that shit.

” There’s no tease in his voice, no smirk playing on his lips.

There’s just possession. Possession wrapped in the softest comfort I’ve ever felt.

I kiss his chest gently and slide up out of the bed, half tempting punishment, half asserting my independence. Also, I really should check-in with everyone back in town. At this point, I’m sure they have half the police department out looking for me.

Cool wood wakes me up as my feet pull me back to reality. Each step, a sad reminder of what the outside world is like.

“Clearly, you want more punishing,” Red groans from the bed, his voice still husky with sleep.

“I do.” I glance down at my phone before slipping back under the sheets. I regret looking at the screen.

“You good?” He turns toward me, the pad of his thumb brushing against my face as though he’s picked up on the frustration that’s settling into my chest.

“Yeah, I just... my ex. He’s called like three times and left two voicemails. There’s a load of texts, too.”

Red takes the phone from my hand as though it’s his problem to fix, then scrolls through the messages. “ He’s worried? That’s rich considering he was screwing another woman... don’t you think?” His jaw clenches not waiting for an answer before clicking the voicemail message.

“Mae, call me back. This is out of control. You didn’t have to disappear like this, okay? Everyone’s worried about you. I’m sorry for everything. Let’s just talk. One night shouldn’t erase all our time together. People are worried. I’m worried. Please.

Come home.”

The silence afterward is deafening.

I want to scream... or cry. Maybe I should just throw the phone across the room.

But instead, I stare at the glowing screen like it might offer different words if I wait long enough.

I’m not sure what those words might be, but I’m thinking something a little more consistent with his actual personality.

“He’s got a lot of fucking nerve,” Red mutters, his voice like gravel and smoke. “Cheats on you, then plays the victim? Leaves you standing at the altar, and now he’s worried?” He scoffs with a sharp exhale. “Nah. He doesn’t get to call you ‘home’ anymore.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t. I’m half-numb, half-enraged.

He turns his head to me, his eyes dark, sharp, and deadly serious. “Tell me you’re not considering it.”

“I’m not,” I whisper, but it comes out fragile like it needs proving.

He stretches out of the bed, his carved, bare chest on display as he paces, then stops. “If he tries coming around you again, I won’t just send him away. I’ll make sure he remembers why he should’ve stayed gone.”

It should terrify me, that anger, but it doesn’t. I can feel what he’s not saying beneath the surface. You are not going back to someone who broke you, not while I’m here... and that feels good.

I sit on the edge of the bed, heart thudding like a warning bell. “He doesn’t know where I am.”

“You better make sure it stays that way,” he growls before softening a little.

“So what, you’re going to hold me hostage here for the rest of eternity?”

” Part of me likes the idea of being trapped up in this old mountain cabin forever with a big, rugged biker who’d clearly kill for me.

The other half knows that’s not realistic.

As small and pathetic as it is, I have a life to get back to.

He raises an eyebrow, his half-wicked smirk twisting at the edge of his mouth like smoke curling off a match.

“If it were up to me,” he says, pacing toward me barefoot on the worn wood floor, “I’d lock the damn door, throw the key into the river, and keep you wrapped up in my flannel until the end of time.”

God help me! A part of me wants that too!

He stands still for a long beat, eyes locked on mine like he’s working through something heavy. “Tell me you’re sta—”

A faint knock hits the door, and I jump back as though I’m afraid of the sound. It’s the truth, I am. Whatever’s on the other side of that door can’t be good. Not up here, not this early in the morning.

Red narrows his brows and tugs on his jeans before grabbing the pistol I didn’t know

he had from the nightstand drawer. “Stay here. I’ll go see who it is.”

I’ve never felt like I was with anyone capable of keeping me safer than I am right now. Still, I don’t want to deal with any of this. I want the world to go quiet again. I want to go back to the place where our love nest was invisible to the rest of the world and time stopped for us.

The door swings open and I listen intently through the bedroom wall. It’s a female’s voice, though Red doesn’t seem happy to see her. In fact, he sounds angry.

Oh God! What if this is some ex-girlfriend coming to talk things out? Maybe he uses this place for all the women he picks up. Maybe he’s had this night over and over again with hundreds of gullible runaway brides.

I’m so stupid!

I storm out of the bedroom, ready to give him a piece of my mind, when I see a girl about my age cold and shaking, standing in the doorway.

Red glances toward me, pistol still drawn and aimed at the girl.

“What’s going on?” I narrow my brows and keep my eyes on the short brunette with thick curves and a pack strapped to her back.

“Sorry,” Red groans. “We don’t have anything extra.”

The girl drags in a ragged breath. “You can put the gun away. I’m not armed. I’m hungry.”

“You should leave,” Red presses, stepping forward a beat as to intimidate her.

“Please. I’ll take the food and water with me. I’m so hungry.” The girl sounds genuine, but Red doesn’t budge.

I go back into the bedroom, grab a blanket and a dry T-shirt off the shelf. Neither are mine to give, but neither are the granola bars and bottles of water I grab next.

“What are you doing?” Red groans, pistol still aimed. “We don’t know this girl from Adam. It’s no accident that she’s up here.”

“You told me last night it’s miles into town, and it doesn’t look like she’s got any way of getting back. She could starve or freeze. We need to help her.”

Red doesn’t lower the pistol, but his grip shifts with reluctance. He’s weighing it. Not just her, but me and my judgment.

“She could be bait,” he mutters.

I toss the blanket toward her, not rough but not gentle either, then set the rest of the supplies in the doorway. “I doubt she’s bait.”

The girl hugs the blanket tight to her chest like its armor, her eyes wide but not pleading.

“Jesus,” Red mutters. “This is how things go sideways.”

I glance over my shoulder. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s just being human.”

“What are you out here for?” he presses, studying the girl.

“I’m Maci. I’m a reporter for the Rugged Mountain Gazette.”

Red's posture stiffens like he's been splashed with ice water. "This isn't helping things, Maci. Why are you here?"

"I was out looking for a story and I stumbled onto this cabin." She untwists the bottle of water and chugs it down fast. "Sorry for the intrusion."

Red lowers his gaze. "You expect me to believe you were out here in the middle of nowhere looking for a story? You like writing about grizzly fights? Or is it the wolf attacks that get ya excited?"

The woman nods as she crams a granola bar into her mouth. "People say all kinds of weird stuff happens out this way. I was just looking around."

"Sure you were." Red stiffens. "Where's your vehicle, Maci?"

"Oh! I don't have one. I came out here on foot."

This sentence seems to set Red on high alert. His shoulders pull back, his jaw tightens, and he grips the girl firmly on her wrist while hollering to me, "Get dressed. We're taking a ride into town."

He leads the girl toward the back door, boots thudding against the cabin floor. She doesn't resist, just follows, the blanket still clutched in one hand like it might shield her from whatever comes next.

I dress fast, my heart thudding harder than it should at Red's response. He didn't even blink before reacting. Something is wrong. Something is really wrong.

Shit! What did I get myself into?

On the other side of the back door is a garage I didn't know existed with an old

Chevy pickup parked inside. It's not as old as Sheila, but it's old enough to be her cousin.

"What's happening?" I whisper to him the second he has the girl in the back seat of the truck.

He nods once. "I think she's lookin' for Duke. I heard about a reporter that had gone missing a while back. She was posting online about some story she was following. Pretty sure this is the girl. I need to take her back to the clubhouse."

My stomach knots. "Why?"

"If she's been following Duke, she knows things she shouldn't," Red mutters, his jaw tight. "Where have you been stayin' in town?"

"At the inn on Main, but I don't want to go back there.

I want to stay with you." The words slide out of my mouth before I've fully fleshed them out.

I know part of me wants to stay by his side because I'm not ready for this to be over yet.

The other part wants to stay close to Maci.

I don't know who she is or what she's done but it can't be that bad.

She's like five foot four inches, and she's wearing a hot pink backpack with cartoon patches.

I'm pretty sure girls like that aren't starting MC wars, and I feel some kind of

responsibility toward her.

Maybe it's that we're the same age, or that she looks about as lost as I feel.

"You can't, princess. I'll drop you off at the inn and I'll call you later. I promise." He opens the truck door and helps me inside, my fingers brushing his before he closes the door and rounds to the driver's side.

What the hell is happening?

An hour ago, we'd been lost in another dimension.

A space in time where real life didn't exist. Where phones didn't ring and people didn't knock on doors.

Where violence disappears, and ghosts of past regrets vanish to make way for love.

Now, the veil has lifted, and reality is here, loud, uninvited, and apparently hell-bent on vengeance.

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Red

“Please, I don’t know anything about anything,” Maci pleads in the back seat of the truck. “You don’t have to do whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I’m taking you back home,” I groan. “That’s all.”

“I heard you tell that girl that you’re taking me to the clubhouse.

Look, I don’t know anything. Yes, I’m a reporter.

Yes, I went out in search of Duke, but I didn’t find anything.

I swear.” Her voice shakes and I know a rebuttal from the kindhearted, though far too trusting princess, is coming next.

“Red, drop her off with me. We’ll stay at the inn, talk, have lunch, and by the time you get back from the clubhouse, I’m sure you’ll have the answers you need.”

“Can’t do that, princess. I made a promise to the MC. Breaking something like that gets you kicked out with your teeth in hand.” I groan under my breath remembering that I need to stay soft enough to protect Mae’s heart. “I won’t forget she’s human. Okay?”

“Wow!” Mae’s eyes widen as we weave the tree-lined, single lane road onto Main Street. It’s not a huge town center, but it does the job. “You can’t be serious. Human? Of course she’s human. You go talk to your buddies, figure out what you need to, but

I'm keeping the girl with me."

There's a beat where I don't say anything.

I just stare out at the rain-glossed main drag like it's got all the answers, but Mae's voice is laced with something heavier than a stubborn attitude.

Something I'd be a fool to ignore. She's not fighting me to win.

She's fighting because she knows I need to be reminded of who I am beneath the patch, of the guy I've been at the cabin, and the guy I want to be for her.

I sigh the kind of sigh that settles in your chest like you're about to make a decision you'll pay for in ten different ways.

"Fine," I mutter. "She stays with you."

Mae blinks, like she didn't actually expect me to fold that easily. Hell, I didn't expect me to fold that easily, but what the hell would she think of me if the guys fucked this girl up? I can't risk losing Mae over whatever bullshit this is.

The sun shines heavy and hot, an attempt to dry the puddles left from yesterday's rainstorm. I pull up in front of the inn, the air thick with humidity, and walk the girls upstairs, making sure they're both tucked into the room before I leave.

"I'll check in at the clubhouse." I brush the pad of my thumb against Mae's cheek. "Don't leave the room, and don't talk to anyone. I'll call when I know what's what."

Mae busies herself with searching the room for snacks but turns back and swallows like she's trying to keep her gratitude buried behind her teeth. Smart girl. Don't thank me yet.

Mae leans into my chest, her arms wrapped around me as though she doesn't want to let go. "How long will you be gone?"

"Couple of hours, tops. Call me if anything weird happens. I put my number in your phone."

She nods and stares at me for a long moment before the door closes, the lock latches, and I wonder if I've lost my damn mind.

The hum of the truck engine does nothing to drown out the thoughts clawing through my skull as I drive.

Maci is for sure here for Duke. She admitted as much herself.

I blow out a heavy breath as I turn up the side road and follow the pine trees up the mountain until the wood sided clubhouse rises in the distance.

This is going to be interesting.

Inside, Duke sits like a demon in the center of the kitchen, the guys surrounding him as though they're waiting for spontaneous combustion. He's leaned back in a wood chair, arm thrown over the back, body lazily swung, legs parted. I've never seen him looking quite this strung-out.

"We have a problem," he groans.

One of the guy's shuffles, scraping his boot against the floor a little too rough, breaking up the stifled silence that resonates around our Prez.

I lean into the counter, toothpick in the corner of my mouth, trying to ease my nerves. "Yeah? What kind of problem?"

He scrubs a hand through his hair, like it might help push the truth back down where it can't burn him alive. "I'm looking for someone." His voice lowers as he says, "A girl. She's sharp, annoying, won't shut up, and I," he laughs once, humorlessly, "I should hate her."

A beat.

His jaw is clenched tight like it's holding back something heavier. "I need to see her again." He pulls his phone out of his back pocket. "I'm texting you all a photo."

The room quiets to still silence as he starts pacing, fists clenched.

My phone dings in tandem with everyone else's and I glance down at the screen, pretending not to recognize the curvy brunette I just dropped off at the inn with Mae.

Fuck!

"Whoever brings her to me gets a bounty and a favor. One big fuckin' favor," Duke groans.

Hushed chatter explodes amongst the guys, and I get the feeling they're all for this twisted game of hide and seek. We've all been looking for a thrill since we got up here and a bounty raises the stakes.

"Duke, what are you doing?" I ask low and edged, the words more a warning than a question.

"I didn't ask your fuckin' opinion. I want her roped and ready, dead center stage in the horse ring at my ranch. I want those pretty pink lips of hers begging for mercy, and I want it now. Move!" He doesn't flinch, just tilts his head, his eyes cold.

Growing up poor teaches you one thing fast. Survival isn't always pretty.

You steal some, lie a little, learn to make peace with the worst version of yourself, just to make it to the next day.

The military didn't clean that up. It sharpens it.

They taught me to follow orders, even the ones that kept me up at night.

If I turn Maci in, Mae would never forgive me. And honestly, I'm not sure I'd forgive myself at this point.

The guys take off. It won't take them long to hunt her down. The girl is all over social media. I should've reminded her not to post. Everything can be tracked nowadays.

"Red," Duke barks before I turn away.

"Yeah?" My chest tightens as though he somehow knows that I know exactly where the girl is.

"You're my best hunter," he growls. "I'll throw extra in for you if you get her to me tonight."

This shit is insane. Duke's spinning out, and everyone sees it. The cocky control he used to command is slipping, replaced with something... erratic.

He used to play the game ten steps ahead, cool as ice. Now, he's making moves out of spite, not reason. It's reckless, dangerous, and we're all just orbiting his madness, pretending it's business as usual.

I nod again, slower this time, my stomach twisting. I'm not sure who I'm protecting

anymore. Maci, myself, or the last scrap of loyalty I've still got left for a man unraveling at the seams.

I need to get the fuck out of here and get back to the girls, maybe give Maci a reality check, then take my princess and disappear back to the little cabin in the woods where life was a fuck of a lot simpler.

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Mae

“Yeah, so this Duke guy is hot. Like... red flag hot!” Maci paces the room back and forth, chewing on her fingernail. “I mean, he’s dangerous, but that just makes him hotter. He’s the kind of dude you mess around with a few times and call it an experience, ya know?”

“An experience?”

“Yeah, like... a little movie reel you’re making. Something I can flip back on when I’m old and boring. Something that’ll remind me about the life I actually lived. You get it. You and that Red guy are totally into each other. I’m sure you were having the time of your life before I showed up.”

“He’s a good guy.” I bite back a smile as I think about Red and those big, rough hands scratching against my skin.

“No, none of these guys are good. That’s the best part.

They’re all messed up and totally bad.” She takes a sip of water from the bottle she’s been carrying.

“Before I ran off to get this story, my life was so boring. I mean... I was doing stories about returns at the candle shop in town. Now, I’m chasing a giant bad boy covered in tattoos with dark brown eyes.

” She sighs. “Ugh... life is way more interesting this way.”

The bed creaks as she tosses herself onto the mattress, popping a few M&M's into her mouth as she lands. The blue bedspread wrinkles and the pine side table wobbles out of place. "Wait, these are customized... with little wedding bands. Are you getting married?"

"Was," I sigh, desperate to not have this conversation. "Now I own fifty bags of custom M&M's and a wine-stained wedding dress."

Her jaw drops. "Oh shit, that sucks. You want to talk about it?"

"Not really," I say, opening my own bag of matrimony chocolate. "I was so depressed a few days ago, but I don't know, I'm sort of happy things happened the way they did. If they hadn't, I'd never have met Red, and he's incredible."

"Oh God." She gasps and sits up from the bed, staring toward me like I have three heads. "You like him, like him. It's not just a one-night thing. Girl..."

"What?"

"You can't fall for the red flag guy. That's when things go sideways."

They're just for funzies. It's an 'in and out before the devil even knows you're there' kind of thing.

"She leans forward, her voice softer as she says, "Seriously, these guys are all trouble. Trust me. I've been following one for months now."

Fire's fun to play with 'til you get burned, ya know?"

I let her words ramble around in my head like a lost hitchhiker ready to cling to anything in motion, but the flags she waves stay stuck and resonate with a reality I

didn't have back at the cabin.

Red can be sweet, kind, thoughtful, fun, and exciting, but for how long? How long can he be that man? Can he be that man outside of the cabin doors? Can he be that man when he was raised to be violent and dangerous?

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly, just in time for a knock to hit heavy on the door. Maci jerks like she's been shot, before jumping and flattening herself on the floor behind the bed. "I'm not here."

I'm not sure hiding under the bed will save her from much, but I guess it's better than nothing.

"It's okay," I sigh, pressing my eye to the peephole. "It's my ex."

"Shit. You want to hide, and I'll answer?"

"Sort of," I groan, rolling my shoulders forward, "but I have a feeling this conversation is coming to me no matter what I do to avoid it."

"Fair enough," she says, opening another bag of M&M's. "I'm right here if you need someone to dramatically throw themselves in front of emotional bullets."

I smile, drag in a deep breath, and slide into the hallway with the man I thought was my forever.

It's funny how you can look at someone and think they're everything, then completely lose every feeling you've ever had for them in less than twenty-four hours. Love is fragile like that, I guess.

"Mae." Rick sighs and tries to lean into me for a hug, but I flinch away.

He smells like that sour cologne I hate.

I always begged him to try something else, but he likes the scent of whatever it is.

“Okay... I get it. You’re upset. You should be.

” He stares down at the ground and drags in a heavy breath.

“It’s over, ya know. I ended things with her. ”

“Oh, wow.” I fake an overly gregarious grin as a light flickers in the long hallway.

“That’s so great of you. Too bad I don’t give a shit.”

“What?” He truly doesn’t seem to understand why I’m not happy he ended things with his mistress. “I thought this is what you wanted.”

“What I wanted?” I say under my breath. “You should’ve stayed with her. I don’t want anything to do with you ever again.”

“It’s been two years, Pook. I made one mistake.”

Pook. God, I hate when he calls me that.

Blood boiling, I drag my gaze up to his, studying the puny biceps, receding hairline, and weak chin that I once somehow found attractive.

“A mistake? Rick, if Netflix did a docuseries on cheaters, you’d take the cake.

I found pictures of your mistress on our wedding day.

There’s no coming back from that. You need to leave. ”

He steps toward me as though he's somehow now going to assert his dominance. "This isn't over, Pook. I still love you and I know you—"

The elevator door rings, and the doors slide open. A moment later a giant rounds the corner, fists balled as though he doesn't need the context of the conversation to know he doesn't like it.

Without question, thought, or pause of any sort, Red hammers his fist into Rick's jaw, launching him into the back wall of another room.

Oh my God! My heart jackhammers against my chest.

Rick grabs his face, holding his jaw as though he's hurt, as dark purple rings begin to form on his cheek. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm the guy that's gonna fuckin' murder you if you don't leave right now," Red growls low and steady, like a wild animal that's out of control.

I gasp, my heart pounding and my mind racing like I'm sat somewhere between shocked and impressed.

"What are you doing outside of the room?" Red directs his frustration toward me. "I told you to stay inside."

"I was handling it," I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. "I'm not helpless, Red."

The statement softens him somehow, and he leans into my head with a soft kiss. "I know, princess. It's been a rough afternoon. Get inside, please. I'll finish this asshole off."

Rick stumbles onto his feet and glares toward Red and I as though he's face to face with a minotaur. "What the hell is this? Did that old man just kiss you?"

I laugh and turn back toward the hotel room door. "Yeah, he did, and you know what... I like it."

Rick's face twists into something that looks like lemon dipped betrayal. "Jesus, Mae. What are you thinking? This dude is like twice your age and he's... he looks like he's spent twenty years in prison."

"Keep going and I'll publish your browser history."

He rolls his eyes and limps back toward the elevators like a wounded animal who never had anything more than a snarl.

The air shifts in the hallway and I exhale before heading back toward the room, returning to Maci who's sitting on the edge of the bed with wide eyes and a grin. "Did you really say you'd publish his browser history?"

I grin. "Yup. I think the eBook would do really well. I'll name it *Chronicles of a Cheating Douchebag*."

She wheezes as she laughs, but Red stops the fun.

"We've got a problem, Maci. You need to go."

"Go?"

Red paces the room, his broad hand brushing over his face before he pauses. "Duke's looking for you. He's got some kind of," he drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, "he's got the whole MC out searching."

“For me?” She grins as though it’s a game. “He said he would do this, but I didn’t believe him.”

“Why are you smiling?” Red groans. “This is bad. Duke is psychotic. You should run.”

“Or maybe,” she says, gathering her backpack up off the bed, “I’ll go wander down the center of Main Street and see what trouble finds me.”

“You think this is funny?” Red groans, standing firm in front of the door. “He’s a bad man.”

She meets his gaze. “Aren’t you a bad man?”

“Duke does this for sport. I can hide you somewhere, but you have to stay put.”

“I’ll take my chances.” She’s beaming as though this really is a game.

“That big ole boy ain’t gonna hurt me. I’ve dated plenty of guys with control issues.

This one just wears less hair gel and has more tattoos.

” She tosses her backpack in place and strides toward the door with fearless abandon.

“I appreciate your concern, but really... I’ll be fine. ”

Red stares down at her for a long moment as though he’s biting back a world of things he wants to say, but knows he can’t. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Noted,” she says, smiling as she pushes past Red and out the door. For a second, she glances back at me. “Hopefully I’ll run into you again, Mae. Good luck with all this.”

And with that, she vanishes down the hallway, leaving Red and I to our own thoughts.

The air conditioning in the room hums behind me. “So, is she totally unhinged or is it just me?”

“Unhinged,” Red huffs, “but so is Duke. Maybe they’re a match made in heaven.”

“Will she be alright?”

“No idea.” His gaze drops to mine. “The dude is nuts, but if she doesn’t want our help, we can’t force it on her.”

The weight of that settles between us, and though the old version of me would keep throwing logic, I rest and lean into the chest of a man who feels like home. Except, how can he feel like home? I barely know him.

That thought clings to me with quiet panic. He’s a stranger in so many ways. A man with wounds carved deep, stories I’ve only seen the edges of, and yet, my body fits against his like it’s known him through lifetimes I can’t remember.

Maybe that’s what terrifies me the most. Not the danger in his past, but the comfort in his presence and how quickly I want to belong to it.

I breathe him in as silence wraps around us.

Will he stay?

Can a man like him ever settle?

Would he even want the kind of life I need?

I breathe him in and hold on to this moment, because maybe this was never meant for forever. Maybe everything ends right here.

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Red

She melts into me like she's been aching for it. Like maybe she's been waiting for someone to hold her this way and actually mean it. Maybe I've been waiting too.

I wrap my arms around her curved frame and pull her close, breathing in the sweet scent on her skin, so soft and perfect. "If that asshole fucks with you again," I press a kiss on top of her head, "I swear to fuckin' God, I'll kill him."

She doesn't flinch. She just breathes warm and heavy against my chest, undoing all the shit that's ever been done to me.

Fuck, this is gonna hurt when she leaves.

She should leave. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I suck with emotions, I don't even know where to begin, and I've messed up enough good things to know what it feels like to let something precious get this close.

Her gaze lifts and meets mine softly in the bright afternoon light of the understated room. "What are we doing here, Red?"

It's now or never.

"I don't have a map for this. I'm sure there's a certain number of days I'm supposed to wait to feel it or whatever..."

but," I pull her close, kissing her forehead, "I don't wanna let you go, princess.

I want to take you back to that cabin, and I wanna hold you and chase you and make aprons for all the babies I want to give you.

I wanna make you feel wanted and I wanna keep you safe. Not for a few days, but forever.”

A tear streaks down her cheek, and she tips up on her toes as she lands a soft kiss against my lips. “I want that too.”

Something inside me shifts deep and low, like a dam finally cracking. I’ve been held back for far too long, kept the beast polite and civilized.

She wants me and I want her. Not only for tonight, but forever.

My hand grips the back of her neck, and I lean in. She gasps when our lips meet again, but this time I’m not gentle. I kiss her like I’m trying to leave fingerprints on her soul. Like I’ve been starving and only just realized she’s the thing I’ve been starving for.

There isn’t language for this feeling. There’s only an instinct, a want, a claim.

I need to make her mine, and I need to do it now!

I groan low and toss her back onto the bed. “Ass up, princess. You were naughty today.”

She grins the sweetest, hungriest smile, and bends into position. “Oh yeah? How was I bad?”

“Oh,” I drag the word, slow and wicked, “you left the room and gave that asshole ex your time. I didn’t like that.” I rub my palms together with a gritty whisper and pull

back, landing my hand against her ass with a smack that ripples up her back.

Fuck!

She jumps and moans as though she's craving more.

"I didn't like that you gave him the time of day, princess. Do you know why?" I spank her round ass again, watching as red marks cover the places I've been.

My cock is hard, ready, aching to slide into her, take her cherry, and ruin her for every other man.

I palm over her soft crease and slide a finger in, gauging how wet and ready she is. "Oh, my little princess is a sloppy little mess." I lean forward and kiss the small of her back then trail a line of kisses up her spine and onto the back of her neck. "Are you gonna let me fill you up, baby?"

She moans softly and rolls onto her back, staring up at me like she'd ride my cock into apocalyptic damnation.

Fuck!

"Yeah." She thrusts upward, her soft curves pressing up against my thighs. "I want you to fill me up, Red. I need it! "

I growl lowly and lean into her neck, scraping my teeth against her shoulder as I tear off her dress and nip her hard nipples.

She jumps and squirms beneath my touch like a throttle revving. I use the opportunity to move lower, tucking into her sweet little pussy with a heavy groan.

Fuck, she smells good, like leather left in the sun, smothered in berries. She's slick and ripe, and with my tongue against her pulsing clit, I can feel how much she longs for me, how starved she is for touch.

It's confirmed when her fingertips dig into my scalp with a rough moan, tugging at my hair as she thrusts against my tongue, moan after writhing moan escaping her lips.

I'm no longer human. I need to press inside of her. I need to know how she feels. I need her to strangle my cock while I fill her up and make her mine.

She draws in a shaky breath and whimpers as I lap at her clit like a starving animal. It's not measured or pretty. It's all out fucking feral, and I need more.

Her thighs shake against my cheeks as she arches off the bed and drives her face against my beard. "I'm gonna come. Oh my God... don't stop!"

Fuck!

Holding her thick thighs beside my face, I slide two fingers in, and dig for her G-spot as she's about to explode.

"Oh fuck!" she screams as she comes, waking up the last sleeping parts of me.

Damn, I don't deserve this.

She's so fucking perfect. Her thick thighs, the way she moans, the way she talks, the way she smells, the way her heart always wants to do the right thing, even if it gets us in trouble.

I thrust into her one final time as I lap up her salty-sweet juices. "Oh, princess..."

“Yeah?” she moans, her eyes closing heavy as her cheeks blush.

“Once I start, you’re mine. Understand?”

She nods and spreads her hips wide, inviting me into her hot, slick wetness.

My God.

I unbuckle my jeans and rub the tip of my cock at her entrance as she draws in a soft breath, staring up at me with those pretty green eyes that shine differently in every shade of light.

Slow would be the way to go. I’m sure of that.

This should be measured and romantic. I should touch her face and tell her my feelings.

I should mumble sweet nothings in her ear.

I should take my fucking time. I know all of this, and yet, the second the tip of my cock slides against her soft wet pussy, I’m done for.

I push into her without restraint, feeling the tight grip of her virgin pussy clamp down around me.

“Fuck... you’re tight, sweetheart. You okay?”

“Ooo...” Her eyes widen as though I’ve impaled her. “You’re huge. Really, really huge.”

“You want me to stop?”

Not sure I even could.

“No, just... go slow for a second.”

I thrust into her again, slower this time, as I wrap her up onto my lap and lean myself back on the ottoman near the window. I like this position better. I can see her pretty face easier when she's on top, and I can let her move at her own speed.

“You're okay, princess. Go slow if you need to.” My words come out in a series of low mumbles as I kiss her face, her neck, the lobes of her ears.

“Is this okay?” She bounces slowly on my hard cock, her soft, round tits rubbing up against my chest with every bounce. I swear to fucking God I'm going to explode.

This was a mistake. I thought I'd last longer this way.

I land my thumb against her clit and rub in small circles, hoping she gets another one out before I fill her creamy slit up, but I'm a weak man.

“You're doing good, princess. Ride my cock like a good girl. Come on.” I thrust up into her without thought as I circle her slippery clit. “I'm getting deeper. Can you feel that?”

She moans under her breath, tipping her head back as her small hand weaves through the hair on my chest.

“Red,” she moans, “I'm gonna come.”

Her inner muscles twitch and tighten around my shaft, her pupils dilate, and her breath quickens.

It's coming. "Good girl. Drain that pussy on my dick, baby. I need it."

I drag in a deep breath, and I know it's the last one I'm taking before I make this woman mine.

Gripping her hips tighter, I thrust upward, watching her soft body ripple and shake, her lips quiver, her eyes widen, her mouth drop open, her tits swing as I fill her to the brim.

Her moans get louder and louder as I call out her name.

"Fuck, I need this little princess pussy!"

"Fill me up, Red." She claws at my chest as though she's trying to hold steady without falling.

I thrust harder, holding her tight as she leans into my mouth and kisses me, her tongue tangling with mine in a deep passionate kiss as I fill her up with what's left of me.

Every damn nerve in my body is like a current of ecstasy under my skin as I spread my seed inside of her.

She leans into my chest with a sigh, my cock still buried deep. "Oh my God..."

"Oh, honey," I growl, "I thought I was going to ruin you, but damn... I think you ruined me. "

"I liked ruining you," she giggles, planting the sweetest kisses against my chest.

For once, I don't think about what will happen tomorrow, where I'm supposed to be

next, or where life is going from here. I just hold her close, breathe her in, and let the simple things happen.

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Mae

Five Years Later

Rain falls heavy on the old tin roof that hangs over this little cabin in the woods.

I swear this place is magic. Somehow, five years have flown by in the blink of an eye.

I moved up here just two weeks after Red and I met.

We packed my whole life into Sheila's truck bed and didn't look back once.

We had a simple wedding on the banks of the lake off that little dirt road.

It was just us, the trees, and the sound of water lapping at the shore.

I wore a white sundress and bare feet. He wore his cut and a crooked grin that said he couldn't believe I was his.

I was pregnant by our first winter together.

Snow fell thick that year, blanketing the world in silence, but inside this cabin, everything was loud.

Laughter, love, the crackle of firewood, the way he whispered to my belly like our baby could already hear the rumble of his voice.

We didn't have much, but we had each other, and that felt like everything. It still does.

Red leans on the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee in his hand as he watches our baby girl stuff Cheerios into her mouth a fistful at a time.

I tip toe in behind him and wrap my arms around his waist, dwarfing myself immediately in his presence. "If this rain stops, I was thinking we should take the girls down to the lake today, get them all tired out, and then tonight," my voice is soft with mischief, "you get me all wet."

He groans low in his throat that deep familiar sound that makes my stomach flutter. "Oh yeah?" His arms grip my waist as he spins toward me. His eyes are dark, playful, and hungry. "That sounds like a perfect day, though I'm not sure I can wait that long to get you all wet."

I laugh, light and breathless, as he pulls me flush against him, biting my shoulder playfully. Somewhere down the hall, Emily, our three-year-old is giggling over something she probably shouldn't be doing, but we let the chaos continue.

"You know what I'm thinking is a better idea," he growls, his breath warm against the lobe of my ear. "I'm thinking we put these kids down for an early nap, and I get you all wet right now."

I turn my head up to meet his gaze. "You think you can get these two down for a nap an hour early? During a rainstorm?"

"I do," he groans, shoulders back, more confident than ever. "Watch this." He kisses my forehead gently, then steps to the side, pulling Renee out of the highchair with a kiss before calling for Emily. "Come on girls. Time to listen to the story about the princess again."

Emily jumps into the air over and over, pig tails swinging as she screams, “Yes, Daddy! I love that story!”

He scoops Emily up in the opposite arm as though both daughters are made of feathers and popcorn. Technically they are, but I couldn’t pull off a double scoop like that.

I smile and follow my little family into the backroom where we’ve added on a bedroom for the girls. It’s a rather large space with soft pink and white quilts, an abundance of stuffed animals, a spot for their embroidered aprons, and the soft scent of lavender from last night’s bath.

Red settles between them, his arm around each of our daughters, their little hands curled onto his shirt like they’re never letting go.

“Once upon a time there was a cranky old man, named Grumpelstiltskin. One day, he was riding his motorcycle deep into the woods when he came across the most beautiful girl in all the land.”

Emily gasps like she’s never heard the story before. Our youngest giggles and tucks her face into his chest, copying her sister.

Red keeps going, weaving the tale like he always does. “The man who thought he was too grumpy to love, and the woman who proved him wrong with every laugh, every kiss, every heartbeat.”

I lean back against the doorway, lost in the moment, brushing tears from my eyes. Not of sadness, but tears from the overwhelming fullness that a life with this man has provided.

It’s hard to believe he ever had a violent bone in his body. Nowadays, we spend our

time caring for the girls, getting lost in each other's arms, and selling candles at the farmers' market on Saturday.

He glances up and smiles, and for a second, the whole world stills, like he too feels the magic of this cabin, of this place, of this wild growing between us.

I wipe my tears and step into the room, curling up beside my family.

And as the rain sings on the roof and his voice carries on, I close my eyes and let myself believe, not in fairytales, but in the truth of this one.

Because I was the girl, he was the grump, and this... this is our forever after.

THANK YOU FOR READING.

READ MACI'S STORY [HERE](#).

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Maci

Main Street smells like pine needles and burnt espresso, which is exactly the kind of small-town aesthetic I'd romanticize if I weren't currently dodging death. Or at least, I think I am. It's hard to tell when the guy chasing you looks like he stepped out of a Stetson ad.

I tuck my phone tighter between my shoulder and ear, dodging a golden retriever that clearly owns the sidewalk. "Kera, I'm telling you, he's not just hot. He's... dangerously hot. Like, 'I'll ruin your life, and you'll thank me' hot."

Kera snorts on the other end. "Maci, you say that about every guy who wears leather and doesn't smile. You have terrible taste in men. Plus, don't you still have Nick chasing you?"

"Okay, that's fair, but this one is different. And Nick... he's... I don't know what he is."

"He's your boyfriend."

"Ex. He's my ex-boyfriend."

"But he's still calling you every day, right?"

"And texting and showing up unannounced. Doesn't mean we're dating."

"Right. Well, maybe harassment is his love language. You don't know that. Plus,

Nick was good for you. He had zero red flags, and all he wanted to do was work.”

“Exactly.”

Kera groans. “Exactly what, Maci? He wanted to work? He was stable? He didn’t come with a side of emotional wreckage?”

“I get what you’re saying,” I sigh. “Nick is safe, but he doesn’t make me whole, ya know?”

Every second of our lives was filled with tasks.

He hides behind it, avoiding me. I mean, he’d go days chasing chore after chore and forget to kiss me more than a peck.

Not to mention that I kind of think it’s weird that we were together a year, and he never wanted sex.

I mean, I didn’t even have to worry about losing my virginity because he had no interest.”

“And this cowboy,” she says, voice tinged with caution, “he has interest?”

“Pretty sure. I mean, he’s chasing me, remember?”

“Right. All this makes total sense.” Her tone is tinged with sarcasm, but I know she means it with love.

“Look, I’m sure I’m delulu. I mean, I’ve been following him for months, I’ve been prying into his life, and I’ve been annoyingly difficult. The truth is, he probably wants me sleeping with the fishes more than he wants me naked in his bed... but a girl can dream.”

I pass the bakery where the window taunts with cinnamon rolls and these giant bear claws people love around here. I wish I had time to stop for one. I could use a calorie dense snack break from dodging sexy-hot cowboys hell bent on keeping secrets.

My boots crunch against the gravelly edge of the curb, and I glance over my shoulder, not because I'm paranoid, but because I've learned to trust my gut, and my gut is currently doing cartwheels.

"Why is this dude so different?" Kera asks, her voice suddenly serious. "Because he's chasing you? Nick is technically chasing you."

I nod, more to myself than to her. "Nick chases me because I fit. Because I helped his story make sense. This guy... he chases me like I don't. That's hot."

"Dear Lord, please send help to my delusional friend. She knows not what she does." Kera's tone is playful and light, though I know she's serious.

She's been worried about me ever since I took on this unhinged hitman story.

A lot of people have. Apparently, it's not normal to run headfirst into traffic.

Who knew?

I duck into the alley behind the bookstore. It smells like wet cardboard and over sharpened pencils back here, and I half expect a stray cat to pop out of one of the trashcans pressed against the back of the building. "Delusion is a nice place to be. You should try it."

"Can't, too busy pursuing things like education, a good career, and a man with a proper job.

" Her tone is tinged with sarcasm, which I love.

Our banter has always been playful. It's part of why I love our friendship so much.

We don't have to overthink every word. We just talk and don't take anything too seriously.

"What good's an education when you can be hunted down by a sexy hot biker in a cowboy hat?"

"Oh, dear God, there's no help for you," she quips playfully, but the levity disappears in a second when there's a flicker of movement at the end of the alley.

My heart skips, and not in the romantic way. In the fight-or-flight way. I press my back to the brick wall and breathe shallowly. Maybe this chase thing was more fun in theory.

"Maci?" Kera's voice is tinny now. "You still there?"

I whisper, "Yeah. Just... hold on."

I bend forward slightly, just enough to see if there really is a man stalking me. There is.

Fuck! There really is!

It's not Duke, the ultra-hot bad boy I wouldn't mind being kidnapped by. The guy with the eyes like a wolf and a jawline that could cut glass. That guy could take me any day. I wouldn't put up a fight.

This guy is young, maybe in his late twenties, a scar on his left cheek, sporting a leather jacket and tight jeans. You'd think he'd be my type, but he's smiling.

Why is he smiling?

That, and he's age appropriate, which also means he's not my type.

Who wants an appropriate age? Blah.

There's something so hot about a guy who knows what he wants out of life, even if those things are a little gray... or illegal... or both.

"Maci, you okay?" Kera presses. "You need me to call the cops?"

"I'm on Main Street in the smallest town in America. I think I'll be okay. There are plenty of people out today."

I peek again. The guy's gone. Just... gone, like he dissolved into the mountain air.

Okay... maybe he wasn't stalking me. Maybe he was just a dude, smiling.

I don't know which is creepier.

I blink, step out of the alley, and rejoin the world of strollers, iced lattes, and people who don't know they're extras in my personal romantic suspense.

A toddler screams about a blue popsicle, a woman in yoga pants carries shopping bags toward her Ford, and a guy in flannel plays a banjo on a bench near the bakery like he's got a stadium full of people watching.

No one looks like they're about to commit a felony, and no one would get kidnapped on a street like this.

It's not possible. Someone would notice, right?

I'm halfway through convincing myself I imagined the whole thing when I see him. Not the smiling guy with the scar.

It's him! Duke!

The monster of a man with unreadable eyes and dark ink streaking up and down both arms. He wears all black with a leather jacket and a Stetson tipped low.

Dear Lord, I could use that prayer now, 'cause I'm not gonna make it.

I freeze mid-step. My phone is still pressed to my ear, but I've forgotten how to speak.

"Maci?" Kera's voice cuts through the static in my brain. "You still there?"

"Yeah," I breathe. "He's here."

"Who?"

My heart slams against my chest as I stare toward the man I've been having fantasy after filthy fantasy about. "The guy. My guy."

"Oh my God!" She sounds terrified. "You're insane. Run!"

"I'll call you back when I'm done with all this. Love you, girl."

"I'm calling the cops."

"Don't. It's okay. He's not gonna do anything. Trust me." I end the call with my friend, who probably has way more sense than me, then do the opposite of everything she suggested.

I don't run. I walk. Not away from him, but toward him.

Either I'm the dumbest journalist alive or the most committed, and maybe a little

turned on. I mean, who wouldn't be? The man looks like a storm that doesn't care I brought an umbrella. Like a wild beast looking for a reason to charge.

Who wouldn't be turned on by that?

He doesn't move, blink, or shift at all as I approach. He just watches me like a little lamb he's already taken over, which does all the things to all the parts of me.

"Nice day for a stroll," I say, smiling widely. Clearly, I get off on poking big, dangerous things.

He tilts his head and smirks, as though he might be amused. "I wasn't going to come down here. I have five hitmen looking for you right now."

"Is one of them like five foot nine with a scar on his cheek? I think I just saw him."

Duke holds the smirk, but there's something darker behind it now. "Yeah, I pulled that one off a job in Texas just for the occasion."

"Ah." I grin. "So, I'm a hot commodity."

He stares at me, the smirk gone. "I don't explain myself to rabbits."

"Rabbits? I don't even like carrots."

"But you're always running, aren't you, bunny?" His voice is deep and tangled with gravel. "You run, and you run, and you run, but you don't get far."

I smile. I hope he keeps calling me bunny. I like it. "See, you're trying to scare me, but I'm not scared of big boys." I step forward and breathe him in. God, he smells good. Like leather and diesel. Like dry dirt and whatever's in his aftershave.

Masculine. Rough. Wild.

He stares down at me, his voice so deep it rumbles my chest as he says, “Careful, bunny. You go teasing the wrong man, you might not walk away.” He chuckles low, rough, and entirely too sexy for a man who just admitted to sending a small army after me.

I swear the air is vibrating.

He steps closer. It’s just one step, but it’s enough to put my clit on high alert. “So, you gonna make this easy on me, or am I gonna have to chase you?”

I shrug and grin as though his threat is a sexy fun game we’re playing on a Saturday night at home. “I think I might make you chase me.”

His eyes narrow, and for a second, I swear he’s going to grab me. Not to hurt me. No, that’s not his style. Duke’s the kind of man who doesn’t need to raise a hand to make you feel like you’re on your knees.

“You’re not scared of me,” he says, almost like he’s disappointed.

“Why would I be?” My voice is quieter now.

His gaze drags over me like a slow burn. It’s not leering, it’s assessing. It’s like he’s already decided how this ends and he’s waiting for me to catch up.

“You think this is a game?” he groans.

I straighten my back and widen my shoulders, though I’m still no match for the goliath in front of me. “Is it?”

He laughs low and dark, sending a shock of something forbidden straight between my

legs. “You’ve been playing games with me for months. Following me around. Spying and writing things down. What were you hoping to find?”

“The truth.”

“You find it?”

“Maybe.” My heart hammers as I speak.

His head tilts to the side, eyes flickering with something unreadable. “I’m going to tell you the rules and you’re gonna follow them.”

I smile slow, sure now that I need more therapy. “Oh, I dare you to give me rules, big guy.”

His jaw ticks, just once. And for a second, I think I see something spark in his eyes, something that looks a lot like restraint. “You’re playing with fire, bunny. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Then tell me. Tell me the rules of the game.”

A beat passes, thick with the weight of unspoken warnings. Then he moves closer, and I swear the air crackles between us.

“Rule one.” His voice is low and deliberate. “You don’t run unless I tell you to.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out.

“Rule two,” he continues, stepping even closer. “You don’t lie to me. Not about anything.”

I swallow, but I hold his gaze.

“Rule three,” he says, and now he’s close enough that I can feel the heat rolling off him. “You pay attention... to everything. You learn.”

“Learn what?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as my clit throbs against my soaking panties.

He leans in, his mouth hot near my ear as he says, “How to behave.”

And then, before I can fire back something smart or stupid, his arms are around me. One under my knees, the other at my back, and I’m off the ground!

“Hey!” I yelp, grabbing his shoulders. “What the hell are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he moves like I’m not squirming in his arms. Like I’m not a full-grown woman. Like we’re not on Main Street in the middle of a busy afternoon. Like he’s not a snake that lured me in with sexy talk and a deep, rumbling voice.

“You said you liked games,” he says, voice calm, almost amused. “This is mine.”

“Put me down!”

“Not a chance.”

“I’m not following your stupid rules!” I quip, though deep down I can’t wait to follow every single one.

“Really?” A laugh gets stuck in his throat. “You break the rules, you get tied to the post. I’d love to see a cute little bunny tied up and begging.”

I freeze. Something cold dances down my spine while heat blooms somewhere lower. “You’re kidding.”

He slows his stride, voice rumbling with a wicked promise as he says, “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

And damn it, he doesn’t.