



BIG BURLY
WRECK

ERIN HAVOC

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All characters are adults.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Epilogue

Also by Erin Havoc

About the Author

The weight of my responsibilities bears down on me like a ton of bricks as I hurry towards the mechanic shop, my boots kicking up dust in their wake. How can someone feel this exhausted before nine in the morning?

“About time,” comes an amused voice as I screech to a stop in front of the entrance and dig into my pockets after the keys. Drew leans against the wall with a smirk plastered across his face. “I was starting to think you took a trip to another galaxy or something. You know, without telling any of us.”

“If it weren’t for the fact that you’re such a damn good mechanic, I’d fire your ass for all this sass.” My gaze meets his, but there’s something about the glint in his eye that tells me he knows I’m not serious. Finally, I open the shop. Late, as every other day this week.

“Aw, come on, Miles. Don’t pretend you don’t love having me around,” he teases as we step into the dimly lit shop. The scent of grease and metal fills my nostrils, a familiar comfort that makes me feel at home. Drew’s right, though; I can’t imagine running this place without him.

Not that I’d ever tell him that.

“Whatever, man,” I grumble, wiping sweat from my brow with the back of my hand.

My gaze combs the shop’s main area. Work’s been piling up. I’d do some extra today, but Mrs. Bridges only keeps Leo until five, six tops.

The old lady has a sharp tongue, but she's an angel sent from heaven. The only one around who would help me.

No time to lose now. I'll have to skip lunch again. I go for my gloves and grab my tools, my mind racing a thousand miles as I recall what I had to do with this car.

The phone rings from inside the office just as I pop the hood open.

"Fuck," I hiss from between my teeth. Why is it always at the worst times?

"I'll get it, boss." Drew saunters toward the noise. "What made you late, anyway? Looked like a bat out of hell when you got here. Baby Leo giving you problems?"

It's been over a month, and I'm still not used to having a kid in the house. That wasn't in my plans. Nope, never planned on getting married and never wanted kids. It doesn't matter. Life doesn't care about our wants.

I didn't even have the time to grieve properly.

"Na," I shoot back as I inspect the engine. "Leo's good. It's just a lot of work for one person."

"For sure," Drew replies from inside the office, his voice getting muffled by the distance. The phone stops ringing, and Drew's voice lowers, so I can't hear him.

I let myself breathe. Ain't the first time I've been late, and it won't be the last. Life's a messy affair when you're a single parent trying to keep shit together.

Drew hangs up after a minute and drags his feet to the car in the back. I pop my head from under the hood to glare at his back.

"So?" I urge him. Drew is a skilled mechanic, but definitely on the slow side.

He flashes me a devilish grin. "What's on the agenda for today? Saving damsels in distress or just fixing some busted-up engines?"

I arch an eyebrow. “What the hell are you talking about? Who was it on the phone?”

He chuckles. “A girl’s car broke down in front of the City Hall. Figured it might make your day a bit more interesting, so I told her you’d be meeting her in ten.” Drew wiggles his brows. “She sounded expensive. From the city, no doubt.”

“Fantastic,” I grumble as I step back from the car and grab the tow truck keys off the hook. “I’ll go check it out.” There’s no time to waste; things won’t fix themselves.

“Have fun!” Drew calls out as I head out the door. I have no idea how he expects me to have fun.

In the back of my head, I can’t stop thinking about my responsibilities. Raising Leo won’t be easy. I’m not made to be a father, and I don’t have the time to learn. I’ll have to wing it.

Mrs. Bridges is too busy with her book clubs and church events to take care of Leo every day. She’s been saving my hide this past month, but she made it clear she can’t keep up forever.

I get in the tow truck and drive out of the shop. My mind swirls in a hurricane of doubts. What am I going to do? How am I going to raise a kid like this? Who is going to keep him on workdays when Mrs. Bridges says she can’t?

I can’t leave him in the shop, not with all the dirt and noise and danger, but I can’t close the doors and spend the day at home.

Where am I going to find a nanny in Riverside?

Releasing a breath, I focus on the road, my grip tightening around the wheel. The day is beautiful, with a sharp blue sky and a warm breeze that makes me forget the approaching winter.

And I can’t enjoy any of it.

Fear gnaws at me. What if I don’t find a nanny? What if I have to move to a bigger city to find a job? Work for someone so I can pay for Leo’s daycare?

My stomach churns, and the mere thought of leaving makes me nauseous. No. That's a last resort. I like it here, and Leo will have a good place to grow up.

The small-town charm of Riverside is both endearing and suffocating. Everybody knows everybody, and nothing stays secret for long. Idling at the stop sign, I glance around, noticing how the dust on the road creates a hazy golden glow in the air.

But as I pull up in front of the City Hall, everything shifts. The atmosphere goes from warm and nostalgic to something almost electric. The sky is clear, but it feels like a storm is brewing. I don't know why.

Parked along the curb is a shiny BMW, the red slick as candy, out of place in our tiny backwater town. A fish out of water, if there ever was one.

I glimpse a couple of neighbors peeking from their windows. Pretty sure this is the most expensive car that ever graced Riverside's streets.

"Damn," I exhale, feeling the tension rise as I park the tow truck in front of the stranded vehicle.

A wisp of smoke sprouts from under the hood. What a place for a car like this to break. Who could be driving this thing around here?

As I step out of the truck, the faint sounds of an old rock song drift through the air. The melody feels familiar, teasing at the edges of my memory. It's not what I'd have expected to be blaring from this fancy car, but it sets a mood that somehow fits the situation.

I leave my truck just as the driver's door opens. And the sight of a heeled shoe and creamy leg stops me in my tracks.

The woman looks like she stepped straight out of a dream. Her blond hair cascades in soft waves halfway down her back, glinting like gold in the sunlight. Her green eyes seem to hold a secret, twinkling as if daring me.

She's dressed in professional attire—a crisp white blouse tucked into a tight black pencil skirt that hugs her generous

curves in all the right places. Damn. I can't help but let my gaze linger on those legs, wrapped in sheer stockings and ending in killer heels.

This woman is a goddess. Her curves should be adored, and I'd drop to my knees for them.

My mouth goes desert dry. My mind is blank. I forget what I'm doing here.

"Hey there," she calls out with a smile that could make a man forget his own name. Her melodic voice cuts through the air, making me feel like I'm hearing my favorite song for the very first time.

"Uh, hey," I reply, trying to sound casual despite feeling like someone has punched me in the chest. My heart races, and heat floods my veins as I walk towards her. "You're the one with the car trouble?"

Olivia tucks a strand of blond hair behind her ear. Her nails are perfectly manicured. Drew was right. She sounds not only expensive; she looks expensive, too.

Though much younger than me. She can't be older than twenty-five.

"That's me," she replies with that blinding smile of hers. "You were fast. I called earlier, and no one picked up, but when you did..." She moves her shoulders into a shrug. "I reckon it's a petite town. Ten minutes can't get me out of the neighborhood back home."

"I bet," I say, then curse myself. *I bet? What?* And why do I have these sudden nerves in her presence? "I'm Miles, by the way. The local mechanic."

"Olivia Hammond." She extends a delicate hand for me to shake. "Associate attorney and unwitting tourist." The warmth of her touch sends a shiver down my spine.

"Attorney, huh?" I raise an eyebrow. "What brings you to our humble neck of the woods?"

"Family business." Her expression softens. "My late grandmother's estate needs settling, and I'm here for the job."

“Oh, Mrs. Hammond, right?” The old lady with the big house by the river. I remember her. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. She’ll be missed. There’s so much to do I barely had the time to grieve for her.”

A knot tightens in my throat. “I understand that.”

Olivia’s eyes sparkle for a moment. She clears her throat, looking away. “It’s just my luck when I’m in a rush, right? Didn’t expect car trouble on my first day.”

“Guess that’s where I come in. Let me take a look at your engine, and we’ll get you back on the road in no time.”

“Sounds like a plan. The temperature gauge rose fast, so I parked. It might have overheated.” Olivia steps back, giving me space to inspect her pristine BMW. I can’t help but sneak glances at her as I pop the hood.

What’s wrong with me? The girl is at least ten years my junior, and she doesn’t belong here. Besides, I have a million other things to worry about. The shop, having time to fix all the cars, finding a nanny, caring for Leo.

I should not be attracted to her. There’s no time.

Focusing on the engine, I double down on doing my job. It takes sheer will, but I stop myself from gawking at her.

“You’re right,” I say after a quick examination. “The engine’s overheating. And the coolant’s marking low.”

“What?” she gasps and approaches me. Too fast. Her thigh presses to mine as she enters under the hood, crowding closer to the engine to take a look. “But I had it checked before coming here!”

The smell of her hair wafts up to me, and it drowns out all other scents. My heart squeezes in my chest, sending all the blood in my body south.

I step back. “Either an accident on the road here or the mechanics in the city aren’t serious about their jobs. It’s a good thing you stopped.”

Olivia curls her nose as she glares at the engine. “You won’t have it ready soon, right?” And she sighs in defeat, stepping away before I can reply. “At least I have grandma’s keys and extra clothes in the car.”

“I’ll need to tow it back to my shop to inspect it better. Don’t worry, I’ll treat it with care.”

She looks up, those green eyes burning in the sunlight. “Thanks, Miles. I hope it’s not too much trouble.”

“It won’t be.” Bending, I lock her BMW to the tow truck.

She paces the sidewalk, scrolling away on her phone.

“Alright, it’s secure. I’ll drive you home,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady as I approach her.

“Thanks. I was about to brave the way on heels.” She looks up from her phone and opens that smile that makes me feel like I’ve swallowed a handful of butterflies.

I hesitate for a moment, aware of my scars and nicks gained over years of working with machinery. My hands are rough and calloused, and I can’t help but feel self-conscious about them. But when I reach out to help Olivia into the tow truck, she doesn’t flinch or pull away.

She places her delicate hand in mine, and the contrast between our skin sends another shiver down my spine. As I help her up, I can feel the heat of her body, and the tension between us grows thicker.

What the hell is this? I’ve never felt like this with any woman. What’s different now?

Why is she different?

“Smooth ride,” she quips, settling into the passenger seat, her green eyes sparkling. “I can see why you’re a mechanic and not a chauffeur.”

“I like cars, but not that much,” I shoot back with humor as I start the engine. “I’d rather spend my time getting dirty.”

“Ah, yes, the allure of grease and metal,” she teases. “You do seem to have a way with machines.”

“Better than my way with people, that’s for sure,” I burst, and the words expose more vulnerability than I should share with her.

Why is it so easy to talk to this woman? I bet she’s busy, but she doesn’t turn to her cell phone again, her entire focus on me.

“That’s not true. You’re funny. Everyone likes to laugh.”

I arch an eyebrow, shooting a suspicious glance at her. “There’s no way you think I’m funny. No one thinks that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not funny.”

She chuckles. “Well, then you can blame my sense of humor because I consider you funny.”

“I don’t mean to insult your sense of humor, but it’s shitty.”

She laughs now, the ringing sound tightening that knot in my throat.

The playful banter continues as I drive, the air between us crackling with electricity. But as much as I want to indulge in the sparks flying between us, I know I can’t afford to get distracted.

Can’t waste time on someone pretty. Certainly not on someone who won’t stay.

My resolve wavers every time Olivia flashes me another one of her dazzling smiles, and I know things are about to get a lot more complicated.

My heels echo against the pavement as I cross the street toward Miles's apartment. Right above the garage, which is now closed. It makes sense why they didn't pick up my phone calls.

"That one, dear!" Mrs. Bridges calls out from her yard.

"Thank you!" I wave back at her as I make a beeline for the door.

Back where I live, it's a huge no-no to tell strangers where your friends live. That would only get said friend on a Missing Persons page, maybe worse.

Not here. When I saw that the garage was closed and asked the lady that lived across from it, she just pointed out where the garage owner lived. Perks of a small town.

But there are not only perks to staying here. I'm extra careful as I dodge the cobblestones on top of my heels. When I opened the map app and it told me the garage was only fifteen minutes away from grandma's house, I thought it wouldn't be a problem. After all, I walk much more in the office.

I didn't take the cobblestones into consideration. These shoes are in danger of killing me, but I don't pay attention to them.

There's a hurricane inside my chest.

I remind myself I'm just here to check on my car, but it's so hard to ignore the butterflies fluttering in my stomach at the thought of seeing Miles again.

I have to take a couple of deep breaths to center myself. This is nothing, Liv. You've faced much worse people and much more challenging situations. Why are you so nervous?

I'm young, but I've worked so hard in law school, and I've defied so many obstacles, never bowing down or backing away.

Why does this man make me this weak?

My trembling hands curl into fists. I can't take too long out here. Mrs. Bridges is watching.

I give the door a hesitant knock. Nothing happens for a minute. I knock again, and it swings open, revealing Miles with wide eyes that convey surprise.

He stands there, all tall, dark, and brooding, so big he blocks the doorway. He's wearing a black T-shirt today, but the same pair of jeans and boots. Somehow, he looks better than yesterday.

God, he's handsome. His presence hits me like a truck again. It's like looking into his eyes for the first time.

He wears his dark hair short, buzzed close to his scalp. Dark skin glimmers under the sunlight. His eyes are the cold gray of steel. Those full lips are in perfect contradiction with his sharp nose and jaw.

"Uh, hey Miles!" I manage after a second too long staring at him. "Just wanted to check on my car, and you didn't pick up the phone... Sorry if I'm interrupting."

Oh, God. He's blocking the door. It's after hours. Of course he's home with his girlfriend. There's no way this man isn't taken.

I awkwardly shift from one foot to the other, but a nervous feeling gnaws at me. I shouldn't have come. This will not end well. My heart will break at the end of this.

Miles is handsome, but he's definitely older, more experienced, and not interested. I'm nothing like him.

He's dark and tall, when I'm pale and short. My curves are full and round, while he's all sharp lines and bulky muscles.

He's a mechanic, while I'm a lawyer.

We live hundreds of miles away. There's no way this fluttering inside me will lead anywhere.

"Olivia? Oh, uh, yeah, come in." His eyes flicker behind him just as something falls with a crash. Without missing a beat, he ushers me inside.

We're in a sort of foyer—a set of stairs leading into the upstairs apartment. I tail Miles inside, following the golden light that comes from the living room.

The last of the sunlight streams through the windows, casting a resplendent glow on the sparse furnishings. There's an old, but comfortable-looking couch, no pillows. A rug sits in the middle of the living room, near a small dining table. No TV. I wonder if Miles's too busy for that.

"What did you drop?" he asks no one in particular, and darts inside a second room.

He's not alone. I knew it.

The apartment is small, just the length of the garage. I let my eyes study the place, searching for morsels of Miles's personality or anything that tells me he lives with a girl.

My gaze latches onto the decoration next to the couch. It takes me a minute.

There's a pile of stuffed animals tucked into a corner, spilling out of a storage container.

"Nice..." I trail off, my gaze lingering on the plush menagerie. "I didn't peg you as a teddy bear collector, but hey, to each their own, right?"

Miles snorts from the bedroom. His laugh sounds like a rare thing, like I could pick them up in the wind and keep them against my chest. It makes me warm inside. I take a step closer, wondering if there's someone else in the house. My heels click on the wooden floors.

An enormous beast rushes from the bedroom. Miles shouts something I don't understand. The animal barrels toward me, too big, a shadow marching in my direction.

The huge brown dog skids to a halt at my feet, its cold nose touching my foot and my shin. A smile blooms on my face.

“Oh, who’s that?” I greet the dog and offer my hand for it to sniff.

“Bear! Come here!” Miles calls out in a firm, authoritative voice that should not send a shiver down my spine.

“It’s okay!” The massive dog wags its tail and leans in, nudging my hand for pets. My smile is still wide when I scratch its huge head.

Bear fits the dog just fine. He’s huge, brown, and makes you want to cuddle.

Miles walks back into the living room. His mouth drops open.

“Whoa,” Miles breathes out, surprise lacing his voice. “Bear likes no one.”

That nugget of information rushes blood into my cheeks. There’s nothing like being indirectly praised by a dog. I open my mouth to tell him that, our gazes locking.

Only something else catches my eye. A small bundle in Miles’s arm.

A baby.

The baby giggles, drawing both of our attention. Miles bounces him on his arm with practiced ease, turning to face me. I can’t help but admire how handsome he looks holding that baby, his icy gray eyes sparkling in the fading sunlight.

My heart squeezes hard. The image before me fills my head with longing. A yearning I never felt.

The baby is a boy as dark-haired as Miles, with light eyes that I bet are the same gray as the mechanic’s.

But if Miles has a baby, that means he has a baby mama. The blooming feeling inside me curls up and dies. It takes all my effort not to drop my smile too fast.

Of course he's married. And with a kid! And here I was, lusting after him. Silly Olivia.

"Please, have a seat," Miles offers, gesturing towards the old couch, and then adds, "Want some water?"

I wave him off, unable to tear my gaze away from the baby. His laughter is infectious, and I can't help but smile back when he reaches out his little hands for me.

Surely, that's alright. Miles would tell me if it wasn't.

I take the baby into my arms, being as gentle as possible. He's soft and smells like baby powder. I hold him closer, pressing my cheek to the top of his head, feeling the wisps of hair against my skin.

My heart grows twice its size. It's like there's an instant connection with this little bundle of joy. But that's so silly. I shouldn't let myself get carried away.

"His mom... Where is she?" I dread the answer. Fear his words. Will he say she's about to arrive? That she is coming soon, and I better leave so he can be with his family?

Miles swallows hard as he sits down, his knee inches from mine. I brace myself.

"Leo's mother was my sister. She passed away last month in a car accident."

My stomach sinks. Oh, no. I can't believe I was being so ridiculous. How selfish of me!

The air shifts around us, heavy with unspoken words. I hold Leo close to me, my heart aching for Miles and his family.

Leaning forward, I touch Miles's arm, offering silent condolences. It's not enough, but sometimes words fall short.

"Your sister... I'm so sorry, Miles."

A flicker of emotion in his eyes reveals our shared understanding of loss. It's a bond neither of us ever wanted, but here we are, drawn together by the fragility of life.

“And baby Leo survived the crash?” I ask in the softest voice I manage.

Miles shakes his head. “He was home with a nanny. His parents were out for dinner.”

God, this is heart-breaking. I close my fingers around his arm and squeeze it. No words can ease this tragedy.

In this golden-lit room, surrounded by stuffed animals and the laughter of a baby, I feel something change between Miles and me—a connection deeper than the initial attraction, an understanding that goes beyond words.

And for now, in this fleeting moment, it’s enough.

Bear curls up at my feet like a big, furry shadow. I can’t help but smile as he lets out a contented sigh.

“Are you sure he’s grumpy?” I tease, meeting Miles’s eyes.

He twists the side of his lip. “Usually, yeah. I never saw him like this.” Then his eyes are on me, staring at me and into me. Miles relaxes next to me, his body an inch away on the small couch.

“You said you’re an attorney.”

I hesitate, knowing that my job often scares people off. But there’s something about Miles that makes me want to open up and share.

“Yeah,” I admit. “But lately, I’ve been feeling... restless. Like I’m meant to be doing something more meaningful, you know? Helping people who need it, not just defending rich guys who want to avoid taxes.”

He nods, his eyes shining with something I don’t recognize. “That’s really brave of you.”

“Thanks,” I say shyly, surprised by his words. It feels good to be understood. None of my coworkers get it.

“You said you’re in town to settle your grandmother’s business?”

“Yeah... Oh! That’s why I came here.” I chuckle, and I swear Miles’s eyes drop to my lips for a fraction of a second.

“What happened to my car?”

“Ah, yes,” he says, dragging his eyes away and rubbing his chin. “The coolant was dripping from a tiny hole. Probably caused by a sharp pebble or something.”

“Figures.” I shake my head, returning my attention to Leo on my lap. The baby gurgles happily, his chubby fingers grasping at the air like he’s trying to catch invisible butterflies. I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. “He’s so cute. He looks like you.”

Miles arches an eyebrow. “You think I look cute?”

Blood rushes into my face. “No! I mean. More like handsome, not cute. But you know, you have the same hair color and the same eyes...”

Miles chuckles, looking away. “Yeah, people said my sister, and I looked like twins.” He side-glances at me. “But nobody ever called me cute.”

I curl my nose and stick my tongue out at him. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, but I enjoy seeing you flustered.”

We stare at one another, the smile on his lips reflecting mine. His gray gaze drops to my lips. I can’t stop myself from looking at his mouth, too.

The air crackles between us.

“So, I’ll be staying in town longer,” I blurt out when my face gets too hot. “I’ll use the time to work on grandma’s things. Enjoy some time off. Maybe make some friends. Any recommendations?”

“Definitely,” Miles replies with a light in his eyes. “There’s this great little restaurant down the street from the City Hall. You’ll love it.”

“Would you come with me?” The words slip out before I can stop them, leaving me feeling vulnerable. Exposed.

Miles looks like I slapped him. I have to bite my tongue to stop the grin.

He clears his throat, trying to regain composure. “I’d love to, but I would have to find someone to watch Leo.”

“Maybe we could just... eat here?” I suggest, hoping I’m not overstepping any boundaries.

He smiles, the warmth in his eyes melting away any lingering doubts. “Sounds like a plan.”

My arms are heavy with takeout containers when I find my keys. Olivia went all out, and I force out a chuckle as I struggle with the keyhole.

There's that familiar swell of nerves at the mere proximity of Olivia. She's got me all twisted up inside—a mechanic like me, thrown off balance by a green-eyed attorney.

I open the door. My voice dies in my throat as I catch the most angelic sight in the world. Happening right here, in my living room.

A song plays from a cell phone over my dining table. Olivia dances barefoot, her blond hair flying behind her. Leo is cradled safely in her arms, and Bear circles them, his tail wagging.

The world narrows down to this moment. Olivia's humming voice fills the air as she twirls with the laughing baby. My chest tugs tight, an ache I can't ignore.

Her gaze finds mine. And it's a lightning bolt to the chest.

Olivia freezes, eyes wide, when she sees me. She hurries to her phone. The music stops, leaving us in sudden silence. A blush creeps up her cheeks, but I play it cool, pretending not to have seen anything.

“Did you order the whole restaurant?” I ask, putting humor in my voice and setting the food down on the table.

God, what is this feeling in my chest?

Olivia clears her throat. “Maybe,” she replies, her voice tentative. “You know what they say; *go big or go home.*”

“Or go broke,” I counter, smirking. But my thoughts are elsewhere, focused on the vision of her with tiny Leo in her arms.

She’s breathtaking, radiant, even. And God, the thought of her carrying a baby... My baby...

It kick-starts something primal in me. Something that roars at the thought of putting a baby in her. I shift uncomfortably, trying to conceal my growing arousal.

“Was it too much?” she asks, her eyes glinting with doubt. “I’m sorry, Miles. I should have asked.”

“It’s okay.” She could have ordered the entire restaurant and I would have paid. I have this stupid urge to do anything she asks of me. “Really.”

“Good. I was afraid it would be too little food. You’re a big guy, you must eat a lot.”

She slides closer to me. Her scent, a mix of ink and flowers, tickles my nose, sending goosebumps down my arms.

“True.” I bite back a groan as my body reacts to her nearness. “But the way you order food, we’ll be living off leftovers for days.”

Olivia chuckles, tucking a strand of blond hair behind her ear. “Well, city sizes aren’t normally this big. I apologize.” She puts Leo down on the high chair. “Also, I hope you don’t mind, but I had to get out of those shoes.”

And she looks down at her toes, wiggling them through the sheer pantyhose.

The sight should not be this sexy. My cock jumps in my boxers. I have to physically force myself away from her. My mind flashes with thoughts of her softness, her curves, the feel of her, her taste...

God, I won’t last long with this woman. Something tells me I would do anything she asked me. I’d give her my soul if she wanted it.

I open the food containers, desperate for any sort of distraction. “The good part is that we have food for a month.

Olivia chuckles, shaking her head. “I got something for Bear and Leo too, of course,” Olivia says, her green eyes sparkling.

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow, genuinely surprised, as I go through the containers. “What did you get them?”

“Steak for Bear, and some nuggets and vegetables for Leo.”

I shake my head, amazed by her kindness. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I wanted to make sure everyone was taken care of.” She smiles, and for a moment, our gazes lock, and time seems to stop.

This is getting ridiculous. I have to focus.

“Let’s eat,” I blurt, rushing into the kitchen after plates. Praying I’ll survive an hour or two next to her without combusting.

Leo falls asleep halfway through dinner. I put him to sleep, and Bear follows us into the bedroom and curls beside his crib like a loyal guardian.

Olivia is perched on the couch, her legs tucked under her, looking lost in thought. She faces the window, and I have a moment to admire the softness of her jaw and neck, the silkiness of her blond strands.

“Your grandma lived by the river, right? In a big old house,” I say, sitting down next to her, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. “Is this the first time you visit?”

“No. We used to come when I was little, but then my parents got too busy, and I got too busy... Her house is like a treasure trove of memories,” Olivia muses, her voice melodic and captivating. “The creaky wooden floors, the old photographs on the walls, the smell of her cooking lingering in the air... It feels like home.” Olivia trails off, and I sense it.

I sense the regret. That same regret we all feel when we lose a loved one. The weight of the what-ifs, the guilt of not having loved more...

“Would you ever consider making Riverside your home?” The question slips out before I can stop myself. The air grows thick with tension.

Olivia bites her lip, hesitating. “I’m not sure,” she says, her voice paper thin. Her eyes rise to meet mine. The green is brighter than anything I’ve ever seen. “Maybe if I had a great reason to stay...”

My heart hammers in my chest. My gaze drops to her lips. I’m parched. I need a taste of her.

We’re teetering on the edge of something forbidden, something intoxicating. And yet, I can’t bring myself to look away. I can’t stop.

“Maybe you’ll find that reason,” I murmur, my voice barely a whisper as the distance between us threatens to collapse.

“Maybe,” she whispers back, her breath warm and sweet against my face. I can’t take another second of this torturous game.

“Fuck it.” The words rumble in my throat, and I crush my lips to hers.

Her mouth is soft and yielding, and her taste is like a burst of wildflowers on a summer day. I tangle my fingers in her golden hair, gripping it as her gasp invites me further into the kiss.

Her lips part for me, warm and inviting. A fiery ache spreads through my chest and down to my cock as our tongues dance together. My hands roam over her body, fingertips tracing the curve of her hips and the dip of her waist.

Her hands find my hair. She scratches down my scalp, forces her mouth against mine. It’s like she can’t have enough. It’s like we can’t have enough of each other.

This electric feeling crackles between us, threatening to melt my body into hers.

“More,” Olivia moans, pulling herself onto my lap. We struggle with her pencil skirt, clinging to her thick thighs.

She straddles me, the heat between us making me lose all sense of reason. Her warm core lands on top of my cock. It aches now. It’s so hard, it hurts.

Our bodies rock against each other, desperate for friction and release, the room filling with the sounds of our heavy breathing and quiet sighs.

“God, you feel so good,” I groan, burying my face into the crook of her neck, reveling in this scent that is uniquely Olivia.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as we grind together, every movement sending electricity coursing through my veins.

She feels so good. She feels perfect against me, as if my body has found a missing part.

But she won’t stay.

The memory is a knife to my back. I wince at it.

She’s not staying. This is not serious. We’re too different. As if she’d ever want anything serious with a small-town mechanic like me.

My heart twists. The kiss slows down and breaks. I pull away from her, creating space between us.

Her lust-hazed eyes silently beg me to let go. God, what is this woman doing to me?

“Olivia,” I breathe, my voice cracking. “We should... we should stop. It’s late.”

As much as it hurts me, I help her down from my lap. Olivia acquiesces without a sound. My thumb brushes her soft cheek. The sweet taste of her still lingers on my lips, and I know that letting go will be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

But for now, I must do what’s right—for both of us. Even when I’m pretty sure I’m falling for her.

The cup holder balanced precariously in my hands jiggles when I rush to the pavement. I don't even know why I walk this fast. There's no reason to. No cars dart down the street, not in this place.

Guess it's the city girl in me. I'm too used to rushing. Everything is just so fast when you live in a big city. Everyone's always in a hurry.

Not here. Not in Riverside. Life slows down in this place. It flows like a stream, singing down the rocks, with no place to be.

It's not what I'm used to, but I don't mind it. At all.

My mind races as my legs move, the garage clear in my sight.

I can't stop thinking about that kiss with Miles.

My heart races, and warmth spreads through my body at the mere thought of it. I grip the cup holder and the paper bag tighter.

Approaching the auto shop, I'm greeted by the chaotic symphony of whirring tools, hissing hydraulics, and classic rock blasting from a radio.

My favorite old rock song plays, adding to my giddy excitement. My lips stretch into a smile, and I don't know if it's happiness at the song or just nerves.

“Hey there,” a man greets, and I swivel my head in his direction as I walk into the shop, my heart jerking in my chest.

But it’s not Miles. And my disappointment must be obvious on my face because the man cracks up.

“You must be looking for the boss.” He grins, his brows shooting up. He points to the back of the shop, where Miles kneels next to my car, his icy gray eyes focused on his work.

“Thanks,” I shoot at the man, hurrying toward Miles. My cheeks grow warm. How could I have been so obvious?

My heels click over the sound of music and the clanging of metal, and Miles glances up from his work. His brows arch in surprise when he sees me, and he unfolds his body until he towers over me.

Memories of yesterday wash over me again. Memories of his hands, his lips, his big body against mine... Heat washes over my body, and there’s no way I can stop blushing now.

“Hi, Miles,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady and failing miserably. “Brought you coffee and donuts.”

He chews on the inside of his cheek. “You didn’t have to do that.” His voice is rough and flat. Is he mad that I’m here?

“I know.” And I push the cup holder and paper bag into his hands. “But you guys have the best bakery in the entire state, I swear. And I might have bought too many donuts.”

The bakery part is the truth. Accidentally buying too many? Not so much. I just had to see him.

Miles stares at me for a second too long, and I’m sure he sees right through my lie. His lips tilt. Just an inch.

Enough for my stomach to flip.

He takes the coffee cups and the paper bag full of donuts. “Thanks, Olivia,” he says with a warm voice. Sultry.

His eyes shoot up to somewhere behind me, then narrow. I peek over my shoulder.

The other man watches us and freezes in the middle of a brow wiggle when I catch him. Instead of leaving, he laughs.

“Do you need something?” Miles asks, his voice straining now as he takes a step closer to me.

He can't be possessive of me, right? I don't think my heart could take it.

“No,” the stranger replies with a huge, unyielding smile. “I just love seeing you fluster, boss.”

Miles grunts, but it's almost a growl. It sends shivers scattering down my arms.

“I'm Drew.” The man offers a hand for me to shake. “I'm Miles's best mechanic.”

Miles growls, but Drew doesn't back down, his arm stretched out. From the smirk across his face, he knows Miles barks but doesn't bite.

He's like Bear. Big, and fearsome, but cuddly on the inside.

I shake Drew's hand. “Olivia.”

“You've got a nice car. What do you do for a living?”

“I—”

“How is that your business, Drew?” Miles cuts in, his jaw locked tight. “Don't you have something better to do?”

I should not be hyperventilating. Jealousy is a red flag, right?

Then why am I on the verge of giggling?

“Sure, boss,” Drew drawls, showing his hands in a pacifying gesture as he backs off, making a scene out of it.

I can't help but chuckle.

“Oh!” I whirl around and grab one cup from the holder. “Here. I bought four because I didn't know how many people worked here. Grab a donut, too.”

“Thanks, Liv!” Drew says, accepting the cup and taking the bag from Miles's hand.

“Don't call her that,” Miles shoots back.

Drew smirks at me as he backs off. “Thanks for the coffee.” It’s undeniable how he sees straight through Miles and me.

Drew sees that I’m into Miles. Can Miles see that, too?

Miles clears his throat once Drew is gone. “Sorry about my mechanic. And thanks for this.” He gestures to the coffee.

I just want to wrap myself around him and breathe in his metal scent. What is happening to me? I’ve always been so focused on my tasks and my job. No man has ever interested me like this.

Everything is different with Miles. There’s a call—a connection straight to my heart. He’s more than handsome—more than a bulky, hot guy.

I feel at ease and electrified. He’s a mystery, though I feel like I’ve always known him. Miles is familiar like home, and entirely new.

Miles’s free hand brushes my arm. An electrical current races down my flesh.

“Come on. Let’s find a quieter spot,” he hushes, his eyes still searching for Drew.

I chuckle. “Okay.” There’s no denying that I adore this jealous Miles.

Miles leads me to a spot behind a car, hidden from the rest of the shop. The sound of rock music gets muffled by the car’s frame and the clanging around us. Drew doubles down on whatever he’s doing, and the noise increases.

“Have you been making progress with the house?” Miles sips from the coffee and puts it away. He leans against the car, his arms crossed over his chest. The question is innocent, but there’s an underlying tension between us that’s impossible to ignore.

“It’s certainly proving a legal quagmire. I swear she collected more documents in her lifetime than some law firms see in a decade.”

Miles shakes his head, his lips curving into a small smile. “And I thought my shop’s paperwork was bad. Remind me not to challenge you to a paperwork duel.”

I chuckle. “See, Miles? You *are* funny.”

He rolls his eyes in disbelief, his lips about to stretch into a smile. But his posture changes. His shoulders square up, and he rubs the back of his neck.

“Listen... I wanted to apologize for yesterday’s kiss. It was impulsive, and... I didn’t mean to overstep any boundaries.”

My heart skips a beat. Good. He won’t pretend it didn’t happen.

I wave him off. “Apology not accepted.”

Miles’s brows shoot to his hairline. “Wait... what?”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Miles. I wanted it too.” My heart is pounding in my chest, but I need him to know how much I’ve been thinking about him.

His jaw works. “You sure?”

“Absolutely.” And there’s a ticking clock in my head. I’m terrified of his rejection, but I have to take the risk. “I can’t stop thinking about you, Miles.”

“Olivia, I—” he begins but hesitates. His eyes fly over my features and soften. “Shit. I can’t stop thinking about you either,” he admits. “But I don’t want to ruin things. For neither of us.”

“Who says we’ll ruin anything?” I tease, stepping closer to him. This need aches inside me. This burning pain will only subside when I’m in his arms.

“Don’t tempt me, Liv,” he warns, but it falls short. The nickname is a sign of it. A sign of how much he wants me, too.

Miles steps closer and I have to crane my neck. I shiver under his intense gaze, feeling my arousal grow with each passing second, my nipples tightening.

I back up against the car, and Miles follows, caging me in with his beefy arms on either side of my head. My breath

catches as our gazes lock.

Miles leans in. He's everything I see. He's everywhere. The scent of grease, sweat, and metal intoxicates me.

His lips hover just above mine. "Don't tempt me," he repeats in a whisper. "Because I'm about to kiss these pretty lips of yours, and I'm filthy, and I can't bear the idea of messing you up."

Warmth pools between my legs. We're too close to the street, and Drew's just around the corner. Since when do I like danger?

No, it's not about danger. It's about Miles. I need him.

"Please, Miles," I beg, grabbing his shirt and pulling him even closer. "Please. Kiss me already."

His hesitation is clear in the second he takes to end the space between us, but our connection is undeniable. His desire for me is too strong to resist.

Miles kisses me. Hard. Desperately. As if he needs my mouth against his to breathe.

And I kiss him back, my lips molding to his. We're desperate for each other, losing ourselves in the moment as half-repaired cars become our backdrop.

His calloused hands bury into my hair. I grab onto his shirt, balancing on the tips of my heels to press our bodies together. The tension between us builds, our kisses growing more urgent and hungry as we give in to desire.

"God, you taste so good," he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot and ragged. My core clenches at his words, my body aching for more.

"Don't stop," I beg, running my fingers down his neck.

Miles's fingers sink onto my hips, and he hauls me up. He flings my legs around his waist, shoving my dress up and out of the way.

Warmth floods my face. I'm exposed, my cotton panties pressed to the hard bulge in his pants. And that's so hot. Miles

is desperate for me, working me into a frenzy with his lips, hands, and body.

He grabs my thighs, fingers tracing up my flesh, leaving grease stains and goosebumps behind.

Miles is so big, I'm like a doll in his hold. Even when I'm a big girl myself, he keeps me up with no effort, his lips tracing my neck now, trails of fire burning in their wake.

"We shouldn't," I whisper, rocking my hips against him. "Not in here anyway." But that's a lie.

Yes, we should. We must. I need it. I need his body, his warmth, and his touch.

"No, we shouldn't," he growls, humping against me. "But I'm fucking obsessed with your taste."

"Prove it," I challenge, biting my lip as my pleasure tightens, threatening to unravel me.

Miles keeps his eyes on my face, his icy gray gaze searing into mine. "I want to see you come apart," he says, voice low and full of promise as his hips work into mine.

My jaw drops. This is so hot. A fire starts between my hipbones, making my panties slick. Miles keeps rubbing, thrusting his cock against my pussy, massaging me in that spot that threatens to shatter me.

I grab onto Miles, my nails digging into his biceps. Pleasure tightens inside me.

"I'm about to—" I stutter, my eyelids threatening to shut.

"Eyes on me, Liv," he growls the command, and it forces me even closer to a release.

Drew drops something in the back of the shop. The sudden noise startles Miles, and he jumps out of his skin, putting me down.

"Sorry!" Drew calls out.

But the moment is gone.

Miles curses under his breath as I chuckle, trembling from the pent-up tension and lust coursing through me. I know I would go off with just a single touch of his.

“Sorry,” Miles repeats.

I shake my head, laughing, an invitation about to spill past my lips. Should we go home? To my place or his? Anywhere. I’d go anywhere with him.

But Miles’s drawing back. His shoulders grow stiff as he shakes his head, too.

Miles’s phone rings. He picks it up and glances at the screen. “It’s probably Mrs. Bridges,” he says.

Mrs. Bridges. The neighbor who is keeping an eye on Leo. I nod, understanding that he needs to take the call.

As Miles walks away, my heart races, and my mind is consumed by thoughts of him. He wants me, but he’s so much more responsible than I am. Miles already told me how busy his life is. How different we are.

What if we’re too different? What if this can’t work?

But as I stand there, grease-stained and breathless, I can’t help but accept that I’m falling in love with Miles—whether it makes sense or not. And right now, all I want is to be with him, no matter how messy or complicated it might be.

A wave of nostalgia washes over me as I pause in the middle of the living room. The architects are gone. I have sent all the paperwork. I'm free to go back home.

Or am I about to leave home behind?

The house is quiet. No breeze flutters through the windows, now closed. And no place has ever beckoned to me like this.

The antique charm is undeniable, from the floral wallpaper that has witnessed countless family gatherings to the creaky floorboards that squeak beneath my feet like an old tune. Cluttered shelves filled with yellowing books and faded photos whisper stories of memories that have seeped into every corner of this space.

"Goodbye, house," I murmur as I walk out onto the porch, my heels making a sad sound on the floorboards.

My heart weighs on my chest as I lock the door behind me, but my fingers grip the knob. I don't let go for a moment.

A knot forms in my stomach, tightening with each step I take away from the welcoming embrace of these walls. Part of me longs to stay here in Riverside, to build a life that would make grandma proud.

What if I could do some good in this sleepy town? Maybe even find a family of my own?

And, oh God, how I long for more time with Miles.

His rough hands, calloused from years of working on cars, have been haunting my dreams since the day we first met. His icy gray eyes pierce through me. There's something about the way he smells—a mix of grease, metal, and just a hint of musk—that makes my knees weak and my heart race.

My heart whispers for me to stay as I imagine what it would be like to wake up next to him every morning, tangled in sheets and surrounded by his warmth. I could watch little Leo grow.

We could be family to him and each other.

I let go of the doorknob.

As I turn around, there he is—Miles, waiting by the curb with his tow truck and my BMW. The watery light of the cloudy day casts a soft glow on his eyes.

My heart thrums in anticipation as I hike my bag over my shoulder. Maybe this is it; maybe he'll ask me to stay.

“Hey,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. Each step toward him feels like a dance, with my body drawn to his magnetic pull. The air between us crackles with electricity, yet his eyes meet mine with heartbreaking intensity.

“I got your payment. The car's ready,” he says, his hoarse voice sending shivers down my spine.

“Thank you.” And I try to smile, but it's impossible. “So, I can go back home now.”

“You can.”

“Yeah.”

The wind blows in my ears, and my hair covers my face. I push it out of the way. My pulse races, hoping for more.

My eyes search Miles's face, trying to decipher any hidden meaning behind those words.

Only silence greets me.

Miles stands there, hands in his pockets, his jaw locked. There's so much in his eyes, but he doesn't say a thing.

“So, that’s it?” I ask, my voice laden with expectation.

Miles hesitates, an internal struggle flickering across his features. The wind blows again, and my hair hits my face once more.

Miles reaches out, stroking my face with tender sadness. I drink in the warmth of his touch, but my heart breaks when I see the pain in his eyes.

“Good luck in the city, Liv,” he murmurs, tucking my hair behind an ear.

And just like that, my dreams of a future with him shatter.

“Thank you,” I reply, swallowing the lump in my throat. A tear threatens to spill, but I blink it back. “Will you... kiss Leo and Bear goodbye for me?”

“Of course.” His words are as soft as a feather brushing against my skin. Miles steps back and away.

As I climb into the driver’s seat of my BMW, dark clouds roll in, mirroring the storm brewing within me. I start the engine, feeling like a piece of my soul is being left behind.

I give him time to regret this. Time to ask me to stay. Once he says nothing, I press the gas pedal.

With one last glance at Miles through the rear-view mirror, I drive off. And he doesn’t stop me. He lets me go.

And that hurts me more than I’ve ever imagined.

Once he’s gone from the mirror, I drop my guard. Tears race down my cheeks. My heart bleeds.

Will I ever love someone like I love him?

The memory of Olivia's laughter echoes through my mind, an intoxicating melody that seems to carry with it the scent of paper and flowers. Each thought of her green eyes sends a jolt of longing through me.

The tool drops from my hand with a clang. Again. I kneel and pick it back up.

Work has dragged on in the past week. Every day that passes is colorless, tasteless, and full of regret.

"Damn, boss," Drew drawls as he saunters over, wiping greasy hands on his coveralls. "You look like you've seen better days."

"What's it to you?" I grumble, my gaze flickering over him. He's right—my appearance is far from its best. I haven't shaved in a week, and I barely ate.

If it weren't for Leo, I would probably haven't gotten up from bed.

Drew arches an eyebrow and stays silent. He doesn't step away. His helicoptering gets on my nerves.

"Where's your sunshine girl?" Drew asks. "Hasn't seen her in a week."

"She left." I look away. Not asking her to stay feels like a punch to the gut, but we're too different... Aren't we?

It still hurts. One fucking week and seeing her go still shreds me.

“Thought you’d have convinced her to stick around.” Drew leans against the car beside me, crossing his arms. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I snap, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand.

It would be hard with only the memories of Olivia. It’s impossible with Drew hovering over me.

A sigh pushes past my lips. “We’re just too different, Drew. She’s a lawyer who smells like flowers, and I’m just a mechanic who reeks of grease. She lives a hundred miles away. She’s a lot younger. It wouldn’t work.”

“Come on, man,” Drew counters, a playful grin forming on his lips. “She loves your nephew and your dog. She likes the town, she has a house. You told me all this. That’s got to count for something.”

“Sure, she gets along with Leo and Bear,” I concede, “but that doesn’t change the fact that our worlds are so far apart.” My heart clenches at the thought of her smile and her vibrant spirit dimming under the weight of my doubts.

Shit. I fucked up so bad. This woman is all I think about, and I kept her at arm’s length the whole time. She never knew how much I want her.

No. How much I love her.

Because that’s what it is. Love. Consuming me and taking over my thoughts. This tug at my chest, telling me to drop it all and go after her. This need to make her smile.

“Seems to me that’s what makes it interesting,” Drew says, giving me a pointed look. “Opposites attract. Like magnets, you know?”

“Or like a car crash,” I shoot back, not willing to entertain the possibility. But damn if I don’t miss her brightness and her will to do good things.

“Either way, it’s worth a shot,” Drew insists, clapping me on the back. “Don’t throw away something real just because you’re scared of getting your hands dirty.”

I stare down at my grime-covered fingers. And I remember my fingers on her skin, how uncaring she was about the mess, and how she enjoyed having my filthy hands all over her.

Am I overthinking? Am I this much of a coward?

Fuck. I am. I am a coward. Olivia made it clear she wanted me, and I pushed her away. I used excuses like Leo and the shop, but the truth is...

There is something worth fighting for between us, even if the odds seem stacked against us. This love is unlike anything I've ever felt. Olivia is like no other woman I've ever met.

I can't lose her.

"Shit, I can't believe I'm going to say this..." I mutter, getting to my feet.

"What, boss?" Drew stops in his tracks and looks over his shoulder at me.

"You're right, Drew," I breathe out, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'll go after her."

His grin spreads wide across his face. "Knew you'd come around, boss man."

I let the thrill take over for a second and smile back at him. A moment later, reality washes over.

"Shit, I'll have to drive Leo with me." And Bear. "Fuck. I don't have a baby seat." I should have bought one by now.

"What are you talking about, boss?" Drew shoots at me, grabbing my shoulder. "You crazy? I have a little brother, remember? I know how to take care of kids."

I pause and gape at him. "What? You're offering to take Leo?"

"Of course! Do you really think I'd stop this selfless act of love?" He smirks. "Besides! If you leave now, that means I'll have the day off."

Laughter makes my shoulders shake. "Thanks, Drew." I start toward my office, then halt. Fuck.

“What now?” Drew asks, already chuckling.

“Bear. You can’t take him with you. He hates you.”

“He hates everyone,” Drew points out. And he’s right. “Take him with you, boss. Girls like puppies. Even if they weigh two hundred pounds,” he reassures me, and I can’t help but feel grateful for his unwavering support.

I smile in gratitude and slap his shoulder, then make my way to the office with new-found determination.

Rummaging through my cluttered desk, I curse myself for not being more organized. My life feels upside down right now, but that’s no excuse for not knowing where Olivia’s address is.

After what seems like an eternity, I sift through a pile of receipts and find the one with her name on it. Thank God.

“Olivia Hammond,” I whisper, running my fingers over the ink as if trying to feel her presence. Her address stares back at me, and a mix of hope and nervousness blooms in my chest.

This is it. For better or worse.

The water droplets cascade down my body as I turn off the shower, mist taking my bathroom. I slip into my silky pajamas, the smooth fabric caressing my skin. The lingering scent of my shower gel envelops me in a cocoon of jasmine and white tea.

It's the perfect self-care session. Well deserved after this stressful day. And yet, all I can think about is the earthy aroma of musk and metal that clings to Miles.

As I brush my hair, muffled music drifts through the window. I frown at myself in the bathroom mirror. What's wrong with these people? It's almost eight. Let a girl have some peace.

The music blares louder. I recognize my favorite song, an old rock that makes my windows shake.

My lips tilt up. What a coincidence! My favorite song is playing out of my window. It's so strange.

So strange to smile now after so many days spent licking my wounds. And I'm not even done.

I'm nowhere close to getting over Miles.

How is it possible to love someone so hard and so fast? To love someone so much, you only hope for their happiness.

Even if it's not with me.

My smile melts away. The pain is still stark, a sore spot I've been avoiding touching.

Miles will be happy. With some other girl, a girl who will raise Leo like her own, and who Bear won't hate. A girl who will kiss Miles goodnight for the rest of their lives...

My vision goes fuzzy. Oh, no. I wipe away the tears. I told myself I was done crying. Why am I not done crying?

The song again. Weird. It's still my favorite song. Is someone playing it in a loop? And how loud can it be that I can hear it through my insulated windows?

I drop my brush and stride to the living room. My bare feet fly over the plywood floors, tender after hours in high heels.

I peer out, catching sight of a man arguing with the concierge on the street below. A dog pops its head out of a car window and barks. The concierge doesn't seem happy as he points at the car.

Oh, shit. Oh, no. The dog... Is the dog Bear? So, the man is...

I recognize that ass. Those shoulders. The truck!

My heart leaps into my throat. What could they want with Miles? Why is he playing music so loudly in front of my apartment?

If the concierge calls the cops on Miles... My stomach plummets.

I dart to the door and throw it open, and then I remember I'm braless and barefoot in my pajamas. So, I run to my bedroom and step into my slippers. On my way out, I grab a silky robe and throw it on.

Miles needs me.

My finger jabs at the elevator button. Three seconds later, and I can't wait anymore.

I rush down the stairs, my legs pumping with adrenaline. My heart lodges itself in my throat.

The song. Miles was playing my favorite song.

I hit the pavement. People have gathered, filming with their phones. I straighten my posture and channel my inner

lawyer. The role is a cloak I put on.

“Excuse me,” I interject, my voice steady despite my racing pulse. “May I ask what the problem is?”

“Ma’am, this man’s been causing a disturbance by playing loud music,” the concierge spits, his expression stern. “And I’m telling him, if he doesn’t walk out, I will call the police!” And he raises his phone.

“Have you tried asking nicely?” I say, turning to face Miles for the first time. His gray gaze sets me on fire. I’m amazed I don’t burst into literal flames. “Would you lower the music, sir? Please?”

Miles swallows, his shoulders square at the sight of me. “Of course,” he replies, and he walks to the car to do so.

The concierge gapes. I’m sure he tried that same thing before, but he’s not me. I have that advantage.

Bear growls at the man, and I step up, offering him a hand to sniff first, then circling his big head with my arms.

“It’s okay,” I tell the concierge. “I’ll take it from here.” My words flow, painting a picture of reason and understanding. “Thank you.”

The concierge gapes between Miles, me, and Bear, then his shoulders drop. “Alright, but we don’t want to be called back here.”

“Understood,” I say, grateful for the opportunity to diffuse the situation. The concierge leaves us alone.

Or as alone as we can get on the pavement.

“Sorry about that,” he says, a sheepish grin on his face. “You didn’t pick up your phone, and that man didn’t let me into the building. That was the only way to get your attention.”

“By serenading me from the sidewalk?” I can’t help but laugh; the tension in my chest evaporates like steam. “You certainly have a unique approach.”

Miles takes a step closer, his skin inches from mine, and sparks fly between us. “Good approach?”

I smile. “Good approach. Like in the movies.” And I press a kiss on Bear’s head.

Miles releases a deep, long breath. As if he had been holding it in since Riverside.

“Can we talk?” he breathes as I rub Bear’s head.

“Of course.” I’m so glad my phone is charging in my bedroom. A serenade is so much better.

Miles bends to grab something inside the car. I open the backseat door and guide Bear toward the building’s entrance. I hold it open for Miles as he locks the car and strides closer. We enter the chilly space of the lobby without a word.

As we step into the white light of the lobby, Miles hands me a bouquet of wildflowers, their vibrant colors dancing together like a kaleidoscope. The delicate petals are as soft as a butterfly’s wing, and their scent as intoxicating as a summer breeze.

My eyes sting.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my heart swelling at the gesture. A smile plays at the corner of my lips. “You did go all out.”

“I couldn’t screw up again,” he says, and there’s so much truth in those words that it scares me.

We walk to the elevator, the silence between us comfortable yet charged with anticipation. As the doors slide closed, Miles shifts nervously, his gray eyes meeting mine.

“Liv,” he says, his hoarse voice barely above a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I tilt my head, waiting for him to continue.

“Sorry for everything before this moment. I should’ve said it sooner. I should have come sooner. No. I shouldn’t have let you leave.” He takes a deep breath, vulnerability painted across his face. “I love you, Olivia. I love you so fucking much that it hurts to breathe when you’re not next to me. Life is unbearable without you.”

His words send shock waves through me, making my chest tighten and my eyes brim with tears. A tidal wave of emotion crashes down on me, and I'm powerless against the force of it.

"Oh, Miles," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion as I squeeze the bouquet to my chest.

Leaning closer, I wrap my arms around his waist, standing on tiptoes to fit into his embrace. His brawny arms encircle me, and I breathe in his familiar scent, grounding me in this intense moment.

"I love you, too," I whisper back, afraid this spell will break. Afraid this is all just a dream.

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open. We stand there, still wrapped in each other's arms, our hearts beating in sync.

I almost let the doors close again, but the promise of what waits for me inside the apartment makes me move.

Miles has a smile on his face when he takes my hand. He still smiles when the three of us—Miles, Bear, and I—walk into my apartment.

Nothing has ever felt this familiar.

“Come on in.” My heart pounds as Miles steps into my apartment. Bear follows behind, sauntering over to the rug and plopping on it like he owns the place.

Miles’s icy gray eyes scan my living room, taking in everything from the soft throw blankets strewn across the furniture to the scented vanilla candles flickering on the shelves.

The warm yellow glow of the last sun rays casts a romantic aura within the room, and I find myself becoming more and more thrilled at the thought of what might happen between us tonight.

“Make yourself at home,” I offer, motioning for him to take a seat. As he sits down on the plush couch, I can’t help but notice how his dark, muscular frame seems even more imposing in my open, pale space.

I put the bouquet away. My heart races faster, my cheeks flushing at the sudden proximity to this man who’s captivated me in ways I never thought possible.

I take a deep breath and settle down next to him, our bodies close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off him. Our eyes lock, and for a moment we’re both lost in each other, the world outside forgotten.

“I missed you, Liv,” Miles admits, his voice hoarse with emotion. “When you were gone... it broke me. I love you, and I’m so sorry I didn’t ask you to stay.”

His vulnerability catches me off guard, but it only serves to stoke the flames of my love.

I sit sideways so I can get closer to him. Miles does the same, almost without noticing, his body moving with mine.

I lean in, my lips hovering just inches from his. His warm breath scatters across the tip of my tongue.

“I missed you, too.” My mouth is parched for his taste, and his eyes drop to my lips. How can someone make me feel this sexy? This desired?

One look from him, and my nerve endings buzz.

“Will you let me apologize?” he asks, his voice trembling with promise.

The promise of love, of belonging, of more pleasure than I’ve ever felt.

I smile, my body calling to his. “How?”

“Oh, Liv... Let me show you.”

Miles can’t resist any longer and closes the distance between us, capturing my lips in a passionate kiss. Our mouths meld together, his tongue dancing with mine in a sensual rhythm.

My hands find their way to his chest, and I grab his shirt and pull him closer, deepening the kiss.

His touch is electric, igniting a fire within me that only he can fan. Miles’s hands explore my body, fingers trailing over every curve and edge, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

The world outside fades away. All that exists is this moment, our bodies entwined, our hearts beating in unison.

This man. This wonderful man.

We break the kiss, our heavy breaths mingling as we gaze into each other’s eyes. The desire mirrored in his expression sends shivers down my spine. Heat pools between my thighs.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers, his voice husky and filled with need. “So fucking beautiful. And you’re mine,

aren't you, Liv?"

I lick my lips, and his gaze fastens on the tip of my tongue. Miles tightens his hold on my hair, and the sting is bliss.

"Show me how much you want me," I challenge him, unable to resist the temptation of pushing his limits.

"Believe me, Liv, I plan to," he growls, his fingers tracing the outline of my collarbone before dipping lower, brushing the swell of my breasts.

I arch my back, silently begging for more contact, and Miles doesn't disappoint.

His hand slips past my collar, his palm cupping my breast. Pleasure is a physical thing, tightening inside me.

A moan spills past my lips, my eyes fluttering shut. Miles teases my nipple through the thin fabric of my shirt. The sensation is exquisite, and I can't help but gasp at the pleasure that shoots straight to my core.

"More," I whisper, my voice barely audible as I surrender myself, eager to explore the depths of our desires.

"More?" Miles chuckles, a wicked glint in his icy-gray eyes. "I'm just getting started."

He kneels in front of me, his powerful hands lifting my foot and pressing a gentle kiss to my ankle. My slipper drops. As he guides my leg over his shoulder, my silk robe drops open, revealing my body to his hungry gaze.

"God, how did I resist you for so long?" His voice is honey, his lips trailing a scorching path up my calf, then along my inner thigh.

Every kiss is torture. Every touch of his lips is exquisite. My heart races, anticipation building with every teasing kiss.

Miles's fingers find the strap of my pajamas, sliding it down my arm and exposing my breast to his heated touch. He growls against my skin as he pinches my nipple, sucking on that soft spot an inch too close to my panties. I shudder, wetness pooling between my legs as desire threatens to consume me.

I'm so wet. I've never been this wet before. Fire roars inside me, and I grab onto the couch, nails digging.

"Please, Miles," I whimper, my voice trembling with need.

"Patience, my Liv," he teases, his fingers tracing a tantalizing path up my leg, pressing against my slick folds through the damp material of my shorts. My hips buck involuntarily, and I'm nearly undone by his touch.

"Ah, so eager," he smirks, his fingers deftly tugging my shorts and panties down, baring me to his ravenous gaze.

Propping my leg over his shoulder once more, he growls at the sight of my glistening pussy. Soaked for him.

"Delicious," he purrs before diving in.

And it's unlike anything I've ever felt.

Miles's tongue licks and sucks at my sensitive flesh, every lap igniting new desire. My head falls back, pleasure spiraling through me like a hurricane, wild and untamed.

Miles's skilled mouth has me whimpering, my hands fisting in his shirt as I hold him close.

An orgasm threatens to blind me. I moan, Miles's lips skating over my clit, slurping with hunger.

"Oh, God! Oh, yes!"

He growls, the sound trembling up his chest to my pussy. I curl my toes. I climb that wave, that wave of pleasure that never broke over me.

Miles isn't done. He flicks his tongue over my swollen clit. Fast. Faster. Every moan of mine urges him on, his fingertips digging painfully into my hips, his lips demanding my pleasure.

And it's like I can read his eyes.

Come for me, my Liv, they demand. And I obey.

The dam breaks, and I cry out, surrendering to the exquisite ecstasy that only Miles can bring. He roars in satisfaction, sucking hard to keep me floating.

An orgasm crashes into another. I shake by the time Miles lets me come down, my legs limp.

Miles is still starved.

He laps up my arousal with a hunger that leaves me breathless. His eyes burn with unquenchable need.

And it's all because of me.

“And that was just the appetizer,” he murmurs, his wicked smirk sending shivers down my spine as he brushes his lips against my hyper-sensitive clit.

I can't wait for the main course.

A storm of desire rages inside me when I see Olivia from that point of view. From between her thighs, her juicy pussy right against my lips, her tits rising and falling with her breath.

She's fucking stunning. Every inch of her, every piece, and every strand of hair. I can't get enough of her.

I'll never get enough of her.

Olivia bats her heavy lids open, her green eyes fastening on my face. "Miles..."

I straighten my spine and lower over her body to brush my lips against her hard nipple. "What is it, Liv?"

My breath touches her skin, and goosebumps tighten along her flesh. So responsive. So eager.

"Bedroom," she stutters out, her voice failing. She licks her plump lips, swollen from my kisses. "Please, take me to the bedroom."

I love hearing her beg, those green eyes sparkling with lust. My fingers curl around her thick thighs, and I throw her legs around my waist. I get to my feet, pulling her up into my arms.

Olivia grabs me around the shoulders, her lips parting in a gasp. I take the chance and kiss her again, my tongue dipping into her mouth. She moans and lets me fuck her pretty mouth with mine as we walk into the bedroom.

Gently, so gently, I lie her down on top of her mattress. There's no time to admire how clean and open the space is, with the last of the orange sunlight spilling past vast windows. I only have eyes for her.

"Please, Miles," she begs, circling her hips against my throbbing hardness. "I need you."

"God, I love it when you beg," I murmur, my voice hoarse. "But now, it's my turn to make up for everything. For being a coward. For letting you leave."

Determined, I lower her onto the pillow, my eyes promising that tonight's all about her pleasure.

She watches with heavy lids as I slowly undress her, each piece of clothing falling away like petals from a flower. My fingers trail along her skin, savoring every inch of soft flesh.

Her full breasts beckon me, and I cup them, teasing her nipples until they're hard little peaks.

"God..." she moans, parting her legs like an open invitation. "Don't stop."

"I'd get on my knees every day just for this view," I growl, taking in the sight of her glistening pussy.

Once more, I lower between her knees. God, this woman. This fucking woman.

She has curves, as if her body were drawn for me. Fucking perfect. I grab her thighs and part them, my eyes on her wet folds.

My mouth finds her center, kissing and sucking on her sensitive clit. The taste of her is intoxicating, like honey and something forbidden.

"Wait... what are you doing?" She giggles, trying to close her legs but failing to shake me off. "You already did that... oh!"

"Thought I'd make you come again," I chuckle, a mischievous grin plastered on my face between laps of her cunt. "You look too good doing it to only watch once."

“Stop,” she playfully murmurs, her arousal undeniable. Olivia braces herself on her elbows and smiles. “If I’m supposed to have whatever I want, then I want you to fuck me.”

Oh, that dirty mouth. How could I deny anything she asked me?

“You sure? Don’t you want to come in my mouth again?”

“Maybe later,” she replies, her smile turning into a grin.

“Not even once?”

Her eyes darken. “Fuck me already, Miles,” Olivia demands, a sultry smile playing on her lips. The words send a shiver down my spine, and I can’t resist her any longer.

I strip off my clothes and savor the way her pupils blow wide when she looks at me. My cock throbs in my hand as I take a moment to admire this beautiful woman laid out before me.

“Damn, Liv. You’re a masterpiece.”

“Less talking, more fucking,” she teases, biting her bottom lip in anticipation.

I growl as I climb onto bed again. My fist squeezes the base of my cock. Shit, I could come just by looking at her. Olivia parts her knees, showing me that pretty pussy.

Reaching between her legs, I play with her little clit then sink a finger, then two into her. She groans, dropping her head back. I take some of her juices and stroke them over my cock before positioning myself between her legs.

And I kiss her. I kiss her and kiss her, committing the taste of her to memory. Olivia holds me close, tilting her hips.

“I’m the luckiest bastard alive,” I whisper against her abused lips, “and I’ll spend the rest of my life proving it to you.”

“I can’t wait,” she purrs.

Our lips crash together in a mad frenzy as I slowly enter her. She gasps, her breath hitching as she adjusts to my size. I

slide in to the hilt, the feeling of her around me almost too much.

She's warm, tight, gripping my cock with this delicious pussy. Nothing ever felt like this.

"Fuck, you feel so good," I say, my voice rough with desire.

"God, yes," she moans, her eyes pleading for more.

As I move, each thrust drags my cock along her silken walls, creating friction that sparks a fire within us both. Her hips rise to meet mine, her nails digging into my back, urging me to go faster.

"Feels so... amazing," she gasps between pants, her green eyes alight with passion.

"Like this, my Liv?" Our pleasure builds and crests like waves against the shore.

"More!" she begs, lost in the sensation of our bodies colliding.

"Anything for you," I promise, picking up the pace with every orgasm that rips through her. I fuck her harder and deeper, our bodies slick with sweat as we race toward the ultimate release.

"Come for me," I whisper into her ear, and Olivia's moans are a sultry siren's call that I can't resist.

She squeezes my cock with her inner walls, climaxing around me, and I have no choice. Pleasure barrels down my spine, and I burst, filling her with my load.

Our bodies tremble together, clinging to each other as if we're the only things keeping each other afloat. The sound of her pleasure is a symphony, and I force my eyes open to watch her.

As our breathing slows, I press a gentle kiss to her lips, sealing this moment between us. Mine.

She's all mine now.

EPILOGUE

Five Years Later

The windows are thrown open, allowing a gentle breeze to dance in the living room. The golden leaves outside are falling. Soon, we'll have snow.

I look over at Lucy, our adorable baby daughter, with her blond curls and infectious giggle. She has Olivia's nose and mouth, but my eyes. The same color as Leo's.

When they go to school, they'll look like siblings. Like blood siblings.

They have one difference, though. Raising Leo was challenging, not because he was especially energetic, but because we were inexperienced.

But Lucy? Lucy's something else. The second she learned how to crawl, she flipped a switch. She spends her day rushing up and down the house, so fast it's unbelievable she's only crawling.

I can't imagine what it's going to be like when she learns to walk.

"Lucy, sweetheart, come here," I call out, trying to keep up with her boundless energy while also keeping an eye on Leo. He's sitting on the dining room table, drawing away with old Bear sleeping next to him. Such a peaceful kid. I'm so glad he doesn't have his sister's energy.

Olivia's heels click on the entryway, announcing her arrival. Lucy squeals and does a one-eighty toward the door.

Leo shoots out from the table and runs in that direction, too, with Bear tagging along and barking.

“Mommy!” Leo exclaims, his small arms wrapping around Olivia’s legs. Lucy does the best she can, propping herself on her knees and stretching her arms up as she giggles. Bear circles them until he gets a pat in the head.

“Hey, sweetie.” Olivia bends down to kiss Leo, her melodic voice filling the room like a soothing balm. She picks up Lucy next, her other hand going for Leo’s hair.

As she straightens up, I can’t help but admire how effortlessly she balances her role as a mother and her career as an attorney. Her dedication to both aspects of her life is clear in her every move.

Living in a small town has its perks for Olivia; the sense of community, slower pace of life, and support from neighbors and friends are a comforting blanket.

She also loves the opportunity to raise our children in her grandmother’s house. It feels like the closing of a cycle.

“How was your day?” I approach her and bury my fingers into her hair, massaging her scalp.

“Better now,” Olivia replies with a smile, planting a soft kiss on my lips. “I helped that family from the farm up north. Remember that industry that was spilling toxic trash into their water? We’re going to sue them. It won’t pay much, but it’s justice.” Her smile brightens. It blinds me every time. “I love helping those who can’t afford the expensive attorneys in the capital.”

“I’m so damn proud of you,” I whisper into her hair, love making my heart swell.

“Language,” she teases, slapping me tenderly. She turns to Leo. “So, what mischief have you three been up to while I was away?”

“Us? Mischief?” I feign innocence, placing a hand on my chest as if shocked by the question. “Why, we’ve been absolute angels, haven’t we, kids?”

“Angels with paint-stained hands,” Olivia quips, raising an eyebrow at me, her green eyes sparkling with mischief.

Oh, yeah. My fingers are still blue from our earlier activities.

“Hey, it’s part of the charm,” I retort with a smirk. “Don’t you love a stay-at-home dad? One who would do anything for his family and his beautiful wife?”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, husband,” Olivia replies with a sexy grin. She breaks the hot tension between us with a chuckle. “Come on. I have to get out of these shoes.”

This is our routine when Olivia arrives home. We make our way to the living room, and she takes her spot on the comfy couch. Leo takes her purse and puts it away. Lucy gets comfortable in her mom’s arms. I get on my knees to undo the straps of her sandals. Bear licks her fingers until she laughs.

Olivia’s laughter fills the room like the melody of wind chimes, and I find myself grinning like a fool. That’s how much I still love this woman.

I plop down next to her, feeling the heat of her body next to me. She wraps her arm around me, pulling me close.

Lucy giggles and makes those baby sounds that definitely make sense in her head. She moves her little hands as if she’s telling a story.

“Hey there, sunshine,” Olivia greets Lucy with a tender smile, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. The love in her eyes is so strong, it could move mountains.

Leo rushes back, clambering onto my lap, trying to balance himself as he wraps an arm around his little sister. His eyes are full of adoration for this tiny person. I never thought an older brother could love his little sister so much.

We stay there, soaking up this love and enjoying our little family. Leo perks up, looking between the two of us with big, hopeful eyes.

“What is it, kid?” I ask, brushing his hair away from his face.

He smiles sheepishly. “I was just thinking... about my birthday gift.”

“Already?” Olivia laughs. “It’s in six months, baby!”

“I know, but it takes time, you said...” He looks between us again. “You promise you won’t laugh?”

“Promise,” Olivia and I reply in unison.

Leo takes another beat. “I was thinking that... this time, I want a little brother.”

Olivia’s eyes go wide. I grin at her.

“See, Liv?” I ask. “I told you. The house is large enough for some ten kids.” And I would love to put them inside her.

It’s primal and possessive and definitely a red flag, but I adore going bareback on my wife, spurting inside her, and watching her belly swell with my child.

Olivia smiles back at me, but this time there’s something different in her eyes. The green sparkles with more love than usual.

She meets Leo’s eyes. “Yeah. I think we can try another. Raise them and Lucy together.” She runs her fingers through his hair. “Would you like that? To be the big brother of two?”

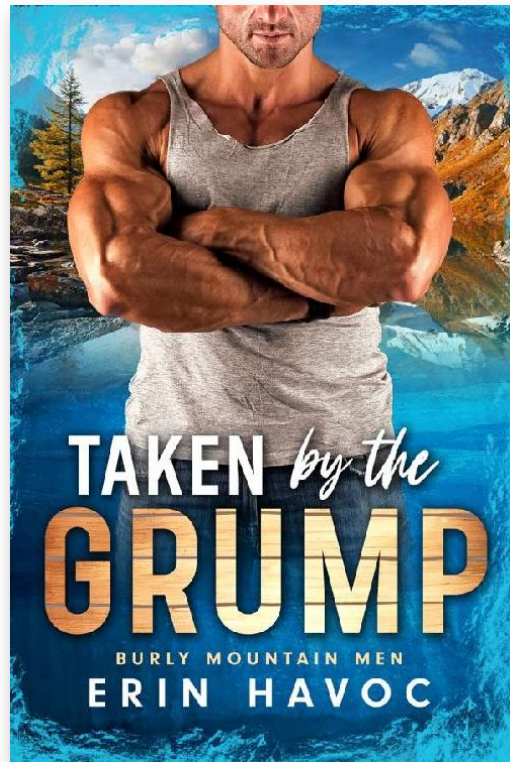
Leo’s eyes sparkle like fireworks. “Yes! Please, Mom, I want that so bad!”

We laugh, and I hug them all close. My family, my heart, my everything.

They’re everything to me. My entire world.

The End

ALSO BY ERIN HAVOC



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Havoc writes steamy romance with curvy heroines. Her heroes might look tough, but they have a soft spot for their girls. No matter if they are mountain men, CEOs, or wolf shifters, there's always a happy ending. Check out her Amazon page for more books, and a link to a free story.

