



The Marine's Purpose (Men of Valor Springs #5)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Abby

Growing up, my mother wouldn't talk about her past. I never knew my father's name or where we came from. My mother was all I had until she passed away and left me alone, save for her moody cat, Whiskers. Then I receive a call from a lawyer I'd never heard of, and what he has to say shakes the foundation of everything I thought I knew. As it turns out, my mother not only had a family, but she was an heiress. With her and the rest of the family gone, the estate has now passed to me, including the grand hotel my grandfather built in the small town of Valor Springs. Now I'm on a mission to discover my lost roots and maybe find out who I really am. The last thing I expected was to find love along the way. But when James suddenly appears in my life, I can't help but wonder if I'll find more than my past in Valor Springs. Perhaps this little town also holds my future.

James

Still broken and aimless months after the injuries that ended my military career, I reluctantly return to my hometown of Valor Springs. After joining the Marines at eighteen, I thought I'd said goodbye to my life in this tiny town for good. But as I drive back home with no plan for the future, I can't help but wonder what fate has in store for me now. I get my answer sooner than I expect when I meet a blonde beauty with striking amber eyes on the side of the road, looking just as lost as I feel. From the moment I approach her, I can't help the feeling that I'm coming home in more ways than one. I've only ever dreamed of being a soldier, but now, I can't help but wonder if something greater is in store for me. All I have to do is convince Abby that Valor Springs can be her home too. I'll do whatever it takes to make her stay...in my town and by my side because when I look at Abby, I see my future clearer than I ever have before.

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Abby

I let out a sigh of relief when I finally spot it. The town's welcome sign, shining brightly in the sunlight, stands at the point where the road splits in two.

I slow down to inspect it, and I'm surprised by the fresh coat of paint glistening in the sun, reflecting the care put into its maintenance. The words "Welcome to Valor Springs" are crisp and bold, inviting me to the town that is going to be my new home.

A town whose existence I only recently discovered.

Up until a month ago, I had no knowledge of Valor Springs or that I had roots in the town. My mother was the only family I ever knew, and she always changed the subject whenever I brought up the topic of her past. The one time she opened up was to tell me she'd lost her family and I was all she had. The clear heartbreak I heard in her tone was all I'd needed to put a cap on that topic, and I never brought it up again. It was not until she was gone and I got a visit from a lawyer that I learned about the past life my mother had kept from me.

A secret she took to her grave.

I clench my hands on the steering wheel as I drive past the sign, wondering for the hundredth time if I am making the right choice by moving to Valor Springs. I just uprooted my entire life from the city I grew up in to move to some town no one's ever heard of—my mother's hometown.

It's too late to second guess myself now; I'm already here. Besides, I have nothing

left in the city to return to.

A soft meow comes from the backseat of my car, reminding me of the companion I brought with me. Frowning, I glance in the rearview mirror to see the black cat blending into the car seat, copper eyes glaring right at me.

“What’s wrong, Whiskers?” I reach back in an attempt to run my hand over her fur, but she swats me, scratching my hand in the process and leaving yet another mark on my skin. “Ouch!” I quickly withdraw my hand and resist the urge to glare back at the Bombay cat my mother left in my care. “I know you hate my guts, but we agreed to get along at least for this trip, didn’t we?”

The cat hisses at me in response, prompting me to roll my eyes at her. My mother’s cat and I have never quite gotten along. There’s always been something akin to a sibling rivalry between us, and maybe it was petty of me to feud with a cat, but Whiskers can be very mean when she sets her heart to it. It never bothered me before because we only ever saw each other a few times a month, but now...she’s all I’ve got.

This furry little menace is the closest thing to family I have left.

“I know you miss her,” I say, my voice cracking, but I hurry to clear it. “I miss her too. Don’t you think she would have loved for us to get along?”

The cat hisses at me once more, and I am not entirely convinced that Whiskers is not a moody teen trapped in a cat’s body. In the month she’s been under my care, she has exhibited all the signs of a teen going through her first heartbreak.

I understand the heartbreak, though, because I feel the same way.

Unwilling to endure a feud with the cat, I decide I might as well offer an olive branch

to her so that this move is easier on us both. With one hand firmly on the steering wheel, I reach out for my purse to dig around for the treats I keep handy for moments like this, but the purse drops to the floor of the car.

“Shit!” I curse, reaching down blindly for the bag but come up empty. I consider letting the cat sulk a little while longer until we’ve arrived at our new home, but she picks that exact moment to meow loudly again, starting up a chorus of earsplitting protests. “Okay, alright! I hear you,” I tell the petulant cat. “You are cranky and want your snacks. Give me a second.”

With another sigh, I pull over to the side of the road and park my car before reaching for the purse where it fell. I dig around the contents, looking for the box of treats I always carry with me, but don’t find it.

Oh no. No. No. No.

“No, please!” I cry out, emptying the contents of my purse on the passenger seat and rummaging through my things for the box. I could have sworn I packed it this morning.

It has to be here!

“Maybe it’s in the glove compartment,” I tell the noisy cat, shifting my focus to that, but the treat box is not there either. I check the floor to make sure it didn’t fall out of my purse, but no such luck.

I let out a shaky breath, my lips trembling with frustration, and I can feel myself slowly lose control over my emotions. For a month, I have bottled up my feelings, pushing through my days with a brave face, and now it seems the dam is breaking. Losing the only family that I had was painful on its own, but learning that everything I knew about my childhood was a lie broke me.

When the lawyer came to see me with the will, I was sure the only thing I was getting from my mother was her gardening books. She loved reading about gardening despite living in a building without a single plant in sight.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

It felt like a punch to the gut when I was told that the will in question was not even my mother's, but her sister's. My aunt. A woman I had no idea existed.

In her will, she'd left behind property worth nearly a million dollars to my mother or her next of kin, which the lawyer claimed was me. It didn't make sense then, and it still doesn't. If my mother grew up with such wealth, why did we live off food stamps the majority of my life?

Heck, we lived in a shitty one-bedroom apartment with paper-thin walls and obscenely loud neighbors. I don't remember a time we weren't late on rent, and most winters, we had to suffer through the cold because we couldn't afford proper heating.

When the lawyer told me about the estate, I was sure he was pranking me or that it was some kind of scam. Why would my mother let us suffer if she had family and could have afforded to give us a different life?

Why would she keep this part of her life from me? Why would she lie to me?

It wasn't not fair that I had to find out about her lies when I was still grieving, still missing her.

I fight back the tears, but they spill anyway. My chest clenches painfully, and I feel myself teetering too close to a panic attack. I quickly crack open the window, but it provides me no reprieve. I tug at the neckline of my dress, but it's not actually restricting my airway in any way.

But I can't breathe. I need air.

Breathe, Abby!

But I can't!

I push open the door and pour out of the car, falling to my knees, but I have enough sense in me to close the door so that Whiskers doesn't slip out.

Breathe, Abby!

Slow and steady... Breathe. You're okay. You are fine.

But I don't feel fine. Not one bit. Despite what the voice in my head—which sounds a lot like my mother's—wants me to believe. I'm not okay.

I'm scared, terrified of what awaits me in this strange little town. What if I uncover a truth I am not ready to deal with or find myself shunned by the very people who carry precious memories of my mother I never knew? What if she didn't leave but was instead forced out?

What happens when I find my family and they kick me out as well?

It's okay... Breathe...

I force in slow, deep breaths, shoving back the panic attack, and wait until my heart isn't hammering in my chest anymore to sit up and take stock. I'm sitting on the rough gravel at the side of the road and leaning against the car, trying to talk myself into climbing back into the car and driving the rest of the way into Valor Springs. From a distance, I can see the buildings, the first sign of civilization I have seen in a while.

Soon, it'll be dark, and it's best if I make it to town before then and get settled in my aunt's inn.

My inn. Christ, it feels strange to refer to it as mine when I've never even seen it or met the previous owner—will never get to meet her.

My head falls back against the car door with a heavy sigh. Looking up toward the sky on the other side of the road, I see it.

I see him.

Next to the deserted road stands a massive billboard I can't believe I hadn't noticed sooner. The words "Welcome home, hero!" are massive and illuminated by the evening sun, but I barely see them. No, it's the image next to the words that steals my breath away.

The image is a full-body shot of a man in military fatigues with a gun strapped to his side. All but his face is covered, and my eyes stay fixated on it—a handsome face with a short dark beard, a clenched jaw, and icy blue eyes staring right at me.

His chiseled features seem to come alive in the golden light of the setting sun. My gaze lingers on the billboard, and for several minutes, I see no one but him. The military uniform fits snugly around his powerful frame that exudes such strength that I feel awe wash over me. His broad shoulders stand proud and firm, and my breath is stolen with just how the sun dances on his olive skin, highlighting the rugged lines of his face.

He is perfect, his eyes carrying an intensity in them that has my stomach fluttering with excitement.

He's all I can focus on, the troubles that have sent me to Valor Springs and those

awaiting me are forgotten, along with the lies I have been fed my entire life and the secrets that are only now coming to light. None of that matters as I stare into the most magnificent gaze I have ever seen. Just looking at this man's picture and the confidence in his gaze somehow puts me at ease.

With those beautiful eyes, he makes me forget that my life is a mess.

"Not my best picture, I must say."

I shake my head. "It's perfect," I sigh dreamily, a smile I haven't felt in ages stretching my lips. "I can't imagine someone who looks so perfect is real. They don't even look like that in movies anymore."

"I'm flattered you think so," counters a deep voice, and my eyes widen in alarm when I realize the voice is not in my imagination. It's too clear and near for it to be anything but real, but it can't be, can it?

My head whips away from the billboard to the massive man standing a few feet away from me. He is standing near the rear bumper of my car with his back to the setting sun so his features are in shadow, but that only makes his already intimidating frame seem dominating. He is massive, like a real-life version of the man on the billboard, but that can't be right.

Am I hallucinating?

I've seen this happen before in movies. When someone is under so much stress, they start hallucinating people who are not real. Is that what's happening to me?

"You're not real." I chuckle at the thought that I am finally losing my mind. It wouldn't be surprising if that is indeed the case. I've had one too many one-sided conversations with Whiskers for it to be normal. If seeing the man of my dreams is

the way I finally lose it, then I will gladly embrace the insanity.

The man chuckles, coming closer and dropping to a crouch in front of me, and my gaze drops to those powerful thighs that stretch his camo pants, and... Oh, Lord! The bulge pushing against his fly is obvious enough to have me blushing. I have never seen a man with such a huge...package—not that I make a habit of looking at men's packages—but his is too impressive to ignore. My cheeks flush at the sight, and in a normal setting, I would look away, but this is not real. This gorgeous man with his massive frame is a figment of my imagination, so I can look my fill.

When my panic attack eases and he disappears, at least I will have the memory of him to get me through the next couple of days.

My gaze trails the strong forearms resting on his thighs, and I spy a string of dark tattoos that disappear into the sleeves of the dark green T-shirt he has on. I want to reach out and trace the large veins popping on his forearms, but I am scared that he will disappear if I touch him.

I don't want him to disappear. Not yet, at least.

This is the most at peace I have felt in so long, and I want to hang on to the feeling a while longer. My handsome vision is watching me with striking blue eyes shadowed by the black cap he has on and sporting a smirk that dances on that sexy mouth, and I can't help but wonder how it would feel pressed against mine. Yeah, I don't want him to puff away just yet.

“What makes you so sure that I'm not real?”

“Because you're not. You can't be.”

“How can you tell?”

I chew nervously on my lip before dropping my gaze from those icy blues to the massive pecs outlined by his T-shirt. I can tell he is ripped even through his clothes, with the kind of strength one gets from years of discipline and manual labor.

But he's not real.

"I know that if I touch you, you'll disappear," I say brokenly. "I don't want you to disappear." If he leaves, then it will be only me and my late mother's cranky cat who can't stand me again. I don't want to deal with reality just yet.

The man chuckles once more, the sound deep and a little rusty, almost as if he hasn't made the sound in years, but it has heat welling up in my stomach and my core pulsing needily. I haven't felt anything like this for any man ever. Never met one that was capable of causing my heart to beat this fast or a tremor to rack my system.

"What if I touch you instead?"

I blink at the man, but he doesn't wait for my answer as he brings his hand to my face and cups my jaw, brushing his warm, calloused fingers down my cheek, and I melt on the spot.

There is nothing sexual in the way he touches me, but that simple graze makes my nipples pebble beneath my dress and a warm heat spread through my core. My breath catches in my throat, and I lean in like I'm touch starved, and he indulges me. He trails his hand over my jaw before dropping it to my hand and bringing my fingers to his lips; his hot breath brushing my skin causes my eyes to flutter. I hold my breath in anticipation, my heart hammering in my chest, nearly punching its way out, when I feel those firm lips press against my skin.

He's kissing me.

My hallucination is kissing me.

“Was that real enough for you?” he asks, and my eyes fly open as sudden realization washes over my body, followed quickly by mortification.

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James

I don't make a habit of kissing strange girls I find stranded on the side of the road, but this girl is different.

When I spotted her sitting on the ground next to her car and looking miserable, my first instinct was to find out what the problem was and help her. She seemed dazed, lost in thought, and didn't notice my truck pull up behind her car. Her eyes were fixed on the billboard the town council chose to put up to celebrate my honorable discharge from the military and my return home to Valor Springs.

I have no doubt in my mind that the residents of Valor Springs are genuinely excited for my arrival—as they would be for any hometown boy—but a part of me has been dreading this day for months.

Perhaps that is too strong, but it perfectly describes my feelings. I knew the town would eagerly welcome me home, and knowing them, I bet they will go all out with the celebration of my retirement.

Medically retired at thirty-five, just the thought alone makes me scoff.

When one has been through the hell that I have, a medical discharge is the best possible outcome, except...I didn't want to leave the military.

My plan was to make serving my country a lifelong career.

Most people don't know what they want at five years old, but I always knew I wanted

to be in uniform, serving and protecting my country. My father had been a hero who lost his life while serving, so I knew the dangers of war, but I still wanted to serve, still wanted to follow in his footsteps and serve my nation.

And now I'm out.

Seventeen years in the Marines, and now...I don't know how to do anything else. If I'm not a soldier, what am I?

For months, while lying in that hospital bed fighting for my life, I pondered what the fuck I was going to do with my future once I was officially discharged. The military was my Plan A, B, and C. I'd never entertained the thought of doing anything else.

I knew the town was planning something for my homecoming, but the thought of seeing and chatting with people and pretending I hadn't lost my life's purpose was eating at my insides.

This is exactly what I was stressing over when I saw her, the pretty girl stranded on the side of the road, eyes on the billboard with my picture on it.

My initial plan when approaching this girl was to help her and be on my way, but the second she lifted those beautiful golden eyes to me, I knew I wasn't going to be able to leave her.

I was hypnotized.

She's gorgeous with her beautiful, bright amber eyes that sparkle in the evening light and strawberry blonde curls that frame her delicate face. She's a walking wet dream, and I am only a man, one who was absolutely taken by this girl. No, walking away from her is no longer an option.

“Was that real enough for you?”

The second the words are out of my mouth, I want to take them back. Her eyes widen in alarm, and she pulls her hand away as if she’s been burned.

“Oh God!” she gasps, her breaths coming out in unsteady pants, her eyes blinking rapidly at me, and I can see how fast she’s falling into a panic attack. “You’re real! I...I can’t believe I just...”

Fuck!

Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut and let her ride the fantastical wave. Perhaps reality is too much to bear, but I need her to see that I exist in this world as well. I take her shoulders and give them a gentle squeeze, being careful to stay back as much as possible so as not to scare her further. “You’re okay. Breathe for me, gorgeous.”

“I...I can’t!”

“You can. Now look at me!” My voice is hard and commanding, forcing her gaze on mine. I haven’t used this kind of tone on anyone besides my platoon members, but it does the job, and as those pretty eyes finally meet mine, I read the panic in them. “Focus on me and follow my breathing. Okay, gorgeous?”

She nods, her eyes locked on mine as I guide her breathing back to normal. I don’t pull away until her pulse is steady under my fingers. “Feeling better now?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, breaking eye contact, and I notice the flush climbing her neck. “I’m sorry... I don’t know what came over me. I swear I’m not normally this crazy. It’s been a stressful month.”

Her voice is pleading for me to understand, but I don't need her apology. She is not the only one who felt this irresistible pull between us. "It's fine," I assure her. "For the record, I don't go around kissing strangers' hands either." The blush on her cheeks deepens, and she looks away, but I spy the small smile that brushes her lips. I feel her tense shoulders slowly relax, and I take that as a good sign. "Will you tell me why you are sitting on the side of the road with such a dejected look on your face?"

"Right," she says with a nervous laugh, as if it's suddenly dawned on her where we are. "I needed a break, so I stopped the car."

I don't mention how dangerous the spot she chose is. She is lucky there aren't many cars that travel in and out of Valor Springs, or getting air would have been the least of her troubles.

"Let me help you up," I say, offering my hand to help her to her feet. I bite back a growl when her slender hand connects with mine and sparks fly between us. Her fingers are delicate and soft, and I don't want to release the grip I have on her.

"Thanks," she says, pulling her hand away, and I mourn the loss of it. "I...I guess I should get going now."

She reaches for her car door but hesitates, her head lifting to look at the road ahead, and I follow her gaze. In the distance, I can make out a couple of buildings at the edge of Valor Springs; we're only a few minutes outside of town.

My eyes shift back to the girl, and I notice the hesitation in her movements—and the tremble in her hands as she moves to open the car door.

"Need some help?" I ask, but she simply shakes her head, and I wish her face was turned to me so I could guess what she's thinking. Even so, her body language is enough to tell me she is not ready to get into the car just yet. "Miss—"

Just then, a loud yowl comes from inside the car, and my eyes shoot straight to the source of the noise. My gaze locks on the fattest cat that I have ever seen—at least, I hope it’s a cat and not some kind of furry black demon. Copper eyes glare at me from inside the car, but I maintain eye contact. I have never seen an animal scoff before, but I am pretty sure this cat does exactly that.

“I think your cat just sneered at me,” I tell the girl, questioning if the chubby little thing is the reason she’s hesitant to climb into her car.

“Don’t take it personally; she hates everyone,” the girl says, turning to face me, and I can almost read the relief on her face at being stopped from leaving. “Whiskers is just cranky because I lost her treats.”

“Understandable.”

“I could have sworn I packed the box in my purse this morning, but I have looked and looked, and can’t find it. I think the box fell somewhere between the seats, but I still can’t find it.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“Yes, please,” the girl says, relief plain in her voice as she moves aside for me. I step up to the driver’s side and lean in, keeping an eye on the cat even as I dig around for the box of treats.

“I don’t believe you’ve told me your name,” I call out, looking under the driver’s seat, but come back empty. “Mine’s James. James Davidson.” Something grabs my attention from under the passenger seat, so I lean in to grab it.

“Abby Miller, and I just moved to Valor Springs,” she responds, before quickly adding, “I mean, I’m about to move to Valor Springs. I assume you’re a local?”

I smirk. “What gave it away?”

Bingo! My hands touch a box, and I figure this is what she was looking for.

“Let’s see...” she drawls in that sweet voice of hers. “Your photo on a massive billboard with the words ‘Welcome home hero’ in all caps and a blinding shade of red were a pretty strong indicator.”

I laugh, deeply amused like I haven’t been in a long time. I tug the box from where it’s wedged and pull back with a triumphant sound, ignoring the twinge in my damaged knee when I do so. I lift the box to Abby, and her eyes light up like a Christmas tree, and once more, I am struck mute. I realize that there is little I wouldn’t do to see that look on her face.

“Is this what you were looking for?”

She nods, jumping into my space and wrapping her arms around my shoulders excitedly, letting me smell her soft feminine scent, and I am hardly surprised when my cock begins to fill, reminding me how fucking long it’s been since I have paid any attention to it.

“You truly are a hero,” she teases, her soft breath brushing the side of my neck, and it takes sheer will to not push the girl against her car and take her mouth with mine. “You have no idea how loud and mean Whiskers gets without her treats. I can’t decide if she has the temperament of a teenager or an old lady.”

Fuck, this temptress doesn’t have the slightest clue how it feels to have the soft body of a woman pressed against mine, and the sensation is killing me.

It’s been so fucking long, the memory is hazy.

I want her.

Abby Miller has no idea how badly I want to toss the box of treats aside and take her right here on the side of the road where anyone could drive by and see us.

She tempts me. With those soft breasts pressed against me and my nostrils filled with her rosy feminine scent, she fucking tempts me.

As if sensing my thoughts, Abby breaks the embrace and pushes back, a beautiful smile gracing her lips as she takes the box from me. She opens it and takes out a treat before passing it to the cat, who eyes her wearily for a moment before she bites into it.

We both watch as the cat nibbles the treat, and I expect Abby to climb into the car and leave, but she doesn't.

“So...why Valor Springs?” I ask her, and realize that I am stalling for time—more time to be with her and to avoid my own arrival—and from the way she responds, it seems she's not too eager to leave just yet either.

The real question is: Why?

“I recently found out that I have roots in Valor Springs.”

My interest is suddenly piqued. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I probably shouldn't burden a stranger with my troubles...”

“C'mon, you called me 'perfect' only a few minutes ago.”

“I was talking about the billboard!”

“How about the fact that I crawled into your car and found the treats, saving you from your cranky cat? We’re hardly strangers after that. We’re friends at the very least.”

Though we’ll be more if I have my way...

I can’t explain why I’m so certain we are meant to be more than just friends, but I am not about to scare away this girl that’s barely gotten rid of the deer-in-headlights look in her eyes.

“Fine,” she says with an eye roll, but I spy the smile on her face. “Up until a few weeks ago, I had no idea that Valor Springs existed.” Her gaze crosses to the buildings in the distance. “Or that my mother was born in that town.”

“How did you find out?”

“Through a lawyer. He showed up right after her funeral with a will and a whole lot of information I was not ready for.” She hugs her arms around her middle, and her eyes take on a faraway look, almost as if she’s reliving the moment once more. “I found out that I had an aunt, and that she had also died not long before my mother. All her property was passed to my mother, and as her next of kin, it legally became mine when she died.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” she asks brokenly, turning those beautiful eyes to me. “Do you really? Because I don’t. How can you live one moment with no family outside the one person you know, and the next learn that you do— did, in fact, have family, but now you’ll never get to know them, because it’s too late and they are gone.”

“If you have roots in Valor Springs, I will help you recover anyone that shares a bloodline with you.”

She shakes her head. “There’s no one left. The lawyer told me so,” Abby says with a bitter laugh. “He said it with so much happiness too, like I would be relieved there is no one left to contest the will or try to fight me for my inheritance.”

The smile disappears, and her lips start to tremble as her eyes quickly fill up. I watch with alarm as she struggles to sniff back the tears, but they spill anyway, seconds before she falls forward. I catch her in my arms, wrapping them around her much smaller frame as her sobs rack her body. Abby buries her face in my chest, and I feel her tears soak my shirt, so raw and gut-wrenching.

I want to find the lawyer who broke the news to her and break his fucking nose for being so tactless, but I settle for comforting the girl in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffs after a few minutes. “I’m not usually this emotional, but I can’t help it. Everyone’s gone, and all I have left is a cat that doesn’t even like me.”

“I thought you said she hates everyone.”

“She does,” Abby says, pushing back to look at me, and once more, I am taken aback by how fucking beautiful this girl is, tear stained and all. When she looks at me like this, so innocent and vulnerable, I want to solve all her problems.

I want to protect her.

Mine! comes the surprising, unbidden thought.

“Abby...”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again, her breath catching in her throat when I bring my hand to her cheek and wipe away the tears staining that beautiful face. “I needed a hug. I’m glad you stopped to help. I thought I was ready for Valor Springs—for the

truth—but I don't think that I am.”

I'm here now , I want to say. I want to promise this girl that I will take care of everything from this moment on, but I don't want to scare her away. Despite our unconventional meeting, we are still two strangers standing by the side of the road, hugging and talking like we've known each other for much longer than half an hour.

“Now that we're going to be living in the same town, you get an exclusive offer of unlimited hugs. As many as you need from me.”

She laughs, and it's a beautiful sound coming from her. “Thank you, James.” She briefly places her palm over my chest before moving back. “I've kept you long enough. You should go ahead; I'm sure people are expecting you.”

My eyes cross back to Valor Springs in the distance, and I know she's right. There are a whole lot of people waiting for my arrival, but however ungrateful it makes me sound, I am not ready to face them yet.

I don't feel like a hero. Not really.

The person returning to Valor Springs is a wounded shell of his former self, with too many scars to count and enough trauma to cripple the mind of even the strongest of men. Perhaps it makes me a coward to hold off returning to my hometown, but I am not ready for the attention—the questions and the prying.

No, Abby Miller is not the only one wary of driving the rest of the way to Valor Springs.

“There is a hill nearby that has the best view of the sunset you will ever see in your life. What do you say we go check it out?”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

Abby

Christ, I must be going out of my mind!

I can't believe I hugged a man I just met and then proceeded to cry all over his shirt. And now, I am following him up a dusty path to some unknown location, all because he promised me a beautiful view of the sunset. How is this different from a stranger offering a child candy to get into his van?

I have seen a movie or two with this very script. I should know better!

Sure, the man in question is built like a Greek god with a face that looks like it was sculpted from stone and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen, but...aren't serial killers usually good-looking? What's the use of watching all those true crime shows if I don't learn anything from them?

This man is dangerous. He carries a power in him that cannot be faked, and while that should scare me, it has the opposite effect.

With him, I feel safe.

I haven't felt anything remotely close to the comfort I feel around this man since my mom died, and maybe what I am doing is reckless, but I can't stop myself. I don't want to lose these feelings just yet, no matter the risks.

"We're almost there," James calls out, walking ahead of me, Whiskers trotting beside him, her fur gently rustling in the breeze. It sure took no time for my cantankerous cat

to warm up to the man. One treat from him, and she melted like ice. That's a whole other thing. Whiskers seems as taken with the man as I am, and I wonder if our rivalry will extend to competing for this man's attention as well.

The thought makes me chuckle, and James stops at the sound, turning around with his brows arched. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I say, biting into my trembling lip before bursting out with laughter. "I just never thought I would live to see a day when Whiskers climbs a hill. It takes so much effort to get her off the couch, and now she's suddenly an adventurer."

James's sexy mouth stretches with a grin. "Cats are surprisingly active animals. Growing up, my neighbor had one who would scale the wall and climb into our kitchen to steal our cat's food. The neighbor swore they fed the cat, but I guess it got a thrill from stealing."

I chuckle at the thought of Whiskers scaling any walls. She's too lazy for that...or so I'd thought.

"She likes you," I say, stepping up to his side.

James smiles, reaching down to run his fingers over the cat's dark fur, and she doesn't hiss or swat his hand like she does with me. Instead, she purrs, arching into his touch. "She was probably cranky from all the traveling," he says, then looks up, those dark eyes firmly on mine when he speaks next. "I don't think she hates you either, Abby. Cats are very sensitive animals and can even scent your mood. If you're feeling down or stressed, they will sense that too."

"I had no idea," I say as it slowly dawns on me that he's right. Despite our little rivalry, Whiskers had never hissed or swat at me until after Mom died. Between us, there's been an overload of negative energy, and perhaps James is a welcome

reprieve not just to me, but to Whiskers as well.

“That’s understandable.” He straightens and offers his hand for me to take, and I don’t even think about it as I slide my fingers into his. That massive palm closes around mine, and we walk the rest of the distance up the hill together.

We reach the top, and there it is: the sunset, just beginning to paint the sky in hues of orange and pink. Beyond the horizon, the town lies peacefully in the distance, its lights twinkling as the day slowly transitions into night. Up here, the air is cool, carrying a scent of pine and earth, a serene moment that I want to last forever.

James spreads a blanket he’d brought from his truck, and we settle next to each other to admire the evening sky. Exhausted from exerting herself more than usual, Whiskers drops onto the corner of the blanket and curls into a ball.

I take a deep breath of fresh, cool air and release it on a relaxed sigh. James was right, this spot provides the best sunset view.

“We can see the entire town from up here,” I say, pointing in the town’s direction, and this time my chest doesn’t hurt when I think of Valor Springs. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It is,” James agrees, and I turn to him with a smile only to find he is not looking in the direction I’m pointing. No, his eyes are firmly on me, dark and heated. His gaze sends bolts of desire licking up my skin, and my lips part on a gasp when I feel moisture pool in my sex.

He’s only looking at me. Other than the kiss to my hand and my impromptu hug, this man hasn’t even touched me. All he needs is his gaze for my body to grow tight and needy... It’s intoxicating.

I clear my voice and quickly look away with a shiver; goosebumps rise on my skin,

and it has nothing to do with the cold. “So, do you come up here often?” I ask to mask what I am feeling, willing this need to fade away. I cannot afford to get any more attached to this man than I already am. He’s the town’s hero, and I... Well, I’m a mess.

“Are you cold?” James asks, ignoring my question. “You are shaking.”

I want to tell him that it has nothing to do with the cold, but he’s already touching me. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me flush against him. I bite back a whimper when he starts rubbing his hands up and down my arms in an attempt to warm me up, but I am already warm. In fact, my body is burning so hot, I am surprised he can’t tell.

“James—”

“Maybe bringing you up here was a bad idea. I didn’t even think to ask you to grab a sweater. I forgot how quickly it cools off once the sun starts to set,” he says, oblivious to the feelings he is arousing in me by touching me the way he is, but it’s too late even if he stops now. I’m half delirious with need, and I can’t help but close my eyes and inhale his strong masculine scent, a mix of evergreen and musk that’s addictive.

Christ, he feels so good. All muscle and warmth, and despite my better judgment, I find myself leaning into him, laying my head on his shoulder and nuzzling his neck, losing myself in his scent. “I’m not cold,” I whisper, my mind miles away from the sunset we came up here to see. I don’t even care about the scenery anymore. All I can think about is him and the way he makes me feel.

“You’ll be feeling it soon,” he says, his voice deep and rough, sending a tremor through me. “Maybe we should head back.”

“Can... Can we stay a little longer? It’ll be a while before it starts to get dark, and I’m not ready to go yet,” I say, unable to make myself look at him. Being in his arms is the safest I’ve felt since my mom died and everything I thought I knew turned upside down. I’m not ready to let go of this feeling yet, to let go of him.

James smiles at me and pulls me tighter against him. “Alright,” he says. I snuggle in close and relax into his side. I feel James’s sigh beneath my cheek and smile to myself at the thought that I might be providing some of the same comfort to him that he is to me.

After a few minutes of silently watching the sky change colors, we start to talk. We’re both quiet, as if speaking above a whisper might disrupt the contentment we’re feeling. James tells me about what it was like to grow up in Valor Springs and the large extended family he still has there, despite being an only child himself. As it turns out, he knew my aunt, though only in passing, and is familiar with her inn. He asks me about my mom, and I share a few stories. Talking about her causes an ache in my chest, but it’s the good kind. I’d been so wrapped up in a mixture of grief and anger whenever I thought about her, I hadn’t stopped to remember all the good times we had together as I grew up. She might have kept secrets from me, but she was still a devoted, loving mother.

We fall silent again as the sun begins its final descent, sinking behind the silhouette of Valor Springs in the distance.

“It’s getting late,” James says, a hint of regret in his tone.

His words shatter the silence that had fallen over us and snap me back to reality, and I flush with embarrassment when I realize I’d cuddled in so close to him, I am practically in his lap. I push away quickly, ashamed at how needy I became when he touched me. His arms release me, and I immediately miss their warmth, hating myself a little for how needy I’m feeling for someone who is essentially a stranger to me.

Am I really so desperate that I will cling to anyone who offers me comfort?

Christ, I need to get a hold of myself.

“You’re right. The sun has nearly set, we should head back before it’s too dark to see where we’re going,” I mutter looking around for Whiskers, who is chasing a cricket.

The walk down the hill happens in silence, and it’s painfully awkward. As much as I don’t want to be parted from James, another part of me is desperate to escape him. This man makes me feel things I shouldn’t, and once he’s gone, it’s going to hurt. Delaying the inevitable will only make it hurt worse.

We make it back to our cars, and I scoop Whiskers into the back seat before she can protest. Then James and I stand awkwardly by the side of the road. Well, the awkward bit is all me. The man doesn’t seem affected by the weird tension between us in any way.

“Uh...thanks for everything,” I tell him, shuffling nervously on my feet. “I’ll probably go back to that spot when I get settled in Valor Springs. The sunset was beautiful and it helped take my mind off things.” You helped take my mind off things.

James doesn’t speak. He moves forward, making me back up a step as he closes the distance between us. My breathing comes in short pants as he backs me to my car, caging me in and making it impossible to escape—not that I want to escape. No, the thought doesn’t cross my mind once.

“W-what are you doing?” I whisper, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. “James—”

“You have no idea, do you?” he grinds out, his voice low and husky, causing my sex to clench painfully.

“W-what do you m-mean?” I stutter, barely able to get the words out.

“What you do to me when you bury your face in my neck and nuzzle my skin like a touch-starved kitten or when you press those perfect breasts against my chest.” I gasp when he lifts his hand and brings it to my breast, causing my nipples to harden under his caress.

The sensation is as shocking as it is sudden, but it’s not unwelcome. I’ve only known James for a few hours, but it feels like much longer. From the first touch, I was desperate for more. I’d wanted him to make his move on the hill and wondered why he hadn’t. Was he waiting until now? Or was our imminent departure what finally spurred him to act?

This should feel wrong; I barely know this man. But it doesn’t. It feels perfect, like finding the light after so long in the dark.

I try to remind myself that James is a stranger, that we are standing on the side of the only road that leads into Valor Springs and someone could happen by at any moment. I need to stop him, not arch into his touch, but I can’t stop myself from reacting to the feeling of his hands on my body.

“I was on active duty for eighteen fucking months, stuck in the desert fighting, then I spent five months in the hospital. Not once did I come across anyone I wanted as badly as I want you. I want to feel you wrapped around me as I make you writhe and scream in ecstasy over and over again.” He brings his free hand to my cheek, those blue eyes turning darker by the second. “Oh, the things I want to do to you, Abby Miller...”

I should run. His words should have me trying to escape. But I can’t. I won’t.

Every part of me wants—craves this man like I never have anyone in my life before,

but even I know a dangerous man when I see one, and James... I can't handle him like this. He has a wild look in his eyes that reminds me of a wolf ready to pounce on a helpless rabbit, and I feel every bit like I'm prey to this man.

Run, Abby!

I shush the warning voice in the back of my mind. I can tell he's watching to see what I will do next, how I will react to his blatant declaration. I have been making a lot of bad decisions lately, though, so what's one more?

"Do it," I whisper, my voice barely audible, but I don't break eye contact with the beast of a man staring down at me. "What you just said, I...I want you to do it. Now."

His mouth slams over mine with little warning, taking me by surprise. I gasp at the move, and it seems that is the opening he was looking for as he deepens the kiss. There is no coaxing, no slow sweep of lips like I was expecting.

My pulse drums rapidly as I bring my hands to that sturdy chest and lean in, my lips parting eagerly against his. A whimper climbs up my throat, my sex clenching achingly when his tongue grazes mine. I can practically feel my panties growing damp, and it's a strange feeling. One I have never felt before.

A moan escapes as I push up for more, but the cruel man breaks the kiss, that sexy mouth stretching into a grin, and he pulls back to look at me. His blue eyes are sparkling with intensity in the low light when our gazes meet. Our mutual desire is an inferno that's quickly engulfing us both. The force of it is shocking.

James dips his head to take my lips once more in a quick, passionate kiss before pulling back slightly. "You are thinking," he rasps against my mouth. "I must not be doing a very good job if you are able to think so hard."

“No, I—”

That is all I manage to get out before long fingers slide down to my backside and grip the hem of my dress, hiking it up impatiently before he hooks his forearms beneath my ass cheeks and lifts me onto the hood of the car, positioning himself between my legs. I barely register the cool metal against my skin, too busy panicking at the scandalous position we’re in.

We’re on an open road!

A nearly deserted road, but it’s still a space anyone could drive through and see clearly what is happening. James, the hometown hero, doesn’t seem to care that someone could drive by and spot us, that he could be stripped of his title for doing something so reckless.

No, those hungry eyes fixed on mine tell me he doesn’t care at all.

“Focus on me,” he growls, his deep voice commanding attention, and I give it to him. “I need you to stop thinking about anything but what I am doing to you. You can do that for me, gorgeous, can’t you?”

“But we—” I let out a gasp when he yanks me hard against the massive bulge pushing at his fly. Moisture pools in my panties as he rolls his manhood over my sex. I wrap my legs around his hips, crying out when he rocks his erection against my aching sex. Spots explode behind my eyelids at the move as delicious heat spreads in my core.

“Oh, God,” I whimper, moving my hips to chase the feeling. I need more! Is this what I have been missing by not entertaining men in my life? “Do it again,” I whimper needily, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and humping his erection, all reservations forgotten. And dignity? Who needs that when the tradeoff for losing it is

this delicious feeling? “Again... Please !”

“Fuck!” he shouts, wrapping his hand tighter around my waist before he thrusts his hips forward, pressing the thick length of his shaft against my panties, and I cry out at the pleasure that bursts through my system. “You have no idea how hungry I am, baby. I need to be inside this pussy right now!”

“Yes!” I cry out, delirious with desire. Eager fingers climb up my thighs, and it barely registers when he slides them beneath the waistband of my panties, and with a violent tug, yanks them down my thighs before tearing them completely off. I jolt against him when I feel the press of his middle finger over my sex.

“Kiss me, sweetheart,” he demands a second before his mouth sweeps over mine, and I match his need. Our tongues lick into each other’s mouths with such feral desire it’s downright obscene, but I can’t stop. My sex grows slicker by the second as he rubs his middle finger between my feminine lips. His thick digit grazes my sensitive bud, causing me to cry out and jolt hard against him as a delicious storm of pleasure shoots through my core.

“Oh, God!” I cry out, but James doesn’t stop at my reaction, breaking the kiss only to trail his mouth down my neck, kissing and licking hungrily at the skin; I find myself arching back to allow him more access.

I barely know this man!

I am letting him touch my body in ways no other has. I am letting him feel secret parts of me I have hidden from the world, and...I can’t help myself.

His mouth is hot as it trails my body, his fingers urgent as they caress the sensitive spot between my legs. My breath comes in short pants as I feel his lips draw closer and closer to my aching nipples pushing against my bra and trembling with

anticipation for...

Christ, I have no idea what to expect, and yet, I can't help but lean into James's touch when I feel his hand search my back for the zipper before tugging down the sleeves of my dress, pulling the straps of my bra right along with it. I bite back a whimper when the cool air brushes my exposed breasts, but I don't feel too much of it as he leans down and sucks my nipple into his mouth, drawing on it hungrily, causing me to flood the finger teasing at my sex with slick arousal.

God! Oh, God!

I'm hot...burning up with the need for something I have never experienced in my life, and now, I want it—him—like my next breath.

My body is strung tight with anticipation as I drop my hands between us and palm his cock. He makes a deep guttural noise that I feel against my skin.

"You need to stop, baby. Let me take care of you," he says roughly, but I shake my head. I love what he's doing to my body, but I want more.

I'm not naive when it comes to sex, just inexperienced. When you live in an apartment complex with thin walls, you learn a thing or two about sex against your will. The walls shaking from impact or the loud, pleased cries always made me wonder what I was missing.

But until now, living through the noise and wondering is all I ever did.

No more.

Here's a man I want more than my next breath, and I am determined to know what it feels like to share this part of myself with someone, so I don't stop. No, instead, I pull

my hand away from his bulge to unbuckle his belt. My hands are so shaky and eager that it takes two tries to tug it off before twisting open the button and sliding down the zipper of his cargo pants.

He inhales sharply when I slide my hand into his boxer briefs and wrap my fingers around his stiff shaft, but... now what? I've never done anything like this, and I am desperate to feel him, but I don't know how to proceed.

"Fucking hell, gorgeous. Do you even know what you are doing?"

"Yes," I counter, lying through my teeth. "I have experience." And by experience, I mean that one time I clicked on a link in an online forum and found myself on a porn site. I clicked out so fast, I nearly broke my finger, but that's the closest I ever got to seeing a dick.

I shake my head. James doesn't need to know about any of that. In fact, he doesn't need to know that he is the first man that's ever touched me. At twenty-two, it's embarrassing to even bring it up.

Would he care?

"You are doing it again," James says, pulling his hand from my sex to close it over the one I have curled around his heavy erection, guiding me in how to stroke him. "Your inexperience is such a turn-on, baby, but this is not the place for a sex lesson."

I tighten my grip on his cock, stroking his thick shaft even as I glare at him. Christ, the man is so big. Every last inch of him. Am I perhaps biting off more than I can chew? His cock barely fits in my grasp, how the hell will he fit inside of me?

I shrug off the thought. It's just my fear talking. I want this enough to overlook the fact that the man is built like a freaking mountain.

“I don’t need any lessons,” I say stubbornly. “I know what I am doing.”

His tongue pokes his cheek, and I read amusement in his eyes, but that is not what I want to see so I push up closer, and with trembling fingers, guide the tip of his cock to my sensitive sex. His muscles are tense, but he lets me take control, his eyes firmly on mine as I drag the head of his shaft through my folds, whimpering with need when his thickness grazes the sensitive nub once more.

“Oh,” I whimper, dropping my forehead against his shoulder. My sex is pulsing hotly with the need for more, but I have no freaking idea how to proceed, and James is no help. “Please...”

“Please what, gorgeous?”

Is he trying to teach me a lesson? Lucky for him, I am too far gone to care about his all-knowing smirk. I’m desperate enough to beg for him to take back control.

“Please take me,” I cry out, the ache in my sex growing unbearable. “ Please...”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

James

I have never been one to make reckless risks.

Calculated, sure. I can be deliberate and tactical, so there is no such thing as an accident or mistake when it comes to me. And yet...I am being reckless now.

This girl makes me forget myself and anything else that does not revolve around her. Even worse, I can't bring myself to care about the fact that what we are doing is dangerous.

“Please...”

Nothing matters but her and what she wants in this moment.

With a deep, feral growl, I grab my cock and guide it to her virgin hole—and despite what she claimed, I have no doubt that she is a virgin. She sucks in a sharp breath, inching closer to me when I probe the thick head of my shaft over her slippery entrance. Christ, and to think that this girl is untouched. The innocence I read in her eyes translates to the rest of her, and I am about to corrupt every inch of her.

“James, please...” she pleads, rocking against me restlessly, snapping at whatever control I was grasping for. I inch my cock into her, stretching her wide until I feel the thin barrier of her innocence. With my gaze locked on the prettiest golden eyes I have ever seen in my entire life, I slam forward, sheathing myself fully inside her with a rough growl that echoes through the night.

She cries out, her eyes glazing over with a mix of pain and pleasure. I drink in her expression, fighting everything in me to not come. She is so fucking tight; her hot little pussy is wrapped around me like a vase, and it's a test of my mental fortitude.

Mine!

This girl—a stranger only a few hours ago—means more than anyone ever has in my life. She doesn't know it yet, but Abby is mine.

I will protect her with my life.

Maybe this is why I had to leave the military. I wasn't sure how I would proceed, but in a matter of a few hours, this girl has become my purpose. I swear to be there for her every moment going forward. Everything in me belongs to this girl. My feelings are as intense as they are sudden and unexplainable.

But there is no escaping it. She is mine to protect...mine to claim!

The thought snaps something possessive in me, and I take her fast and hard, ravaging her like a beast in rut, but I push back my desire, reminding myself of her inexperience. But fuck, is it hard. This innocent little thing has the wettest pussy I have ever felt, practically dripping between us and driving me crazy with need.

Mine!

I clench my jaw hard and will myself into finding some control. I wait until blood isn't pumping harshly in my ears to turn to the girl. "How is it, gorgeous?" I grasp her waist as I roll my hips gently. "I'll take it slow if it's too much for you."

"No," she protests, digging her fingers into my back and pushing up against me, wincing slightly at the sudden move. "I'm fine... I..."

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not,” she whimpers, rocking forward, slower this time. “It hurts, but it feels good too. Please don’t stop!”

I keep my eyes on her as I flex my hips, looking for any shadow of discomfort on her expression but find nothing but pleasure. In fact, what I sense in her is impatience. It should be way too strong for someone who has not been touched before, but it seems I have unlocked something inside the girl as she starts rolling her hips faster to meet mine.

“I’m trying to be careful—”

It’s killing me, but I don’t want to hurt this girl when it’s clear that mine is the first dick she’s ever taken, and fuck, it feels intense. Her channel is wrapped around me like a fucking glove; it’s a miracle I haven’t exploded.

“I don’t want you to be careful,” she argues. “Everyone has been treating me with kid gloves all month, and I am sick and tired of it. I want—need—to feel every bit of you. Please, James. Take me. Have me.”

Take me.

I pull out and slam back into her tightness, her arousal dripping down my cock to my balls. Her tight pussy pulsates around my shaft, eroding whatever control I still had, and then I am thrusting hard into her. Her head falls back, splaying her hair over the hood of her car, her pleased cries shattering the silence of the night.

“Mine!” roars a dangerously possessive voice inside of me, and I don’t realize I’ve yelled the word out loud until her eyes widen slightly before immediately turning glassy as I take her in rough pumps. Her pussy clenches needily around my cock,

welcoming the violence of our lovemaking, and I can tell she loves every second of it. “You are mine, Abby Miller, and so is this body,” I growl, the sound inhuman even to my ears. “Only I get to possess this pussy. Fuck you so hard and breed you!”

Get you pregnant and swollen with my baby!

Fucking hell, why does the thought of this gorgeous girl swollen with my child send my heart racing so fast? I’ve never thought about any other woman in this way, and now... I want everything with Abby. I want a diamond ring on that slender finger and a baby in her belly.

I want her. I crave everything!

“James,” she sobs as I hammer into her wet pussy in rough strokes, and fuck, lying on the hood of the car like this... Abby is the most breathtaking thing I have ever seen. God, she’s beautiful with her tits bouncing with every thrust and eyes glassy and unfocused. Her pretty mouth is parted, and I lean down to sweep my mouth over her panting lips. The kiss is dirty and downright obscene as our tongues engage in a carnal dance as I fuck into her with fast strokes. My balls ache with the need to come, and I have to clench my abdomen hard to stop that from happening.

“Mine,” I rasp into the kiss, jerking her knees higher around my hips and positioning the base of my cock to stroke her swollen clit with every thrust. Her breathing changes and grows more labored, knees shaking as I drive into her, grinding over her sensitive bud as I do so.

“Feels s—so good,” she cries out, a rough tremble racking her body when I drop a finger between us and strum her clit in rough circles, sliding my cock in and out of her wetness, feeling her teeter closer and closer to the edge.

“You take my cock so well, gorgeous. This rough soldier hasn’t had anything

remotely this good ever. Your pussy is so tight and wet; it was made to take this fat cock.”

“James!” she sobs, digging her heels into my back seconds before her lips part on a scream, her pussy clenching hard around my cock and squeezing me tight as a rough tremble takes over. Her pleased cries echo through the night as I slam harder and more furiously into her, feeling my own orgasm threaten to explode.

“You are so fucking gorgeous, baby!” I say hoarsely, punching my hips forward three more times, and my abdominal muscles strain painfully before releasing in a firestorm. I come with a roar, driving my cock faster and harder into her pussy and burying my seed in her womb. Sweat drips down my forehead as I take possession of the girl and mark her as mine with my seed and scent.

I slam into her until she’s milked me to my last drop before collapsing over her as my muscles turn to mush, careful not to crush her. Her labored breathing matches mine, and for a hot minute, neither of us breaks the silence. I don’t move to withdraw my softening cock from her pussy. Give me a few minutes, and I will be back to full mast, ready to take her again, except I am not sure she can handle another round so soon.

“Are you okay, gorgeous?” I manage through my labored breathing, brushing my lips over her neck and inhaling her sweet scent. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Abby wraps her arms around my shoulders and shakes her head. “You didn’t hurt me. I never... I mean, I know people enjoy sex, or there wouldn’t be so many of us in the world, but I didn’t think I was missing out on something so...”

Her voice trails off, and I lift my head to look down at the pretty girl, surprised to find her eyes shut but a smile lingering on her lips. “So what?”

“Magical.” Her eyes snap open and lock on mine. “So intimate. Is my heart supposed to beat as hard even when it’s over? Am I supposed to want to do it again?”

I know what she means, but I don’t want to bust her bubble by telling her that I’ve only ever felt this way with her. Even though the military occupied most of my life, I found ways to fill the my limited free time. I dated—albeit rarely—but I’ve been with other women. I cared for them for a brief time, but not once did I picture the rest of my life with any of them. Heck, I’ve never once had sex without protection until her.

Abby Miller.

It was reckless and so unlike me, but the thought of Abby swollen with my child sends pleasure rocking through me. I want that more than my next breath.

“You are allowed to want it again,” I tell my future wife, leaning down and brushing my lips softly over hers. “You can have it as many times as you want, but not right now.” She whines when I pull out of her despite my deep longing to have her again immediately. Just this once, I will deny us both. “I bet you are sore. You need a little time to heal before we can think about making love again.”

She nods, and I help her climb off the cool metal of the car before walking to the driver’s side door. Earlier, when I was looking for the cat treats, I noticed a box of wet wipes on the dashboard, and they are still there when I reach in. I grab a couple and use them to clean myself before zipping up.

Abby is straightening her clothes when I walk back to her. She notices the box in my hand and tries to reach for it, but I move it away, picking a few instead and moving toward her. “W-what are you doing? James!”

“Let me take care of you, gorgeous,” I say, backing her against the car and caging her in.

“I can do it myself.” I notice her flushed cheeks even in the moonlight, but she has nothing to be embarrassed about. Very soon, I will know every inch of her body better than my own, will have kissed every inch and learned what makes her tremble with need.

Next time, I won’t have to depend on the moonlight and touch to guide me around her body.

“Let me,” I say, bringing the wet wipes between her legs and running them softly over her inner thighs. She stands still as I clean her up as best as I can before finally pushing back to give her space.

She doesn’t look at me, but I can read the embarrassment on her face. “Maybe we should...uh...head to Valor Springs now?”

“Are you ready to leave?”

She shakes her head. “No.” Her eyes move in the direction of the town I was born and raised in. “But I can’t put it off any longer. Thanks to you, I am not feeling sorry for myself anymore. It’s time to face the past.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Her head whips to mine. “Y-you mean to town?”

“Wherever it is you want to go.”

She gnaws her lips for a couple of seconds before she speaks. “You just met me, James. I know we had sex and all, but—”

“When I called you mine, I meant it. You are mine, and I’m not letting you go when

you need me.”

Her lips open in surprise, closing before opening again, but no sound comes out. It seems I have shocked my gorgeous girl into silence.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

Abby

I read somewhere that it takes just five seconds to fall in love, and I wonder if that applies to lust as well.

When I called you mine, I meant it.

A shudder racks my body from the memory of those words. James sounded serious when he spoke them, and by the truck trailing mine, I can tell he was. Maybe the sudden possessiveness should terrify me coming from someone I've just met, but it doesn't. It grounds me, reminding me that I am not alone anymore. For however long his obsessive feelings last, I will not be alone during that period.

I can handle that.

Despite the initial calm, a sense of dread returns with a vengeance when I spot the first sign of civilization in the form of a large mechanic shop. All of its lights are on and there is a massive American flag hanging at the front along with a banner that reads "Welcome home, hero."

"Look, Whiskers, it's almost like we're part of the welcoming committee," I tell the cat napping in the back, and I notice her ears twitch, but she doesn't even look my way. Was I really expecting the cat to be friendlier after the walk? Yes, I was .

My nerves give way to confusion as I observe people going in and out of the shops along the street, despite the late hour. The town center is lit up with streetlamps, and while the sidewalks aren't crowded by any means, the area is still surprisingly active.

A part of me expected Valor Springs to be a sleepy little town with rundown buildings and unfriendly faces, but it's nothing of the sort. People are chatting and laughing as they pass one another, and I question how it would feel to be a part of such a community. They all seem so close, which is a stark contrast to city life. Heck, even my neighbors cursed me for wishing them a good day.

I follow my car's navigation system, joining the traffic slowly driving through town, and I find my thoughts drifting to my mother, her beautiful strawberry blonde hair that she passed on to me and her beautiful green eyes that were so unlike my amber ones. I wonder if I got my eyes from my father, but my mother liked to talk about him as much as she liked to talk about her past.

I stopped asking.

For her sake and mine, I buried all my questions in my heart and never brought them up again, but maybe I'll find answers now.

Does my father live in this town? What if he lives back in the city and our paths have crossed multiples times without either one of us even realizing it?

I clench hard on the steering wheel as another panic attack threatens to well up inside me, and I force my eyes on the review mirror, and the familiar black truck driving behind me grounds me.

I'm not alone.

James is here. The town's hero, built like a mountain and with the iciest blue eyes I have ever seen is with me. He's following me like he promised he would, and as we pass, people stop to wave excitedly, obviously recognizing his truck. Despite the attention from the people in the sidewalks celebrating his return, James eyes are firmly on my car. The sight in my rearview mirror settles my nerves, and I'm able to

take a grounding breath.

When I called you mine, I meant it.

The words reassure me, and the shakiness in my fingers dies a little as I near the end of Main Street. I make a turn and drive a couple more minutes before stopping outside a massive, ornate building.

Surely this can't be my aunt's inn, right?

As I park outside the multi-story, Victorian style home, it casts a shadow over me. It's dark and a little ominous looking with no light coming from any of the windows. It appears the windows on the uppermost part of the turret that dominates the front of the inn are boarded up, and it looks menacing in the dark. I am almost afraid to get out of my car.

"We're here, Whiskers," I call out to the cat, hoping she wakes up and takes the tour with me. She wakes up alright, just not so she can follow me. No, the little demon wakes up only to change her sleeping position before going straight back to sleep. "Great!"

I look through the review mirror, wondering if James decided to stop in town and talk to the residents, but I notice his truck parked behind my car and spot the man just as he is climbing out. He walks to my door and taps on the window to get me to lower it.

"Are you okay?" he asks, concern clear in his voice. "This is the only inn in town, so it must be the one you're looking for."

"You know this place?" I ask, peering through my windshield at the massive building. "The papers the lawyer gave me stated that it is called the Pearl or something. He forgot to mention that it is an old, haunted house."

“It’s not,” James says with a laugh. “It’s still in operation.”

“As a haunted house during Halloween?”

“Now you are just being mean. It’s been well maintained. It looks better in the daylight,” he promises.

Surely that can’t be true. The large structure with its Victorian style and dark windows has to be haunted. “Maybe I’ll wait until morning to check it out then,” I say with a shudder. “I’m not going inside a place that looks like that in the dark!”

“I have no idea why the lights are all off. Maybe an electrical issue? Hold on, I’ll get us a flashlight,” he says, totally ignoring what I’d just said.

I watch the handsome man walk to his truck and come back a moment later with a large black flashlight. He opens my car door, and I blink at him in confusion. “James, I am not going in there. I’m terrified of ghosts.”

“It’s not haunted, I promise.”

“How do you know?”

He points at himself. “Lifelong Valor Springs resident, remember?”

“But you also mentioned that you haven’t been back in almost two years,” I point out, and he smirks.

“So, you were listening.” I flush and look away but stand firm in my decision to stay in the car and wait for daylight. “Tell you what, if we run into a ghost, I promise to throw myself in front of it and give you a chance to run.”

“Why don’t we offer Whiskers to the ghost instead?” The chubby feline turns her nose up to glare at me before going back to sleep. I look back at the looming structure and take in a deep breath. “Okay, fine.”

James offers his hand for me to take, so I unclip my seatbelt and put my hand in his, climbing out of the car. His hand closes around mine, and my heart starts racing at the contact. He is so warm and solid that I find myself leaning into him as we walk up to the grand entrance doors set in the base of the high turret. I swear that it gets colder the closer we get, and the shadow by the door definitely just moved...

James pushes open one of the doors and clicks on his flashlight. We enter a large open space that must be the lobby. Once we’ve taken a few steps inside, I notice a dark shape on the floor just outside the pool of light cast by James’s flashlight...a dark human shape.

“Ghost!” I cry out, my heart beating hard in my chest, but despite the desire to escape, I find myself rooted to the ground.

The ghost jolts at my cry and sits up, and I let out a scream. Oh my God, I was right. This place is haunted.

I shift my gaze to James, who doesn’t seem one bit scared of the female figure rising to its feet and approaching us. I can’t see her face in the dim light, and I imagine it’s probably distorted or something.

Was she killed in this building? Do I need to offer Whiskers as a peace offering to this ghost? I don’t feel bad sacrificing my feline sibling, knowing she would happily do the same to me.

More importantly, why can’t I get my feet to move and get the hell out of here? And why isn’t James at all concerned?

Christ, why did I listen to that strange lawyer and move from my home in the city to this strange little town? I should have told him to sell the property and just give me the money. I could have used it to live a much more comfortable life in the city, but I just had to come here to search for the truth about my roots.

“You are late,” says the ghost as she reaches us, and when she steps into the circle of light made by James’s flashlight, I realize that she is not a ghost after all, but a pretty girl—one who was expecting me? “Mr. Rothchild asked me to wait for you and show you around. You are Abby Miller, right?”

“Mr. Rothchild, the lawyer... Who are you? You’re not a ghost?”

“Of course, I am not a ghost,” she scoffs, and I flinch at the glare she tosses my way. Great. Way to make a good first impression, Abby.

“Calm down, Lizzy,” rumbles the voice of the man standing next to me, and my gaze whips to his. Does he know this girl?

The girl’s brows furrow, and her lips puff open as she squints against the light. “J-James, is that you?” She shrieks, jumping forward and pushing past me to fling her arms around my—around James.

He’s not mine, I try to remind myself even as jealousy sears through me when the two embrace a little too long to be considered just friends. They seem close, and I wonder if perhaps the ghost girl is his ex...or a lover. Shit, I didn’t even stop to ask if James had someone waiting for him before I threw myself at him.

“How’ve you been, Lizzy?”

The girl, who I can now tell is about my age, laughs, pushing back from the embrace to look at James. “Everyone has been waiting for you to show up. You are late too.”

“You know I don’t like the attention.”

“Of course, so we went ahead and celebrated without you. Should have seen how many people were on the streets waiting for your return. The elementary school even put on a little show.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it here in time,” James says, and a petty part of me wants to explain why he was late, but James picks that exact moment to turn to me. “Lizzy, this is Abby Miller. I heard she is the new owner.”

“It’s about time we got one.”

“Abby,” James reaches out and takes my hand, drawing me to his side. “This is my cousin, Elizabeth Davidson—Lizzy. My father and her mother are siblings.”

Oh. They’re cousins.

Now that Lizzie has stepped fully into the light, I see it. They have similar hair color and features, and the same blue eyes. There is no denying their familial relation.

I manage to pick my jaw off the floor and extend my hand to the girl. “Nice to meet you. Sorry, I’m late, I—” My cheeks flush as I realize that I have no excuse. At least none that can be said out loud. “I’m sorry for thinking you were a ghost.”

“It’s no big deal.” She waves me off. My eyes move back to the spot where she was lying, and she chuckles. “Oh, that. I didn’t mean to scare you; that’s just my favorite spot in this entire place. Come with me.”

Lizzie takes my arm before I can protest and walks me back to the spot where she was lying, nudging me to follow her down on her knees. I turn to look at James, who is sporting a smile and nods for me to go ahead. I follow the girl down and lie on my

back when she guides me to, and that's when I see it.

My God... It's beautiful.

The high ceiling above me is a breathtaking sight. For the first time, I realize why the lights in the lobby were off when we walked in. Any artificial light would dim this magnificent view.

We are looking up at the turret that I'd observed from outside, and I realize that what I'd thought were boarded up windows in the darkness are solid walls from inside. The polygonal ceiling of the turret is entirely made of glass. Through the glass roof, the night sky stretches endlessly, creating a canvas of twinkling lights. The moonlight filters through, casting a soft glow down the tower, illuminating murals painted on the walls.

It feels like I am lying on the floor of a meadow, looking up at the stars. It's otherworldly and mesmerizing, but calming and peaceful at the same time.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Lizzy asks from my side.

"Very," I manage, tears inexplicably welling in my eyes.

"Melissa loved stars," she whispers, and it's the first thing I've heard about my mysterious aunt from someone who actually knew her. "Late in the evening, when all the guests were in their rooms, she would turn off the lights in the lobby and lie here, looking at the stars, and sometimes I joined her."

My brows arch. "You were close to her?"

Lizzy hums. "I worked here when I was in high school, and even when I started college, she let me work a few shifts and earn a bit of money. Besides, I am studying

hotel management, so it helped with my experience and all. Before she passed, she asked me to come back and manage the inn until her heir arrived to take over. That was a little over a year ago. Her estate has kept this place running, but no one has shown up to claim it...until you."

I want to know more about this interesting girl and how the hotel has been running, but all that will have to wait, because I have one thing I need to know. The one question that's been eating at my insides since I learned the truth.

"Lizzy," I say, sitting up and turning to the girl. "Do you know what happened between my aunt and my mother?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure anyone knows. Melissa never talked about it, not with me anyway."

The disappointment is like a knife in my chest. I'd finally made it here, and I am still no closer to answers.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

James

After seventeen years in the military, my senses have sharpened to notice even the slightest sound, and I detect the movement of the person attempting to creep up behind me in the dark. Without looking back, I anticipate their presence until they've drawn near, then I turn around with my flashlight held like a weapon, prepared to crack open their skull but stop in time when I see who it is.

"What the hell, James!" my little cousin shrieks, glaring at the massive flashlight I always keep in my truck.

"You should know better than to creep up on a Marine. Our senses are always on guard!"

"Yeah, that was probably dumb of me." Lizzy stops beside me and leans back on my truck, and from the look she gives me, I can tell she has questions. "So..."

"Spit it out."

"This Abby girl, how long have you known her?"

"I just met her tonight."

"Wait, but you two showed up here holding hands. I saw it. Don't you even think of denying it!"

I smirk at the nosy girl. She's always been too curious for her own good. "I am not

denying anything,” I say, reaching into my truck to grab my duffel bag. I travel light, but there will be no more traveling now that I am back in Valor Springs. I wasn’t sure I was going to stay once I returned, but now I plan to be wherever Abby Miller is.

Lizzy falls in step with me as we walk toward the inn but grabs my arm before we make it to the entrance. “Does she know?” she asks, her eyes dropping to my knee. “About your injuries?”

“I’m fine, Elizabeth.”

“You were in the hospital for five months with tubes all over you. You have no idea how terrifying that was for the rest of us.” I don’t point out how much she’s exaggerating the extent of my wounds, because I see how much the memory hurts her. She is the closest thing to a sibling I have, and despite our age difference, we’ve always been close. “We were scared we would lose you, James. We’d finally gotten Jax home safely, then you were hurt. You should make the rounds so everyone can see that you are fine. Jax especially took it hard when we found it you were in the hospital.”

Jax is another cousin of ours, and he had also been a Marine. But unlike me, he’d never intended to make a career of it, choosing instead to return to Valor Springs at the end of his enlistment to work for his best friend’s family, something Jax’s father had also done.

“Tomorrow,” I promise her.

“And please tell Abby about your injuries. Don’t go playing tough guy and risk further damage. If you are going to be together, she deserves to know what happened.” I nod my head at her. One way or another, Abby is going to notice the scarring on my shoulder, chest, and knee and question it.

“Fine.” I roll my eyes at the girl. “Now, are you staying at the inn or going home?”

“I live in one of the rooms on the second floor,” she says as we walk back inside. “Only the rooms on the first floor are open for guests right now. Most of the staff left when Melissa died, but we still need someone on site at all times, so that’s been me while we’ve been waiting for the new owner.”

“Did my aunt live here?” Abby asks, joining us as we make our way toward the elevator.

“Oh, yes. She lived here her almost whole life.” We take the small elevator to the third floor, and Lizzy leads us down a short corridor, stopping at a door at the end of the hall before turning to Abby. “This was your aunt’s suite. This hotel was her entire life, and she spent most of her time here. Tomorrow, I’ll show you around the place and introduce you to everyone.”

“Thank you,” Abby says.

Lizzy opens the door for us to a large suite and doesn’t look surprised when I follow Abby in with my duffel bag. “I can tell you are tired, so I’ll wish you a good night. We don’t have enough staff to provide room service, but you can find the chef in the kitchen in the morning and ask him to fix you something. If you get hungry tonight, James knows where the kitchen is.” Turning to James, she adds, “If you go down now, you might be able to catch the chef before he leaves for the night.”

Abby nods, thanking my cousin once more. “Thank you so much, Elizabeth.”

“Please, just call me Lizzy,” she says with a smile, slapping the key in my hand before closing the door softly behind her and leaving me alone with my clearly exhausted girl.

Abby walks to the bed and falls back with a sigh, her eyes immediately going to the ceiling before she suddenly sits up, her eyes panicked. “The cat!”

“I checked on her when I went to get my bag; she’s still sleeping. I’ll go get her in a minute. I’m sure she’ll be excited to explore the inn,” I say with a laugh.

“Oh, thanks.” She sighs, falling back on the bed. “I never pictured Whiskers as much of an explorer. She rarely left the couch, but I guess you can’t compare an eight hundred square foot apartment to ten thousand square feet of room to explore.”

I drop my duffel bag and walk deeper into the room, extending my hand to the girl. “How about you grab a shower, and I’ll find something for us to eat from the kitchen and get Whiskers settled.”

“I’m not really hungry,” she says, but takes my hand anyway, letting me pull her to her feet.

“I don’t usually mention this in case it comes off like a brag, but I’ve been told I make the best instant noodles,” I tell her, and she smiles, which was the desired effect. “Back in the military, thousands of people would line up, offering to pay me to make them my world-famous noodles.”

“By that logic, then can I assume I am in the presence of a billionaire.”

“My skills have never been for sale, but I am willing to impress you with them,” I say, walking her to the ensuite. I stop by the door and bring her fingers to my lips. “You look tired. Take a shower and get some rest. I’ll be back with my world-famous instant noodles.”

She nods and walks into the ensuite. I leave her to freshen up and leave the room to find the kitchen. I need to get away from Abby before I am tempted to tear off her

clothes once more and kiss every inch of her body. My cock is hard—has been for hours—but I’ve been forced to push back my needs so I don’t hurt her.

I want her.

That has not changed one bit. In fact, I think I want her more now that I know what her lips taste like and how her pussy feels wrapped around my cock. I’ve felt those tits in my palms and tasted the velvet of her nipples on my tongue, and I want more...

Fuck, I want everything.

I find, Davis, the chef, in the kitchen, stripping off his apron, and I can tell he’s getting ready to leave. His face lights up when he sees me, though. “It’s great to see you, James. Thank you for your service,” he says with genuine happiness.

“Thank you,” I respond, reaching out to shake his hand. “It’s good to be home.”

“We all heard about what happened, and we are happy you made it home safe,” he says before quickly changing the subject. “What are you doing in here anyway? I was closing up, but if you need something...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell the man, who clearly seems to be in a hurry. “I know my way around a kitchen and can make something light for my...girlfriend and me,” I say before quickly adding, “That is, if you don’t mind me borrowing your kitchen for a few minutes. I will pay for everything I use.”

“No, please, I don’t mind. Be my guest.”

I nod at the man, and we exchange a few more words before he excuses himself, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I search the shelves for the instant noodles but immediately change my mind. I need more than just five minutes away from Abby to

shore up my control, so I decide I might as well make a stir fry. I gather the ingredients on the counter and get to work.

It takes me half an hour to finish making the meal. While the meat simmered, I ran outside and gathered a sleepy Whiskers and her supplies and got her settled in our suite. She seemed unimpressed and quickly curled up on the couch. Abby was still in the shower, so I was able to slip back down to the kitchen unnoticed.

I fill two bowls with rice and stir fry and clean up the kitchen before making my way back to our room. Abby is seated on the bed, blow-drying her hair when I walk in. Her eyes droop with sleep, but she perks up when she smells the food and moves to help me set up the table.

“Oh!” she gasps when I remove the lid from the tray. “This looks delicious, James.”

We settle down to eat, and I watch as the girl enjoys her food, humming and complimenting me with every bite. She offers to return the bowls to the kitchen, but I don’t trust her not to get lost in this massive place, so I offer to do it instead while she feeds Whiskers and finishes up getting ready for bed. I clean up the dishes and leave everything where it was before heading back to our suite.

Abby is fast asleep with Whiskers at her feet when I make it back to the room, and I can tell she tried to stay up waiting for me from the awkward angle she’s sleeping in. Her eyes stay shut as I adjust her to a more comfortable position before leaning in to kiss her temple.

My lips linger on her skin, and I close my eyes, inhaling the cheap hotel shampoo, but on her skin, the scent is addictive. I groan when my painfully stiff cock presses against my zipper, begging me to take this girl, to wake her with my kisses, get her all wet with arousal and ready for my cock before pounding into her tight heat. I want those thighs wrapped around my waist as I sink my manhood fast and hard into her.

Fuuuck!

I have never felt anything like this about another girl, and my desire for her is driving me to the brink of madness. I brush her hair back and watch that beautiful face, vowing once more to protect her with my life.

With a sigh, I tug the covers over her shoulders and walk to the ensuite to grab a shower. My thoughts are still on the girl in the bed when I step under the hot spray, pressing my forehead against the cool tile as I fist my hard cock, using the shampoo to slick my hand.

Mine!

“Fucking hell!” I choke out as I stroke my hardness with images of Abby dancing in my mind. My girl spread on the bed as I kiss every inch of her body. Those beautiful amber eyes locked on mine as I hammer my cock into her tight pussy, taking her in every corner of the hotel room. Those eyes growing teary when she takes my cock down her throat...

Need claws my chest, leaving me helpless. The girl sleeping in the next room is oblivious to the force of desire and all my dark fantasies. I bet the sweet girl has no idea of the lengths I would go to protect her.

To make sure she stays mine!

I slap my left hand on the glass door as I fuck my fist like an animal; my movements are fast and the noises leaving my throat are inhuman. I imagine her slippery sex around my cock, taking me deeper and clenching hard around my shaft. I can almost hear my name on her lips as I slam harder into her tight heat, breeding her...marking her...claiming her!

Abby Miller seems to have awoken something in me no one has before. A feeling so possessive and dominating, it's dark.

Mine!

It's her name on my lips when I explode, spraying my release across the tiles. My tense muscles ripple as I stroke myself through the blinding climax, my vision doubling from the intensity of it before I slump over with a heavy sigh. I close my eyes, my breaths coming out in short pants, and it takes a while before I calm down.

Abby is still fast asleep when I make it back to the room in nothing but my boxers, but I don't care to change into anything else.

The second I am on the bed, the girl pushes back against me, tucking her sweet ass against my growing erection, and I bite back a curse when she squirms in an attempt to find a comfortable position. I wrap my arms around her to stop her movements, and it takes all my strength not to loosen the belt of her robe and thrust my cock into her.

I sigh as I pull her tighter against me and smile when Whiskers gets up to curl into a ball against Abby's stomach. The chubby little demon clearly loves Abby more than she lets on.

Despite the coziness of sharing a bed with my beautiful girl and the soft sound of Whisker's purring, sleep doesn't come easy, and I can already tell that it's going to be a long night.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

Abby

I wake up to the press of lips against my skin and my body burning with heat.

A cry slips past my lips when my robe is parted and a wet mouth closes around my nipple with hot suction. I buck on the bed as pleasure floods my tummy, wet heat pooling in my core.

“James.” The name slips out of my mouth before I can even make sense of what is happening.

I whimper when his calloused fingertips trace my other nipple, pinching the bud between his fingers, groaning against my skin when they harden under his teasing. He releases the nipple from his mouth with an obscene pop before shifting his attention to the other.

“Oh, God,” I whimper, writhing on the bed as he traces his hand down my stomach to the spot between my thighs. I already know what he’s going to do, and yet nothing prepares me for the pleasure that shoots up my body when his thick digit delves between my wet folds and grazes my clit. I jolt hard against him, my back arching, but he uses his thigh to pin me down on the bed.

“I haven’t had a wink of sleep, convinced myself that I could wait...” he growls, and my eyes snap open. I meet his heated gaze and feel a shudder rock through me at the desire I read in them. “I need to taste you, gorgeous. Feel you cream under my tongue.” His hooded eyes carry a dangerous glint in them as he starts kissing a path down my stomach.

With whatever strength I can muster, I try to hold his gaze, but it becomes impossible with every press of his tongue against my skin. I should do more, but there is something about lying on the bed naked—vulnerable—with this bear of a man having his way with me and touching me in places no other man ever has that turns me on and makes me desperate with need.

My lips part with a whimper when he slides his middle finger into my sex. I'm still a little sore from yesterday, but even that doesn't seem to matter when his tongue strokes the center of my sex. My hands spread out, and I fist the bedsheets, screaming out when his mouth closes hotly around my sensitive bud even as he drives his thick digit into my sex.

Christ, I need to keep it down.

This is an inn with people in it, and I need to be quiet, but I can't grasp reality long enough to make a sensible choice. He doesn't allow me that chance with his hungry mouth and the finger stroking me fast.

James is like a man possessed with the way he licks at my sex, sucking at the sensitive bud and lapping at the wetness he is causing. I pull hard at the sheets, my back arched off the bed as I feel a storm build up in my core. It's strong, and I know I am hardly prepared for the wave of pleasure that is about to sweep through me.

"Oh, God! James!" I sob when he adds another finger inside my sex, thrusting fast even as he flicks his tongue over my aching bundles of nerves, breathing heavily as he brings me to the brink of my orgasm, the pressure growing so intense my legs begin to shake.

It is stronger than I was anticipating, and perhaps that was my first mistake, thinking that I can ever anticipate what this man is going to do to me.

My hips rise off the bed, and a scream tears from my throat as the world explodes, leaving me momentarily blind. Black spots shoot behind my eyelids as James brings me to climax. He hooks his finger in my sex and grazes a pressure point I had no idea existed, and that sends wet heat rushing out of me in a spurt, and I would be horrified if my entire body wasn't trembling. I attempt to lock my legs at the pressure, but he doesn't allow it, his tongue flexing on my sex until I am sobbing from the sensitivity.

When his hand finally leaves my sex, I fall back on the bed, but he's not done. He's suddenly on top of me, those dark eyes wild with desire. When he leans down to kiss me, I taste myself in his mouth.

His kiss is hungry in the way he takes me, brutal in the way his lips sweep over mine.

"Goddamnit, gorgeous. You taste better than I could have ever imagined. That was so fucking hot, the way you came all over my tongue," he rasps against my lips. "Can you do that on my cock too?"

"James!" I gasp at the hard press of his cock entering me. He is so big. Christ, I don't imagine this is the average size for men—James is too big to be considered average anything—and I wince slightly as his massive girth stretches me.

"Fuck, baby, you feel like you've never had a cock in you," he grinds out roughly, slamming the rest of his cock into my drenched sex. "So fucking tight!"

The pleasure that was waning comes back in a storm when he starts moving, sliding in and out of me in rough strokes, causing the bed to creak under us, but James doesn't seem to care. He looks too far gone for that as he pulls out and slams back inside of me.

I could grow addicted to this, I realize. Not just the act itself, but watching this man lose control. When we met yesterday, he was the epitome of strength and control, and

I never thought he would let go the way he does with me.

His forehead is streaked with sweat, and those beautiful blue eyes are dark with lust. His muscles are strung tight, and I can see the veins on his temples popping, and I question how many girls have seen him like this.

How many have had this man take them hard and raw?

No, he's mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck and force him down on me, my lips slamming on his possessively. Until yesterday, I hadn't ever kissed anyone, and the press of lips is awkward at first, but I don't care to think about that.

James is mine as much as I am his!

This small-town hero belongs to me and only me.

"Fuck, baby," he pants when our lips break apart for some much-needed air, his hips grinding against me slow, and his eyes lock on mine. The moment is so intimate, it has my heart clenching in my chest. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

Did I just say that I could grow addicted to this man? No, that doesn't cover it. The feeling this man arouses in me feels too deep for the word "addiction" to even cover it. People recover from addiction, but this feeling and its intensity threaten to be a permanent fixation—unhealthy and all-consuming.

All mine.

James is all mine!

His rough fingers press into my hips as he hammers his cock into me, and I rock forward to meet his thrusts, the intense feeling in my core returning with a vengeance. “Harder, please,” I beg, raking a hand up his chest and grazing his nipple with my fingertips. He hisses, so I do it again, dropping my eyes to his chest, and that’s when I notice them. “James!” I gasp at the small circular scars on his chest. There are two right above his pec and one above his left shoulder. My fingers are trembling when I bring them up to graze the spots. “James...”

“It’s okay,” he says, as if I am the one who needs comforting, and my eyes shoot to his in confusion. His expression looks pained, but I can tell it’s not pain from his healed gunshot wounds. “I’m okay, baby.”

He drops his forearm above my head and swallows my whimper with his kiss as he starts pumping into me, faster and harder, sliding his massive shaft in and out of me with hard strokes, and I forget everything, including my own name. Nothing in this moment matters but this man and the way he makes me feel.

“Close,” he rasps into the kiss, dropping a hand between us to strum my clit, and I jolt against him, sobbing as he brings me to yet another intense orgasm. I wrap my arms around him, needing to feel his breath against mine as I climax with a sob, my sex cinching hard around his cock, and it sends me right over the edge.

His muscles seize under my fingers a second before he explodes, snapping his hips hard and pumping his cock into my pulsing sex, filling me with his hot release. His muscles strain over me as he rocks forward, and I hug him harder, longing to feel every shuddering inch of his body pressed against mine.

His breathing is labored as the climax wanes, and James slumps against me, dropping his deliciously heavy body on top of mine. I stroke his massive back, brushing my mouth over his shoulder as my thoughts return to the scars on his body.

I want to ask him about them, but what if it brings up terrible memories? I don't want to hurt him with my questions, but I also can't stop thinking about it.

"You are doing that thing again," James whispers into my ear, his voice deep and heavy, sending goosebumps licking up my skin.

"What do you mean?" James lets out a sigh before pushing off me to roll on the bed, bringing me with him.

"I can tell when your mind is running wild with thoughts. If you have questions, I'll give you answers."

I bury my face in his chest, the side without the scars, before bringing my finger up to trace them. "Do they hurt?"

"They don't," he responds. "It's been months."

"What happened, can I ask?" I whisper tentatively.

"We were ambushed," he says with a bitter laugh, but there is nothing humorous in his tone. "We were deployed to support an allied unit overseas. We received the wrong intel and found ourselves in the middle of an ambush. We were pinned down until backup arrived. It was a long night, and there were casualties on both sides."

I've always thought that my life sucked because I lived in a room where I could hear the couple next door arguing, but I was able to sleep peacefully in that little apartment because someone like James was there to shield me and take the bullets for me.

I lean in and press my lips over the scars. "I'm sorry. I'm glad you are here."

James combs his fingers through my hair and grabs a fistful, tugging my head up

before his mouth sweeps over mine in a hungry kiss. “I would take a hundred bullets for you, gorgeous. Fire a hundred to protect you. You are mine.”

I stare dazedly at the man and question for the first time if my coming to Valor Springs had nothing to do with learning about my mother’s roots, but developing my own in this little town.

I never imagined that I would fall in love with anyone. That I would look at someone and see my entire future.

“Yours,” I whisper, brushing my lips once more over his to express with my body what I can’t quite say. The kiss shifts into something dirty and desperate, and soon, he is entering me once more. Our lovemaking this time is slow, filled with unspoken promises.

Vows that neither of us voice, but can read in each other’s eyes when they meet.

He wraps his arms around my body as I ride his shaft. There are promises written in those fiery eyes watching me with so much affection. Something I know is reflected in my own eyes.

When we come, we come together. Our arms locked in an embrace and hearts beating as one.

Whatever happens after this—whatever truths I learn—at least I have James.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

James

All hell breaks loose when we leave our suite.

It's already noon when we emerge, and the inn looks so much more welcoming in daylight. Abby says as much as we take the elevator down. She points out a few things that are outdated and that the place needs fresh paint, but I can tell she's surprised by how beautiful it looks during the day.

"I can't wait to check out the other floors and the rooms..." Her words trail off when we reach the lobby to find a large group of people gathered. It looks like my entire extended family has shown up at the inn with how many familiar faces are in the lobby. They haven't spotted us yet, with most of them standing around and chatting in small groups. Abby's brows furrow as she peers at the crowd. "Is there a celebrity checking in or something?" she whispers, sliding her hand around my arm when we step into the room.

I don't think these people are here to see a celebrity, but I don't have the time to tell her that before someone calls out my name and all heads turn in our direction. The room falls silent before it erupts with noise as everyone rushes forward at once.

This has Lizzy written all over it.

My little brat of a cousin just couldn't keep my arrival to herself. I had a plan—one that involved casually visiting everyone and checking in so my arrival wouldn't turn into a big ordeal.

“James!” calls a familiar voice again, and I look over to see my mother approaching. She slaps my shoulder before wrapping her arms around me in a hug. “I can’t believe you didn’t immediately come see me, you brat. I had to hear it from Lizzy.”

“I arrived pretty late; I was coming to see you this afternoon,” I tell her, pulling back from the embrace to meet her tearful eyes. Lately when I see her, they are always tearful, and I imagine it must have been difficult for her to see me hooked up to all those machines in the hospital, not sure whether I was going to make it or not. “I’m fine, Ma,” I assure her.

She smiles, wiping her eyes with a white handkerchief before turning her attention to the girl at my side, who looks like she wants to disappear into the ground. My mother’s expression widens with recognition, and suddenly Abby becomes her sole focus.

“My God, you look just like her,” my mother gasps, slapping her hand over her mouth as her eyes fill up once more. “You must be Hailey’s girl, aren’t you?”

The room falls quiet once more as everyone shifts their attention to Abby, who is staring at my mother in shock. “You knew my mother?”

Knew.

I see my mother’s expression crumble, and her tears finally fall before she wipes them away. “Sweet Jesus, I’m a mess. Yes, dear. I knew your mother, and you look so much like her. I’m so sorry to hear of her passing.” She smiles before turning to me and patting my shoulder. “It’s good to see you, son. We prepared a welcoming party to celebrate your return, and you are not getting out of it.”

Before I can put up a fight, I am surrounded by people wanting to inquire about my health and time in the military and thank me for my service. The celebration is moved

to the Shadow Lounge, which is typically an exclusive, members-only club for the elites of Valor Springs, but the owner, Vladmir Andreyev, is my cousin's boss and seems to have made an exception for me as a favor to Jax. Heck, he even provides free drinks for everyone in attendance.

It surreal and equally overwhelming. I notice Abby try to move away from my side and leave me in the spotlight, but I take her hand in mine and keep her close, making it obvious to everyone who she is to me.

In the past, during my visits to Valor Springs, I often had residents try to set me up with their daughters, sisters, or nieces, but I refuse to endure that this time.

I have found someone.

Abby Miller is the girl I want by my side for the rest of my life, and I make sure everyone sees it. Valor Springs is a small town, and the news will be all over it before the end of the day.

After I've greeted my family, more people file in as others leave, and my afternoon is occupied by conversations with people. Throughout, I don't let Abby out of my sight. She has questions. I sense it throughout the afternoon in the way she keeps looking over at my mom, but she stays quiet.

"Do you want to leave? I can sneak us out and back to our suite," I whisper into her ear, and she turns to me with a horrified look in her eyes.

"What? No!" she says, shaking her head rapidly. "Everyone will notice if you leave. We can't do that."

"Baby, you don't look like you are having a great time."

“I am,” she hurries to say. “Okay, I am not used to crowds, but I find it amazing how many people love you in this town. The girls haven’t stopped looking at you...or the way your T-shirt hugs your muscles.”

“Jealous?” I tease.

“Yes,” she confesses, turning those golden eyes to me. “I found you first. Well, you found me sitting on the side of the road in a panic, but...you’re mine now.”

My cock thickens at the possessiveness I hear in her voice, and I am ready to bend her over the nearest surface and rut her like a dog when someone interrupts us. The voice comes from behind us, and it’s like a bucket of cold water splashed over my fantasies.

“Is that how you met?” asks the brat that instigated this whole celebration. Lizzy is standing behind us with a wide grin on her face, and I look over my shoulder to glare at her.

“I will get you back for this, Elizabeth Davidson.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” she snarks before turning to Abby. “My aunt wants to talk to you.”

My brows draw in confusion. “What does my mother want to talk to her about?” I love my mom to death, but she better not be trying to scare Abby away. She is vulnerable right now, with her emotions in turmoil, and I don’t want anyone upsetting her, not even my mother.

Lizzy shrugs. “I don’t know, she asked me to get Abby.”

With a sigh, I climb to my feet, ignoring my cousin when she protests and argues that

my mother asked to see Abby alone. No, I am not letting her out of my sight. Left with little choice, Lizzy escorts us toward a table where my mother is seated with a group of other women. She excuses herself from them and walks over to meet us and doesn't even blink at the hand I have around Abby's waist.

"What is this about, Ma?"

"Let's find a quiet spot to talk," she says, and the three of us follow her as we look for some place private to sit, but with the way the place is crowded, we are left with little choice but to walk out to Lizzie's car. Lizzie climbs into the driver's seat, and my mom sits in the front passenger seat, leaving Abby and me to take the backseat.

"Is this about my mother?" Abby asks once we're all settled.

"Yes," my mother says, her voice taking on a sad tone. She's twisted around in her seat to face Abby. "I knew your mother when we were young. I was several years older than the twins, though."

Abby's eyes widen with shock. "T-they were twins? My mother had a twin!"

"Yes, and both were very mischievous. Your grandfather bought that inn when they were small, and the twins loved it. Every time anyone walked in, they would find the two running around, their strawberry blonde hair standing out above anything else."

"I didn't know." Abby's voice sounds heartbroken, but before I can reach out to comfort her, my mother beats me to it, taking Abby's hand with hers.

"Hailey and Melissa were very close. The only way you could tell them apart was the color of their eyes. Melissa had these beautiful, striking amber eyes, and Hailey's green eyes were gorgeous."

“But I—”

“Yes, you take after your aunt. I mean, Melissa and Hailey were twins, but in a funny twist of fate, you favor your aunt more.” She chuckles ruefully. “Hailey couldn’t escape her twin sister after all.”

Abby perks up at that. “What do you mean ‘escape.’ Why would she need to escape?”

For the first time, I notice an uncomfortable look settle over my mother’s expression. “This is not going to be easy to hear—”

“I want to know the truth,” Abby pleads. “It’s why I came to Valor Springs. Please .”

My mother studies Abby for a few long seconds before she nods. “It’s a cliché story. The twins loved the same things, so it came to no one’s surprise when they both fell for the same man. His name was John.”

“My father...” she whispers, and my mother nods firmly.

“He had business in town and stayed at the inn for a few days, and both girls took a liking to the man. They were obvious with their attraction for him, and he... Well, the kindest thing I can say is that he enjoyed the attention. He was a scoundrel. He ended up extending his stay to spend more time in Valor Springs.”

Although not part of the story, Lizzy and I are at the edge of our seats, waiting to know what happened next. I vaguely remember Abby’s aunt as the owner of the inn, and I know that she died from an aggressive form of cancer, but I had no idea about any of this.

“He took a liking to your mother first. He pursued Hailey, and the two dated secretly

for months before it was discovered that he'd also been seeing Melissa that whole time. He'd convinced both of them to keep the relationship a secret."

"That jerk!" Lizzy gasps, and I lightly tap the back of her head for her to stay quiet. She flashes me a glare but complies.

"When Melissa and Hailey discovered his deceit, they fought horribly. Rather than placing the responsibility where it belonged—on John—they blamed each other. It was a messy affair all around and it tore them apart. It got even worse when Melissa demanded that John choose between the two of them, and he picked her. Hailey was devastated."

The car falls silent. "What happened next?" Abby asks.

"Despite your grandfather's best efforts to reconcile the girls, they refused. Then Melissa announced that she was pregnant, and Hailey left town that same day. No one knew where the hell she went. She just got into her car and left town, and we never saw her after that."

"So I have a cousin? A-and what about my father?"

"A couple months into her pregnancy, Melissa discovered that John was an even worse cheat than we'd thought. She discovered that he was actually married and had a wife in another town. Melissa was so distraught when she found out that she miscarried her pregnancy. She was embarrassed that she'd fallen for his lies and devastated that she'd lost her baby. John was run out of town, and no one heard from him again. Not long after, your grandfather had a heart attack and passed away. No one knew how to get in touch with Hailey to tell her, and Melissa took over running the inn. She never married or had children. A couple years ago, your aunt was diagnosed with an advanced stage of ovarian cancer. She decided it was time to track down her twin and hired a private investigator. She wanted to make amends before

she died.”

There are tears in my girl’s eyes, and I want to comfort her, but I can tell she needs a minute to gather her thoughts. “Thank you for telling me.” She sniffs, reaching to open the car door but stops, turning back to my mother. “Did she find my mother before she died? Did she know about me?”

My mom shakes her head sadly. “No. The investigator tracked down John and learned that he’d died in a car accident a few years after leaving Valor Springs. He never had any other children. There were rumors that Hailey had left because she was pregnant, but the investigator wasn’t able to track down the two of you until after Melissa had already passed.”

Abby nods, but my mother tightens her hand on hers before she can leave. “I’m sorry about your mother, Abby. You deserved to know the truth about your past, but I hope you don’t hold it against her or your aunt. They were both betrayed by a man they loved. I can only imagine how painful it was for her to learn of Melissa’s pregnancy while keeping her own a secret.”

Abby nods but doesn’t say another word, pushing open the car door and slipping out, leaving the three of us in the car. I turn to go after her when my mother grabs my arm to stop me.

“Let her go.”

I blink at her in shock. “Surely you don’t expect me to leave her alone after all you just told her, do you?”

“She needs a moment to herself. Give her that at least.”

I shake my head, unwilling to let my hurting lover wander around with a bleeding

heart. So many people in her life have let her down, and I refuse to be a part of that list. I meant every word when I called Abby mine.

Mine to protect and to love...to treasure.

“I know what she needs,” I say. “Me. She needs me.”

My mother lets go of my arm, and I slip out of the car to go after my heart. Whatever it is Abby is feeling and dealing with, she doesn't have to do it alone.

Not as long as I live and breathe.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:26 am

Abby

I stumble out of the car, tears blinding my eyes as I try to make out the direction to the inn.

I need to get the hell of this town. I need...I need to leave. I can't be here. I'll go back to my little apartment with paper-thin walls and my shitty job at the grocery store with my creepy manager and deal with it. I'll sell the inn, or, hell, I'll let it rot. I don't care what happens to it.

A lump climbs up my throat, but I push it back down, refusing to crumble in front of so many people. Christ, there are so many people, and I can feel their eyes on me. Tracking me... Judging me...

The bastard child. The product of a love affair between a jerk who wanted to have it all and an impressionable young girl and lost everything as a result.

You deserved to know the truth about your past, but I hope you don't hold it against her or your aunt. They were both betrayed by a man they loved.

All these years I have wondered who my looks favored. I always looked at any amber-eyed men I saw, questioning if it was he who'd fathered me. No, I don't have any daddy issues and never planned to look for my father, but I always wondered...

Of all the reasons I imagined and scenarios I created in my mind, the truth hurts worse.

I was wrong in thinking that I was ready to know. So wrong!

Somehow, I make it back to the inn. I have no idea how that happened without my getting lost, but I find myself standing in front of the magnificent building that in the daylight is the complete opposite of the terrifying impression it left in the dark.

I gaze up at the towering structure with its charming presence. I imagine whoever first designed this place must have loved his job very much because the designs are intricate, with ornate trim work and balconies that carry an old-world charm. The windows are large and elegant, reflecting the sunlight, and the turret at the front stands like a sentinel over the property.

There are many things I didn't notice in the evening darkness. Like the lush greenery surrounding the foundation. The cupid statue near the entrance is what I confused for a ghost when we arrived last night, but in daylight, it's a beautiful piece.

The inside is so stunning too. In the daylight, the glass roof of the turret pours light into the spacious lobby, creating a sense of grandeur. My eyes shift to the plush furnishings and artwork on the walls, laughing without mirth at how beautiful and well-loved this place is.

It's funny, really. Anyone coming here would never know how much of a mess the owners are—were.

I look around, imagining two strawberry-haired girls running around this place and disturbing the guests. Their father—my grandfather—scolding them for being too rambunctious. A sharp pain spears through my chest at the image, something I will never get to experience.

Something furry rubs against my legs, and my teary eyes look down to find Whiskers twirling her fat body around me. I kneel to pet the cat, and to my surprise, she lets

me. “How did you get out of the suite, Whiskers?” I sniff as I pet her, but she only lets me do it for a few seconds before she trots off in the direction of the dining area, leaving me standing all alone in the lobby.

We need to leave, Whiskers and I.

Maybe when I am far away from Valor Springs, I will call James. He’ll understand. He was there when the messed-up history of my family was explained. I hope he doesn’t hold it against me.

Would he leave with me?

I shake my head as if to brush off the thought before rushing to the elevator and pressing hard on the button. Inside the lift, I push the button for the third floor, but before the door can close, a set of combat boots steps into my line of vision and stops the elevator door from closing.

My breath catches in my throat when I look up, my eyes locking with James’s. Christ, he’s so freaking perfect that the thought of leaving this man physically hurts me. I rub my hand over my aching chest and stare at him, those intense blue eyes stealing my breath away. Built like a freaking mountain, James stands over six-foot-five, but although this man has a hold on me, it’s not merely physical.

It's much deeper than that.

“James,” I whisper when I find my voice. “Y-you shouldn’t be here. The party—”

“isn’t important,” he says, stepping into the elevator, but I take a step back when he approaches me.

“From what I’ve heard today, the town has been waiting for you all week to show up

and celebrate your discharge,” I whisper. A part of me craves his embrace, but the dominant part of me wants him to go back to his party. It will hurt less to leave without him around.

“Abby—”

“You should go back,” I insist.

“So that you can leave Valor Springs?” he counters, and my eyes widen with shock.

“You think I don’t know that’s what you are planning to do?”

I look away. “You can’t stop me.”

James steps into my space, grabs my chin, and forces my gaze to his. “I am not trying to stop you, baby,” he says. “It’s not fair that you have to deal with the aftermath of what your family did, even those you’ve never met. I bet this place will always remind you of everything you never had. I just want you to know that whatever it is you decide to do, I will be by your side.”

I blink up at him. Surely, he’s not saying he would leave Valor Springs with me. For me . That would be crazy. “Your entire family is here.”

The elevator door opens, and I sneak out around him, hurrying to our room. I use the key to unlock the door, and I hear him step into the room behind me, but I don’t turn around to look, heading straight for the ensuite to grab my things.

James follows me and grabs my hand. “Abby, stop!” he growls, and I freeze, our gazes locked in the mirror as he steps up behind me but doesn’t immediately touch me. “Yes, my entire family is here, but you need me more.”

I shake my head, even if that is indeed the truth. I need this man like I’ve never

needed anyone in my life before. His presence grounds me. Those massive arms comfort me, and I can't imagine never again waking up to the press of his lips against my skin. I want to have beard burn on my chin and inner thighs from his kisses... I want to see those blue eyes first thing every morning.

Christ, I've only had it for one night, but I want that and more.

I want his body flush against mine, legs wrapped around his waist as he fills me with his cock, taking me hard and fast until his is the only name on my lips. Only him .

But taking this man away from Valor Springs would be robbing the town of its hero and a family of a son. One they've spent months worrying about. The thought of taking him away leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but can I really stay here?

James leans in and nuzzles the back of my neck. "Baby, you don't need to worry about anyone but yourself. If leaving is what you need to do, then I will go with you."

"I...I can't do that to you."

"You are not doing anything to me, Abby," he says, his voice deep and growly against my skin. He brushes his lips over my shoulder, causing a shudder to rock through me. "My family knows I will always be there for them. I don't need to be here physically for that to be true."

"Some could argue the same for me."

He lifts his head, and our eyes lock in the mirror once more. "Maybe it's me who needs you and not the other way around."

"James—"

“Do you think it’s easy for me to return to Valor Springs?” He drops the confident expression he carries to reveal something I never expected to read on his face. Uncertainty . “I joined the military at eighteen, and that has been my life for seventeen years. I never thought I would be discharged this early and always hoped to retire from the job at an old age. Coming back to Valor Springs leaves me...unmoored.”

His words take me aback, and I never quite considered that I might not be the only one struggling with change. “What are you worried about?”

“What I am going to do with my life, for one. I have led a very disciplined life in the military, and I question if that will change now that I am living as a normal civilian.” He wraps his hands around my waist and pulls me hard against him, letting me feel the hard press of his erection. “Well, at least that was my fear before I met you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You give me purpose, baby.” He slides his warm hand up my dress and massages my inner thighs but never quite reaches the place where I most crave his touch, sending a rush of heat to my sex. “The moment we met, it was one bleeding soul recognizing another, and without either of us noticing, we started to heal each other.”

I close my eyes, trying my best to fight my need for this man, but it’s a losing battle. “Y-you have family to help you.”

“And soon, you will too,” he promises, his fingers biting into my flesh. “When we marry and I give you my last name, I will become your family. You won’t ever have to think about any of the people who broke your heart. You will be a Davidson. My family will become yours.” Heat swells in my sex when he nips my ear lobe. This conversation shouldn’t be had in this way. Only this man can say words that would

have me bawling my eyes out while driving me crazy with his touch at the same time. “You are mine, and everything that belongs to me is yours, Abby.”

We should stop, take a seat, and have this conversation properly, but my heart yearns for this man. For both his touch and words. My heart is tuned in to everything he’s saying, soaking it up like a sponge, and committing it to memory, and my body is trembling under his hot touch.

I gasp when he slides his hands up and grabs the waistband of my panties, then yanks them down my thighs. I step out of them without a second thought, my sex already pulsing with need. With a deep growl, James sweeps everything off the counter to the floor before grabbing my right knee and propping it up on the bathroom counter, leaving me completely open and exposed.

There is little warning before he falls to his knees behind me, his hungry mouth closing around my sex. I cry out and drop my arms on the counter when he starts to lick me. This morning when we made love, I was sure I would be sore all day and wouldn’t want him anywhere near me, but the second he touches me...the thought of parting makes me sick to my stomach.

I love him, every perfect inch that is this man and the way he makes me feel.

“Oh, God!” I sob when he flicks his tongue over my clit, sucking and licking me like he can’t get enough. My muscles clench and release rapidly under his tongue as I feel myself edge close to a climax, but he doesn’t let me get there, pulling back when my legs start shaking from the building climax. “James!” I sob when he pulls back and gets to his feet.

“You see how impossible it would be to be away from each other, don’t you?” the cruel man says as he unzips his pants, his eyes full of mirth when they meet mine in the mirror. “I need you, gorgeous. If you leave Valor Springs, I will go with you.”

He spins me around to face him, grabbing my backside and lifting me to the counter. I wrap my legs around him, biting hard on my lip when I feel his hard cock prod my sex, inching into me. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, locking myself to him for a second before he slams forward.

I scream when he buries his manhood in me, impaling me with this thickness.

“I’ll stay,” I sob into his shoulder, clinging hard to the man I am starting to realize I cannot live without. “In Valor Springs, with you... I’ll stay!”

“Good!” he says hoarsely before he buries his face in my hair and starts pounding into me like a man possessed. He takes me hard and fast, his growls and my cries echoing through the room, but I don’t care to consider how far the noise travels.

I don’t care about anything but this moment and all the moments we are going to create together. “Mine” is on his lips as we fall apart, locked in an embrace, our bodies twined as one.

Deep down, I know that it will not be easy coming to terms with what I know now, but I realize I want to stay, not just for James, but to learn more about my family’s legacy and to continue with the inn that my mother and aunt both loved so much. In my soul, I know that it would make them both proud. And if I ever do feel the need to run, it will be into the arms of this man, who makes me feel whole.

I’ll be his purpose, and he will be mine .

Five Years Later

James

I wake up to someone pulling at my beard. Another set of small hands joins the first and tugs at my hair, and then my face is being pulled in all directions.

A groan slips out, and I open my eyes to find two sets of blue eyes staring down at me. “Daddy is awake. I told you not to pull his beard!” argues the twin yanking my hair.

“It wasn’t me. You’re the one who woke him!”

I blink sleepily at the twins, turning my head to see my wife still asleep, her beautiful face resting on the pillow next to mine. I am not surprised that she hasn’t been woken by the commotion caused by the twins who decided to let themselves into our bedroom.

It’s been a busy couple of months for us, but Abby especially as she’s been supervising the inn’s renovations. Every five years, we work on updating part of the Pearl, and between taking care of the twins and managing the inn, my lovely wife needs all the rest she can get. It was beautiful watching Abby go from not caring much about the inn to it becoming one of her babies.

“Daddy, are you going to work today?” asks the twin pulling at my beard, who is now seated on my chest like it’s her own personal throne.

“No, pumpkin,” I say sitting up, unwilling to call her by the wrong name. The two look so identical, it terrifies me sometimes, and I am too sleepy to tell them apart at the moment. My wife has always been able to tell them apart from just hearing them talk, and I’ve never quite understood how she does it.

“Yay! Does that mean you’ll hang out with us today?”

“Can you make us pancakes? I want blueberry pancakes!”

“I want chocolate chips.”

“I want mine with ice cream!”

I yawn, climbing out of bed as the twins continue to list all the things they want with their pancakes. “How about you two go on ahead and brush your teeth, put on socks, and I’ll wake Mommy so we can all have blueberry pancakes.”

“And ice cream?”

I nod. “And ice cream.”

The two shriek and run out of the room, slowing down when I call after them to stop running. I walk to the bathroom to brush my teeth, my mind on the girls whose giggles make it down the hall. I hear them playing with the cat, and I figure they’ve forgotten all about my instructions.

Despite not being able to sometimes tell the twins apart, they are my entire world. The day we found out that Abby and I were going to have twins was one of my best days of my life, right next to the day the two were born.

Everything seemed to fall in place the day I met Abby on that road. All my uncertainties died, and I found a new purpose in creating a life for us. Heck, I even

found a new passion when I started to help Abby make changes around the inn. I never thought my passion would be maintenance and renovation, but working with my wife to build the home of our dreams and keep alive a Valor Springs landmark has brought me a satisfaction I couldn't have imagined.

This feels like a dream.

Sometimes a part of me thinks that this is some twisted fantasy, that I am still lying in that dirty field with gunshot wounds in my chest, slowly fading into oblivion, but then my wife looks at me or our daughters giggle, and I realize that this is in fact, reality.

My reality.

A soft hand circles my back before climbing up my chest and brushing my nipples with her fingers. She adds another hand, tracing it lovingly over my scars, and my cock begins to take notice.

"Hmm, you feel so good," hums a sultry voice from behind me as those hands start tracing my firm stomach. My muscles clench when she palms my cock over my boxers, making it harden in seconds. "I heard someone promise us pancakes this morning."

"I thought you were asleep."

My wife chuckles, her voice heavy with sleep and so goddamned sexy. "It's impossible to sleep in a house of giggling toddlers," she says, reaching into my boxer and stroking my cock, making me groan when she takes me in her slender hand. "I wanted to sleep a bit more, but since you are making the sacrifice to fix us breakfast, I thought I should help wake you up."

"And how do you intend to do that?" I ask, turning around to face her, and my breath

is stolen at how gorgeous she is with her strawberry blonde hair a mess and those eyes heavy with sleep and lust, and she's all mine.

Christ, it's been five years since this gorgeous girl walked down the aisle to me with that beautiful smile on her face and eyes brimming with happy tears. Our family watched us vow to love each other forever, and it feels like it was just yesterday. My love for my wife hasn't faltered once through the years. In fact, it seems to have grown to an obsessive level.

I see only her.

I want—will only ever want—her.

“You want to know how I'll help wake you up?” she asks with a sly smile. “How about I show you instead.”

I watch with dazed eyes as the most perfect girl—my perfect wife—reaches back to lock the bathroom door, then drops down to her knees. Desire punches through me at the vision she creates. From her position, I can see the outline of her perky tits, nipples poking at the thin material of her top, and I notice the small red marks I left on her cleavage from our lovemaking last night.

With her eyes locked on mine, she tugs down my boxers, and my cock bobs out, the tip red and angry, leaking precum. I draw in a sharp breath when she leans down and kisses the head. “Hmm, I see you're up already,” she teases, watching me from under her lashes as she licks at the precum. Her eyes close with a moan when she tastes me on her tongue, and fuck, she's quite a sight.

A fucking tease, my wife!

“Fuck, baby, you are driving me insane with that sexy mouth!” I say hoarsely, combing my fingers through her hair and gripping a fistful to bring her mouth closer

to my throbbing shaft.

“You mean like this?” She makes another humming sound as she drags the flat of her tongue over my shaft, licking me like a popsicle, and I sway on my feet, my knees going weak. Only she can do this to me.

Only my wife can bring me to my knees. “You are killing me, gorgeous,” I growl.

Her eyes are full of mischief when she lifts them to mine. “I can do more.” I don’t get to process what she means before she swallows my cock, taking my entire length into her sexy mouth and down her throat, so fucking deep that my balls smack her chin.

Fuuuck!

A hoarse cry climbs up my throat and tears free as she holds me in place for a few seconds, letting me savor the soft texture of her mouth and the feeling of her throat pulsing around my length, before pulling away, gasping and coughing, but there is a smile on her face.

Two more seconds, and I would have come, flooding her mouth with my seed.

“Up!” I demand, grabbing her arm and dragging her to her feet, my balls mere seconds away from exploding. I bend her over the sink, and she giggles, arching her back teasingly at me. My cock is throbbing with need as I yank down her sleep shorts and slip a hand between her legs to find her folds wet and slippery with arousal. “You’re fucking dripping, baby. Did you like it, taking me down your throat? Did that turn you on?”

“Yes.” She whimpers when I slide my middle finger into her entrance, her tight sex clenching around my digit when I start thrusting it in and out of her. “Oh God, James. I need...”

“What do you need?” I rasp, fucking her hole with my finger until she’s bucking against me, her cries carrying, making me grateful for the solid wood of the bathroom door. “Tell me!”

“Your cock,” she sobs, her eyes turning glassy in the mirror, and I watch her, drinking in her expression as I pull my finger out of her tightness, replacing it with my cock. Her eyes roll back when I push my fat cock into her, fingers splaying on the counter as she braces for it. “Oh God... Oh!”

I slam forward, bringing my hand to her mouth and muting her scream. She bucks under me, her sex clenching around me as I begin pounding my shaft into her, riding her fast and rough. She is drenched, her sex taking me smoothly as she whines and moans behind my hand. “We don’t want you making too much noise now, do we? We’ll have to stop if the little ones hear us. You know that, right?”

She nods frantically, her eyes rolling back when I drop my hand from her mouth to wrap it around her throat. Her sex clenches around me, and she bites her lip to stop her cries, letting me know how much she likes my hand on her. “You’re mine, Abigail Davidson!”

“Yours!” she sobs.

“I’m going to flood this pussy with my come, fill you with my seed, and mark you, remind everyone that you belong to me.”

“Oh, God, yes... Want it!” she cries out, gripping hard on the edge of the counter as I work her pussy, and all I can think about is getting her pregnant again. The twins are now four, and they could use a sibling. It’s almost as if my wife can read my mind because her glassy eyes connect with mine in the mirror, and she says, “I stopped taking the pill.”

Fuck!

I spread her thighs wider, gripping hard on her hip as I rock my cock into her, every pound violent and feral, slapping a hand on her mouth to mute her pleased sobs. Our lovemaking is brutal, but we love every second of it, and when we climax, we come together. She jolts hard against me, her sex cinching tight around my cock, pulsing wildly and triggering my own orgasm. I bury my face in her neck as I feel my body give in to the weight of pleasure, muscles spasming rapidly as I bury my seed in her trembling sex.

“Fuck, baby!” I growl into her neck, driving my cock harder and faster into her until she’s milked me of every drop. I slump against her back as my muscles turn to mush, my breathing as heavy as hers. “Fuck, I love you, gorgeous,” I rasp, brushing her hair to the side and leaning down to kiss her shoulder.

“I love you,” she breathes, turning her head slightly to the side for a kiss. What is meant to be a simple brush of lips quickly shifts into a full-on mating dance as our tongues slowly slide together. I groan into her mouth, and she makes a low mewling sound at the back of her throat as we deepen the kiss. My sated cock gives a twitch, nearly ready to go another round, when a scream fills the air.

“Daaad!” comes another cry from one of the twins, followed by, “The cat stole my socks!”

“No! They were my socks!”

My wife laughs into the kiss, pulling back before breaking into a full-on belly laugh as we hear the twins argue in very high-pitched tones about whose socks the cat just stole.

“We should probably go check out what’s happening,” she says, turning around and wrapping her arms around my shoulders before pecking my lips. “I love you, James Davidson. I will forever be thankful to the town for putting up that billboard, and to you for stopping.”

“I love you.”

She smiles, pecking my mouth once more before pulling away from the embrace to straighten her clothes. “How about you grab a shower, and I’ll play judge and jury between the kids and Whiskers. Something tells me Whiskers is guilty.”

I laugh, forever amused by the unspoken feud between my wife and her cat. “I trust you’ll make an unbiased judgment.”

“I’ll try.” She winks. “Get ready and find us in the kitchen; I’ll make you some coffee to fuel you before you make us those pancakes you promised the kids.”

“Sounds great.”

In fact, it sounds perfect. I could spend five more years, a decade, a hundred years, waking up to such mornings. A perfect morning with a perfect family.

And it’s all mine.

~The End