

VALENTINES & HOLIDATES

My Rebel

H  **LIDATE**



RILEY ASH

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Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Last Chapter Press LLC

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MY REBEL HOLIDATE INFO

She's been warned about guys like him. He wasn't planning on staying until the law caught up with him. Can he show her that he's not that bad and maybe she's not the good girl she claims to be?

Kenzie

Life in Storm Canyon is often too predictable, until I meet a stranger when I'm making a delivery to the jail.

He's the bad boy my mom warned me about.

When he interrupts the blind date my mom set me up on, I'm struggling to be the good girl I've always been.

Dean's smart mouth, tight jeans, and crooked grin have turned my life upside down.

Can I tame the stallion or will I get bucked off?

Dean

I'm running from the what I've done in the past, trying not to fall back into old habits, until I meet Kenzie.

She's like a drug to me and I'm looking for my next hit at every turn.

Her sweetness and light keep drawing me in.

Kenzie is all that I'm not- good, kind, and innocent.

When my past catches up with me, can I be the man the sweetest woman I've ever met needs?

The romance and twinkle of Valentine's Day leads twelve passionate women to take a chance on a man who will make their Valentine wish come true. These blind date holidays are filled with roses and chocolates and are as unique as the valentines hidden in their mailbox. You won't want to miss out on these heartwarming, instalove stories, perfect for celebrating all the feels this Valentine's Day.

Go on a date with your next book boyfriend!

No cheating. No cliffhangers. Always a happily ever after.

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KENZIE

“Two specials today, meatloaf and chicken fried steak,” I say with a robotic tone and a wide yawn.

Mr. Martino’s head tips. “Today’s Wednesday, Kenzie.”

I look across the room at the bank calendar with the big black numbers. “Well, look at that. It is Wednesday.”

I’m losing days of the week, great.

But when every day is just like the last one, it’s bound to happen.

And that means it’s only two days to Valentine’s Day. The day for lovers. That’s just another dream.

“So today is fried chicken and roast beef specials like every week?” the octogenarian says with a lopsided grin and a smartass tone.

Nothing ever changes.

I sigh. “Exactly. I’ll give you a minute to think.” I walk away.

I know what he’s going to get. He gets the same dish every Wednesday. Roast beef special with double corn, no mashed potatoes.

Who doesn’t like mashed potatoes and gravy? That’s practically un-American, right?

I put the order in. If he doesn’t want it, someone will or maybe I’ll actually get to eat a lunch for once.

Ha. That’ll never happen.

I don’t know why I even say the specials. Ninety-nine percent of the people in this room have been here every Wednesday for the last hundred and twenty Wednesdays that I’ve worked here. Used to work at the Briggs’s hardware store, but Jameson Briggs, the elder of the Briggs clan who own everything in this dozing-off town, thought it wasn’t right for a girl to work in what he saw as a “man’s job.”

I roll my eyes at the memory.

But being a waitress is perfectly fine, apparently.

Essie Travers slips through the door, followed by Thad Underwood twenty seconds later. She sits at the counter and he takes a seat four seats away. He swivels on the circular, red leather topped stool as if he’s taking in the room, but in reality, he’s taking in Essie. They’ve played this little flirting game for the last year. It’s cute and it’s clear they like each other, but thus far only a few pleasantries and nothing more. I hope they actually talk to each other one of these days, but I know better. Hoping doesn’t get me or them anywhere. And taking a leap to doing something different is hard to do. There’s a fear that’s been drilled into me from childhood.

The bell rings in the window from the kitchen. “Sheriff’s order up!”

And then there’s that.

I deliver Sheriff Colt Briggs’s lunch to the sheriff’s office-slash-jail-slash drunk tank on the weekdays at noon sharp. It’s

my *Groundhog Day*.

I grab Mr. Martino's meal off the ledge and walk it to him first. I have five minutes before I need to leave to get the meal to Colt on time. I could walk there in my sleep.

"Here's your order." I place it in front of Mr. Martino and he chuckles.

"I don't even remember ordering, but it's exactly what I wanted. Thanks, sweetcheeks."

Yes, I know. And don't call me sweetcheeks!

"You're welcome. Enjoy," I say with a smile that feels plastered on my face.

My boss, Caitlin, points to the bag. "You want me to..." Her eyes catch on something behind me and I hear the five-inch heels announcing a presence that's not what I need right now.

It's fifty-degrees out and most people are still bundled to the hilt, but she wouldn't dare cover up her latest pedicure from the big city of Denver.

I spin. "Hello, Mom."

She kisses each of my cheeks like someone from the highest echelons of European royalty when we're barely meeting the middle-class qualifications of this tiny town of Storm Canyon.

Before she backs away, she growls in my ear, "Straighten your back. You're slouching."

She steps away with a smile that doesn't betray how disappointed she is in me for reasons that I'll never be able to change. "I just wanted to stop by and remind you that tonight is that date with... oh, what's his name?"

You know his name, you set up the blind date and demanded I attend.

Caitlin rounds the counter. "Sorry, Ms. Miller, but I need Kenzie to deliver this to Sheriff Briggs. As you can see, we're slammed right now."

Mom leans toward me. “Colt Briggs, now he’s a fine man that any woman would be lucky to have.”

Gross.

Don’t get me wrong, all of the Briggs brothers are uber attractive –like GQ models in the Rocky Mountains– but he’s... old. Or at least too old for my twenty years, and they treat me like I’m their little sister.

Even though some people might believe otherwise here, I don’t have daddy issues and don’t need a man to be “my daddy.” The biological one left when I was a baby never to return. And the other kind sounds exhausting. I don’t want to be at the beck and call of any man and I definitely don’t need to be treated like a princess.

But this blind date my mother set me up on with her garden club friend’s son sounds about as fun as a colonoscopy. But telling my mother my opinion will go in one cubic zirconia-studded ear and out the other.

“Yes, I remember, Mother.”

“Wear that pink dress I got you for Christmas and those silver heels. Oh, maybe he’ll take you dancing tonight.”

“I don’t dance,” I mumble.

“You’ll dance for the right man,” she says with a tight mouth and then realizes that Caitlin’s staring at her. The thin lines around her mouth betray her age, but when she smiles it pulls them flat and her bleached teeth take ten years off her age.

“I gotta get going.” I grab the bag from Caitlin’s hand and almost drop it to the floor, definitely heavier than normal. I look at the clock. One minute late. Crap.

“Don’t forget tonight... seven sharp,” Mom calls out as I head toward the door.

I don’t look back. I’ve learned to only look forward in my life.

Even if there’s nothing there to look forward to.

DEAN

This isn't my first time behind bars. Lockup isn't new, even if I pride myself on not getting caught... that often. But this is my first time in a cell where the bars look like something out of *The Andy Griffith Show* with a lock so pickable it'd be like slipping candy from this sheriff's pocket.

Which I did.

I pop the peppermint into my mouth.

I'm not one to tempt fate though. Like their archaic sheriff's office, their systems seem behind the times too— I'm pretty sure there's a warrant out there somewhere with my name on it and it doesn't look like this small town has any clue about it. I only saw Storm Canyon at night before the cuffs were slapped on me, but I know a shithole when I see one.

I can practically smell it. *Is that cattle?*

I need to get out of Storm Canyon. I need out of Colorado all together. I left Denver in a hurry, grabbing the first bus I could under a false name and I.D. When that ticket ran out, I resorted to old habits. Jacking *old* cars is supposed to be easy game, their systems are easily wired in contrast to newer cars modded now with computers and anti-theft shit.

Funny thing 'bout old cars in the country, usually means old men with shotguns. Old man held me at gunpoint until the Sheriff Briggs came along, all while I tried to schmooze my way out of it.

They were mistaken. *Why would I want a beat-up, old truck that didn't even have a working radio?*

But no one was buying my bullshit. Like how the sheriff is ignoring me now. Maybe that's how old, small-town justice works— they bore you to death.

I'm halfway between sleeping and baiting the first badge I see when the front door open.

Everything changes.

The air pressure from the doors shifts the atmosphere. The bars groan from the chill. There's the smell of hot food making my mouth water, while the very air I just sucked in is escaping me quicker than I can retain the oxygen, making me dizzy.

Or maybe it's the fact I just laid eyes on the prettiest thing on two legs that I've ever seen.

After stripping off a thick coat, an apron cinches her waist and jeans and a t-shirt cling to her like Michelangelo sculpted them from marble for her body alone. Strawberry blonde hair mussy from work but also curled back from her sweet face has my dick jumping to attention.

And what a sweet face it is. High cheekbones and full lips, but dramatic dark brows draw me into her eyes. They're like finding the ocean in the middle of the mountains— seafoam green flecked with gold.

Any ideas of sleep are gone. I abandon my cot and lean casually on the bars, watching the wholesome beauty set a bulking brown bag on the sheriff's desk. My lips purse,

watching her laugh at something the sheriff says, her arm resting on his.

Too close, baby.

The sheriff stands. “I was just going to text you to see where you were.”

Is that why she’s here? Bringing her main squeeze some lunch?

Sheriff Briggs tucks his black cowboy hat on his head, giving it a seating wiggle. “Do me a favor, hand the food out to them? I’ve got—”

“Whatever you need, Sheriff Briggs.” She rolls her eyes when she turns and he can’t see it.

Please let it be a familial affection between them.

Fueling my hope, he ruffles her hair as he walks by, and she does a quick jab to his arm and it isn’t gentle.

“That’s a felony offense, missy.” He rubs his shoulder.

“Arrest me and you’re never getting a lunch special hand-delivered again.”

Fuck, she’s feisty. Suddenly, Storm Canyon is a little less shitty.

I scramble for a mirror as she rifles through the brown bag. Using water from the sink I hastily sweep my hair back, cringing at how in need of a shower I am. Still, the growth of stubble on my chin is doing me favors and as I grin at my reflection, I’m pleased enough.

I resume my position at the bars, casually leaning and waiting for her more than the food.

The girl sets down a meal in the cell beside mine. It’s occupant snores away, sleeping off the bender he was caught attempting the night before. She greets him by name even with him asleep, and that either means he’s a repeat offender or everyone in this town knows one another.

That’s something I’m not looking for.

“And for you nothing but our finest chili.” She sets down a Styrofoam cup, accompanied with a thick slice of bread and plastic spoon.

I crouch down to catch her eye, grinning. “I ordered the vegetarian dish, Miss.”

Her eyebrows rise and she is motionless, caught up in my gaze as much as I am in hers. They’re even prettier up close, her white shirt making the light hues of mint green pop even brighter.

How the hell does an off-the-grid mountain town like this have this siren?

“This is Storm Canyon, if you need a vegetarian meal then you’ll starve to death,” she quips, blinking out of her daze. “We’re in beef country. Hence... the chili. And you’ll live.”

I grip the bars, leaning in as close as I can without pressing my face into the cell barrier. “Too late, I think I’m having a medical situation coming on.”

She stills.

I continue, “I’ll be dying of a broken heart... if you don’t go out with me, cookie.”

Her laugh nearly puts me on my ass. Her eyes roam my seven by ten-foot prison and her lips tilt into a smile.

“You seem a bit preoccupied right now.” She straightens up and I leap to my feet in response. “Besides, I’ve... I’ve already got a hot,” she swallows uncomfortably for some reason, “date tonight.”

She’s kidding herself if she thinks I believe a word of that.

Hot date? In this town? Not happening.

Plus, she practically choked on the sentence as she spoke, doubt flickering in those tempestuous eyes.

“I’ll be seeing you,” I promise her as she turns away from me.

I’m getting out of this cell one way or another...

Charges be damned.

KENZIE

I've listened to this guy drone on for, I check my phone, thirty-two... thirty-three... minutes about his collection of bear teeth. Apparently, it's hard to find one in the wild that isn't on the bear. He's very proud of his accomplishments at finding sixteen incisors, molars, and canines since he was four years old. And I estimate that was four decades ago. And I now know more about bear teeth than I ever wanted to.

Larry Gouch is his name, and I really don't want my name to be Kenzie Diane Gouch. Plus, he's twenty years older than me.

He could be my...

Don't think it.

My mother's really never talked about my father so I really don't know much about him past a name. The only thing I know is he left an indelible mark on Barb Miller. One that has shaped who I am and given me a healthy —or unhealthy

according to some people— fear of men and their ulterior motives.

The thought brings the guy from the jail back into my head. He's been taking up space there for a while today. He was interesting.

Possibly dangerous.

And definitely off limits.

His smoothed back hair, his leaning casually and holding onto the bars, just to flex his toned arms, and that crooked smile all screamed player to the nth degree to me.

But still, there was something about him...

Larry holds out his phone. "And this one... it's an incisor from a mature *black* bear. These puppies are highly rare. I estimate that it'll fetch two hundred thousand at an auction. Maybe a million."

Pretty sure that Larry's good at overestimating things. Like how much I'm enjoying this conversation, the trajectory of this relationship, and the size or value of personal property and desire of others wanting said property.

I yawn and check my phone again.

Only thirty-four minutes? How is that possible?

If Mom was here, which she tried her hardest to be, she'd be oohing and aahing about every single tooth like they were diamonds. But that's exhausting. The only way I could stop her from coming and making Larry my third stepdad was to agree to not ditch the Gouch and sit here through a three-course meal at the Whole Hog Restaurant at the end of Main Street. The meal was fine, dessert is always a highlight, and Larry's already put his bank card on the bill, insisting that he's a gentleman and he has to pay. I'm not arguing.

But there's no burning fire here. There's not even a tiny spark. Heck, I don't see a match... literally.

He stands, "Gotta hit the head. You know, take a pi—"

"Yes, I know, Larry." *Nice.*

“When I get back out, we’ll talk about what we want to do next. Maybe you could come see my collection,” his thick fingers trail under my chin, “up close.”

Oh... my... God.

I pull a tight smile but say nothing. And this would be my life for the next twenty years. I grab my coat, but before I can slide out of the booth, someone slides in on the other side.

“Hey, cherry,” the guy from the jail says and those two words are dripping in all kinds of implications, an invitation and a warning.

Maybe he can smell a virgin?

“What are you doing? I’m on a date,” I hiss at him, pulling my jacket to my chest as his gaze roams indiscriminately. This damn pink dress hides nothing. I lean forward. “Did you break out of jail?!”

He nods his chin toward the bathroom. “What is with this guy? Teeth? He really thinks that’s romantic? This isn’t a date, it’s torture.” He grabs a leftover fry off my plate and pops it into his mouth. His dark red lips molding together into a smirk.

He’s not totally wrong about the quality of the date, but I feel a little violated.

“Have you been listening in on our conversation?”

“Do you ask only questions?”

“No, but he’s coming back—”

“That’s why we need to get out of here right now. You already were thinking about it. You grabbed your coat.” He stands and holds out his hand. “Come with me and I’ll show you what a real date is.”

I swallow. My heart is clipping along in my chest, something between excitement and fear.

The bathroom door creaks open in the back hallway.

I slide out and in seconds his hand is covering mine and we’re out the door. I catch Sheriff Briggs out of the corner of

my eye but I keep moving even after he calls out my name.

The guy opens the door to his car, and I don't hesitate to jump in. Maybe it's being bored to death by a two hours-plus of animal bone talk or maybe it's that I've had enough of reciting today's special and not realizing the day it actually is, but this moment is more exciting than ninety-nine percent of my life to this point. It shouldn't be that way.

Expectations from my mother, the community, and probably myself have kept me from doing anything as daring as this. I need to live. My soul is dying in this small town. I deserve excitement and passion and I'm thinking this guy knows what those two words really mean.

"So, where to, cupcake?" Every time he calls me a piece of food, I feel like I'm being told I'm edible and things tingle where they've never tingled before.

"I thought you had a plan?"

"There you are with the questions again. My plan was to get you out of that restaurant and away from Mr. Comb-over."

"His name is—"

"I don't care." He leans closer, his hand on the back of the seat of the older sedan. "I only want to know your name."

I stop breathing and stare into his eyes. Brown irises so deep that I'm sure they're an abyss and I'll never climb back out once I fall into them.

"Kenzie," I breathe out.

"And I'm Dean."

I see the door to the restaurant open and Larry slides out shoving his arms through his jacket. I duck down in the seat.

"Drive, Dean. Just drive."

He starts the car and in seconds, we're peeling out.

"Head north," I tell him, remembering the place that everyone would go to in high school. At least the ones who had someone to go there with.

The overlook... lovers' point... whatever you want to call it, I never went there, but there were a lot of things I never did before Dean.

And I'm not looking back.

DEAN

The car isn't mine, but I'm smart enough not to jack another vehicle in Storm Canyon. Borrowing is something I can do. Turns out the old man I tried and spectacularly failed to siphon from had a whole collection of old beaters just needing a little TLC.

As I put us in park, we overlook all the dim lights of Storm Canyon. I'm a miracle worker on this old and rusted Buick Sedan to make it up the hill —mountain— that's this overlook. There's a car with no lights on a good distance away but otherwise, we're two unbothered lovebirds.

Lovebirds? I doubt Kenzie would agree to that term.

The stall of the engine and my rev of the engine to bring it back to life must have brought her to her senses because she's as jittery and unsure as she was in the booth. I'll have to put her mind at ease and it will likely start with her questions getting some answers.

“Alright, Kenzie.” I liked calling her by little foodie terms of endearment, but I love calling her by her name even more. Something sweet and salacious about it and her.

“Alright, Dean,” she chirps back, hand on the door’s handle.

She’s ready to jump off this cliff at the first sign of danger from me.

“Ask your questions, shortcake.” I turn in my seat to face her, letting the car sit idle to keep the heat on.

Kenzie shifts in her seat, all we need is a table between us and it’s a skit of her earlier date, seats are just as about as old as the booth I slipped her from.

“Why were you in jail? How did you get out of jail? How did you know where I was going to be on my date?” She cuts right to the point. My little firecracker doesn’t wait around.

“Inquisitive poptart, aren’t you?” I let my words distract her as I wiggle my way across the seat till our knees are nearly touching. “I needed a car, tried to jack a truck, got caught. Not my proudest moment,” —for failing what should’ve been a simple job for me— “But, with a smile like this, they couldn’t keep me locked up.”

“Bullshit,” she calls out, rolling her eyes.

Sighing, I amend, “I offered to fix the truck in turn for dropped charges. Got it singing—”

“And this car?” Her eyebrow lifts as she begins to suspect she’s in hot wheels.

“A lender. Old man let me borrow it if I could get it running.”

“Which old man?” I expect she knows everyone in town.

I smirk and say, “He went by LeRoy, didn’t get a last name. And as for your date, Sheriff told me the Whole Hog is a good place in town for steak and fries and I had my suspicions your date might try to win you over with a side of beef. But you seem like a milkshake, gal, something sweet and creamy.”

I lick my lips, eyeing her up and down. I've never seen heaven captured in a body like this. She was breathtaking in an apron. In a sweet little dress with a sweater, she is the moon and sun keeping this world worth living for.

"Now my turn," I pressed. "Tell me about yourself."

She huffed, her cheeks turning pink. "That's not a question."

"What's your favorite flower? When's your birthday? Do you like sunrises or sunsets?" Her cheeks become more flushed the more I speak. "Does your daddy carry a 12 gauge I should be worried about?"

Kenzie is quiet, chewing on her bottom lip and searching the floor of the passenger side for her answers but all she'll find is decades of dust I didn't have time to Shop-Vac out.

"I like bluebells," her voice is sheepishly soft. "There's a field on the other side of town near where I live that blooms with them in the spring. I'm a summer child, born on the Fourth of July—"

"World knew it needed to celebrate you every year with fireworks."

A small smile takes over her full pink lips. "I like sunrises. It's quiet. Something about mornings that make me hope for a new and different day. A sunset always seems like a goodbye... I hate goodbyes."

I wait but she doesn't answer my final question, quiet and picking at the button on her sweater. The question doesn't bear repeating and I'm not that stupid to pry. There's daddy issues but I'm thinking they're not of the normal kind.

"I'd very much like to kiss you, Kenzie." My wry grin is met with wide green eyes, but it's me who's pleasantly surprised.

"Then why aren't you kissing me?" Her question is accusatory and needy.

I'm already so close. Leaning towards her, my hand cups the back of her head and tendrils of silky strawberry blonde

hair slip through my fingers. My lips capture hers in a slow claim, each of us exploring one another's lips and breath and tongue.

A groan rumbles in my chest as I'm climbing on the seat and over her. Kenzie mews the sweetest sound as I lay her back on the seat. She clings to my jacket, then my shirt, pushing it up till her adventurous fingers find my toned abdomen. My knee wedges between her thighs, spreading them. She's so goddamn warm there.

This time, I don't give warning. I'm invigorated. I'm ravenous. Our kiss breaks and she pants, breasts swelling with each inhale against the sweetheart neckline of her dress. My mouth travels to her ear and down her throat to dip my tongue between her cleavage. She inhales sharply, moaning as I playfully pinch the peak of her nipple through her dress.

"Sweeter than anything," I praise, cock aching against the coarse nature of my jeans.

"Where you going?" she asks.

My hands stroke her calves, leading themselves up to her thighs, pushing her skirt up. "So many questions."

My warm breath caresses her legs as I slink down the seat to taste what could only be sweeter than her mouth. Her ankles come to rest on my back as my fingers slide past white cotton panties, her core slick and creamy for me.

"Don't be quiet," I tell her, my only warning to what's to come.

"Wha— Oh!" I hear her head crack on the door behind her as she moans.

My tongue slides across her clit while I hold her underwear to the side. Her legs twitch around me as I press the flat of my tongue and wiggle. My other hand clutches around her thigh, squeezing and massaging the sensitive inner side.

Kenzie moans and struggles with her desire. "I've—" She's trying to find her words in between heavy breaths and whimpers. "It's so—" She squeals as I slide a single finger

inside her as I suckle on the sensitive bundle of nerves at the apex of her pussy.

“Delicious,” I finish for her, before sucking harder and pumping my finger. “Give me everything.”

“Da... Da... Dean!” She screams, reaching down and balling my hair in her fists. Her juices flood my mouth and I’m suddenly the one with milkshakes on my mind. If they served a Kenzie flavor at a malt shop, I’d be the diner’s number one customer. Hell, I’d find a way to buy out the company.

“Dean,” she repeats, sighing as she comes down from the high of her orgasm.

I lazily lap at her juices and then her thighs. My body is ready for the main course.

“Dean?” She repeats more sternly. “Dean!”

The last one in a panic. I pop my head out from between her thighs and blink.

“It’s after ten,” she says as her phone lights up. “I need to get home. Shitshitshit.”

I recoil. “You have a curfew?”

She scowls at me, wriggling out from under me to correct herself.

I smirk, licking my lips. “Alright, let’s get you back before you turn into a pumpkin.”

Call me a Peter-Peter-Pumpkin-Eater any day.

KENZIE

I look back as I open the front door to the small house Mom and I live in and Dean gives me a two finger country wave and wink as he leans against the side of the car that’s seen better days decades ago.

Tonight started out rough but ended up not too shabby. I shiver remembering everything that happened. The man is a god with his tongue. Might not ever need his other parts.

Well, maybe...

I open the front door and am smacked in the face by “Kenzie Diane! What the hell were you thinking?!”

I cringe and quickly shut the door behind me, hoping that Dean misses most of my mother’s rant. I knew there would be hell to pay, but she always charges me a high interest rate on my behavior.

“Mom, calm down, please.” I drop my jacket on the tattered lounge chair closest. “Larry Gouch is twenty years older than me. He collects teeth!”

“And Larry has a King in Africa on the line to buy that bear teeth collection! He’s been working him over by email for weeks and that King is offering millions of dollars for just one of those teeth. Larry’s a businessman and he’ll be a millionaire soon. Any woman would be lucky to have him!”

“Then you have him!” I try not to raise my voice, but seriously?! An African king? That’s *How to Lose Your Money Scams 101!*

The people in this town can be so... small town.

“But then you had to run out on him with that... that... criminal.” She paces the floor. Ever since she gave up cigarettes, she chews on celery when she has the urge to chain-smoke. She bites down hard on a stick and tears it with her incisors, which makes me think of Larry and his dental hobby. “That boy is no good. No good, Kenzie.”

“How would you know?”

“Sheriff Colt called me and told me everything. He was worried about you and so was I.” She chews faster and takes another bite.

The law enforcement grapevine. It’s where all the salacious news starts.

And I’m tired of it.

Mom’s heels click on the linoleum from the dining room into the living room. It’s only seven steps in this small house, but it’s a roof over our heads and we’ve been without one of

those once or twice in life, so I try to remember to always be grateful.

She holds my face, making sure I'm looking at her. "Kenzie, baby, I just don't want what happened to me to happen to you."

"And what exactly is that?" I cross my arms and shrug my shoulders when she drops her hands, closes her eyes, and purses her lips. "I'm waiting."

It's at times like these that I can see her age. She's only seventeen years older than me, but at thirty-seven she looks well into her forties, maybe pushing fifty.

This life hasn't been easy on Barbra Jo Miller, and I should be less hard on her.

She huffs. "My parents warned me about your father. They told me not to go out with him, that he would take what he wanted and leave me in the dust. And you know what? They were right." The words come out fast but not furious.

There's a sadness I've never experienced from her. She's usually trying to be an optimistic mom. If we don't have butter, but we have heavy cream, we shake a baby food jar of that until it's creamy butter. She makes life fun. But this isn't fun.

She continues, "I told him I was pregnant and he swore up and down he'd stand by me... and for you. But after you were born, one night, he just disappeared." She cups my face. "Baby, I promise, I wouldn't change a thing," she tickles up my back so I react, "except that you keep slouching."

She wraps her arms around me from behind and puts her chin on my shoulder. "You are a blessing. But please, please don't go down the same dirt road that I did. It's a dead end, Kenzie."

I remember the dirt circling behind the car as we made our way to the overlook and my stomach drops.

Mom steps around me and puts back on her smile, but I see it differently now. It's a mask. A mask of pain. "That boy is

undependable. I guarantee it. Here today and gone tomorrow leaving only dust and a broken heart in his wake.”

I kiss her cheek and back away. “I hear you, Mom. I’ll be okay. Promise.”

But hearing and listening are two vastly different things.

KENZIE

The next morning things are sunny and bright in Storm Canyon. At least that's the theory I'm going with. I thought about what Mom said and maybe she's right. Maybe I'm playing with fire and getting burned, like she did, sounded and looked painful.

So I take myself out for a walk and end up at the Saturday Farmers' Market. It's the mountains, but if we don't get out in the cold, we'll never get out. It's mostly meats, handmade goods, and some hydroponic vegetables. Not fancy, but the aisles are still bustling with town and mountain people hoping to find something to make their day a little special. There's always someone I don't recognize, and it kind of surprises me. After working at the café for four years, first as a plate washer and moving up to wait staff after just a few months, I usually see at least everyone in the community once a year, but there are plenty of people here who look new.

Or maybe the world just looks different today.

My brain keeps revisiting last night. And how much heat Dean and I produced. I'm afraid that if he'd asked to go all the way, I would have. I'm sure it's the fact that he's only a visitor here, or maybe it's because I'm just tired of the hum-ho my existence has been. Sheltered and protected by my mother. Not taking any chances.

I stop at one of my favorite stands. Harper Rose lifts her massive, brimmed straw hat and her red ringlets lilt on the breeze like little fireworks shooting from her head. The sun makes it feel warmer today, even if it's barely forty in the sun, and probably thirty-five degrees out of it.

"Kenzie! How are you?" Harper says, reorganizing some of her handmade soaps, hands covered by fingerless gloves that I'm sure her sister, Dakota, knitted.

"I'm doing good."

"I bet you are," she mumbles with a smirk.

I still and tip my head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that the grapevine has reached the Rose farm and the news is that you were seen at the overlook and the windows of that car were steamed up." Harper leans toward me. "Don't get me wrong. Dakota says that this guy is quite the treat for tired mountain eyes. And, I mean, Larry Gouch? What was your mother thinking?"

This is the most that Harper has said to me since high school two years ago. She ran in the crowd of Briggs' and Lowes' — the rich kids. I ran with the Gradys and Winchesters— the poor to middle class kids. Even back then, our conversations were forced by group projects and clubs we both participated in. I think maybe she never got over the fact that I was selected for the lead role in *Mama Mia!* instead of her. My musical prowess had the crowd on their feet... all thirty of them.

"Are these candles new?" I ask, moving the conversation to something that feels safer.

"They are. We're branching out. All of the decorative, dried flowers on the top come from our garden."

“They’re nice.”

“Well thank you.” She clears her throat. “So... are you going to see him again?”

I pick up a candle and smell, rose and lemon. “Who?”

“The guy...” she lowers her voice, “The *criminal*.”

I roll my eyes. “Charges were dropped, Harper.”

“He has a rap sheet. I heard it’s not short.”

“Who are you? Veronica Mars, amateur sleuth?”

She laughs. “I wish. No, Dakota saw Sheriff Briggs at the convenience store this morning getting some coffee and he made it clear how dangerous this guy is.” She smirks and pulls her mustard yellow, corduroy jacket a little closer to her as a burst of wind comes down the gorge. “But if you ask me, danger can be kinda fun.”

I bite my lip remembering tearing out of the Whole Hog parking lot last night, racing away, and how my heart pounded with a quicker beat. The rush almost addictive.

Her mouth drops open dramatically and she sucks in a breath. “I think you’re blushing. So something did happen with Mr. Danger.”

“Don’t call him that. His name is Dean.”

“Close enough.” She starts to walk away but turns back. “I’m just saying that we both know how dull this town really is. Might be fun to let your hair down for once.”

And since Dean’s not staying around, it’s not like it’ll mean anything to him.

Might be good to get my V-card punched and sow my oats with a man who looks like he could really plant and tend a good garden.

I put the candle back and walk away.

“Have fun, Kenzie!” Harper calls out.

I walk faster, taking a left at the diner, and walking another two blocks to the Storm Canyon Motel. The only motel in

town.

And there's the dilapidated car, rust and all. It's like this town— from the past. And I want a different future. I want excitement. I want more.

And it's now...or never?

6

DEAN

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I didn't have a drop of liquor last night, but I swear I was drunk on Kenzie. I might be hungover from her taste and whoever is knocking is seriously interrupting my sweet dreams. I was just about to taste Kenzie all over again.

I walk to the door, starting to talk to the person on the other side as I open it, "What the fu- Sheriff?" I clear my throat, straightening up. "To what do I owe the pleasure? Miss me? Jail not the same without me?" I post up in the doorway, all smiles.

Sheriff Briggs stands with his hands on his hips, black cowboy hat tipped forward to cast, what should be, an intimidating shadow over his face. But this isn't my first time with the law and it's going to take more than a mountain Sheriff to shake me in my boots... or rather in my briefs.

“Couldn’t answer the door with your pants on?” Sheriff asks, waiting to be invited in. I don’t grant him access, treating him like a vampire. Once you let them in, they never leave.

“And deny you the view? Never, Briggs. Now unless that old bag reported his car missing, I have some dreams to get back to—” I begin to close the door but his hand slams into it, challenging me.

He pushes but doesn’t force his way in, just enough strength to match mine to keep the door at a standstill.

“I saw you and Kenzie Miller run out of Whole Hog last night. What are you doing sniffing around her?”

Oh boy, would he be pissed if he knew I did far more than sniff Kenzie. I had her on her back crying out in pleasure and showing her there’s a whole world outside of Storm Canyon and I can be the one to give it to her.

I smirk. “Just making myself at home. I hear mountain folk rival the south for hospitality,” I jest.

“I know your type. You run through and cause a whole mess of trouble, and then you’re gone, leaving us to clean up after you. She’s a good kid. Don’t go fucking around and breaking her heart.”

She’s not a kid and the fact that the community still sees her as one probably pisses her off. Does me.

But I’m going to stay silent for now.

He pushes off from the door, straightens up and looms over me, his cowboy boots give him a few inches of purchase. “We take care of our own kind out here and I won’t have you disturbing our town.”

I outright laugh. “Please, don’t give me that man-with-a-heart-of-gold bullshit. Only thing you give two shits about with Kenzie is making sure you have someone to bring you lunch every day.” I’m getting riled up, something I rarely do over women. “I can see how nice a life you live, Sheriff, in your big mansion, while your “folk,” I do quotes around the word, “like Kenzie make do in trailers, dilapidated houses, and probably some sleeping in their cars. You don’t know me

beyond a rap sheet... but I will tell you this. I could give Kenzie the life she deserves more than this place can.”

Sheriff Briggs’ dark gaze softens and I’m a little taken aback by the move. He eyes me up and down and retreats a few steps from my door.

“I said my peace,” is all he offers me before getting back into his patrol vehicle.

I stay in the doorway, watching the sheriff make his exit from the parking lot. My blood is pumping, a simple conversation like that should never get me this riled up.

Is it Kenzie? She tasted sweeter than a malt shop’s prize milkshake but there was something more...

The dreamy look of wanting more in her eyes, and the way her smile lit up when she leapt at opportunity.

Fuck me, I’m in seriously deep sh—

My phone goes off on my bedside and interrupts my thoughts. And it concerns me. The phone’s a fresh burner. *Who the hell could be calling me?*

Answering the phone, I don’t say anything right away, my already boosted heart rate picking up pace.

“Dean, don’t just breathe into the phone like a creeper.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, recognizing the gruff, two pack-a-day smoker voice of Morris anywhere.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” I relax and slump onto the bed, staring up at the mysteriously stained ceiling. It made sense for Morris to have my number, I bought the burner phone off of him after all.

“I tried you yesterday but you didn’t pick up.”

“I was busy...” A smile easily slips over my face as I think of strawberry blonde hair and soft, bubblegum pink lips.

“Get un-busy. Tig wants you in on the next job.”

My smile disappears as quickly as it came. I cut Morris off as he starts in on the details. “No. I’m out, Morris. I made that

pretty clear leaving town and literally disappearing,” I growl.

He’s quiet and I can hear him exhale from a puff of his cigarette. “You know that’s now how it works, Dean. Tig has to let you go, and if he hasn’t, then you’re not out.” The plastic of my phone creaks as my grip tightens on it. “You do this job and I bet Tig would consider it,” Morris adds.

“I gotta go.”

“Be seeing you,” Morris chirps as I hang up.

I slip on my jeans quickly, tossing my denim jacket on for good measure. It’s sunny out but this mountain air chills me. Grabbing my keys, I make my way out of my hotel room and run smack dab into sunshine itself.

“Kenzie!” I exclaim, grabbing her to keep her from toppling over. My arms instinctively wrap around her, pulling her in close. She smells of morning coffee and fresh strawberries.

“Dean,” she gasps, as if caught as off guard as I am. “I... I was just coming...” A blush creeps onto her round bubble cheeks.

“What are you doing around here?” I ask, a twinge of jealousy coating my words. Is she visiting someone?

“I came to see you,” she says more firmly, gaining resolve in her admission.

My heart skips a beat and my face breaks into a grin. “Lucky guy.”

I lean down and kiss her lightly, a gentle reminder of last night. It’s even better in the daylight. She’s all in, deepening the kiss and gripping the lapels to my jacket.

“I have to head out,” I tell her, brushing her hair behind her ear.

There’s no hesitation. “Take me with you, Dean.”

“I’m not going to the store, buttercup. I’m headed into the city.”

“I said what I said,” Kenzie tugs on my jacket and I chuckle. I don’t have time to argue, maybe I can show her just how much more she deserves than little ol’ Storm Canyon.

“Fine. Get in.” I hold open the passenger side door for her and once she’s in, we’re off.

There aren’t many turns from the hotel to the edge of town.

Maybe it’s Brigg’s high and mighty speech or maybe I’m ready to make those changes that will truly get me out of my past, but I feel the need to lay it all out there to this woman. She needs to know enough to know me.

“Kenzie, whatever people have said about me to you, most if it is —*was*— probably true. I left a lot of the bad behind me before coming here. But old habits die hard, and I’m glad I hadn’t broken all the rules yet or I wouldn’t have met you.” Being vulnerable is a bitch. I grip the steering wheel with my eyes locked dead ahead. If I look at that heart-shaped face, I’m done.

I clear my throat and breathe in deep. “I’m a changing man, and with good reason now...”

Kenzie is quiet as I slow down, stopping short of the sign just outside of town. A picturesque painted mural sign of mountains with the bold phrase “Storm Canyon will miss you.” The founder’s established line has been graffitied with the name Briggs crossed out and Winchester crookedly imposed in dripping red spray paint.

I want to give her a chance to back out... or jump out.

“Why are you stopping?” Kenzie asks, leaning back comfortably in her seat. I glance over at her, too hopeful for what this could mean for us. “Not going to get to the city sitting here, will we? I know this car can move.” Her sassy smile beams through my concerns.

“Well, shit, cupcake, if you wanted me to go fast, you just had to ask.”

I step on the gas, tires peeling. This old hunk of junk still has some get up and go. She hollers with me as we take off,

leaving Storm Canyon behind in a kick of dust and burnt rubber.

One more and I'm out, Tig, I've got a future now.

KENZIE

The sun is just falling over the mountains creating a painting of brilliant colors when Dean comes out of the motel office waving something in his hand and a big smile on his face. We stopped off for a swim in a hot springs between Storm Canyon and Denver, and then we grabbed burgers and fries at a roadside dive and ate them in the car. It was casual and no pressure.

He grabs my hand and leads me to a door and using something that looks like a credit card lets us in, but once we're in the room, he's like a caged animal.

He grabs the curtains and closes them, even though they were only open a sliver, and then five minutes later, he goes back and makes sure they're still closed. And then to the room door to make sure it's locked. And then back to the window. He completes a round about every ten minutes, looking at his phone occasionally and texting with someone.

“You don’t think I know that,” he mumbles to himself after looking at his phone again.

“Dean?” I’m on the giant bed, sitting crossed legged. I didn’t even know they made beds this big. “Everything okay?”

He looks back. “I’ve got a meeting in the morning.”

“Okay. I’ll come with—”

“No, I... I need you to stay here. I got us a late check out at two in the afternoon, and that should be enough time for me to do what I need to and... you can take a bubble bath and chill out.” He runs his hand through the long hairs that are normally curved up and over, but right now are almost a mohawk.

It’s been forever since I had a bubble bath and that does sound inviting. But then I realize what he said.

“Should be enough time to do what?”

He comes to the side of the bed and cups my chin. “You don’t need to worry about the what, just the why, honey. And the why is you. I’m doing this so I can be with you, Kenzie.”

My stomach rides a nasty roller coaster. Not the kind that makes you scream with a thrill, but the kind that you wish you never stepped on that almost breaks your will.

Danger. Danger.

There’s a little siren going off in my head, but my heart is trying to run up there and knock that alarm out of service.

“Okay,” I say, smiling softly. “I’m here for you.”

“There’s so much I want us to do together. We... I mean I... I just need a clean slate.”

As much as I’m on edge, Dean’s practically vibrating.

“Why don’t you lay down and I’ll give you a back rub?” I tug on his t-shirt hem, running my fingers across his tense abs.

He raises an eyebrow. “Back rub, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m good at them,” I say with false bravado.

He chuckles. “One thing you’re not good at is... lying.”

“Well, I’ve never had the opportunity to be good at lots of things, Dean. But I’ve never wanted to touch a man like I do you. That’s the truth.”

He stills. “Are you telling me something, sugar bean?”

My heart slams against my ribs. “I’m a virgin, Dean, and I... I want you to be my first.”

His chest rises and falls quickly. “Well, fuck me.”

“I think that’s what I’m suggesting.”

He throws his head back laughing and my chest warms, the beating now steady and sure.

He grabs my hand and pulls me to stand. “Let’s dance first.” He puts on a slow, sultry song, one I’ve never heard before, but it’s doing something to me.

My mother was right, when it’s the right man, I will dance. He won’t judge me.

I slip my hands around his neck, cupping the back of his head, and his hands go to my hips, the pads caressing my skin. My shirt is tied at my waist, exposing skin. Even though I’m a curvier girl, I allow small glimpses of my stomach. I’m not ashamed of my body. It’s who I am. His fingertips burn hot and dig into my body with a possessiveness I’m just starting to understand.

Pulling me close, his arms wrap my body, molding us into one movement. “You smell like strawberries, shortcake.”

My body bounces against his with a silent chuckle. I lean back and run my finger over the stubble on his chin. “I guess this is a little late, but do you have a girlfriend?”

He slows the sway. “Actually, I do.”

My heart stops. “Oh. Fuck! Then we shouldn’t do this.”

“Why not? It’s what I want to do with...” he leans down to my ear and whispers, “my girlfriend.”

I grunt, pushing on his chest and trying to get out of his hold. “Then maybe you should go see her!”

He shakes his head. “Kenzie, it’s you. You are my girlfriend. At least, if you want to be. There’s no one else. No one.”

I stop. “Oh... why didn’t you just say that?!”

Dean cups my face. “You’re adorable. You know that?”

“And you’re...” I contemplate what I want to say. I breathe out the word that hits me hard, “Mine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve lived more in the last twenty-four hours than I have the last twenty years.”

“Then let’s keep living.”

His fingers untie my shirt and he shoves it down my arms. My tank top does nothing to hide my body’s reaction to him. His hands slide up my sides to just cup the outside as his thumbs thrum over my peaked nipples, sending lightning bolts between my legs.

There are moments in time when a person wonders the right road, but no matter the mud, the snow, the rain, the potholes, I want to be on the ride with him. It’s something so deep inside of me that I wonder if we are made of the same universe matter. He *is* the match to my fire, and the heart to my soul.

I lift his t-shirt over his chest and my hands explore every bump and mogul of man as he removes it. He’s not beefy. He’s toned. His stomach is flat with taut abs and I trace a route through all of them.

He backs me to the bed as I continue my journey up to his chest. A sprinkle of brown hair between his pecs curls into tight ringlets.

“You’re so hard,” I say and clamp my eyes closed hearing what I actually said.

Dean lifts my chin. “Open your eyes.” He’s smiling when I do. “Kenz, hey, you know what? I am hard everywhere... for *you*. I want you to stop worrying about what you say and I

want to see that strong woman that made me hard enough to drive nails when I was behind bars. She's the real you, right?"

He's right. My mother has raised me to be self-sufficient, to know who I am, and to not back down from a challenge.

He's not a challenge. He's the one.

I turn us around and work his belt buckle. My lips press a road down the middle of his abs and when I push his jeans and boxers to the ground, I'm face to face with something more impressive than I could ever have imagined.

Thick. Veiny. Purple mushroom head.

"Wow."

He grabs my hand and wraps it around, showing me his desired touch. "Rock it with a tight fist."

"I can't get my hand around it."

"Then concentrate on the head. That's where it's most sensitive and..." He moans when I jack the skin near his head, just brushing over the head as my hand moves. "Fuck, like that, yes."

I love making him feel and react. His cock swells in my hand and he grunts, his hips pulling the hardness from my grasp.

"Now you." He lifts my tank top. His hands round to my back and he frees my breasts. "Damn, you're perfect."

"No, no one is."

He stills. "You're right, but you're fucking close, Kenz."

Warm hands cradle my breasts and I work my jeans down my legs. I'm starting to pulse in my core and my thighs start to tighten uncomfortably. I'm going to go off like a firecracker at this rate.

Lips caress my nipple and my knees buckle.

"To the bed, baby." He pulls back the covers. "We're going to go slow and you have the say, always."

I scoot back on the bed, my bare body in full view. “I want you. My body is vibrating for you, Dean. It almost feels like I’m going to explode into a million pieces.”

“That is the idea.” He stares at me.

“What?”

“Touch yourself, Kenz. Show me how you pleasure yourself, so I know what you like.”

I swallow down fears. Spreading my dewy lips, I grab some of my juices and bring two fingers to my clit, pressing down and rotating over the hard nub. My breath starts to quicken and I squirm in the bed as my body tingles from the inside out.

“God, that’s beautiful.” He licks his lips. “I need to taste you. Just keep going.”

He lays between my spread thighs and his tongue dips deep inside me.

“Oh, fuck...” I grunt as my stomach tightens. I press harder and rotate faster, faster, faster. His tongue flicks at my fingers.

“Let me, baby.”

I let go and grip the headboard to have leverage to grind against his face. The way he goes at me is like he’s feasting.

His lips suck on my hard pearl and waves rush over me. Every peak recedes and then the next peak is taller before I fall down again.

“Oh, God, Dean!” His name rings from my lips.

He’s tender and soft, bringing me down slowly. He leans over the edge of the bed and pulls a condom from his jeans. Rising to his knees, he sheaths with an urgency that starts me reheating.

“You ready?” he asks, waiting.

I nod. “Just promise me one thing.”

“I can’t promise it won’t hurt, baby.”

“Not that. Promise me you won’t leave me.”

His head tips and he lowers until chest presses to mine and he seats his hips between my thighs. “A man left you?”

“My father left Mom and me.”

“I’m not him, baby.”

“I know, but my mother thinks you are and I’m asking you this. I need this, Dean.”

His forehead presses to mine. “You have me. I won’t leave you, sweetheart.”

His hardness presses against my thigh almost making me lose my train of thought.

“You could’ve left me behind today, but you wanted me to be with you. And that’s what I want... to be with you, Dean.”

His hand reaches between us and I gasp when the large head of his cock seats inside my body.

“Slowly...” He presses up, planking to look down on me while his hips rock forward.

I shiver as his hardness separates the untouched parts of me and makes me feel more than I ever have before.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasp.

“You okay?”

“Amazing.”

His lips spread into a big smile. He kisses my nose, and then his lips claim mine, hard. Dean’s hips start to move and I grab onto his shoulders, wrapping my legs around his tight ass.

I give into the moment. It’s not painful, it’s beautiful. It’s pressure, but in the best ways, and my core pulses around him as he thrusts faster and faster.

“So fucking tight. Baby, are you...” he grunts, “Close?”

I reach between us and rub my clit like before.

He moans. “That’s it. I wanna feel you explode on my cock.”

I rub harder and the magic starts. It's just a tingle, but soon, it's fireworks that I can't control. I buck against him, my back arching high and my screams echoing the room.

“Shit, fuck...” Dean drives deeper and the waves continue. “Oh, that's beautiful.” He plants deep and his body rocks with his own release. Grunts of pleasure fill the air and I pull him close.

He breaths out, “Beautiful, my love.”

His love.

8

DEAN

Morning comes and I see heaven on earth. Rolling over, there's an angel that the devil in me relished in last night. But it was more than just ravaging of her body, it was of her soul too. My soul and hers bound together, and I never want it torn apart.

Similarly, I never want out of this bed but to have a future with my cherub, I have to do this. I just don't know what this new gig is and that concerns me. But do I have a choice?

Sliding out from under the sheets, I'm careful not to wake Kenzie. I dress quietly and scribble a note for when she wakes, leave a small bundle of cash with it. I grimace at the way it looks, like I'm paying her for our love making. I add a P.S. for good measure.

KENZ,

Stay put, there's a diner across the street if you're hungry. I've got some business to take care of and then we're out of

here. If I'm not back by night, take the money and get back home. I'll find you.

I love you.

-Dean

P.S. the money isn't what it looks like ;-)

BEFORE I CAN GO, I LEAN DOWN, BRUSHING A LOCK OF HAIR from her sweet face. I might wake her but it's worth the risk. I brush my lips to her forehead, closing my eyes.

God, I know I haven't always been good, but hear me out... Let me keep this angel.

I lock the motel door behind me, keys jingling in my hands. I'll be a joke in this old car, but maybe it'll give them more reason to let me go. As I grab the door handle the hair on the back of my neck stands up. My body goes tense and I look around wildly.

"That's weird," I mutter. It feels as if someone's watching me.

A quick scan shows no cops in the area and I settle down. I'm not doing anything illegal, so why am I so jumpy? To shake my nerves, I peel out of the parking lot, giving the old beater a run for its money. The sooner this is all over, the better.

I stop for a coffee, hoping the jolt of caffeine will help me get through this morning. Every part of me wants to go back and crawl into bed with Kenzie and blow this whole charade off. Tig doesn't own me, even if he thinks he does.

But in ten minutes, I'm parked and the old chop shop is just like I left it yesterday. Some things don't change. I barely tasted the outside world and they're reeling me back in.

With a paper cup of ninety-nine cent coffee in hand, I enter back into the world I thought I put behind me. They're all there too, waiting for me. It's eerie, like they knew I was coming.

That prickle I felt before comes back like a Mack truck, my instincts firing on all cylinders. They knew I was in town. I

hope it's because I'm predictable. But if they knew I was here... *Do they know Kenzie is here too?*

"Prodigal son returns!" hollars out to me from the rafters above.

"Oh, looks like Mr. Too-Good-For-Shoes," another taunt comes from beneath a car, as a grease monkey slides out from under it.

"It's 'goody-two-shoes', Mike," I correct him, rolling my eyes.

I have a persona amongst these people. I'm not myself. I'm a hardened shell of steel. No one gets under my hood.

No one but Kenz.

"Quiet down!" A shout comes from the back stairwell. Tig. Domineering both in stature and in nature. He owns the whole operation. It's his shop, but it's my life. I don't owe him anymore.

I know I keep saying the phrase over and over. I guess I just need to make him understand it.

"My man," he greets me warmly, wrapping his arm around my shoulders, shaking me. "It's good to have you back."

"I'm not back," I grit out. "I left. We talked about this."

"You went on vacation," Tig counters. "And—"

"No, I left for good. We talked about this." Well, I talked and then walked away. It was entirely possible he ignored me and didn't absorb a word of what I said.

Tig shakes his head, not yet releasing me. "You're out when I say you're out, kiddo."

It's as if I'm back on the school yard with a chorus of "ooohs" for being in trouble with teacher. But here I'm in trouble with the bully.

"Besides, this job is too good to pass up." He lowers his voice at my ear, and I can feel the smile even though I can't see it as he adds, "And I'm going to sweeten the pot for you, kid."

He snaps his fingers and the back doors to the shop burst open. Tig loves his dramatics. I'm about to break free from his hold when I spot two men flanking a young woman, barefeet shuffling, her hands tied with rope in front of her and a blindfold around her eyes and duct tape over her mouth.

Kenzie. Oh fuck, it's my girl.

"Who's that?" I choke out, keeping the mask on.

They can't know I've got a heart. They need to think I'm just like Tig mentored me to be. And I keep my voice low. Hopeful she can't hear me, can't figure out I put her in this danger.

"Don't be coy, lover boy," Tig laughs, he signals again and they take her blindfold off.

Kenzie, baby, I'm so sorry for who you're about to meet.

The worst side of me.

KENZIE

“You think he’s gonna go for it?” one man asks, but the question isn’t for me.

“If he knows what’s good for him. Tig don’t mess around. Bitch, keep moving.” He pulls on my arm, they’re tied in front of me and my head covered with a dirty cloth bag. I don’t recognize any of the voices.

I went out to get ice at the ice machine down the walkway outside and when I stepped out of the small room, the ice bucket went flying and my hands were twisted behind my back.

I tried to scream, but they gagged me. Then they blindfolded me. And then I freaked out. I fell to the floor and kicked one in the groin, at least it felt soft and yet meaty, and he did a really squeaky sound and grunted and I headbutted the other one. He finally got a grip on my arm and pulled me to

stand, before whispering in my ear that I was lucky that the order was to bring me in alive.

And as soon as one said, “Damn, Dean got himself a fighter,” I decided to stop fighting.

He’ll save me.

After what seemed like a long ride in the back of a pickup truck, my bare feet pad on cold cement and the acrid scents of gasoline and oil saturate the air.

A man chuckles evilly and then says, “And I’m going to sweeten the pot for you, kid.”

My head jerks forward when the bag is pulled off my head. I blink for a few seconds and my eyes immediately land on the man who has my heart. I try to shake free of the guy who smells like cigarettes and whiskey, but his fingers dig into my upper arm.

Dean’s gaze connects to mine, but lightning fast, it’s gone. And in its wake, the vision leaves me chilled to my bones. It’s a look I’ve never seen from him. My heart clicks faster in my chest.

Dean? It’s me...

“Have you ever known me to give three shits about anyone?” Dean asks, spitting to the ground after making the declaration. The chill in my feet flashfires through my body. Every moment is crusted in a frost that he’s emanating.

But like always, I thaw from a man abandoning me and an irritation builds inside of me. My nostrils flare and my hands fist in the rope.

“How could you—” I start to say, but a greasy hand covers my mouth and I’m pulled backward into an office that is from the 70s, with green pleather chairs, a metal desk that has what looks like a splatter of blood across the top, and an ancient computer.

What’s going on here?

I turn to look back, but all I see is the belly button of a rotund man.

“I told you she was going to be a handful,” he says, shoving the chair I’m in to a corner, but from my vantage point I can see the security cameras on the computer.

“Let’s go see what Tig’s gonna do to him.” The tobacco coated one nods his head toward the door for the portly man to follow. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Tig’s got a bit of an... anger issue.”

The two of them crack up and my heart pounds quick in my chest.

When the door closes, I can hear that there’s a speaker on the desk broadcasting what’s happening in the garage bay. I stand and reach for the speaker, turning it up enough so I can hear, but not enough for it to be heard outside of the room. I sit back down and watch the computer screen. I try to use my mouth to untie the rope, but one of them apparently tied up Houdini and I don’t know what the magic is.

Dean runs a hand through his hair and my fingertips tingle remembering how soft that hair is. Silky. He paces and I remember the same move from last night. The tension and unease soak into me. He keeps looking to this room, but there’s a jacked truck in the way of him seeing me, plus the windows haven’t been cleaned since the place was built, so it’s just a haze of shapes outside.

“This is it, Tig. I mean it. I do this last job and that’s it.”

The man he’s facing rubs his chin. “We’ll see.”

Dean moves quickly into the man’s face and the man’s security detail moves in and it takes two of them to hold Dean out of striking distance.

“No, it’s not we’ll see. It’s I’m done.” I swear I see spit fly from his mouth as the words pepper out. “And let that girl go, she’s got nothing to do with this. She...” he pauses and looks back toward me, “She was just fun for a night.”

Bile rockets to my throat. And considering we could’ve created a life last night, caught up in the moment and forgetting protection the second and third times we connected,

I'm starting to hear the words, no, the truth, my mother tried to instill in me.

How could you, Dean?

But then I move and I feel the note he left me crumple in my jeans pocket. It had hearts in the corners. After all, today is Valentine's Day.

I'll find you. I love you. Dean

"She's insurance, Sanders. You mess up, she gets messed up."

"Do it," Dean says, "I don't care."

The man leans forward. "Yes, but does she?"

I don't want to die.

I can't watch anymore. I lean back in my chair and with one kick of my foot, the screen goes black.

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG IT IS, BUT WHEN THE DOOR OPENS, the man I'm starting to believe is the devil himself enters. And it's not Dean. He's the devil's apprentice.

My heart can't stop hiccupping every time I think about Dean saying those things. Did he mean them? Is he going to let me die?

The man I think is Tig fingers his hair over a balding spot. "Well, well, someone has a temper." He chuckles and I sit straight in the chair waiting for some retribution. I've never been hit by a man, and today's not going to be the first time.

He rounds toward me and I freeze. "You don't need the rope with me. You're not going to hurt me, and I'm not going to hurt you... yet." He unties my wrists and I rub them as the blood sears back into my fingers, creating pins and needles.

He sits in the leather desk chair and leans back, lighting a cigar. Jameson Briggs, Colt's father, smokes cigars, and I've seen the labels, Davidoff. They smell like chocolate, leather, white pepper, and toasted nuts. This smells like dirt and rotting bark. And it makes me homesick for Storm Canyon.

“Your boy out there, he and I go way back.”

I stare at a NASCAR racing poster on the wall that has a schedule from 1988. I’m thinking the less I say the better.

He leans back and puts his boots up on the desk. The silver tips are polished to a shine and I can see myself in them.

I look like hell. Feel like it too.

“Dean’s one of my boys. He tried to boost a car from me about nine years ago. He was only sixteen, but man he had the balls of someone twice his age. So I took him in and gave him a home. He’s the best of the best.” There’s a little bit of admiration in his voice and glance at him.

He shakes his head. “At least he was, up until about four months ago, when he decided he was done. No one is done until I say they’re done. My needs come first and I still need his... skills. But I don’t take betrayal lightly, and I’m assuming by my broken monitor, you heard everything, and you don’t either. Do you, peanut?”

I remember how many times Dean called me some food — cookie, cherry, cupcake, shortcake, honey and so many more — and this guy’s “peanut” is making me feel like I’ve eaten something rancid.

“That punk thinks he decides when he comes and when he leaves.” He puffs a solid ring of smoke toward me and I cringe. “But of course you know that since he left you all alone at the hotel to come here to me. Bet he wasn’t planning to come back.”

I pick up an old stapler and in one quick motion throw it at his head. I miss, but Tig didn’t even flinch.

He leans back and crosses his arms behind his head. “Get comfy, toots, neither of us are going anywhere and if you want to keep that pretty face the way it is, you better hope to God that Dean finishes this job so his ass and your ass can go on your merry way. Otherwise...” he puffs the awful cigar, his eyes narrow, “Your rebel will be the end of you both.”

DEAN

I'm never anxious when I work. I have this switch I can just turn it all off. Tig taught me to do it. Nothing in the world matters while you're working, no one and no thing. Except now I have Kenzie and she's all I can think about it.

I *had* Kenzie at least. Will she still want me when this is over?

The biggest question is if Tig is going to be a man of his word and let me go. I don't want to flip the switch and become a mindless thief. But for Kenzie's sake I need to.

We're out on a highway that's off the beaten path and I'm starting to get antsy.

"What's the job?" I grit out. Tig hands me a tablet and I flip through the pics. "You've got to be shitting me."

No wonder he wants me on this job. No one in his crew can hotwire a car like this. He wants me to nab him a

Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Gullwing Uhlenhaut. It isn't just a beautiful, expensive car. It's the world's most expensive car.

"It's the dream job," Tig remarks, like we're old buddies again.

"Where are you going to move a car like this? It'll be hot the second you lay a finger on it."

Tig brushes it off, "I've got a buyer overseas that wants this baby. But don't you worry about the details."

I look around and toss the tablet back to him. "How the hell are we supposed to secure the coupe?"

We're on the side of the road, some stretch of the western valley outside Denver.

His smirk drives a chill down my spine. He nods toward the window and a semi-truck flies past us. "That's how."

The driver takes off, the tail end of the cargo van shaking as we race off hot on its wheels. I fear Tig expects me to hop out the sliding door and onto the truck. This isn't *The Fast and the Furious*, even if I'm as good looking as Paul Walker.

Tig motions the driver around him, so there is some mercy. "Run him off the road but fuck's sake don't make him crash!" Tig orders the driver.

I strap myself in, gripping the seat in front of me. I don't get car sick, but I might with the way this muscle head drives, swerving in and out of the two lanes.

"Get up to the front where he can see you or you're going to get us killed!" I snap. No wonder Tig wants me back. If these are the guys on his jobs, he's got big problems.

"Do as he says," Tig growls when the driver looks between the two of us.

Stepping on the gas, he passes the semi and nearly catches the grill as he slides in front of him. He brake checks the truck behind us, and the screech of the brakes and the smell of rubber fills the air as tires lock up, both ours and his.

The truck driver pulls over, hopping out of his cab, shouting and cussing up a storm. The driver pulls a gun on him and the trucker turns extremely compliant. Tig motions to me and I climb into the back of the trailer after I take a pair of lock cutters to the lock.

I whistle low, peeling back the protective tarp on the coupe. I might not want to be here but I can appreciate a \$140 million, two-of-a-kind car. I slide into the driver's seat, gripping the wheel is only second to holding Kenzie in my arms. Behind me as I start to work the wires, Tig sets up the ramp.

"Yes!" I laugh as the engine fires up at my fingertips with a shock that numbs my hand. The door opens beside me. "What are you doing?" I ask as Tig slides in beside me.

He chuckles. "You're on thin ice, buddy. You think I'm letting you drive off with my \$160 million ticket? No way." Of course he'd have a buyer for more than its last auction price. "Drive," he demands with a side glare.

I have to be careful, backing it down the ramp, it's probably millimeters of clearance. I put any scratches on Tig's new car and it'll only mean I have to do something to make up for it. It's a vicious cycle. He warns me to get a move on as I put us in drive, and take the highway back towards the city, the Eisenhower Tunnel ahead. Behind us, and by quite a bit, because this baby can drive, is the driver and his trucker hostage. I feel bad for the man, and I hope Tig won't do whatever it takes to tie up the loose ends.

"Faster," Tig grumbles.

"I thought you wanted this in one piece?" I challenge, knowing I'm tempting the devil to come out.

"I also said faster."

I don't need to be told again. The sooner this is back at the shop, the sooner I can get to Kenzie, and we can put Denver behind us. I can put all of this behind me and have her as my future. Open my own shop, a legit one.

“Hold your breath,” Tig jokes but I do, hoping so desperately that if I hold my breath the old superstitions about having a wish come true at the end of a tunnel.

I want out of this life.

That’s my wish. Well, that and to have Kenzie there.

As we hit the tunnel, there’s light at the end, just not the kind we’re hoping for. It isn’t sunlight but the red and blue of Colorado’s finest and some unmarked vehicles, waiting for us. This car was hot before we touched it.

Tig is button-lipped after a single “fuck.”

There’s no schmoozing his way out of this one. “No, officer, this isn’t my car, just borrowing it.” That’s not going to work.

I don’t have a death wish. There’s a damn battalion waiting for us, guns drawn and roadblock secure. I also don’t want to ruin a car like this one with road spikes. Tig doesn’t even give me shit for it as I slow down, stopping short of the legion of red and blue.

They separate us, Tig in one cruiser and me in another. Can’t corroborate if we can’t talk, even though Tig’s golden rule is ‘Saint Fugal’, STFUGAL: shut the fuck up and get a lawyer. The cruiser holding Tig goes off first and a few minutes later in cuffs in the back of my own popo limo it’s a short ride, and not to county. We pull off the highway and down a dirt road, out of sight. I should be sweating, worried, especially as they park and open up the back. The cuffs are off and I’m rubbing my wrists.

“Sheriff,” I greet with a nervous grin.

“Bad egg,” Sheriff Briggs returns the welcome with his hand on his gun like he’s willing to use it. “Or, redeemed bad egg, I should say.”

“Let’s say soft boiled,” I compromise. “Kenzie, is she?”

“She’s good. We’ve got eyes on her, and we’re moving in. You did good, Dean. I’m impressed.”

I sigh, peeling off the mask I had to wear to get through this. “I’m just glad you got my text.”

“How did you even get my number?” Colt asks, patting me on the back.

“Kenzie’s phone.” I run a hand through my hair. “I really need to see her, Sheriff. I’ve got some explaining to do.”

“I bet you do. Let’s go get her.”

I’m coming, baby.

And hopefully, you’ll forgive me.

KENZIE

Crash! The sound booms from outside the room and I move toward the door. Tig locked me in here when he left. I thought about sending a chair through one of the windows, but those old office chairs are heavy!

I pace the small space. The doorknob turning has me frozen and I look for that stapler to throw at whoever it is.

The door opens and I inhale at the sight, stapler poised.

“Hey.” He holds up his hands in surrender, looking almost relieved to see me.

You're lucky my aim sucks.

I drop the ridiculous weapon and cross my arms on my chest.

He doesn't look like he's been hurt and I'm partially thankful for that, but I'm also pissed, and hurt, and wanting a pound of flesh. And not the kind between his legs.

Although... *stop it!* I admonish the sex kitten that he's brought out in me. Hell, she's more of a mountain lion at this point.

His eyes roam all over me and I clear my throat.

"What the hell, Dean?!" I yell at him and hear a chuckle out in the hallway.

He shuts the door behind him. "Let me explain, Kenz."

"You said things, horrible things. What explanation could you give me to make me believe you didn't mean them?"

He inhales and exhales deep and long. "I know. But it was all to protect you. Let's sit and I'll tell you what happened."

I motion to Tig's chair. "Is the big guy coming back?"

"No, he's taken care of."

My stomach drops to my knees. "You killed him?"

"No. I helped the feds to set him up." He slides onto one of the other chairs and rubs his face, a gray cast of exhaustion over his face.

He tells me a story that I probably shouldn't believe. It sounds like something from one of those movies with fast cars and dangerous deeds. Expensive cars, heists, and not getting away with it, in this case.

"But you could've told me what was happening, been honest."

"No, if you knew it was all a ruse and they found out, they wouldn't have thought twice to take you out with me. But this way you were oblivious. It was to protect you." He grabs my hand leaning forward. "But I didn't mean any of those words. I promise, sweetheart. I did it to protect you."

I pull my hand back. "You made me feel abandoned and only solidified the fears that my mother said would come true, that you would leave me."

He leans back. "I know. I hate that I did it. I'm sorry, baby. But I'm done with this life. I'm out of all of this and I won't be going back."

“I want to believe you.” I roll my lips in. “But I don’t know...”

Looking at him takes away my resolve to be mad, but it doesn’t take away the fear that he’s lying to me.

The door opens and a familiar black hat enters the room before the man wearing it. “Hey, Kenz.”

“Sheriff Briggs?” I stand. “Um, did my mom send you?”

“No, Dean’s telling the truth. He texted me, and we worked out a plan to bring down the chop shop and theft ring. Dean’s one lucky SOB that I have contacts all over Colorado and that I believed him. And maybe you should believe him, too.” He lifts one eyebrow. “If you want to, if you don’t, I’ll send him on his way with a swift kick to his—”

“No need.” I giggle. “But thank you.”

The Briggs’ aren’t all that bad. Their feud with the Winchesters is irritating, but I honestly miss Storm Canyon and what turns out to be just perfectly un-boring for me.

Dean stands and walks to me, his hands softly grasp my waist. “What do you think about going back to that hotel and getting a room for another night?”

“You’ll never leave like that again, right?”

“Never...ever.”

Colt clears his throat. “Guess I’ll let your mamma know you’re okay.”

“I’ll text her and let her know.”

“Good. And Dean?”

Dean looks back over his shoulder and finds an outstretched hand. He doesn’t let go of me but slides to my side so he can still hold me and grab the offered hand.

Sheriff Briggs pulls him toward him a little. “You treat her right or you’ll be hearing from me.”

“Understood, Colt.”

“It’s Sheriff Briggs to you.”

“Whatever, Colt.”

Sheriff Briggs shakes his head. “Later, Kenzie.”

“Later, Sheriff.”

The door closes and Dean turns back to me. “So, you ready for this?”

“For?”

“I love you, Kenzie, and I want you to be my Valentine.”

My heart soars and my soul is filled again.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Dean.”

“Happy Valentine’s, Day, sugar.”

His kiss seals the deal.

The rebel is gone, he’s just... mine.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER...

DEAN

I've boosted cars. I've faced down the law. I've faced down men like Tig... and yet I've never been more nervous than I am now. Everything needs to be perfect— she's perfect after all.

Kenzie's still in the car behind me, something about touching up her lipstick. I'm thankful for the few moments alone I have to get my nerves in check. It's been a year since I've been out, since I've found my footing with Kenzie at my side. I'm not the outlaw she met anymore.

But I'm still a *bad boy* where it counts.

A sly smile spreads across my lips as I recall last night, her back arched and fingers in my hair as I made her call out to God and then to me over and over again. I'll never get tired of her taste. I'll never get tired of the fact I'm the only one who's tasted her too.

She's mine.

I was her first and I'm going to be sure I'm her last.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Kenzie sighs, alerting me to her presence.

She's closing the door to the old beater that I first took her in to this very same overlook. It's a lot less beat up these days with a fresh coat of paint and new custom upholstery. Turns out Storm Canyon needed a mechanic and I was the man for the job. It was a real bitch getting permits but Sheriff Briggs helped me out, so long as I discounted the service to all the law enforcement vehicles.

Those Briggs's give and then they take.

I turn from her to look out at the horizon, the blue sky turning orange and violet as the sun sets. It was dark when we were first been here, and since then we've seen many sunsets and some sunrises. Hell, we've even had a few afternoon delights.

"You make everything about this place my home," I told her, taking her hand into mine, leading her into my arms. I wrap them around her snugly, nuzzling her strawberry blonde hair and sighing. "Or maybe my kitchen. You always make me hungry," I practically purr.

"Best watch out," she teased, her ring finger jabbing me in the ribs.

Seizing the opportunity I quickly snatch her finger and bringing it to my lips, kissing it slowly.

"Mhm...something," I say, feigning pain as I release her hand. "Owe, damn rock cut me," I lie.

Kenzie blinks confusion. "What? What rock are you—" Her gasps silences her as she stares down at the finger I was holding.

"Dean?" she squeaks. It's a vivid silver ring, with a princess cut diamond flanked by a halo of rubies and smaller diamonds.

“Kenzie Jo Miller,” I say as I lower myself to one knee, holding her hand as delicately as I can. “Will you do this rebel the honor of making me an honest man?”

There are tears in her eyes as she laughingly says, “No one can get that silver tongue of yours to be honest.”

“You can,” I whisper softly. “Just say yes...” *Please, say yes.*

“Of course, yes!” She giggles, wiping her tears with her other hand.

I hoot as loud as possible, my joyful cry echoing down the mountain. I lift her around the waist and swing her around till she’s banging on my shoulder to be put down.

“Mom’s going to lose her shit planning this wedding.” Kenzie sighs, staring at the ring with a smile flanked by her teeth worrying her bottom lip.

“That’s because Barb loves me,” I add, proving the point that it’ll be a little while longer for me to get real honest.

Kenzie rolls her eyes at me but doesn’t stop smiling. “She tolerates you at best, Dean.”

“But she’ll love me when I put a grandbaby in you.” I nibble at her neck, a hand quick to grab at the swell of her buttcheek.

“After we’re married,” Kenzie moans.

“Whatever you want, lemon drop. So long as you’re my Valentine forever.”

“Forever,” she whispers back and I end the conversation by capturing her lips as the sun dips below the horizon.

And the rebel still comes out when I need him.

Up next in the Valentines & Holidates series is [My XOXO Holidate](#) by Chloe Monroe.



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