

**CLAIMED** *by the*  
**GRUMP**

BURLY MOUNTAIN MEN

**ERIN HAVOC**

## BLURB

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

After two years stuck in an abusive relationship, I finally  
escaped.

With nowhere to go and no family to embrace me, I'm on the  
run.

Aspen Glen is the perfect small town to raise the child  
growing inside me.

But I'm still not safe. My ex won't stop until he finds me.

Then I meet Hunter.

Hunter is as handsome as he's mysterious.

Older. Grumpy. A man without a past.

Some say he's a former soldier. Others that he's a criminal  
lying low.

It doesn't matter.

Hunter has a proposal.

He needs someone to pretend to be his girlfriend.

I could use the protection his isolated house offers.

We have a deal. A fake relationship for a month and then we  
part ways.

Hunter makes it clear he's no knight in shining armor.

He has his dark past. I have mine.

Can two broken people heal each other?

Or are we doomed from the start?

# CLAIMED BY THE GRUMP

BURLY MOUNTAIN MEN

BOOK TWO



ERIN HAVOC

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All characters are adults.

Cover by Cormar Covers

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## Epilogue

## Also by Erin Havoc

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# CONTENT WARNING

- Mentions of domestic abuse;
- Pregnancy;
- Graphic violence;
- Stalking (not the hot kind);
- Mention of war-related disability;
- Undiagnosed PTSD;
- Age gap (twenty years);
- Cockwarming;
- Unprotected sex;
- Size difference;
- Degradation.

*Mental health is health.*

# NATALIE



A pang of sadness hits me when I think about how different my life used to be. Back in the city, I had a decent job and enough money to live comfortably.

I could even splurge on nice dinners twice a month. I never thought things could come to this.

Never thought I'd live to see the moment I'd debate whether it's healthier to live off sardines or instant noodles.

"Guess it's protein over sodium," I mumble to myself, grabbing a few cans of sardines and dropping them into my basket.

I scan the shelves for any other affordable options, but they all seem equally unappealing. At least I won't go hungry. So many people have it much worse.

Besides, it's not forever. Yeah, after that whole thing with losing the job, the "accident", and having to run away, my spirits were pretty low. But I'm a half-full sort of person. There's no way my nightmares can follow me across the country like this. There's no way I'm going to be found in this tiny town.

Once I have a new job, things will start looking up. Soon, I won't even remember the taste of sardines.

The thought brings a smile to my lips. Sometimes, it's so hard to maintain my sunny disposition. It's like life is challenging me.



But that's the whole thing, isn't it? It's easy to be hopeful when you have no problems. Courage is keeping a smile despite the circumstances. And a smile I keep after I grab some rice to go with the sardines and make my way to the cashier.

"Hi there!" I greet the cashier with a smile, hoping that the warmth will brighten my day, even if just for a moment.

She smiles back and starts scanning my items. I open my mouth to make small talk when it happens.

A sudden kick. From inside my belly. I jump in place, a gasp spilling past my lips. My hand instinctively goes to the spot hidden under my oversized hoodie.

The cashier catches my reaction and flashes me a friendly smile. "Must be an active little one in there, huh?"

"Uh, yeah," I chuckle, unable to hide my nerves. There's a reason I'm wearing hoodies and sweaters bigger than I am. I want to avoid showing off my belly for as long as possible. I don't need Lars to find me out. Finding *us* out. "A future soccer player, I guess."

The cashier chuckles as she puts my meager items in a single bag. I glance at the total on the register, and my heart sinks.

I'm a few cents short.

With my savings drying up, I withdrew some money several days ago. I might be overreacting, but Lars always "knew someone". What if he could track me with my credit card?

With my card stashed in my backpack back at the hotel, I'm screwed. I start to panic, thinking of what I can put back. Maybe I can live off just rice for a couple of days. Maybe there's a dollar lost somewhere in my things.

The cashier sees right through me. She hands me the bag.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart," she says with a sweet smile. "Pay what you can. I'll cover the difference. Just promise me you'll take care of that baby, okay?"

My eyes sting with unshed tears. I can't deny that embarrassment makes my cheeks burn, but genuine gratitude warms my chest. That's something you don't see in big cities. Nobody cares there.

"Thank you so much." I stroke my belly. "I promise I will."

That small act of kindness feels like a ray of sunshine breaking through the dark clouds that have been following me since leaving my old life behind.

Well. Following me since the first "accident". Since everything changed.

As I head back to my temporary refuge, I pass a window display, glimpsing my reflection. My blond hair is pulled back into a messy bun, dirty and dull, but my green eyes shine back at me. I smile at the reflection. The large hoodie I'm wearing conceals my growing belly for now, but it's only a matter of time before I won't be able to hide it anymore.

I've always been a curvy girl, but there's only so much baggy clothes can disguise.

I wish I didn't have to hide, or to escape. All I want is a safe place to raise my child. If Lars were a decent person, we'd have money to provide for our baby and to live well.

But he's far from good—he's the reason I'm on the run.

I shake my head, expelling Lars from my thoughts. There's no use lingering on those dark memories. They bring me nothing good. Lars belongs to the past, and soon I won't even remember him. I lift my eyes and focus on the goldens and browns around me.

Aspen Glen has been a breath of fresh air since my arrival. It's a charming small town with cobblestone streets and mountain views that feel like I've stepped into a fairy tale. The aspen grove surrounding the town creates a sense of serenity I haven't felt in years.

The trees are a perfect yellow against the blue sky, and the chilly breeze kissing my cheeks helps me forget the problems.

It's almost like I'm on vacation. A little solo trip before I become a mother.

I search for my phone in my back pocket. There's no internet, of course, so I'm sure Lars is not tracking me. It's nothing more than a small camera now, and sometimes I use it to check the maps.

I pick it up and snap a picture of a vibrant red tree, a rusty color so different from the others. The beauty of this place is indescribable. I've been here for two days, and it still steals my breath away. Turning, I snap another picture.

The twist of my hips shoots an ache through my lower back, making me wince. And I can't stop the images flooding my mind. The pain brings back memories.

Memories of pain. Memories I've been trying to ignore.

It's hard when angry purple covers my side, proof of our latest "accident". The latest and hopefully last time Lars touched me.

Once more, I shake my head, dispelling the thoughts. It's a struggle, but I put a smile back on my face.

As I continue walking down the sidewalk, the tranquil atmosphere of Aspen Glen soothes my frayed nerves. This town feels like it could be my sanctuary, a place where I can start anew.

A place where my baby can grow up safe and happy.

The smell of bacon hits me like a slap, and saliva floods my mouth. I follow the scent of food like a bloodhound, my stomach grumbling in protest as I pass tempting restaurant after tempting restaurant.

My meager budget doesn't allow for dining out, but it doesn't stop me from hungrily eyeing the plates of steaming hot dishes through the windows. A pang of longing hits me, but I shake it off, determined to make the best of my situation.

Aspen Glen's charm has sunk its teeth into me, and I'm hell-bent on staying here, even if it means living off rice and

sardines for a while. But soon, I'll have a baby, and I'll need loads and loads of diapers.

I need a job.

Pausing in front of a diner's windows, I gaze at the patrons coming and going. It dawns on me.

"Waitressing," I whisper to myself. It's perfect. I can blend in, keep an ear to the ground, and earn enough cash to keep this baby fed and safe.

I inhale, then slowly exhale. A smile stretches my lips as I pump myself up. That's it. I can do this.

As I step inside, the warm aroma of coffee and bacon greets me like an old friend. The place is buzzing with chatter, laughter, and the clatter of forks hitting plates. I don't have the time to study the decor when a waitress rushes toward me.

"Excuse me," I say as she waltzes past with a tray of steaming dishes. "Could you tell me where I might find the manager? I'd like to apply for a job."

"Sure thing, hon," she replies, a lady in her sixties with bright red lips and colorful glasses. "Just take a seat at the counter, and I'll send her over."

"Thank you," I say, my voice wavering just a tad. I slip onto a stool at the counter, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. My hand drifts to my belly, seeking comfort from the tiny life growing inside me.

I know I'm risking everything by trying to build a new life here, but it's a risk I have to take. For my child's sake and my own. I've spent too long hiding in the shadows, letting fear control me.

And Aspen Glen is where I'll make my stand.

# HUNTER



The sun beats down on my neck, sweat trickling under my collar as I aim. It's unusually hot for October. The gun's metal grip is cool against my palm, a sharp contrast to the sweltering day.

I exhale, feeling the tension in my shoulders release as I squeeze the trigger. Another gunshot pierces the air, and the target flutters, punctured by yet another perfect shot.

A rush of pride washes over me. My lips tilt, the closer I get to a smile these days.

My shoulders relax as I step away and reload. The smell of gunpowder is oddly comforting—a familiar embrace.

The shooting range is the one place I don't feel judged. It's the one place I can be myself.

I line up my next shot, focusing on the black bullseye staring back at me from across the range when my phone buzzes in my back pocket.

My muscles tense, and my brain focuses on immediately picking up the phone. It takes physical effort to stop myself. I don't need to do that anymore. There's no need to hurry to the phone, expecting to be called to duty.

I lower my weapon, curiosity piqued. No one calls me these days. Who the hell would call me now?

The phone goes quiet. The breeze kisses the sweat off my nape. I put the gun away and turn toward the house, leaving behind the scent of expended rounds.

Up the short track, the trees open into the place I call home. It's a big house for a man living on his own, with no intention of changing that. It's nestled on the edge of town, amid the trees—my fortress, my sanctuary.

Climbing the back steps, I glance out at the view from the porch. The treetops stretch out as far as the eye can see, like a sea of green and golden waves crashing against the sky. I never use the space. It always feels like something is missing.

The phone buzzes again as I open the door to the kitchen. I pick it up.

“Hunter.” The military greeting hasn't worn off. I don't think it ever will.

“Hunter! It's Simon!” His voice is as warm and familiar as ever, a welcome surprise. “Haven't you saved my number yet?”

“Not really. People rarely call me anymore. I saw no need,” I tell him as I grab a glass and fill it with water. “How are you doing? You need something?”

Simon's a good guy. We've been friends for years and years, ever since we were first approved for SEAL training. But after we left? I can't seem to face him. I'm not able to face any of them.

Simon clucks his tongue. “Friends call to check on each other, you know? I don't need to ask for anything.”

“True.” A twinge of disappointment reminds me I haven't been useful in a while. I haven't made peace with what I've done to Simon and the others. I take a sip of cool water, my gaze lost in the trees outside my kitchen window. “So, how are you?”

“Busy, with the wedding coming up. But this isn't about me. Listen, man, I've been worried about you. You up there in that big house all by yourself... You don't even have a dog or anything.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Appreciate the concern, but I can take care of myself.”

“I’m well aware.” Simon chuckles. “Just saying. Humans aren’t meant to be alone. You don’t have to be.”

This again. “Just been taking some time to figure things out,” I say, trying to downplay my loneliness. I don’t want Simon worrying about me.

The truth is, I *am* lonely. There’s a deep ache in my chest when I think about it. The sheer silence of lying in bed awake in the middle of the night by yourself. The pain of knowing you will live out your days alone.

I am lonely, but there’s no changing that. There’s no way I would ever force anyone to live with a man like me. No woman should go through that.

“Sure,” Simon stretches the first syllable. “Well, I, for one, don’t want to end up a spinster, so I’m getting married. You coming, right?”

“Of course. I have the suit and everything.”

“Great. Just checking if you remember. Checking if you’re alright. Oh, bring your girlfriend. You said she’s new, but you’ve already RSVP’d her, so you’ve got no choice.” I can hear the grin in his voice. He gives me no time to reply. “Shannon and I will judge if she deserves you, and if she does, I expect a proposal before Christmas.”

“Uh...” Shit.

“Does she know she’s coming? You know girls need some time to choose a dress and everything.”

“Sure. Yeah,” I hesitate, cornered. “She’s great. I don’t know about any proposals, but it’s about time I introduced her to everyone, I guess.”

Shit. I knew this story would come back to haunt me.

Simon was over-worrying about me living alone with guilt as my only company. On a whim, I told him I had found a girlfriend.

And then I might have agreed to introduce her to our SEAL friends at Simon’s wedding.

And now I'm fucked.

Simon is a good friend. He's just worried. It's easier to tell him I broke up with my imaginary girlfriend when I go to the wedding. Of course, that'll be shitty, since they'll have taken her into consideration for food and everything...

Simon laughs. "I'm happy to hear that, man. Can't wait to meet her." Simon sounds excited, and I feel a twinge of guilt for lying to him.

"Great, we'll see you at the wedding," I say, new guilt adding to the usual.

"Take care, Hunter. Looking forward to catching up soon."

"Same here, man. Talk soon." I hang up and let out a long sigh. What the hell am I going to do now?

My entire life, all I wanted was to fulfill my duty to my country. That's what I was taught. Do what I'm good at and keep people safe with my skills. I worked hard for that.

And then I failed. I failed my country, my superiors, my friends.

And all I hoped for was solitude in the aftermath.

My phone buzzes again. I shove my hand through my hair and check the new message.

Noah: You coming?

Oh, yeah. Lunch.

Hunter: On my way.

Shaking off the worry, I grab my keys and make my way to the car. Lunch with Noah has been a staple since I moved



into Aspen Glen. Abigail was a natural addition when she started dating Noah.

The thought of seeing them together brings a strange mix of happiness and envy. They have something special, and I can't help but wonder if I'll ever find that kind of connection.

I can't help but wonder if I deserve something like that.

# NATALIE



**B**alancing a precarious tower of dirty dishes, I weave my way through the crowded diner. Sunday lunch is so busy. I've been rushing back and forth for the past hour.

And though sweat licks my nape, I can't wipe the smile off my face.

My manager catches my eye and smiles back. "You're doing good out there, Natalie! I hope you're getting fat tips."

"I am!" And I've been for the past week, which means I went to the grocery store to pay the cashier back and bought fruits and veggies to cook in my shared kitchen.

Sardine days didn't even last that long, and I'm so grateful for that. Turns out I'm not a big fan of sardines.

I pass the manager to leave the dirty dishes behind. My blond hair swishes back and forth in a ponytail, and I tap the top of my head to make sure the strands are still in place. Whirling around, I make my way back to the tables.

My manager frowns, nodding at my hoodie. "Aren't you hot on that thing, Natalie? We've been having hot days."

That we have. I force a smile and wave her off. "I'm good, thanks!"

Underneath the thick fabric, sweat trickles down my spine, and nausea churns in my stomach. I grit my teeth, determined to keep up appearances—and, more importantly, hide my growing belly. At five months of pregnancy, it's getting harder each day, but I've managed so far.

It's not for long. Just until I'm sure Lars won't find me here.

A couple walks in and takes the only empty table. The two hold hands and steal kisses with every few words. I sigh. This is the kind of love I can only dream of.

"Hello," I say, my voice cheerful as I pause next to them, looking away and giving them a moment to stop sucking each other's faces. "My name is Natalie, and I'll be your waitress today. Can we start with some water?"

The girl looks up at me, and her eyes sparkle. "Are you new in town?" she asks with a smile.

"Um, yeah. I moved here a week ago," I admit, racing my hand down my ponytail.

"Welcome! I'm kind of new myself, you know? We're discussing whether we should stick around these parts or move somewhere different. I was just telling Noah that. I mean, I could never leave the Rockies, but..." She cuts herself in, her eyes going wide. "Oh, look at me, going on and on. You should stop me! Noah never does."

"That's because I like to hear you," the man, Noah, adds, his gaze all over her.

She grins at him. "Look at you. A few months ago, you couldn't wait for me to shut up." She curls her nose at him, and the two chuckle. The girl turns to face me again, and she shoots out a hand. "I'm Abigail, by the way. This is Noah."

"Nice to meet you." I smile when I shake their hands. It's impossible not to. Her enthusiasm is as bubbly as mine, and I immediately know I'm going to like her.

"We should hang out sometime. I'll show you around," she suggests. "I've missed having a girlfriend." She leans forward, covering the side of her mouth with a hand. "Everyone here is so old."

I laugh. "Sure, I'd love to hang out." The thought of making a new friend lifts the weight from my shoulders, if only for a moment.

“Can I get your number?” she asks.

“Can I get you some water?” I reply with a grin.

Abigail laughs. “Yes, please!” And I hurry to the back to pick up a jar of icy water before we exchange contacts.

As I return with the water and glasses, the diner door swings open. I raise my head to tell them we’re crowded, but the man standing there makes me stumble.

He looks like he could have stepped straight out of a romance novel. Tall and muscular, with short black hair brushed back and piercing blue eyes that seem to catch every detail around him. A full beard frames his strong jawline, and tattoos peek out from under his rolled-up sleeves.

My heart skips a beat as our eyes lock for a moment. Electricity zaps through my veins. My ears pop.

It’s like the air pressure has changed. Like something important is happening. My stomach is in knots.

Does he feel this? Do those blue eyes see into me the way I’ve always wanted someone to?

He seems to falter for a second, too. Or so I tell myself.

The man blinks, his gaze turns cold, and he strides towards Noah and Abigail’s table, ignoring me.

I have to physically force my mouth shut. God, was I staring? Worse, was I gawking?

Calm down, Natalie. I know all too well I have a rotten finger for men. There are handsome men everywhere, and all good judgment flies out of the window when a pair of blue eyes look my way.

That only brought me trouble. No matter how much I ache for connection, for love, I have to focus on what’s important now.

Keeping my son safe.

I swallow hard and move toward their table in time to catch the stranger greeting them.

“Noah. Abigail.” His voice is deep, and gruff, and it sends shivers down my spine. I can’t help but imagine the way his beard might scrape against my skin.

Would my insides melt if he whispered with that voice against my ear?

My eyes go wide. Wow, are those pregnancy hormones? They have to be. Right?

“Hi, Hunter!” Abigail greets him, while Noah gives him a nod. Their quiet friendship is obvious, and I watch as he takes a seat at their table. “Look, this is Natalie. She’s new to town.”

Hunter. Even his name is hot.

“Nice to meet you! Here’s your water,” I say, placing the glasses on the table and pouring water into them. Abigail smiles her thanks. “I’ll bring a third glass. Are you ready to order?”

“Yeah,” Hunter grumbles, not looking at either the menu or at me. “I’ll have the burger, medium-rare. And some fries.”

“Same,” Noah says.

Abigail goes with a bacon and avocado skillet, and the mere thought of it makes my stomach grumble. It feels like I’m always hungry these days.

“Noted,” I reply. “Anything to drink for you?” I ask, avoiding looking in Hunter’s direction.

Both Abigail and Noah go for orange juice.

Hunter sits back and crosses his arms over his chest. It’s hard to avoid gaping at his biceps. “Coffee. Black.”

My eyebrows jump. “With your burger?”

Hunter looks up. The intensity of his blue gaze makes me want to bite back my surprise. “Anything wrong with it?” he asks, arching his brow. “I didn’t know there was some new rule on not drinking coffee with burgers.”

I pause, shifting my weight between my feet. “There’s none, of course. It’s just... weird.” I shrug. “Besides, it’s so

hot today. A beautiful blue sky and everything. Wouldn't you like something cold? Maybe some Coke?"

He scoffs. "That's pure sugar. I don't drink my sugar."

My gaze drops to his muscular arm. "You sure don't," I whisper.

Abigail chuckles behind her hand. Hunter doesn't look as amused. He narrows his eyes at me, leaning forward.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Oops, he didn't like it. Damn. I can't say to his face that he's hot. My cheeks go warm. I lick my dry lips. "Just that... maybe some sugar would improve your mood. It's Sunday, after all. Nothing wrong with some sugar here and there."

"There's nothing wrong with my mood. *This* is my good mood."

Abigail snorts this time, and even Noah gawks in disbelief.

"Of course," I reply, opening a smile. Then I'll get you an extra dark coffee to balance all this cheer."

"Thanks." Hunter leans back again, but this time his eyes don't move away from me.

I try to ignore the way his gaze makes my knees weak. "So, two burgers, medium-rare, with fries. A bacon and avocado skillet. Two orange juices, one black coffee. Is that all?"

"Yes," Hunter says. "That's all. You can take your sunshine to the next table."

Abigail and Noah look between themselves and grin. I have no idea what that means.

"Okey dokey. Dark and stormy coming right up!" And I whirl around to leave them.

"Make it a double," he calls after me.

"Will do." Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I stride to the kitchen. Gorgeous or not, he sure knows how to be irritating.

As soon as I've passed their order to the kitchen, my manager touches my shoulder. "Take five," she says with a smile. "You're working hard. I'll cover your tables."

"You sure? We're full."

She winks. "I'm used to it."

I smile in gratitude and make a beeline for the back exit. The morning air is a blessing, even if too warm for October. I amble to the front of the diner and soak in the blue skies. My eyes flutter shut, and I enjoy the coolness against my hot skin.

Aspen Glen has been treating me well. I like the diner and my co-workers. I can picture myself working here. Renting a small apartment, raising my kid.

Yes. I can picture that. A smile tilts the corners of my lips. For the first time, I allow myself to daydream.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's been a while since I got any messages. My relationship with Lars was textbook abusive, and I lost many friends. After blocking his contact, I haven't had anyone to talk to.

Who might be reaching out? It can't be Abigail. I check the screen.

My heart drops.

Unknown number: I know where you are.

A chill runs down my spine, and I slap a hand against the wall, trying to steady myself. It's Lars. It has to be. The number is unknown, but there's only one person who could have sent this.

The thought of Lars finding me fills me with dread, and I know that if he ever gets his hands on me again, things will be far worse than before.

I might not make it. I might not survive.

The heat of my presence crawls over my skin. I glance up to find Hunter's unfaltering gaze on me. His face is hard, made

of stone, but I can almost pretend there's concern etched on his face.

As much as I'd like to believe he could be my knight in shining armor, I know I can't rely on anyone but myself to escape my past and protect my unborn child.

I sink back into the shadows next to the diner, my eyes darting up and down the street. How much does Lars know? The city? The diner? The room I rented?

Will he be waiting for me after work? Will I see the morning?

My heart thumps in my chest, fear a venom in my veins. And I know I must act. I have to do something.

I have to hide again.



# HUNTER



The moment I slide into my car, a sense of ease washes over me. Aspen Glen's safe enough that I never worry about locking the doors. I give Noah and Abigail a casual wave as they continue their lovey-dovey nonsense on the sidewalk. Time to head home.

The sky above is a crisp fall blue, with streaks of clouds stretched thin like cotton candy. As I drive through the trees, golden aspens surround me, their leaves quivering in the breeze like little flames. It's damn peaceful, but my thoughts keep drifting back to her.

To Natalie, the stunning waitress from the diner.

It ain't just her looks that got me hooked. It's the way her blond hair swished on her ponytail, those huge green eyes that seem to see right through me. And her pink cheeks... they make her look so innocent.

But she doesn't elicit innocent thoughts from me. Hell no.

The curve of her hips could make a grown man weep. A perfect ass. She was in a hoodie, and I can only imagine what she looks like under that.

Natalie's curves got me hard, but it's not just that. The way she kept her ground against me? She won't back down. There's a fire in her pupils that burns me.

She has fucking sunshine hidden behind a shy smile.

"Damn it," I mutter, shaking my head. She's too young for me. I should not be daydreaming about her.

But as I steer onto a road winding through the golden aspens, I can't help but wonder what it'd be like to hold her and feel her warmth pressing against me. She takes my thoughts as my imagination tortures me. And this is so unlike me. I don't even remember the last time a woman made me feel this way.

A thump from the trunk yanks me back to reality. Glancing at the rearview mirror, I hesitate, debating whether I'm imagining things.

*Get your head out of the gutter, Hunter.* I scold myself, but Natalie's image lingers, refusing to be dismissed.

My past ain't pretty, and it sure as hell stops me from enjoying the happiness that Abigail and Noah have found. Could someone as bright as Natalie ever see past my darkness and love me for who I am?

Being around her feels like the first spark of life in a long while, like a bonfire on a cold fall night.

"Focus," I tell myself, but it's easier said than done. Every curve of the road seems to mirror the curves of her body, and the rustle of leaves makes me imagine her whispering in my ear.

Oh, the sounds she would make with my hands all over her small frame.

I pull into the driveway of my secluded home, nestled amid the trees. I kill the engine and exit the car, then pause.

The silence here is deafening, broken only by the stirring of leaves and the melodies of birds. A breeze whispers through the aspens, but it doesn't bring the sound of other humans.

It's the closest thing I'll ever feel to peace.

As I close the door, I catch another small thump from the trunk. One time is a coincidence. But two?

My military habits kick in. Adrenaline washes into my veins, setting my teeth on edge. I turn to the trunk, narrowing my eyes.

Fuck. Is there someone inside? Why? Why the fuck would someone break into my car and hide? Did they want to rob me? To surprise me, then steal the car? Maybe they ended up locked there accidentally?

I have no idea, but it doesn't matter. My muscles grow taut with expectation. I tell myself to stay sharp as my SEAL instincts surge to the surface. I anticipate an ambush—someone ready to pounce on me. My body tenses, preparing for a fight.

With one swift motion, I fling the trunk open.

And it's... Natalie.

My heart stops, and my surprise is so intense it's like I've been sucker-punched. Her huge green eyes lock onto mine, wide with fear. She's pale, her breaths coming in quick gasps. She's a trapped deer, caught in the headlights, and I'm the predator about to strike.

We stare for a charged second. I have no idea what's happening. Did I crash the car? Is this a coma? The afterlife?

“Wha—” I try to say something, anything, but the words are stuck in my throat. How the hell did she get in there?

Natalie sits up abruptly, her movements jerky and panicked. Our eyes remain locked, the tension thick between us. Then something changes.

Her nose curls. Her eyes narrow. I'm pretty sure her face goes pale green.

With no other warning, she barfs.

All over me.

# NATALIE



Mortification washes over me as I sit in the trunk, staring at the puke running down Hunter's shirt. Jesus, I can't believe I just did that.

My heart races, remembering my frantic escape from the diner when I thought Lars had found me. The terror was so real, that I'd tried every car in the lot until I discovered one that was open—and jumped right in.

“Oh no. I'm so sorry,” I stammer, my words barely a whisper, my throat raw.

Hunter's face is unreadable. Stony. Emotionless. I can't help but feel a flicker of fear—would he snap like Lars always did?

I glance sideways at the place where Hunter parked. We're at the entrance to a large house... in the middle of nowhere. I swallow hard.

If Hunter wanted to kill me, it would be easy. He's a big, muscular man. No one would hear me scream. No one would miss me.

Hunter leans closer. I wince, jerking away, my heart jumping to my throat. He pauses.

Then he bends down and swoops me up into his arms.

I gasp in shock, my hands flying to his shoulders to keep my balance. He carries me like I weigh nothing. I look down to where our chests meet.

Horror squeezes my heart.

“Hunter!” I squeal, trying to push away from him. My wet shirt clings to his, creating a mess even worse than before. My stomach roils at the sight of it.

What have I done?

Hunter doesn't even bat an eye. He doesn't close the trunk. He marches toward his front door, uncaring about the mess on his shirt.

Lars always detested anything related to sickness. I couldn't even mention I was on my period because he'd get disgusted. And oh, if I even dared to get sick close to him...

The way Hunter holds me close without caring about the mess is... confusing. I'm not sure if I'm impressed and endeared, or afraid he's just too mad to react.

My body goes rigid, lips turning dry with nerves as he carries me inside. My attention travels to the living room once we enter.

His house is a perfect reflection of him—masculine decor, rugged and functional. Lots of wood, beige, and wrought iron. There's a stone fireplace. There's a framed map on the wall and a collection of hunting knives displayed on a shelf.

Hunter walks into the kitchen, a large space with enormous windows that pour natural light in. Sturdy wood cabinets, granite counters, and stainless steel appliances fill the place.

He pulls a chair out and sets me down gently. For a man this big, I would never expect him to treat me like expensive porcelain.

Hunter pulls back, and my gaze lands on his wet shirt. My face burns with shame. “I'm really sorry,” I whisper again.

Hunter shrugs it off. In one stride, he reaches the sink and bends to search the drawers. He wets a tea towel and hands it to me.

The silence presses into my ears as he fills a glass with water. My heart hammers in my chest as I wipe my face.

He surely won't hurt me now, will he? Why would someone worry about cleaning me up if he planned on killing

me?

Hunter offers a glass of water and an empty bowl. I blink at it, unsure what that's supposed to be.

"Wash your mouth," he instructs, his voice clear in command. "Spit it out."

"I can do that in the sink."

"You're unwell. You don't have to stand. Do it." And he tilts the bowl closer.

I sigh, shame making my eyes prickle with tears. Hunter turns away. At least he isn't reacting like Lars did. I'm grateful for his stoic understanding.

I obey him. Hunter puts the bowl inside the sink and starts working on something. With his back to me, I can only hear the clink of a spoon in glass. Hunter turns to me and offers me a glass of water, the liquid still swirling inside.

"There's a teaspoon of salt and a tablespoon of sugar. You look pale. It'll help."

I already feel better. Just being away from the heat of the diner kitchen and out of the bouncing trunk helps. My gaze rises to him.

Hunter's blue eyes pierce through me, assessing the situation with unnerving intensity. He watches me drink. The air crackles. The tension between us is palpable. Strangely alluring.

Or maybe I'm delusional after living my life with no one caring for me like this.

"Thanks," I say, trying to ignore the tingles beneath my skin. "I'm feeling better now."

"Good," Hunter grunts, his eyes never leaving mine. "You can start."

I arch an eyebrow in doubt. "Start... what exactly?"

Hunter's lips twist. "What were you doing in my trunk?"

# NATALIE



I hesitate, not wanting to reveal too much about my past with Lars. Hunter helped, yes, but we never know. If Lars is after me, he could just ask around to find out where I live.

I must be careful. “I had to hide.”

His expression doesn’t change. “From what?”

“A... stalker.” It’s not a lie, but it’s not the entire truth.

“Really?” Hunter raises an eyebrow, his tone sarcastic. “And you couldn’t have asked for help? Called the cops? You decided jumping into a stranger’s trunk was a good idea.”

My lips press into a line. “Considering how annoying you were at the diner, I doubt you’d have wanted to be involved,” I retort, a bit of my own sarcasm creeping in.

“Fair point,” he admits, cocking his head. “Even so, you could’ve chosen a better hiding spot. What makes you think I won’t hurt you?”

“I didn’t know it was your car.”

“That’s much worse.”

“Well, I couldn’t go home. He could be there.”

Something dark crosses his eyes. “And the cops?”

A knot tightens in my throat. “The cops rarely take women seriously. It gets worse when the insulting man has money.” And I brace myself for this argument. An argument I’ve had dozens of times.

Justice is on Lars's side. There's no use involving others. I tried.

Hunter stares. His jaw works. A muscle there flutters.

The tension between us grows, but there's something comforting about this. This... banter.

Hunter shakes his head. His shoulders relax an inch, and if he were a man for sighs, I'm pretty sure he'd release a big one now.

"Alright. It's your life. You do whatever you want," he says, his lips tilting downward as he motions back to the living room. "Do you want me to carry you to the bathroom?"

I curl my nose. "No. I can walk."

"Fine." His brow arches.

"Fine," I shoot back. I don't know why I'm responding like this. Hunter pushes all my buttons.

His brows press upward. I get to my feet and follow him out of the kitchen. He shows me to the bathroom.

"Clean yourself up. You'll feel better."

"Thanks," I mumble as I step into the pristine bathroom. It's spotless and organized, unlike Lars's house. The tiles gleam under the soft light, and every item has a designated place. The contrast is crazy.

I take off the hoodie, knowing it needs to be washed. I turn on the tap and splash cold water on my face, feeling the adrenaline drain away.

As I stand there, I realize how safe I feel in Hunter's presence. There's something solid and dependable about him, like an anchor in stormy seas.

Maybe it's the stoic way he reacted to the whole thing, without complaining or being rude. It's refreshing.

When I leave the bathroom, Hunter is standing there with a sweater of his for me. I accept it, bringing it to my chest. I'm in a t-shirt and it's strange to be this exposed.



There's no way to hide it, though.

Hunter's gaze drops to my pregnant belly. For a moment, a quiet tension hangs in the air. I can almost hear the cogs turning in his brain.

"Put it on," he says, cutting the silence, his chin tilting to the sweater. "I'll wash your hoodie."

"Thank you," I say, pulling the sweater over my head.

The sweater is big enough it almost reaches my knees. I tuck it into my waistband. It's warm and comforting, like the tight hug of someone who cares.

Hunter watches me, speechless, then walks back into the kitchen. I follow him there and pause near the table as he enters what I believe is the laundry room. He's back a moment later.

"Tea or medicine? Maybe some juice?" he offers. I blink at him, confused by the lack of judgment at finding a pregnant woman in his trunk. I swallow.

"Tea would be great."

I watch the muscles on his broad back move as he fills the kettle and sets it on the stove. "Mint tea might help with your stomach," he says, then takes a beat, "Do you know if mint tea is safe for pregnant women?"

I smile at his back, my cheeks flushed with warmth. "Yes, it's safe."

I take my previous seat. Hunter pulls a chair close to mine and joins me, his thigh nearly brushing against mine. My heart races, our proximity filling the room with an electric tension that's both exhilarating and terrifying.

"Tell me about your family," Hunter blurts, his blue eyes seeking mine.

Surprise leaves me at a loss for words for a moment. I clear my throat. "I don't have any," I admit, feeling exposed under his gaze. "I mean, no one but the baby."

He watches me, the silence heavy with unspoken thoughts. I can't help but wonder if he's considering calling the police and reporting me as some crazy chick who's broken into his car.

"Listen," Hunter says finally, his voice low and serious. "I may... have an idea. It'll sound crazy."

My eyebrow arches. "An idea?"

His blue eyes search my face. Tension tightens between us, a fist around my heart. Why do I feel like a live wire under his gaze?

Hunter swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Yeah. I have a proposition for you."

# HUNTER



Staring at her, I can't help but wonder if what I'm about to propose makes me the monster I've always feared. Natalie's swollen stomach is a constant reminder of her vulnerability.

And the whole stalker thing? This woman might be desperate, and I would be taking advantage of that.

My gaze drops to her stomach again. A strange ache builds in my chest, an unfamiliar longing.

I take a deep breath, grounding myself. This might be a solution. This might truly help both of us.

"Alright, hear me out," I say, jumping into the deep end. "How about we pretend we... are dating?"

Her green eyes widen. They widen until I see her entire irises. Shit. If she could go any paler, I'm sure she would.

I brace myself for rejection. Before she can speak, I bulldoze ahead. "Look. I've got this wedding coming up in a couple of weeks, and I told my friend I was seeing someone. If we play this charade, I can keep you safe from your stalker until you're sure he's gone, and I'll have a date to boot."

Natalie bites her bottom lip. She looks away, considering my proposal. Her lips look so soft and inviting, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to lean in and taste them.

"Okay," she says, snapping my attention up. "I get where you're coming from, but..." Another torturous pause, "Are

you sure about this? He's your friend, he'll understand if you tell him you don't have a date."

I sigh. "My friend is... a worrier. To stop his fussing, I told him I had a girlfriend."

She arches an eyebrow, cocking her head. "So, you lied? To your friend?"

A shrug shakes my frame. "A small lie that keeps him happy."

She twists her lips and narrows her eyes. "Okay, but do you think this can work? What if your friend finds out?"

Her voice is as sweet as honeyed whiskey.

*Focus.*

"He won't. It's his wedding. He's going to greet you, be happy for me, and move on," I reply, trying to sound as confident as possible. "And you'll have someone to keep you safe. I ain't gonna let anything happen to you or the baby." I pause, letting her chew on this. "So, do we have a deal?"

She hesitates, her gaze flitting between my eyes and the floor. Finally, Natalie nods, her golden ponytail bouncing around her face. "Alright, I'll do it. But only for two weeks. Only until the wedding."

"Promise," I agree, suppressing a shiver as we shake hands. My fingers brush against her delicate skin, sending an electric charge straight to my core. Her fingers fit perfectly around mine.

The kettle hisses and I let Natalie's hand go. I pour the steaming liquid into two mugs. The fresh aroma of mint tea fills my nostrils as I walk back to Natalie, her lips sunk into her bottom lip.

"Here you go," I say, handing her a mug. Her fingertips brush against mine, sending sparks skittering up my arm like fireflies. I try to ignore the sensation, focusing instead on the way she cradles the mug in her delicate hands and blows gently across the surface to cool it.

Ah, and the sweater. Sleeves covering her knuckles, the garment so big for her small frame. The sight of her in my clothes shoots blood south. I grind my teeth together and take a seat so she won't notice.

"I don't want to get you involved or hurt," she murmurs, her green eyes full of concern. "You've already helped."

"I can handle whatever comes my way."

"Your friend will think you're about to be a father if I show up looking like this," she says, gesturing to her swollen belly.

"Ah, that ain't a problem," I reply, shaking my head. "We can tell him it's from your ex, and we're going to raise him together. That's not a problem. You don't need to hide."

Natalie looks surprised, then nods. "We'll just be helping each other for a little while."

"That's right."

"Okay." Her lips tilt into a small smile. "Where do we start?"

# HUNTER



Natalie stretches her arms toward the back seat, fingers searching for her backpack. I'm faster, opening the back door and hauling her bag over my shoulder.

Natalie huffs as she leaves the car. She tries to get to the trunk before I do, but I have longer legs. I snatch her suitcase before she does.

"You don't have to carry everything, you know?" she shoots, annoyed, as I slam the trunk shut.

"I know, but I want to." I'm not a smiling person, but she makes me want to start smirking.

The strangest feeling.

Natalie tilts her chin up in defiance and hurries toward the door. She steps inside and holds it open for me. I readjust the backpack over my shoulder before following her back inside the house.

The thought of Natalie lugging these bags by herself, pregnant, out of her apartment, into a bus, fearing for her life... It burns. The thought burns, an all-consuming anger inside me. It's unlike anything I've ever felt.

It's blinding, so I avoid looking at it. My teeth grind together, my lips turning in disgust. This so-called man who Natalie fears so much... I wish for five minutes with him. Just that.

"If you want me to carry it, you can say so," Natalie says, that sing-song voice cleaning my head of thoughts of violence.

Whirling around, I arch an eyebrow at her. “What? I told you I’ll take it.”

“Then why were you scowling?”

Oh. “I was not scowling at it.”

“Then at what?”

She doesn’t need to know. I’m such a rotten person I’m daydreaming about ripping the head off an unknown man.

I don’t respond.

We walk into the living room. Her fingers brush the backpack strap near my hand. My arm stiffens.

“Let me take the backpack, Hunter,” she insists, reaching out for it.

“Absolutely not,” I grunt, shifting the weight on my shoulder to keep the bag from her grasp. She huffs, her pink cheeks puffing out like a disgruntled chipmunk, but I can’t help being amused by her fiery temper.

It’s a side of her that ain’t been allowed to flourish. Natalie hesitates too much, wonders too much. I hate to think about the pain she’s been through to be so careful around people.

I want to see her burn.

The door closes behind us and I motion for the space ahead of us. “Living room. Kitchen and bathroom you’ve seen already. The door into the balcony is that way.”

Natalie snaps her head toward me. “A balcony. But it’s a house.”

“The balcony hangs over a patch of the woods.”

Her green eyes sparkle like crazy. “Oh,” is the only thing she says, as if she’s holding back. She glances that way, her cheeks going pink with excitement.

And it’s so fucking strange. This feeling inside my chest, this want to make her smile, to give her whatever the hell she desires. Natalie has been through shit, and the bright way she faces challenges makes me want to protect her at all costs.

God, what's wrong with me?

"Come on." I put the backpack down near the suitcase. "Let me show you."

And it's so worth it. The way her eyes sparkle when she walks into the balcony? And how bright she smiles when she finds the town in the distance? It's so worth it. I stand in silence, watching her. Amazed at her.

With her presence, it's as if something clicked into place. With me.

And the thought *terrifies* me.

"Let us head inside. You can come back later."

We take the hallway to my bedroom. I'm damn grateful I keep things tidy. There's nothing worse than showing a woman your pigsty of a room. That just ain't gonna fly.

I put the backpack and suitcase down on the edge of the bed. "There's plenty of space in the closet. Put your things there so you won't have to bend every time you want to change."

Natalie steps inside after me, her green gaze fastened on the large bed. "Is there just one bed?" she asks, her voice almost flat.

Almost.

"Last time I checked, yeah," I reply, raising an eyebrow.

"Feels like some sort of romance movie," she teases with a grin. "I mean, it's a cliché."

"Can't say I've ever seen any of those," I confess. "Movies ain't my thing."

Natalie raises her eyebrows at me. "But everyone loves movies. Or are you more of the bookish kind? I saw you had some in the living room. And a video game."

I shrug. "Not really. I never had the time for hobbies, so I'm trying to figure out something I like."



The words spill out of me before I can stop them. It's so strange to open up like this. This girl does something to me.

"Well, we're going to have to change that," she says with a determined glint in her eyes. "I'll show you some of my favorites and I'm sure you'll change your mind in no time." And she grins, and that smile makes my stomach flip.

The sun begins setting outside, casting a warm golden glow over the room. I watch as Natalie hangs her clothes in the closet, her touch gentle and deliberate. And, for a moment, I wonder if this fake relationship could ever turn into something real.

But just as quickly as the thought enters my mind, I shake it away. This is all pretend, after all. And someone like me doesn't deserve love, especially not with someone as bright and beautiful as Natalie.

"So, are you going to have the guest bedroom?" Natalie asks once she's done with her clothes and we walk back into the kitchen.

I turn the lights on and shoot her an incredulous glance. "I don't have a guest bedroom." Never had guests, so there's no reason to.

Natalie's lips curl downward. "So, you were not kidding. We're going to share the bed?"

I shoot her another look. "Of course not. I'll take the couch."

I boil another kettle of water and pour us more tea while Natalie tries to convince me against sleeping on the couch. We're halfway through dinner when she gives up.

"You're all so nice here. First, at the diner. I can't believe they understood I had to step away so easily. Now this," she complains, curling her nose. "You shouldn't have to sleep uncomfortably."

I can't help it—a dry chuckle escapes me. "That couch is amazing compared to many of my past sleeping situations. Don't worry your head about that, *spitfire*."

Natalie twists her lips, but she doesn't discuss and she doesn't complain about the nickname. I almost want her to. There's something about the way she fights herself on complaining, and how her temper wins it over.

I like to see the flame in her eyes.

We settle on the couch after she insists we should start watching the movies. Natalie chatters on as she chooses one.

Once she passes the animations, I frown and ask her if she's really going to put me through a child's movie.

Just because I complained, that's exactly what she chooses. I press my lips together to keep myself from smiling. Pretty sure she thinks I'm just scowling.

She puts on *Nightmare Before Christmas*. Natalie sings every song and my attention keeps drifting to her. Halfway through the movie, she shivers, and I grab a fleece throw blanket for her before I crank up the heat.

The sight of Natalie all cozied up on my couch, singing songs under her breath, should not make my heart race. It does. Oh, it fucking does.

I force myself to focus on the TV. It gets harder when she leans against me, her warmth sinking into my bones.

As the movie unfolds, I'm surprised to find myself captivated by the animation. The storytelling has me invested, locked into the story.

"Alright," I say, once the credits roll. "I'll give you this one. Some animations really are impressive."

But Natalie doesn't respond. Glancing over, I realize she's fallen asleep, her head resting on my shoulder. Her breaths come slow and steady, her cheeks flushed pink from the warmth of the room. Her golden hair cascades around her like a waterfall of sunlight, and the sight leaves me breathless.

As I look down at Natalie, her peaceful slumber a testament to the trust she's placed in me, I realize that maybe, just maybe, there's hope for a monster like me after all.

# NATALIE



The car sways gently as Hunter navigates the winding road, his powerful hands gripping the wheel. I try to focus on the golden trees outside, dancing to the breeze, but my gaze keeps finding Hunter's hands.

I had no idea someone could have sexy hands. But Hunter does. Thick veins run down the back of his toned hand. I bet my fingers can barely close around his wrist.

"You ain't feeling sick or anything, are you?" he asks, a hint of concern in his gruff voice.

I chuckle and shake my head. "No, I'm fine. I promise I won't puke all over you again."

"Mm, can you promise that?" And I swear the corner of his lips tilts an inch.

My heart skitters in my chest. He's such a big, cold man. And yet he's taken me in. A part of me is grateful. The other wants to tease him until he breaks. Until he reveals anything.

"Where are we going?" I inquire, trying to keep my tone light.

"We're gonna do some shopping," he explains, his blue eyes focused on the road ahead. "You'll need a gown for the wedding."

My cheeks flush at the thought of attending such an event with him by my side. I would meet his friends, people who know him. And he would have to hold me and pretend to love me.

*Pretend to love me.* I wonder what it would be like to be loved by him.

“But I don’t have any money, just my savings,” I warn him. My savings are all but finished and, with Lars after me, I won’t make money soon.

Will I ever have peace? How am I going to know we’re safe? I chew on my bottom lip and search Hunter’s eyes.

Hunter looks offended, his jaw clenching. “You ain’t paying for anything while we’re in this deal, Natalie,” he announces.

*Announces.* In his tone, he leaves no room for argument.

Arching an eyebrow, I tilt my head to face him. “In my experience, men who like to pay expect more of a girl. I’d rather pay for myself,” I insist. “How about a thrift store? Those, I can afford.” Maybe.

Hunter looks borderline horrified. His hand moves from the wheel and he reaches out for me. His fingers brush mine for half a second before he pulls back and grabs his knee.

A shiver races through me as I imagine his hand around mine.

“I told you, spitfire. I’ve got you covered,” he says, his voice softening.

Tension crackles between us as our gazes lock, and I can’t help but notice how close he is.

Something thumps on the windshield. Rain falls outside, pattering against the glass. It takes me a moment to turn away from Hunter’s eyes.

As if sensing the effect he’s having on me, Hunter grips the wheel and focuses on driving again. My body buzzes with the proximity, with the mere brush of his fingers. I clear my throat.

“Fine,” I relent, as the rain continues to pick up. “But just this once.”

Hunter nods. Something about the way his lips press together makes me think he doesn't agree.

After everything that's happened to me, wouldn't it be nice to have someone taking care of things for a change? Lars wasn't like this. He wouldn't care for me, he wouldn't do nice things. He only wanted to control.

The rain falls in heavy droplets that splatter against the windshield as Hunter parks in the shopping mall's open area. I bite my lip, glancing at him with a mix of uncertainty.

"Are you sure you don't want to try thrifting?" I ask one last time as I peek at the high-end stores.

Hunter's blue eyes darken, and he turns off the engine. The sudden silence amplifies the drumming of my heart as if it's trying to keep pace with the rain outside.

Hunter watches me for a minute. He unbuckles his seatbelt and leans closer, cornering me in the small space between us. My breath hitches, and heat pools in my belly, setting every nerve alight.

"Listen, spitfire," he says, his rough voice velvety to my ears. "You're going into that store, you're gonna pick out your favorite dress, and I'm gonna buy it. Got it?"

My skin tingles as his gaze flicks down to my lips and back up to my eyes, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. I swallow hard, my mouth dry. It feels like all the air has been sucked out of the car, replaced only by the electric charge crackling between us.

"Also," he continues, "we need to find a nearby doctor to monitor your pregnancy. I promised to keep you *and* your child safe." The unexpected tenderness in his voice is my undoing.

How can someone this big, this cold, feel so warm?

"Fine," I whisper, my gaze on his lips. My breath comes out in shallow gasps, and for a moment, I think he might kiss me.

Instead, Hunter pulls back.

“Let me take care of it.”

And I want to believe him. I do.

I huff, the tension between us still palpable. His tone brooks no arguments—not that I have any left in me.

With a roll of my eyes, I push open the car door and step out into the rain. The water soaks through the fabric of my hoodie. But just for a moment.

Hunter stands next to me, his jacket draping over my back. He puts one of his thick arms over my shoulders in protection and leans closer. That big body makes it easy to hide from the rain.

He’s close, too close. The smell of his musky fragrance makes my head swim. He’s warm like a forest fire. I sink into him a little further.

We reach the store and slip inside. And just like that, Hunter’s gone, and my body immediately misses his. Something tells me it’s not getting easier from here.

# NATALIE



A jolt wakes me up, and I cover my belly with my hand. The baby kicks again. I sigh, stroking circles there, mentally caressing my child to calm them down.

But they keep going.

“Well, you’re active today. Couldn’t have waited until morning, could you?” I chuckle, dropping back onto the pillows.

Hunter’s bed is so comfortable. I could get used to sleeping here. It’s been only a couple of days, and I already can’t imagine myself without this softness. For a guy so serious and grumpy, he has an amazingly comfy bed.

Sleep stretches its tendrils toward me, but every time I doze off, the baby kicks again.

“Alright, baby,” I whisper, then sigh. “I’m awake.” And aching for a bathroom now. With a grumble, I get up.

My feet touch the floor and I half-expect to wince with the cold. But it’s pretty warm. Hunter kept the heat on. I let myself smile.

As I leave the bathroom, my gaze finds the silhouette on the couch. I pause. The moonlight casts a gentle glow over Hunter’s naked, muscular back, making his skin look like silk. My heart races.

I stand there and stare at him. At how male and beautiful he is. Without a sound, I approach him, drawn in by his presence.

The moon catches the scars scattered across Hunter's right shoulder and down his back. I frown.

My heart aches for him, wondering what he's been through.

Alongside the scars, intricate tattoos of feathers climb down his arms. Wings. I stretch out my hand, my fingers hovering over the drawings.

Hunter values freedom. Is that why he lives so far from the city? Is that why he prefers his loneliness?

What's his story? I yearn to know more about this mysterious man. I crave to hear more about him.

Hunter jerks awake. I almost jump out of my skin. His eyes are alert, scanning the room before landing on me.

I realize how close I am to him, feeling the heat radiating from his body. Shit. He's going to think I'm a crazy stalker.

Hunter sits up, revealing his chiseled chest.

Good. Now my heart's racing even faster. Can a person have a heart attack from seeing too much hotness?

Hunter's face twists in agony for a second before his expression morphs into one of surprise at seeing me. "Shit, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he says in the gruff voice of someone who has just woken up.

"You okay?" I whisper, even though it's just us in the house.

"Yeah. Just a nightmare."

A nightmare. How hard was his life for him to wake up from such nightmares?

"What are you doing out of bed?" he asks, concern lacing his voice.

"The baby's kicking up a storm," I reply, covering my belly with a hand.

Moonlight illuminates Hunter's face when his eyes shoot to my stomach. "A good kind of kick, I hope? The healthy



kind?”

This time, I can't help but smile. “Yeah. The healthy kind.” The baby starts kicking again. “Oof. There they are.”

The way Hunter looks at me can only be described as yearning. I can't believe he's looking at me like this. Am I dreaming?

A wild thought occurs to me. I take a deep breath and ask, “Do you want to feel it?”

Silence stretches between us, tension humming in the air. Will he do it? Will he touch my stomach, feel my child moving? I'm almost afraid to hope.

Which is good, because he glances at my belly again, then shakes his head. Disappointment is a bitter pill.

I clear my throat, trying to salvage the moment. “What was the dream about?” I ask, as softly as I can.

Hunter's lips press into a firm line. “Don't worry about that.”

“Of course I do. Talking might help.” Undeterred, I make my way closer, drawn to his body heat.

As I sit next to him, our arms brushing together, electricity sparks between us like fireworks. His eyes are blue flames in the darkness.

“You can trust me,” I whisper.

My heart beats in my throat. Those eyes pierce into me, seeing through me. Hunter leans an inch. His body presses closer.

Hunter snaps out and straightens his back. “You should go back to bed. You need your beauty sleep,” he says, and though there's sarcasm in his voice, I know it's fake.

Why can't he open up with me? Does he think I'm so foolish I can't be trusted?

I huff at the thought.

“Why do you have to be so obstinate?” Frustration colors my voice. I push myself off the couch, feeling the sting of rejection burn deep in my chest.

And I hope he’s going to stop me, but he doesn’t. There’s an undeniable connection between us, one he refuses to acknowledge.

One I will not let go.

# HUNTER



The enticing aroma of bacon invades my senses, dragging me from the depths of sleep. My eyes flutter open to find sunlight spilling into the living room.

It's early. My clock goes off at six and it hasn't made a sound yet. But there's so much sunlight...

I stretch my stiff limbs as my stomach rumbles. My thoughts turn to Natalie, and I wonder if she's the one filling the house with that heavenly smell.

I sit up and search for my shirt. Scratching my chest, I find the item in a pool near my feet. I pick it up and put it on. Finally, I check my phone.

Eight o'clock. Holy shit. I can't even remember the last time I woke up this late. What happened to my alarm?

Padding barefoot to the kitchen, I chew over the matter. The second my feet touch the floor tiles, I freeze.

The sight before me makes my heart skip a beat.

Natalie bustles around the kitchen clad in her pink pajama set, showing off her delicious thighs, and her blonde hair tied in a messy bun. Her green eyes sparkle with concentration as she flips pancakes with practiced ease, her pregnant belly leading the way.

It's like I died and this is heaven. A gorgeous woman preparing breakfast as if she were mine. As if the child in her belly was mine.

As if this was usual and we were a family. I can't help but watch her with a mixture of admiration and desire. Awe steals my breath away.

"Morning, Mr. Grumpy Pants," she teases, glancing at me with a smile that lights up her pink cheeks. "How did you sleep?"

I grunt. "Can't complain. I did oversleep."

Natalie shoots me a grin. "I'm the one who turned off your alarm. I thought you deserved a bit of rest, and then I'd have the time to prepare breakfast."

I arch an eyebrow. "Why would you do that?" This woman! She's maddening.

"Because you've been preparing breakfast every day since I arrived. It's not fair, is it?"

Narrowing my eyes, I march to her. "How is it unfair that I want to keep you from working? You're pregnant."

"I'm pregnant, not dead." She narrows her eyes back at me, and we stare for a moment.

"You're challenging," I tell her, leaning against the countertop as I try to ignore the strange feelings bubbling inside me. I ain't one for falling for someone so easily, but damn, Natalie throws all of my plans out the window...

"So you slept well," she cuts me in, flipping another pancake onto a plate.

"Like a log," I say and pick up a mug, "as I mentioned, I've had worse."

"Just because you had worse, it doesn't mean you should get used to something bad again," she shoots back. "I still don't like the whole sleeping-on-the-couch thing."

Coffee steams off my mug, and I can't help stepping closer to Natalie. "Is that an invitation for us to share the bed, spitfire?"

Her cheeks burn red, but her green eyes narrow in defiance. "Only in your dreams."

Ah, she's been in my dreams. My dreams are twisted flashbacks, scenes of war and death mingling with memories of my routine. Until Natalie walked into my life.

Now, I dream. And I dream about her.

It's painful how much I want this woman to stay in my life. How hard I need her closer.

"What I meant," Natalie goes on, turning the oven off, "is that I'm the guest, so I should keep the couch. That's the logical thing to do."

"The logical thing is to put the pregnant woman on the bed," I correct her, walking to the table and putting my mug down. "Juice or hot chocolate?" I ask. She brewed coffee for me, but I know she's avoiding coffee during the pregnancy.

"Juice," she replies without missing a beat. "And I don't want you to treat me differently just because I'm pregnant."

I snort. "Natalie. You're carrying a child inside you. Of course I'll treat you differently." Then I shrug. "Not that I'd let you take the couch if you weren't."

"Oh, so you admit you're just pigheaded?" she asks with a smirk as she puts the pancake plate in the center of the table.

"Call me what you want, it's my house, and I won't allow you to sleep on the couch."

She twists her lips but doesn't say a thing. I'm afraid I insulted her, but when I glance her way again, her pink cheeks glow and her eyes sparkle.

God, this woman. Only a handful of days and I'm head over heels. I'm in awe, and obsessed, and utterly, completely... falling in love.

That's a first. I'm falling in love with this hurricane of a woman.

And I have no way out.

# HUNTER



We take our seats and I pile my plate high with pancakes and crispy bacon. It's not what I usually have, but it's home-cooked and perfect. I even pour syrup over it all.

"Alright, let's talk strategy," I say, trying to regain some semblance of control over my thoughts. "We need to convince Simon that we're dating, and we barely know each other."

Natalie nods, taking a bite of her pancake. It's quite the effort to pry my eyes away from her lips, curling around the fork, her little tongue lapping at the syrup on the corner of her mouth.

My cock jumps in my pants, but I'm already used to it. It never goes down around her.

"Maybe we should quiz each other on likes and dislikes, so our lie is more convincing," she suggests. "Just like the movies."

"You have a point. We can't wing it, especially with someone as perceptive as Simon."

"Of course I have a point. I'm so smart." And she smirks, victorious.

It takes everything in me not to smile back. "Go on, spitfire. Tell me something about you."

"Um, I love sunflowers," she shares, her eyes gazing into the distance. "They remind me of happy times, and they always brighten my day."

“Sunflowers, huh? Good to know.” I can’t help but imagine Natalie surrounded by a field of vibrant sunflowers, her face glowing with happiness. “Alright. What else? Favorite food?”

“Anything that has mashed potatoes.”

Mentally, I write the items down. Buy sunflowers. Buy more potatoes, mash them once a week for her...

“I listen to blues. My favorite movies are always animations...”

“That I already know.” And this time I can’t help but open a small smile.

The things this woman does to me.

Natalie’s cheeks go bright pink and she smiles back. “What about you?”

I sit back. “No favorite flower. They’re all the same to me. Food? Maybe a burger. Medium-rare. I like rock music, anything with a strong rhythm. No movies.”

“Well, you’re easy to learn about,” Natalie teases, curling her nose and grinning. “Tell me something deep. A truth you don’t usually share with people.”

I think about it for a minute, but I don’t need to. I know what to tell her.

“Professionally, I’m a Navy SEAL.”

“Oh,” she mouths, her gaze giving me a once over. “Yes, it makes sense.”

Shit, is she checking me out?

“Wait, how do you work all the way from Aspen Glen?” She cocks her head, her golden hair spilling down her arm. “Or are you on vacation?”

“I’m retired.” A shrug. “Had some pretty good investments work out, saved all of my money working too much. I’m not young, too.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty-five.”

“Oh.” Her silence makes my stomach sink. I gaze at my plate.

“You?”

“Twenty-five,” she shoots back, almost too fast for me to understand. “So, how you being in the Navy is something deep and secret?”

I nod. She’s twenty years younger, holy fuck. Talk about a wake-up call. “I’m not proud of some things I’ve done as a SEAL. I did what I had to do, but it doesn’t mean I enjoy remembering it.”

Her eyes soften. Natalie reaches across the table, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. “It takes a strong person to admit that, Hunter.”

That well-known warmth spreads through my chest at her words. “You’re one of a kind, you know that?”

“Aw, shucks.” She smiles. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Damn right it is.” I roll my eyes, feeling lighter, despite the circumstances. “What about you? Tell me something *you* don’t tell people.”

Natalie’s face darkens. She doesn’t like the question. Her eyes flit away and she chews on her bottom lip for a moment. She’s wondering if she should share something.

The darkness goes away. She looks back at me with a forced smile. “I don’t know how to ride a bike.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Really? Why?”

She shrugs. “No one ever taught me. My parents were never home. I’d go to school, then go straight back home to care for things. Never learned to ride a bike or swim.”

“That’s awful, Natalie.”

“I know.” She shrugs. “Maybe when the baby’s grown, we can both learn together.”



The words almost come out—I'm about to tell her I'll teach her and the kid. I hold them back at the last second.

Natalie's hiding something else, but I won't press her. I won't force her. That wouldn't help.

“Okay, next question,” I say, breaking my reverie. “Favorite ice cream flavor?”

“Chocolate fudge brownie,” she answers with a smile. “You?”

“Vanilla,” I reply, and her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “What? I hardly eat ice cream.”

“Mr. Grumpy Pants, buff and dangerous, likes vanilla ice cream?” She chuckles, shaking her head.

“Ah, so we're now judging each other's preferences?”

“Don't judge my animation movies!” she quips even before I say anything. “They're good! You saw they're good!”

I can't help but chuckle. Natalie's eyes sparkle, her gaze dropping to my mouth. She shouldn't do this. And worse, her cheeks go pink. While she's looking at me.

My smile drops. Tension builds, crackling between us. Our gazes are locked together. I can't look away. I can't stop looking at her.

Natalie is beautiful and warm. She's a flame in my cold heart, thawing the feelings I had forgotten I had. She makes me want to become better.

She makes me want to laugh and be happy. With her, I all but forget the guilt that's my usual company.

Natalie drops her fork. She stares back at me, and I swear there's pleading in her eyes.

Reaching out, I grab her chair and bring it closer. She lets me. She says nothing. Her knees fit between mine. Her lips part.

Every nerve ending is alive with the electricity that seems to crackle between us. It's intoxicating. Terrifying.

“Let’s try something else,” I whisper.

“Such as?” She raises an eyebrow, the challenge in her gaze setting my blood on fire.

“Kissing,” I suggest, surprising myself with my boldness. “We should make sure it won’t be awkward when we have to do it in front of others.”

But deep down, I know I just want to taste her lips, to feel her warmth pressing against me, even if it’s just for a fleeting moment.

My heart races. I’m afraid she’ll pull away, slap me, curse me. Instead, Natalie swallows and tilts her chin up. There’s no teasing in her eyes.

“Fine,” she agrees, nodding slowly. “Yeah. I think that’s a good idea.”

As our faces draw closer, the air around us thickens with tension. Our breaths mingle.

My heart races like a wild stallion. I expect Natalie to pull back at any second. My fingers brush her chin, up her jaw. I feel the silkiness of her blond strands.

Natalie’s soft lips meet mine. She tastes sweet from the syrup. It gets me weak in the knees.

I pull her closer, my hands finding purchase in the back of her head, her hips. With my tongue, I part her lips and dip inside.

Natalie moans softly against me. Her hands shoot up to grab my shirt and keep me close. I feel myself growing even harder, the sensation both thrilling and dangerous, but I can’t seem to pull away.

The kiss is slow, gentle. I explore her mouth with languid, long strokes of my tongue. She lets me, keeping up easily. Natalie tilts her head and lets me devour every tiny sound she makes.

Then it comes back. Her age. The age difference. Her pregnancy. Fuck. No. This is wrong.

My heart almost rips through my rib cage when I break the kiss. My entire being burns with need and desire as I look down at her flushed face.

“That should do for now,” I manage to say, my voice husky.

All I want is to sit her on my lap, fit her pretty ass against my hard cock, and kiss her until her lips are swollen.

“Sure,” she whispers, her eyes shining, her lips wet.

I turn back to breakfast, forcing my hardness down. This shouldn't have happened. It was the best kiss of my life, but it shouldn't have happened.

Natalie is much younger and vulnerable. She needs me. She needs me to keep her safe, not to kiss her and fuck her until she creams my cock and...

I shake my head. She's driving me insane. I was never a man for losing control like this. And yet...

And yet she makes me question everything. Natalie makes me want so much more.

# NATALIE



The moonlight filters through the trees outside, casting dappled shadows on the kitchen floor. I rummage through the cabinets, craving something sweet. It's funny how my three-a.m.-hunger is only for sweet things.

The nocturnal symphony of the forest fills the air. Crickets chirp, an owl is hooting in the distance, and the leaves rustle to the night breeze.

A low grunt comes from the living room. My heart skips a beat, and I tiptoe towards the sound.

Hunter is sprawled on the couch, his muscular frame tense. He grunts again, deep in the grip of a nightmare.

My heart squeezes. I can only wonder at the terrible things he dreams about. I lean closer and touch his shoulder, the skin warm beneath my fingertips.

Hunter starts awake. Beads of sweat glisten on his forehead, and the intensity in his blue eyes is raw like a storm.

"It's okay. You're safe," I whisper.

Hunter's eyes narrow at me, his jaw grinding. He doesn't like me seeing him like this. "Go back to bed, Natalie. I don't need your pity."

"I'm not offering pity," I quip, glaring back at him.

"Then what?" he growls, sitting up.

I'm torn inside. Should I open up to him? Maybe that could help him see that vulnerability isn't weakness. Maybe

it's time to take the plunge.

“Hunter, I need to tell you something...” I take a deep breath. “I have nightmares, too. I get that it's not the same as what you have... I don't have war experience or anything, but...” A knot forms in my throat. I push through it. “The man who's stalking me.” My hand curls over my stomach protectively. “He's my ex-boyfriend. Lars. We lived together for a while and... he didn't take the breakup easily.”

I wait, the silence pulsing between us. Hunter's expression shifts from hurt to fury. Pure, unbridled fury. His fists clench, knuckles whitening. A vein pops on his temple.

“He did... What...” His voice falters, breaking with anger. “Is he... He's stalking you? Because you broke up?”

I nod, unable to produce words.

Hunter's big frame quivers with restrained anger. “That piece of shit better not come near you or the baby. I swear, I'll tear him apart if he tries anything.”

A shiver runs down my spine at the ferocity in his voice, but it's also oddly comforting, knowing someone wants to keep me safe for a change.

“Thanks, Hunter,” I whisper.

“Did he know? That you're pregnant?”

I shake my head. “I was too afraid to tell him. He's not a good man. What if he forced me to... to give up the baby or something?” A shudder of fear races down my body. “A baby with Lars was never in my plans. He would just use the baby against me.”

Lars was that evil. He'd force me to do his every bidding in exchange for keeping the baby safe. Lars is not able to love. He doesn't have a heart.

So, I ran. I want the baby. I want to keep them and raise them and love them like no one ever loved me. But to do that, I had to be far from Lars.

I sit next to Hunter on the couch, leaving only inches between our bodies. His strong presence is like a magnetic

force, drawing me closer.

“Natalie, I promise you,” he says, his grave voice echoing in the living room. “Just stay close, and I won’t ever let him hurt you.”

I smile and touch his hand, wordlessly. He understands. He understands how grateful I am to have found him.

Hunter sighs, stroking the back of my hand. “My nightmares... they’re about the things I’ve done. The choices I’ve made.” His voice cracks. “The people that died under my command.”

I squeeze his fingers. “You were doing your duty, Hunter. You’re a good man, and you want to help me. That means something.” I look into his deep blue eyes, searching for any doubt. “We all make mistakes, but they don’t define us.”

The tension in the room thickens. Our faces inch closer. My heart races as if it might leap right out of my chest. It feels electric the moment our lips meet.

No testing, no teasing. It’s not about the deal.

The kiss is soft and tender at first, then ignites into a wildfire of passion. His tongue teases mine, dancing playfully like we’re two flames entwined. His beard scratches the bottom of my lips and my chin. I smile into the kiss.

No kiss has ever felt like this. Like home. Like this is the right place. The place I’m meant to be.

Hunter breaks the kiss. “Natalie,” he whispers, his fingers brushing my cheek, “you’re too bright, too young for someone with my past.”

I shake my head, dismissing his concerns. “Hunter, you care for me like no one ever has. That’s what matters.” My fingers brush against his beard, finding comfort in its rough texture.

He kisses me again, deeper this time. His hands wander, exploring my body. Desire builds, lust tightening between my hips. My skin tingles beneath his touch, every nerve ending popping.

And that's when I know it. I'm falling for Hunter, and that scares me more than anything else.

Would he want me to stay after this is done? Can I allow myself to fall without fearing getting hurt?

Hunter caresses my face, much gentler than I expected of a man his size. "You need rest. Let me put you to bed."

I smile, my heart swelling with affection for him. I nod, knowing sleep will be scarce as my thoughts race with anticipation.

As my entire body thrums, aching for him.

# HUNTER



*M*y grip tightens around the pistol as I aim at the target. Normally, I can focus with laser-like precision, but today, all I can think about is Natalie and the way her lips felt pressed against mine.

The memory of that electrifying kiss haunts me, making it goddamn impossible to concentrate. Last night, it was already hard to fall asleep.

I squeeze the trigger. The bullet hits off the mark, an inch to the left.

“Nice shot!” Her voice rings out behind me, startling me out of my thoughts. I immediately lower the gun. I didn’t hear her approach over the earmuffs.

“Jesus, Natalie.” I exhale, my shoulders relaxing. “You should never sneak up on a guy with a gun.”

A new kind of fear seeps into my bones. The fear of accidentally hurting her. Of turning too fast, of missing the mark.

I grind my teeth together. Shooting is the one hobby I brought from my time as a SEAL, but I might drop it. I might shut down the shooting range.

The thought of ever hurting her is too much to handle.

Natalie opens a tight-lipped smile. “I’m so sorry. You’re right. I should have waited.”

I put the safety lock on and turn to face her. “You’re up early again.”



She shrugs. “Baby won’t let me sleep past six, apparently. They wake me up every night at three, then at six. And I’m not even that far off.”

Natalie ambles closer, her eyes studying the shooting range I built. It’s not much, just a walled area five minutes from the house. I never expected I’d have more people around, or I would have built it differently.

“This place is... interesting. Having a shooting range is exactly the kind of thing I pegged you for.”

I narrow my eyes at her as she opens a smirk. “It’s just something I’m good at, so it became a hobby. Just to keep my head off things.”

“No other hobbies yet? I haven’t seen you reading or playing video games.”

“Besides protecting pretty blondes from their psycho exes?” I quip, arching an eyebrow at her. “Not much. Working out? But I guess that’s not a hobby.”

“It looks interesting,” Natalie says, her eyes on the targets. “Teach me how to shoot?” She tilts her head, her green eyes sparkling with excitement.

I hesitate, running my free hand through my hair. Should I involve her in this dangerous side of my life?

At the same time, it might be worth it. Natalie could defend herself. She could do something if her ex ever threatened her again...

“Alright,” I relent, and her face lights up like Fourth of July fireworks. “But only the basics. I don’t want you getting too comfortable with this.”

“Deal.” She grins, stepping closer to me.

I unload the pistol and describe each part. Natalie’s face grows serious as she focuses on my explanation. I warn her about ways it could go wrong and accidents that happen in shooting ranges. She nods along, eyes wide in concentration.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask once more, needing her confirmation before we proceed.

“Positive,” she replies, determination painted across her delicate features.

“Alright.” I walk her to the edge of the shooting range, the place I position myself to shoot. “Come. Stand right here,” I instruct, positioning her just in front of me. Her body is so close to mine now, I can almost feel the warmth radiating from her.

“Like this?” she asks, glancing back at me with those pretty green eyes.

“Exactly.” I nod, taking a deep breath to steady myself. “Now, let me show you how to hold the weapon.”

Natalie’s fingers curl around the unloaded pistol. I slide my arms around her shoulders, reaching for the pistol she’s holding. I place my hands over hers, molding her fingers around the grip.

Our bodies press together, and the tension between us rises like a tidal wave. I can feel her heart racing against my stomach, and my pulse quickens in response.

That sweet fragrance of her wafts up to me. It overpowers the scent of nature, of the trees and rotting leaves. My mouth waters.

And the way her small body fits against mine? Perfection. She’s all curves. Soft like a cloud, smooth like a pearl. Her delicious ass presses against my thighs, and my hard cock—always hard around her—nudges the small of her back.

“Relax,” I murmur into her ear, not sure if I’m telling her or myself.

Natalie blows a breath, her body relaxing against mine. Is she tense because of the weapon or because of me?

“You’re doing great,” I tell her and a shiver races down her body. I feel her tremble against me.

“Thanks,” she whispers back, her voice faltering ever so slightly.

I show her how to cock the weapon, how to squeeze the trigger. She tries it a few times as my hands hover over hers.

No idea why this looks so fucking erotic. My body is a raging inferno, burning against her. And every time I tell her something, she shivers.

Are her nipples tight and hard because of the shivers? Fuck, how would her tits feel on my hands? Soft and heavy, the peaks hard as rocks.

Would Natalie moan or whimper when I touched them? How long would it take me rolling her nipples for her cunt to get wet?

Fuck. That's wrong. I shouldn't be fantasizing about fucking her while there's a weapon involved. This is irresponsible.

This is absolute nonsense.

I shouldn't have accepted it to begin with. Natalie's too gentle, too kind for such violence. I can't bear the thought of her being hurt or hurting someone else.

Worst of all, I can't bear the thought of her having to defend herself. If she had to, that meant I wouldn't be next to her, ready to give her my life.

No. This is wrong.

"Alright," I shoot, pulling away from her. "That's enough for today."

"Did I do something wrong?" she asks, concern filling her eyes.

"No," I reassure her. "But I don't want you to get too comfortable with this. You shouldn't have to protect yourself. That's my job." I stare at her in the eyes. "Natalie, I'll always protect you. Even after our deal is over. Lars won't touch you."

She chews on her bottom lip. "But what happens when this is all over?"

"Lars won't touch you," I repeat, every word resonating inside me.

This might be madness. Natalie isn't mine. She might never feel the same way toward me.

But I can't bear the thought of her getting hurt. Loving me or not.

"Oof," she says as I take the gun from her hands and put it away.

"What's up?"

She curls her fingers around her stomach. She doesn't need to say anything.

I can't help but glance down at her belly, wondering how it would feel to touch her there. To feel the life growing inside her. But there's a reason I refused when she first offered.

I'm not worthy of that light; I'm too rough, too dark. My hands are tainted with blood. How could I ever touch something so precious?

"Would you like to feel?" Natalie whispers, the air crackling with unexpected intensity.

I say nothing. I do nothing. The one thing I manage is to stare. The yearning in my chest—the yearning to have her, to love her, to raise this child—grows bigger by the moment.

Natalie takes one step closer. She grabs my hand, her small fingers curling around my wrist. I freeze when she brings my palm to her stomach.

I don't pull back.

Our hands rest on top of each other on her belly, her skin warm beneath mine. The baby moves, just a gentle shift, but enough to send a ripple of emotion through me.

My heart jumps to my throat. I can't tear my eyes away from her beautiful face. From this beautiful woman, who makes me a monster like me feel loved for the first time.

"Thank you," I whisper, hoping she knows how much that simple gesture means to me. As we stand there, our hands still touching, I can't help but pray. Pray that I might stay close to her and protect her for as long as she'll let me.

# NATALIE



God, will I ever stop being hungry? I shoot out an arm, searching for my phone on the bedside table. It has to be almost morning. There's no way it's the middle of the night and I'm this starved.

Three in the morning. As usual. The baby is probably doing his evening yoga or something.

Two hours of restless sleep have done nothing to curb the gnawing emptiness in my stomach. I've always been a curvy girl, and I never held back from eating what I love, but this is getting ridiculous.

I shift to sit up when footfalls catch my attention. Hunter appears in the doorway, his big frame creating a shadow.

"Hunter?" I murmur, searching for the table lamp and turning it on. Dim orange light inundates the room, illuminating Hunter's face.

He stands there, shirtless, bulky, amazing. He's holding a plate of snacks. My stomach grumbles in response.

"Thought you might be hungry. Guess I was right," he says in that delicious, rough-as-gravel voice.

The sight is undeniably funny. A huge, serious man with a plate piled high with cookies and apple slices and cheese. A grumpy knight in shining armor.

"God, thank you." My eyes light up at the sight of the food, and I can't help but smile. "I've been sleeping like crap lately. All the baby wants is food."

“No wonder, the baby is going to weigh one pound by the end of the week. They’ll start sleeping regularly, though. We should get you a pregnancy pillow.”

I nod, but I’m so focused on the food I don’t register what he says. As I throw off my sheets to accept the plate of food, the meaning of his words sinks in.

How does he know all of that? Was he looking it up?

The possibility makes me flush with happiness. I glance up as I bite into an apple slice, searching for Hunter’s eyes.

Hunter’s gaze lingers on my exposed leg. He’s mute, his eyes wide, and his lips turned downward in horror. I follow his line of sight.

To a fading bruise on my thigh.

When I’m standing, the shorts cover it, but now, with the fabric bunched, there’s no hiding it.

“Um...” I start, trying to cover my leg. “That’s... that’s...” Shame is a knot in my throat.

I feel stupid every time I remember. Why didn’t I walk out earlier? Why was my self-confidence so low I thought it was better to stay?

I watch Hunter’s hands curling into fists. His lips tighten, but he says nothing, giving me space to continue.

“I found out I was pregnant and had to run away. He was abusive and...” My voice cracks, fear and determination mingling within me. “Lars hit me. He liked to hit me. I think it made him feel powerful. Manly. And he’d tell his friends I had an accident, but I think they knew, and no one did a thing.”

Hunter’s anger flares, his muscles tensing as he clenches his fists. “I promise you, Natalie, he won’t lay a finger on you again.”

His protectiveness should scare me, but it doesn’t. Lars’s possessiveness was different. I was an object, a pet, someone supposed to obey him. Lars felt entitled to whatever he wanted.

Hunter's protectiveness is like I'm part of his family and he doesn't bear seeing me hurt. I've never felt this safe in my life.

I nod, looking down at the plate. Hunger has escaped me now, with the memory of Lars's beatings. I eat a cookie and a couple more apple slices and put the plate away.

Hunter sits next to me, his knee an inch from touching mine. His hands slowly open and he reaches out to touch my jaw.

The touch is a feather. Gentle, less than a brush. Hunter cares. A man this big, and he holds back even from touching me too hard. That's how I know he would never hurt me.

"It's not your fault," Hunter whispers. "None of it. Don't feel ashamed. Don't feel guilty. This man is a rat. No person deserves to be treated like that, no matter what they do."

Unshed tears blind me. I can't find the right words.

Hunter's fingers sink into my hair. I fit my face into his palm, fluttering my eyelids shut.

"Leave that rat behind," Hunter says. "I'll keep you safe and you won't ever have to fear anything."

I open my eyes and our gazes lock together. It's hard to breathe, like trying to suck air through a straw. And yet, I find myself wanting more.

Nothing ever felt like this. His warmth, his touch. I ache for more.

"Would you... stay with me tonight?" I ask, my voice barely audible.

He hesitates, his blue eyes searching mine for any hint of hesitation. Finally, he nods.

"Alright. Just for tonight."

Hunter puts me under the covers, then turns off the light. I follow the sound of his footsteps around the bed and the way the mattress sinks beneath his weight.

His warmth encapsulates me. As we lie in bed, our bodies close but not touching, the anticipation is suffocating.

I'm wide awake. I turn on my side, scooting closer to his beckoning warmth. The mattress shifts as he does the same.

His breath scatters over my cheeks. "I'm sorry for losing my temper the other night," Hunter says, his voice rough and gravelly. "When you told me about your ex being the stalker. It just makes me so mad. So fucking mad."

"It's okay," I whisper back. "It's good to know someone has my back."

"Of course I have your back. I've never felt this way about anyone before, Natalie."

His confession makes my heart swell, and the words tumble out before I can stop them. "No one has ever cared for me like you do, Hunter. No one."

Silence stretches between us and his fingers brush along my jaw, tentative, searching. I reach out, intent on grabbing his shirt, but my hand finds only warm skin.

The contact sets me on fire. A flame ignites between my hips and I scoot even closer, racing my hand up his muscular chest to his shoulder. My fingers sink into the hard flesh of his biceps.

Even in the darkness, Hunter can find my lips. He kisses me hard, our bodies drawn together by an irresistible magnetic force. The taste of him sends electricity coursing through my veins, igniting every nerve ending in my body.

As our mouths explore each other, his strong hands roam down my sides. Lava courses through my veins. I've never been this horny in my entire life. My brain is foggy with lust and I'm two seconds away from jumping this man.

The mere touch of his fingers on my skin might make me burst.

His hand comes back up to my face. I whimper into the kiss, my heart beating too fast. I sink my nails into his arm, pulling him closer.



“You should stop touching me,” Hunter growls in my ear, his breath hot and heavy.

“No.”

“You should stop if you want us to just sleep.”

I shake my head, brushing my lips over his prickly beard. “Please, touch me,” I beg him, my voice raw with desire. “Please. I need it so bad.”

Hunter growls, and his big body shifts to half-cover mine. He yields to my plea, brushing his fingers down my neck and collarbones. My skin prickles with delight, my back arching into his touch, pleading for more.

His hand travels downwards, finding my breast. Hunter’s lips hover over mine as he devours my soft whimpers. A big hand curls around my breast, squeezing, massaging it. He joins his fingertips, finding the nipple through the fabric and pinching it.

The sensation sends me spiraling, and I’m dangerously close to climaxing with just that single touch. “Oh, God,” I moan, scratching at him so hard I’d be surprised if he’s unhurt in the morning.

“You’re so needy for me,” he whispers, his voice laced with lust. “Keep doing these sweet sounds.”

Hunter pulls back and I almost cry out, but there’s no time. He slips a hand under my shirt and finds my bare breast. A loud moan escapes me this time. Hunter eats it up.

I don’t have enough focus to keep up with his kisses, so it grows sloppy, anxious. Hunter tortures me, my arousal growing with every touch.

I need more. I need to feel him, too.

Hunter’s cock is hard and pulsing against my hip, begging for attention. I reach down, trying to wrap my fingers around him.

Hunter stops me, thrusting his hips against mine. “Don’t,” he says, desperation evident in his tone. “Fuck, don’t touch me. I won’t take it. Let me make you feel good first.”

“Please,” I whimper, my need overwhelming me. “Please.”

“I’m right here,” Hunter breathes against my mouth. “Tell me what you need.”

“I need you to touch me.”

“Where?” His fingers trace my stomach, then play with my waistband.

“Lower.”

“Here?” He slips his hand under the waistband of my pajama shorts. His fingers find my wet heat and my blood ignites.

I cry out, my hips bucking off the bed, into his hand. I can almost feel his grin against my cheek as he covers his fingertips in my arousal, circling my clit.

“So ready for me, aren’t you?”

I nod desperately, unable to form words. Hunter’s fingers glide along my slick folds, teasing my clit, making my hips buck off the bed.

“Oh, oh,” I whimper as Hunter gives in, dropping his teasing act.

He skates his fingers over my clit, giving me exactly what I want, the way I want it. It doesn’t take long for the waves of bliss to rise within me, crashing over me like a tsunami.

My jaw drops and I scream my pleasure. Hunter kisses me then. As I climax on his hand, Hunter’s kisses never falter. They anchor me through the storm, bringing me back to the safety of his embrace.

“Wow,” I whisper between breaths, my body still trembling from the aftershocks.

Hunter wraps his arms around me. “Sleep now. There’s more where this one came from.”

And though I want to go all the way, my body does as he says. The relaxation is too much and I melt in his arms, trusting Hunter will keep me safe and happy.

Trusting Hunter will let me stay.

# NATALIE



*Z*ipping the backpack shut, I glance at my suitcase once more. Anything else I need to take? No, I don't think so. The party gown has its hanger and Hunter has already put it in the car.

Well. Then I think I'm ready.

The wedding is tomorrow and butterflies flutter in my stomach at the thought of it. My heart races with both excitement and dread.

This is it. This is where it ends. And what happens then? What happens after we've convinced Hunter's friend that we're together? What happens once we're back?

Hunter makes me feel special. He makes *us* feel so special. But can I trust him? I trusted men before, and look where that got me.

The door creaks open and Hunter walks in, his towering presence commanding my attention. I turn to face him.

He's a walking contradiction—his rough edges wrapped up in an appealing package. His tall, bulky frame fills the doorway. Piercing blue eyes threaten to steal my breath away.

My heart skips a beat like it always does when he's near.

"Everything okay?" Hunter asks, his voice low and impossibly sensual. I can tell he's concerned, his gaze scanning my face for any signs of distress.

I press my lips together. "You still afraid I'll puke all over you, Mr. Grumpy Pants?"

A small smile stretches his lips. “Won’t you, spitfire?”

My mouth drops open in mock offense. Truth is, morning sickness is gone, thank God. I’m only praying it never comes back.

Hunter’s brows furrow as he hesitates. “You sure you’re up for that car ride? It’s gonna be two hours, Natalie.” He runs a hand through his black hair, ruffling it in frustration.

“Of course,” I insist, determination lacing my words. “I’m not backing out of our deal.”

His eyes darken, and tension hangs heavy in the air like a storm cloud ready to burst. “I don’t give a fuck about the deal. Natalie...” He crosses the space, coming to stand in front of me. “If you’re not comfortable about the whole thing, we can drop it.”

“But why wouldn’t I—“

“You’re pregnant. It’s a two-hour drive. You’ll meet a bunch of new people. You’ll have to pretend we’re...” Hunter clears his throat. “The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable?” I scoff, folding my arms across my chest. “Hunter, this baby changes nothing. I can handle a car ride and a wedding.”

His eyes search mine, and I see the vulnerability he tries so hard to hide. The doubt.

He’s trying to balance his protectiveness with my need for space. My comfort with his instincts. I get it. It’s hard to find the right spot when everything’s so new.

I don’t even know what’s going to happen once we’re back.

“Did you...” I start, tilting my head up to meet his gaze. “Did you think of what you’re going to tell Simon?”

“What do you mean?”

“About the pregnancy. Don’t you think we should... hide it?”

Hunter shakes his head. “No. We stick to the truth. You don’t have to hide anymore.”

And though his words are pure honey, I can’t ignore a nagging. Like when you enter your bedroom and you know someone moved an item, but you can’t tell what.

A part of me wants to stay. The coward part wants to ask Hunter to stay, and come up with some excuse about not feeling well. But that’s our deal. Besides, I have no reason to fear this wedding. No one there is going to hurt us.

Hunter tilts my chin up and brushes a kiss on my brow. “You look distracted. I’ll make you a snack.”

As if ignited by his words, my stomach rumbles. I smile at him as Hunter tugs me out of the bedroom, toward the kitchen.

Still, a million possibilities pop up in my head. I have this bad feeling, but I don’t know why, and because of that, I question everything.

My hand curled around my stomach, I tell myself everything will be alright. That in three days we’ll be back.

Or will we? What if his friends don’t like me? What if they mock Hunter for dating a girl pregnant by another guy?

What if that’s exactly what he needs to hear to step away?

Hunter is a rock, and I ache to hold on to him. To let myself trust. I can’t help but fear this won’t last.

Fear that this was nothing but a dream. A beautiful dream, and I’m about to wake up.

# HUNTER



Laughter and lively chatter fill the luxuriously decorated hall, while strings of fairy lights twinkle above us, casting a warm glow on the elegantly dressed guests. White and yellow flowers decorate vases and tables, and several people photograph the carefully designed centerpieces.

The place is packed. It shouldn't surprise me, since the church was also crowded, but it still does. I can't deny a slight discomfort.

I might have gotten used to living in a tiny town, far from people. This large number makes my skin crawl. And not just because of me.

I squeeze Natalie to my side, my hand on her shoulder. My head swims with questions—is she comfortable? Does she want to leave? Is this too much, too hot, too bright? Glancing down, I search her face.

And I can't help but catch my breath at how stunning she is.

Her dress fits like a glove. A V-neck exposes just enough of her cleavage to make my mouth water. Long sleeves reach her wrists, and the flowy fabric touches the top of her shoes, not constricting her stomach. A pink ribbon, matching the dress, marks her waist, ending over her stomach in a bow.

Her blond hair is neatly pulled back into a sort of bun, curly strands framing her face. Natalie held back on the makeup, only wearing mascara and dusty pink lipstick.

She's absolutely glorious. Her face glows as if a fire burned inside her. Every time I see her pressed against me, I fall in love a little more.

I can't fathom how a man like me, a man with my past, has been rewarded with such a woman. What a lucky bastard.

Natalie glances up at me and catches me staring. Her lips curl into a knowing smile. "You think I'm pretty, don't you?" she says with a chuckle.

"You have no idea." And I lean closer, brushing my lips to her ear. "I'm afraid to touch you too hard and you dissipate into smoke. Are you even real?"

Natalie giggles and I can't help but smile at her. This woman has my whole heart.

A man walks past, his gaze lingering on Natalie's curvy body. A flare of jealousy ignites within me. I bare my teeth at him as Natalie glances away.

She remains oblivious to the hungry eyes that follow her, and it makes me want to shield her from them even more.

"Son of a—" I start to mutter under my breath, only to be interrupted by the arrival of a familiar face.

Simon strides in with his bride, Shannon, on his arm. My friend tilts his chin in greeting to the other guest, and the two are all smiles.

I nod in his direction and his smile grows, if possible. The scar on the side of his face wrinkles with his grin.

Seeing Simon is never easy. The scars and his missing right arm are a testament to the battles we've faced together. Moments I let him down.

Simon never held his losses against me, but it doesn't change the guilt I feel.

Even with all the trouble, tonight he's happier than I've ever seen him.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" Simon grins, pulling me into an embrace. It's a bit awkward on my part, but he doesn't



seem to notice. “I mean no offense, but you’ve become such a hermit I didn’t expect you to show up.”

“Offense not taken, because you’d usually be right. But not today.” There’s honest affection on my face when I squeeze his shoulder. “Congratulations, man.”

“Thank you! Remember Shannon from the one time you met before you started dodging my invitations?” Simon asks, making me wince.

“Of course.” I offer a hand to Shannon and shake it. “Congratulations, Shannon. I’m happy for you two.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” Shannon replies, but her eyes are not on me. “Who is this beautiful woman? She can’t be your date, Hunter.”

“Simon, Shannon, this is Natalie,” I introduce her, pride swelling in my chest. “Natalie, meet Simon and his wife, Shannon.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Natalie says shyly, extending her hand.

Shannon bypasses that and pulls Natalie in for a hug. “It’s such a pleasure. You look gorgeous.”

“You too...” starts Natalie, a bit off-kilter after the sudden affection.

Shannon pulls back, grinning at Natalie’s belly. “And you guys already have a bun in the oven! Oh, Hunter, I’m so happy for you. Simon used to tell me all about your brave stories. How hard you fought for him. You deserve all the best.”

Her words catch me off guard. I almost don’t believe them.

“So glad to meet you, Natalie,” Simon beams, offering a hand and shaking Natalie’s. “Hunter didn’t mention you guys were expecting! I wouldn’t have asked him to come all this way.”

“That was no problem,” Natalie says, glancing up at me. She wants me to tell them. She wants me to say the baby is not mine. That it’s someone else’s. And I know she’s afraid of their reaction.

But none of it matters. I squeeze Natalie to my side again. “You know me,” I tell Simon. “I’m discreet. Besides, I wanted to surprise you. We’re starting our family, and I’ll do my best to make this kid the happiest in the world.”

Natalie’s eyes brim with tears when our gazes meet. Love makes my heart grow twice its size.

Simon’s brother rushes toward us. “Oh, hey, Hunter. How do you do?” We shake hands and, before I can introduce him to Natalie, he turns to Simon. “You should get ready. First dance and all.”

Simon smiles at us. “Don’t disappear on us!” And he takes his wife to the dance floor.

I hold Natalie close again, my hand stroking circles on her back. The music begins and Simon and Shannon take the floor. We clap. Then it’s the parents. We clap a bit more.

Though I’m easily the tallest guy in the place, it still suffocates me. So many people. And the woman of my life is right here. I can’t help but think of all the scenarios of things that could go wrong...

Natalie touches my chest. “You okay?” she whispers.

“Yeah,” is my immediate response. I don’t even think about it.

She arches an eyebrow. “You’re tense.” She presses the hand on my chest down. “I can feel it. Why don’t we sit down?”

“It’s the first dance. It’s important for him that I watch. That’s my duty as a friend.” Then I pause. “Unless you’re feeling off. Are you okay?”

Natalie rolls her eyes and smiles. “Hunter. Stop thinking about what you have to do for others. Duty toward Simon. Toward your country. Toward me. Think about you. I’m okay. Simon is okay. What do *you* want to do?”

She’s right. Natalie’s right. I’ve spent too long putting others first, and it’s not making me a better person. And I should become a better person to deserve her.

I nod and take her hand. “Let’s step back.”

Natalie smiles as she follows me to the edge of the crowd. I can’t stop looking at her. She’s gorgeous. And she’s all mine.

Then her gaze drifts away from me. She looks somewhere else... and her face goes ashen.

Natalie freezes on the spot.

“Natalie?” I call, and I snap my head that way, searching for whatever made her feel like this.

Searching for whoever makes my girl tremble like this.

# HUNTER



There are so many people here. I can't tell where the threat is, or what she sees that has her like this. My heartbeat kicks up a notch.

"What's wrong?" I urge her, but she's wide-eyed and mute, her jaw locked. Her hand shakes in mine. I step in front of her, cutting her line of sight. "Natalie?"

The light in her eyes flickers like a candle being snuffed by the wind. She's paler than that first day when she threw up on my chest.

She tries to offer me a smile, but it doesn't fool me. "I'm fine," she stammers.

My anxiety grows. She's lying. Why? Why does she feel the need to? Adrenaline floods my veins. I have to protect her.

I swing around in time to see him. A man walks our way, a smirk across his ratty features. He's short, bulky, with blond hair buzzed to his scalp.

There's something about him; something that makes my gut churn. And I immediately get it.

The one person who could make Natalie afraid. The one person who hit her until she broke. Until she left. Until she ran for her life.

"Ah, Natalie," he sneers, his voice dripping with fake nicety. "Fancy seeing you here. We all thought something terrible had happened to you."

Natalie looks down, an arm covering her belly as if to protect her child. “Why are you here? How did you find me?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper. Her grip on my arm tightens, and I pull her closer.

Lars’s eyes drop to her swollen stomach, then up to me. “Are you...” He narrows his eyes. “No, you’re not old enough to be her father, and I know he’s dead. Who are you again?”

“This is Hunter,” Natalie says, her voice firmer. “He’s my boyfriend. And I don’t know how you found me, but...”

“Found you?” Lars cackles. “Oh, someone thinks highly of herself. Shannon worked for my dad and he asked me to come in his place. Do you really think I’d waste my time hunting you down?”

Natalie’s face crumbles. “It wasn’t... you following me? Sending me those texts?”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lars shrugs, glancing over his shoulder at the dance floor. “I have a busy life. Not my problem if you don’t want to be part of it. I mean...” His gaze drops to her stomach again. “Since you’ve run away, I’m guessing you don’t want me involved in any of this. Good for me.” Lars looks up and smirks at me. “Lucky you, Natalie. You found someone who doesn’t mind picking up another man’s leftovers.”

My blood boils at his words, my fists clenching so hard that my knuckles turn white. Natalie flinches at his comment, and I struggle to keep my anger in check.

A part of me wants to punch him into a pulp. The other part reminds me this is Simon’s wedding and I don’t want to ruin his special day.

“Listen, piece of shit,” I growl, putting Natalie behind me as my protective instincts kick into overdrive. “I suggest you get lost before I make you.”

“Is that so?” Lars smirks, not intimidated even when he’s half my size. “You wouldn’t dare raise a finger. Don’t you know who I am? My father has more money than you can ever dream of.”

As if I give a fuck about this weakling's daddy.

"Please, guys, let's not do this," Natalie pleads as she steps between us. Her eyes flick up to me, green pools of worry. "This is Simon's wedding. We don't want to cause a scene."

"Fine by me," Lars sneers. "I'm just impressed by how fast you found someone new." His eyes narrow, fixed on Natalie. "Did you cheat on me with him? Is this *fetus* even mine? Is that why you left?"

"How dare you!" Natalie exclaims, her face flushing with embarrassment. "You know I would never—"

"Didn't think you had it in you," Lars scoffs, his disdain dripping from every word. "I never expected you were the kind of woman who changes men as she changes clothes..."

"Shut up, fucker," I snarl, feeling my control slipping. My hands itch to grab hold of him and show him what I think of what he's done to Natalie.

I tremble with barely restrained rage, but I keep telling myself Natalie doesn't need another violent man in her life. She needs me to protect her, not scare her. Not embarrass her.

"Whaveter," says Lars. "Have fun picking up the pieces," he shoots my way, then turns to Natalie. "I only ever gave you the best, and yet the first chance you have, you throw yourself into the arms of a nobody who obviously has no control. Good luck with that," he spits before walking out.

And I would punch him—if that wouldn't prove his point. My arm shakes with wrath, but his words are a bucket of cold water.

Fuck, he's right. Natalie's light calls me in because I live in the darkness. She's beauty to my ugliness. She's hope to this never-ending guilt I feel.

I am violent. I am a monster. He's right.

Should I really put Natalie through this?

I face her, my hands curling around her arms. She winces, jumping in surprise. I let her go. Fuck. Fuck, is she afraid of me?

“He’s gone,” I tell her, trying to hide my fear of hurting her.

Natalie relaxes a tiny bit, then releases a sigh. “Okay. I’m okay. It’s all okay.” She strokes her belly nonstop, as if reassuring both herself and the baby. She glances up at me, but her gaze doesn’t lock with mine. “I need a minute, actually.”

“Sure. Let’s find our seats...”

“No, I mean...” Her gaze travels around me, unsure, fleeting. “I need a second by myself. I’ll find the restroom.”

Natalie doesn’t wait for me before she walks out. She leaves me standing there, with my heart shattering in my chest.

This is it. This is the end of a dream.

This is where Natalie finds out I am, in fact, the monster I warned her about.

# NATALIE



*M*y heart still pounds like a thousand thunderstorms in my chest by the time I leave the restroom. The party swirls around me, laughter and music and the clinking of glasses creating a cacophony.

My head swims. Lars said he's not the person after me. Then who is it? And that message, saying they knew where I was... It's something Lars could have said.

Or am I imagining all this? Am I so broken that I created a narrative of a sequence of coincidences?

What if all the times I thought someone was after me, I was imagining things? I was so afraid of Lars, looking over my shoulder... Could I have imagined the man in the hoodie? The one following me? Were the messages sent to a wrong number?

I'm dizzy. I need to find Hunter.

Hunter. What will he say when he finds out it was all nonsense? A stranger puked all over him, then slept on his bed for two weeks, saying she feared for her life... And then it turned out she was imagining things?

I walk along the edge of the room, my eyes searching for Hunter's huge frame. Hunter is dependable and strong, the polar opposite of the storm cloud that is Lars.

Yes. Yes, I can't forget that. Hunter feels this connection. That part is no imagination. It's no accident. He'll understand. Surely.



At least I hope so.

As if summoned by my darkest thoughts, I feel a vice-like grip on my arm. Someone whirls me around, too hard for it to be Hunter. My heart skips a beat and I gasp, stopping myself before I hit him.

Lars glares at me. He's much shorter than Hunter, but he's still taller than me. His bulky frame looms over me like an angry shadow. There's disgust on his face. All masks are off.

"Thought you could just walk away from me, huh?" he snarls, his voice dripping with malice, his eyes wide, bloodshot.

"Let go of me," I say, trying to sound confident, though my voice trembles like leaves in a gale. "I have nothing more to do with you."

"Nothing more? You're carrying my child, Natalie," he spits venomously, shaking me like a rag doll. "You belong to me. You've always belonged to me. Do you really think you could outrun me?" His smile is an evil grin. "No one escapes me. Not even in that backwater Aspen Glen."

My stomach plummets. "How do you—"

"Oh, please. It was so easy to track your phone. We should always know where our things are, right?"

I squirm, trying to release his hold. "I'm not a thing. And I'm not yours, or anyone's. Let me go or I'll scream."

His hold tightens. I wince. Blood stops reaching my fingers.

"Will you? Are you sure? Because you know I hate a scene, Natalie. I've always hated drama. People should solve their problems inside their houses, not in the open. That's what the cop said, right? The first time you called the cops on me."

I swallow the knot in my throat, fear burning my eyes. "You bribed him. You bribed him so he wouldn't take me seriously."

Lars smiles. "It's so easy. When you have money, you can have anyone in your pocket."

“So it was you,” I say, glaring at him. “Following me. Sending the threats.”

“Of course not. Do you think I have time for this? I paid someone to. Someone to follow you, to find you, to keep an eye on you. As I said, I don’t like losing my things.”

“Why?” I whimper, a tear escaping down my cheek. “Why do you want me so much? You don’t even like me.”

He shakes me once. “Because I say that you’re mine, and I hate it when things don’t go the way they should.” He pulls me closer to his body and I stumble. “Now, we’re going to make our way back to my car, calmly. You’re going to smile. Don’t worry, I won’t hurt our kid. I know exactly what to do so I’ll get you to obey without hurting my kid.”

“Stop!” I protest, my heart hammering wildly against my rib cage. I wish I had Hunter’s strength, his unwavering resolve. My gaze snaps around me, desperately searching for him. “Please!” I struggle, sinking my heels onto the ground.

*Scream*, I tell myself, but tears suffocate me, fear stops me from acting. I’m numb. I’ve been beat up too many times and my body doesn’t quite remember how to fight.

“Yes,” Lars sneers, dragging me closer, his breath hot and putrid on my face. “Struggle. Squirm. Fight all you want. You know I like it better that way. The more you fight, the more I enjoy putting you back in your place.”

His hand shoots up and time seems to slow. I brace myself, but there’s no escaping this storm. His palm connects with my cheek, an explosion of pain sending me tripping. Lars’s hold doesn’t keep me up and I stumble, collapsing as all air leaves me.

“Get your hands off her!” Hunter’s voice booms through the room, his anger a tangible force. Everything stops. It’s like the room is holding its breath.

My heart leaps as Hunter rushes towards us, his blue eyes coming alive in this moment of fury.

“Stay out of this!” Lars spits, but Hunter’s determined gaze remains locked on him, ready to protect me from the

darkness even as I lie crumpled on the floor, my cheek stinging, and my heart aching for the safety of his arms.

Hunter's strong hands collide with Lars, propelling him away from me. A flash of satisfaction flickers within me, as if a phoenix is rising from the ashes of my fear.

Lars stumbles, but Hunter keeps up. Hunter's fists fly, striking Lars again and again, each blow a fierce embodiment of his rage. That dark satisfaction burns and burns inside my chest.

But adrenaline washes off. People gather around. Someone helps me to my feet.

And Hunter's still beating Lars up.

"Hunter, please!" I cry out, my voice quivering with desperation. "Stop! You'll kill him!"

Despite my pleas, Hunter's anger remains unleashed, a relentless force unwilling to yield. He continues his assault on Lars, even after the man stops fighting back. Lars didn't put up much of a fight, being much smaller than Hunter, but now his arms are lump noodles to his sides.

Blood colors Hunter's knuckles when he brings his hand up again.

"Hunter!" I cry out again, but my legs are lead and Hunter doesn't falter. What's going on? What's happening?

The commotion ripples through the room, drawing the attention of security guards who sprint towards the scene. They pull Hunter off Lars and restrain him with brute force. Two are not enough. Four men have to pile up on Hunter.

"Don't hurt him!" My heart screams in protest, but there's nothing I can do. One guard pulls me away, then other people help me into a chair. "Please, let him go!"

Hunter is dragged away, his eyes wide with rage, his hands covered in red, so much red.

Lars lies crumpled on the ground, his face battered and bloody, a grotesque remnant of the monster he once was. His chest barely moves, and for a moment, I fear he might not

make it. But even now, I can't bring myself to wish death upon him.

I watch, disoriented and in shock, as the paramedics arrive. Hunter doesn't come back. At some point, Shannon has sat down next to me and is holding my hand.

Is this the end? Will they arrest him for protecting me?

And is his past too dark for him to move on?

# HUNTER



“*M*an, I’m sorry,” I say for the umpteenth time as we walk out of the police station. “That was so fucking messed up. I can’t believe I lost control like that.”

Simon and Shannon have just bailed me out, and my insides are twisted knots of guilt. Not only I ruined their wedding, but their honeymoon. They weren’t supposed to be here. They should enjoy their time together.

Simon opens that smile that always seems to know something you don’t and slings his arm around my shoulders. “Hunter, it ain’t your fault.” He guides us toward his car.

Shannon nods. “It’s better Lars’s true colors came out before things got worse. I’m so sorry about what Natalie went through. Lars is a major piece of shit. Everyone’s going crazy at my job. His father’s going to disown him to save face.”

“Natalie was very brave.” Simon nods, letting go of me to grab his wife’s hand. “When we came after you, she told everything to the cops. How Lars abused her, how he bribed a cop, how he threatened her. There are messages on her phone. A bunch of people saw him hitting her. We might even have a video of him threatening her at the party.”

Shit. My shoulders drop in relief. “Fuck. This is good news.”

“It is.” Simon smiles. “Of course, you still beat the shit out of the dude and he’s definitely going to prosecute, but we have your back. He was arrested, too. A couple of other girls also

came up with their stories. Natalie wasn't the first girl he mistreated."

I'm so relieved I could fall asleep right now. No, not really.

There's something more important first. I have to see Natalie.

"Where is she?" I ask, knowing very well they'll understand me.

"We drove her back home yesterday," Shannon says.

Shit. Of course. Of course she left me. My heart sinks. That's expected, isn't it? She figured out I'm a monster, and now she doesn't need me to protect her. She's free. Free of Lars, free of me, free of fear.

I'm happy for her. But it still hurts.

As I slide into the backseat, I can't help but feel like an emotional wreck. I've got a tight knot in my chest and a head full of regrets.

"By the way," Simon says, looking at me through the rearview mirror, "Natalie came clean about your fake relationship. Gotta say, I'm intrigued."

Fuck. I had forgotten all about that.

"Shit, man, I'm sorry. I thought you'd worry if you knew I was alone," I confess. "It was stupid and selfish, I know."

"Hey, hey," Simon chuckles, waving off my apology. "No harm done. Besides, the spell worked against you, right?"

"What do you mean?"

Shannon and Simon exchange a look. It's Shannon who shoots me a grin through the rearview mirror. "You kidding? You're obviously head over heels. You almost killed a man with your bare hands to protect her."

"A red flag," Simon points out with a chuckle, "but also romantic?"

Shannon agrees with several nods. "Are we right?" she asks. "You're head over heels, aren't you?"

I sigh. “Yes. I’m in love with her. Head over heels. Completely taken.”

Simon’s eyebrows shoot up, a teasing grin spreading across his face as he turns to face me. “Well, well, look who’s decided to join the party. Welcome to the world of men with a heart, my friend.”

Shannon mock-slaps him and the two laugh at one another.

“Listen, Hunter,” Simon says, his tone turning serious. “Love like this only comes once in a lifetime. You owe it to yourself—and to Natalie—to fight for it. Don’t let fear hold you back.”

“Take a chance, man,” Shannon adds. “You might be surprised at what happens when you open your heart.”

They don’t need to tell me twice. “I’ll do it. I’ll find her, and I’ll make her happy. No more bullshit. No more running away.”

“Damn straight!” Simon exclaims, giving me a playful punch on the knee. “Now, let us get your ass home so you can work that out. But a shower first. You need it.”

I punch Simon’s good shoulder. “Thanks, guys,” I say, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably be miserable and alone,” Shannon teases, winking at me. “It was because of our wedding you proposed the fake relationship, after all.”

“Hilarious,” I grumble, but deep down, I know she’s right. It’s time to fight for Natalie, and this time, I won’t back down.

I relax against the backseat. Maybe there’s still hope.

With that in mind, I can’t help but doze off.

# NATALIE



*M*y fingers twist the soft fabric of the napkin on my lap as I sit in this cozy little restaurant, waiting for Noah and Abigail to arrive. I can't help but let my thoughts drift to Hunter.

God, how I miss him. I miss him more than I'd like to admit. He's always been my rock, but I fear that defending me from my violent ex might've ruined his life.

I close my eyes. No. No, I won't let the defeated thoughts take over. I've been through this with Shannon and Abigail. After so long being put down by Lars, it seems like that's all I can do now. I have to find the half-full Natalie once more.

Things are looking up.

With Lars facing the consequences of his acts and without his dad's name or money to get him out, I can finally hope. I can hope for closure.

It's like the girls said. We need professional help—both Hunter and I, for different reasons. Hunter is still haunted by the ghosts of his past, and I'm scarred by the wounds of mine. We are two broken people.

And our love will heal us.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the door to the restaurant opens and Hunter walks in. I gasp, not expecting to see him this soon. My heart jumps in my chest.

Oh, God. He's as handsome as ever. His blue eyes go wide when he sees me, his black hair still wet. A leather jacket hugs



his broad shoulders.

This man is perfection. And he's running toward *me*.

"Natalie," he breathes out as he approaches, his face filled with concern. How does he manage this? How can he make my name sound like a prayer? "Simon didn't tell me you'd be here. I wouldn't have taken so long if I knew, I—Are you alright?" His hand makes to touch my face, but he stops himself. "Are you hurt? Anywhere? Did you eat?" His hands hover lower, over my belly. "How's the baby?"

His gruff voice sends shivers down my spine, and I find myself lost for words as I soak in his worry. My eyes sting with tears and I let a smile stretch my lips.

"I'm okay. I promise." My hands curl around his jaw, his prickly beard scratching at my palms. "Oh, Hunter. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to drag you into all this mess."

He waves away my apology with a shake of his head, his eyes never leaving mine. "Don't worry about it," he says, his voice softening. "Your safety is my priority. I don't regret getting involved. I'd give my life for your safety, sweetheart. And I mean it."

Oh, this nickname is new. And it *melts* me. My body molds to his. I release a deep sigh as if I was holding my breath until now. Hunter holds me against him, his hands folding around my elbows. For a second, it's just us in the world. For a second, I'm captivated by the way his eyes burn.

The door to the restaurant opens again. Simon and Shannon walk in, hand in hand, both grinning at us.

Anxiety flares up within me as I recall the events at their wedding, where everything had gone horribly wrong. It's the first time I see Simon after the whole thing, since Shannon has been keeping me company. My mouth goes dry as I muster up the courage to face him.

"Simon," I say, my voice trembling. "I'm so sorry about what happened at your wedding. I ruined it, didn't I? The wedding, the honeymoon... And then Shannon was so nice she stayed with me, and..."

“Natalie, don’t worry about it,” Simon interrupts me in a surprisingly gentle voice. “We just want you to be safe and happy. You’re our friends, and Lars is a criminal. Stopping him was the right thing to do.”

“Exactly,” Shannon chimes in, her smile warm and genuine. “We’re not mad at you, baby. We’re here for you. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, my heart swelling with gratitude. Their kindness envelops me like a warm embrace, and I feel the tension ebb away.

As Simon and Shannon take their seats at the table, the atmosphere lightens. Hunter sits across from them and I perch on his knees, his hands cradling my hips, holding me close.

We chat as we wait for Noah and Abigail, but my gaze keeps drifting to Hunter. And every time, he’s staring back. It never fails to make me smile.

Simon glances at Shannon and kicks Hunter’s foot under the table. “You know what, buddy? I think you and Natalie should step outside for a moment, have a little chat. Maybe go home for half an hour or so.”

“We walked in too fast,” Shannon says. “Should have given you a few minutes more.”

Hunter and I exchange hesitant glances. The air between us suddenly charged with electricity. The truth is, I want that conversation. The unresolved tension between us has been simmering for far too long.

“Sounds good,” I respond, staring at Hunter. He smiles back, squeezing my hips once.

“Great,” Simon says, clapping his hands together. “We’ll hold down the fort here. Every patron that walks in, I’ll ask if they’re Abigail and Noah.”

I chuckle, but my heart soars. We step outside into the cool night air, and I can’t help but feel that my whole life will be decided in this one chat.

Our entire future, right in front of us.

# NATALIE



As Hunter's heavy front door creaks shut behind us, the tension in my chest eases. It's as if I'm stepping into another world, away from the chaos of the wedding and the threat of Lars. Away from fear. From doubt.

The rich scent of pine and leather fills my senses, and one word dawns on my mind.

Home.

Hunter flips the lights on. My gaze combs the space I thought I had seen the last of, then I turn around to face him.

"Are you truly alright?" Hunter asks, his gruff voice laced with worry. "And the baby? Didn't you get hurt in the fall? Fuck, I shouldn't have left you alone like that."

I smile at him, trying to sound reassuring. "We're okay, Hunter. Shannon drove me to a doctor. After we went to the police station, she brought me here."

"Still," he says, rubbing the back of his neck with one large hand, "I lost control back there. Shouldn't have let that happen. I ruined the wedding. And I had to leave you alone."

"Nobody's perfect," I murmur, feeling an inexplicable urge to comfort him. My fingers find their way to the rough skin of his palm, our hands intertwining like branches of a tree. "Besides, the wedding went on. Just without Shannon and Simon. They said they managed to move the honeymoon around. They're good friends. I think they're okay with that."

Hunter relaxes, releasing a sigh. “That they are. They saved my skin. I’m glad they kept you safe.” His bruised knuckles brush along my jaw, his blue eyes fastened on my face. “Let me start a fire. Take a seat.”

I do, brushing my hands down my rust-colored winter dress. After a couple of minutes, Hunter joins me on the plush couch facing the crackling fireplace. We sink into it, our bodies pressed close together, and I allow myself to bask in the warmth of his presence.

“Can I tell you something?” I start, my heart pounding like a hummingbird’s wings against my rib cage.

“Anything,” he replies, his blue eyes never leaving my face, as if I’m the most fascinating person he’s ever met.

“Being with you... it felt like a dream. But I was always scared that one day, I’d wake up and Lars would be there, ready to drag me back into the darkness.” I swallow hard, the taste of fear and bile burning my throat. “I was terrified he’d find me and hurt me again.”

“Never gonna happen, Natalie,” Hunter states for the tenth time, his jaw set like granite. “I’d die before I let that bastard lay another finger on you.”

“I know.” And a smile works its way onto my face. “Things have changed now. I know he won’t hurt me. And I know you have my back. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. About the stalker, and Lars, and the baby...”

Hunter taps his thumb to my lips. “You don’t have to apologize. I ain’t no saint either,” he admits, his gaze flickering to the dancing flames. “You saw Simon. He’s that way because of me. I didn’t protect him.” His grip on my hand tightens, as if grappling with the weight of his own guilt. “And it terrifies me that the same might happen to you.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” I repeat softly, echoing my earlier words. My thumb strokes the rough skin of his knuckles, trying to offer some semblance of comfort. “We all have our demons. And I want to fight mine with you. I want us to fight together.”

Hunter smiles. We stare, our fingers intertwined. Hunter reaches out with his other hand and curls his fingers around my stomach.

“We will. We’ll fight together. I promise I’ll fight for us.” Hunter’s eyes blaze with determination. “I’ll be there for you and this baby, no matter what.”

A wave of relief crashes over me, but at the same time, I don’t want him to think that’s all I’m after. “Hunter, I don’t expect anything from you. This baby and I—”

“Stop right there,” he interrupts, his voice soft yet firm. “Don’t say you expect nothing, because I want to give you everything. You’ve become my sun in the darkest of times, Natalie. You’re everything, everything to me. It hurts to think of ever living without you. I want to build a family together, face whatever storms life throws our way, and navigate them with you by my side.”

“You mean it?” I ask, my voice fragile. This is everything I’ve ever hoped for.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he says, his forehead pressing to mine. “And I mean it from the bottom of my heart.”

“I love you too,” I whisper, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. “I love you so much.”

The tension that had been tightening between us snaps. Hunter jumps me, or I jump him, I don’t know. Our lips crash together, a deep kiss fueled by burning desire.

Hunter’s hand grasps my hair, tugging on it while his tongue explores the depths of my mouth. He pulls away just enough to pant out, “You drive me crazy, sweetheart.”

And he kisses me again, and every kiss sets my skin on fire. Desire ignites inside me, lava pooling between my thighs, and I have to do something. I have to feel him, to taste him, anything. Anything to quench this thirst.

I break the kiss and drop to my knees. Hunter stares, unsure. My hands move to unbutton his jeans. His mouth drops and I know he’s about to stop me.

I put a hand on his chest and shove him back against the couch. Hunter lets me, his eyes sparkling with awe. Finally, I release his throbbing cock.

And it's everything I dreamed of.

My fingers barely meet when I curl them around the base. Hunter is big, as expected for a man his size, but he's also thick. A big vein pulses near my thumb and I don't hold back.

I lean in and lap up, tracing the vein with the tip of my tongue.

Hunter grunts, a sound so deep and so animalistic, I almost pull back to search for the source. His thick cock throbs in my hold and I can wait no longer.

I take him into my mouth, tasting his arousal as I swirl my tongue around the velvety tip. Hunter's groans fill the room, urging me to take him deeper.

"Shit, Natalie... that feels so good," he breathes, gripping the back of the couch. His knuckles bleach. And all because of me.

I had no idea giving head could make me feel so powerful, but a man this big melting under my touch? God, it's so hot.

Relaxing my jaw, I take him deeper over my tongue. There's not much I can do—my mouth is too small for a dick that big. I barely make it past his head.

So, I seal my lips around him and suck. Hunter grunts as if someone had punched him in the chest. I look up, meeting his eyes.

"Fucking hell, you have no idea how hot you are," he says, his fingers tangling around my hair. "Your little mouth feels so good."

I moan, picking up speed. My eyelids flutter shut as my panties grow soaked. I'm so needy. I need him so bad.

Hunter gives my hair a soft yank. I snap my eyes open. "Eyes on me," he orders, his voice thick with command.

My legs tremble. I'd drop if I weren't on my knees already.

Curling my hands around his base, I use the dripping saliva to move my hands up and down. Hunter's eyes darken. His hold on my hair tightens.

“That's it. Keep looking at me. You like sucking my cock?”

I moan in response. The bitter taste of his precome covers my tongue.

Hunter lifts his hips off the couch and pumps into my face once. Testing. I moan again, aching to feel more of him. Aching for his body. He does it again, his cockhead hitting the back of my throat.

“Fucking hell, you're so hot,” he groans, and his hands fold around my shoulders as he pulls me up onto his lap.

My ass lands on top of his scorching erection. I move my hips as I stretch out, my back to his chest. Hunter kisses my ear, nibbles on my pulse.

A hand of his curls around my breast. He flicks my hard nipple through the dress, every motion shooting more arousal straight to my core. I hump him, parting my legs unashamedly.

Hunter wastes no time. His strong hand slides under my dress and he gets rid of my panties. The flimsy fabric hangs around my foot. Hunter soaks his fingers in my arousal and teases my throbbing clit, eliciting shivers of delight that race down my spine.

It's absolute bliss. My body melts. I grind against his fingers, desperate for more.

“That's it,” he growls against my ear. “You like my fingers on your wet pussy, don't you? You like it when I twist your little nipples like this?” And he does as he says, playing with my sensitive breasts.

My head is empty. There are no thoughts, just lust, bright red and sultry.

“Please, Hunter... I need you inside me,” I beg, almost tearing up.

“How could I say no when you beg like this?” he growls, but his voice falters at the end and I know he’s hanging on by a thread, too.

Hunter positions himself at my entrance. I gasp, his thick cockhead forcing me open. His fingers never stop, taking me higher and higher.

Hunter enters me deliberately, the thickness of his cock stretching me deliciously as he fills me. A long moan escapes me, my head falling back against his shoulder.

He holds me close, a grunt vibrating through his chest. Hunter stops once he’s seated inside me. The sensation is impossible to describe, a mix of bliss and sweet agony that makes me crave more.

It’s overwhelming.

As Hunter holds still, he continues to work his magic on my clit, coaxing my arousal to new heights. My body trembles with each stroke, every teasing touch pushing me closer to the edge.

“Please, please, please,” I repeat over and over, a prayer as I try to move my hips.

But Hunter holds them in place, keeping me locked against his body. “Shh,” he blows against my ear, his beard scratching me oh so deliciously. “You first. You always come first. Are you ready to come for me?”

“Yes,” I blurt out, my voice breathy, desperate.

“Are you going to cream my cock?” He skates his fingers over my clit and I teeter on the edge, curling my toes, slamming my eyes shut.

“Yes!”

“Then do it. Come around my cock. It’s the only cock that’ll make you come for the rest of your life.”

And his words make me burst open. My climax brings a cry of ecstasy that echoes through the room, my inner walls clenching around him as waves of pleasure crash over me.



“Fuck,” he pants against me, and, with a shudder, Hunter’s load explodes inside me. I gasp, the heat almost too much. My pussy clamps down around him, aftershocks popping like fireworks.

“That was so good,” he murmurs into my ear. “You feel so fucking good around me.”

“Please, love,” I pant, my body still quivering from the intensity of my orgasm. “Fuck me. Now. I can’t take it anymore.”

His lips brush my ear. “Do you need me to fuck you?”

“So much. I need you so much.”

“Then beg, spitfire.”

“Please!” I cry out, no dignity left, no fire, but the one burning between my hips. “Please, please, fuck me!”

He growls in satisfaction. “That’s my girl.”

# HUNTER



*M*y cock throbs with a desperate ache as I watch Natalie's flushed face. I carry her to the bedroom and lie her down gently. But my girl doesn't care for gentleness now.

She chucks her dress and bra away before stretching out on the bed, her red cheeks robbing me of breath.

She's fucking perfection. Full, perfect breasts, those hard nipples ready to be sucked. Round hips, those thick thighs I can't wait to see around my head.

And that sweet pussy, fucking hell.

But there's something else, too. I can't ignore she's pregnant. That gives me pause.

"Sweetheart... I'm not sure if it's safe to do this while you're pregnant," I confess, my voice strained. "Is there a limit? Something I should... not do?" Fuck, I didn't look that up.

I researched a lot of things about pregnancy, but I didn't search for this. I never expected she'd want to fuck me.

Her huge green eyes meet mine, and she licks her swollen lips. "Hunter, it's safe, I promise. It's just about what I'm comfortable with, and I'll only be comfortable when you put your cock back inside me."

That's all it takes. The dam breaks, and I crash into her, kissing her hard.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I breathe, bending down and taking one hardened nipple into my mouth. She’s so sensitive that her entire body shudders, and she lets out a throaty moan, sounding like she’s on the brink of an orgasm already.

“Please, love,” she begs, her voice thick with lust. The scent of her arousal hits me like a freight train, and I dive in, licking her pussy like a man possessed.

“Ah! Yes!” she cries out, gripping my hair as she rides my face. It’s a bit awkward with her pregnant belly, but we make do.

I eat her up, my tongue lashing out at her clit, taking the remnants of her orgasm and firing them up. Natalie climaxes within moments, her body quaking with ecstasy.

“Fuck, love,” I groan as I straighten up. The sight of her quivering sends a jolt of electricity through my veins. I strip off my clothes, and she races her hands down my torso.

The way she admires me makes me want to puff out my chest, and I promise myself I’ll make her feel sexy every day of her life, too.

“Condom?” I ask, trying to catch my breath. My rational mind is still fighting for control, but it’s losing ground fast.

“No,” she gasps, pulling me closer. “I want you, all of you, right now.”

Her words ignite something primal inside me, and I can’t hold back any longer. I position myself at her entrance, watching her eyes widen in anticipation.

With one smooth thrust, I enter her, our bodies melding together like they were always meant to be this way.

“Ah! Hunter, you... it feels so amazing!” Natalie moans out loud, her fingers digging into my shoulders. The sensation of her tight, wet heat wrapped around me is more than I’ve ever imagined, and I can’t help but let out a growl of deep satisfaction.

“Does it? Do you like my cock inside you?”

“So much!”

“You’re so needy for my cock,” and I start to pump, dragging my cock out of her before thrusting home. “And you’re so naughty. Begging for it like this. Did you know that?”

Her cheeks flush darker and she bites her lip, nodding. The sight of her surrendering to her desires sends my head spinning.

I pull her onto my lap, taking control and guiding her hips as she moves up and down. Natalie weighs nothing in my arms and I take all the work from her, my hands clamping around her hips.

I hold Natalie close, my fingers tracing the delicate curve of her lower back as I guide her movements. The slick heat of her pussy sliding up and down my throbbing cock is intoxicating. I’m drowning in her.

“Oh, Hunter,” she moans, her voice raspy. “You feel so incredible inside me.”

Her words are like gasoline on an already raging fire. I can tell she’s close, her body trembling with anticipation as she clenches around me.

So, I tilt her hips until her clit hits my pelvis with every thrust. Natalie moans louder and I smirk.

“That’s it. That’s a good girl. Get yourself off on me.”

I move her hips against mine as we climb pleasure together. With one last thrust, she shatters, and it’s my name that spills out of her mouth.

“God, Hunter!” she cries out, her nails digging into my shoulders as she rides the crest of her orgasm. Her tight walls pulse around me, and it’s all I need to let go.

I groan, my entire body tensing as pleasure floods my senses, and I come hard, filling her again.

“Christ, spitfire,” I pant, still holding her close even as our bodies begin to calm. “That was... fuck, that was amazing.”

Natalie smiles against my lips. “I love you.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.” My heart swells with a warmth I’ve never felt before, the sincerity of her words leaving me feeling vulnerable yet stronger than ever.

As I lay her down on the bed, I place a gentle kiss on her forehead before pulling out slowly. A part of me still worries I might have hurt her or the baby. I’m not exactly a small guy.

The sight of my come dripping from her soaked pussy causes a primal growl to escape my lips. Something stirs deep within me.

“God, I love seeing you like this,” I admit, unable to tear my eyes away.

“Do you like this?” She smiles sleepily. “Do you promise to keep coming inside me like this?”

“Fuck, sweetheart, I promise,” I groan, the sight of her so full and satisfied making me want her all over again.

I slide a finger into her slick folds. Slowly, I push my come inside her. It’s stupid and primal, but the sight makes my cock jump. Natalie gasps at the sensation, her pussy squeezing around my finger in response. Her breath comes in short, needy pants, and I can’t help but grin wickedly as she arches off the mattress.

“Look at you, all needy,” I tease, my voice laced with seduction. “Guess that wasn’t enough.”

Natalie opens her heavy-lidded eyes, a sexy smirk on her face. “I’ll never have enough of you.”

I climb on top of her, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Good. Because I’m far from done.”

# EPILOGUE



## HUNTER

### Three Months Later

The sterile smell of the hospital room hangs in the air, but it ain't enough to deter my focus from Natalie. Her blond hair cascades around her face like a halo, and her pink cheeks are still flushed.

She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. A sunrise after the darkest night. I can't tear my eyes away from her.

God, the strength of this woman! Such a small woman, so fragile, and she pushed a healthy baby out of her. A whole human being.

I'm still shocked. Through it all, I held her hand, but I still can only half-believe it. I can only half believe I'm this lucky. That this amazing woman really wanted me with her in this most vulnerable time.

And she was so strong. So fucking strong. I can only stare at her in amazement.

The door swings open, and the nurse strides in, her white shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. Natalie stirs, her green eyes fluttering open. The sight of her half-awake makes my chest tighten, like I'm being bound by some invisible force.

I lean in and make sure that her pillows are fluffy and her covers are keeping her warm. The place is chilly and I want her comfortable.

"Is it time for dinner? She should eat, shouldn't she?" I ask the nurse, my voice rougher than usual. "She needs to keep her

strength up.”

“Of course,” the nurse replies, chuckling at my eagerness. “Don’t you worry. I haven’t forgotten her dinner. You remind me of my husband when our first was born. New fathers always fuss about.”

Natalie scratches sleep off her eyes as she tries to sit up. I’m quick to help her. The nurse checks her vitals with a soft smile.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” the nurse tells me. “Women are strong. Everything is in order for you to take your family home tomorrow morning.”

“Already?” Isn’t this too soon? Shouldn’t she stay a few days so they’re sure she’s okay?

The nurse waves me off. “The doctor will come talk to you tomorrow. Don’t worry. Now, dinner is in order.” The nurse turns to Natalie with that same motherly smile. “What do you think, dear? Ready to hold your baby?”

Natalie lights up like a Christmas tree. “Yes, please!” Natalie replies with her voice growing stronger, her green eyes sparkling with anticipation. The sight of her so excited makes my heart race. I squeeze her hand in mine.

The nurse returns with our tiny bundle wrapped in soft blankets. She picks the baby up and gently places him into Natalie’s waiting arms. The room seems to hold its breath.

Natalie gazes down at her son, her face glowing like the sun breaking through storm clouds. Her eyes brim with tears as she strokes his cheek, lost in awe and love.

The nurse excuses herself, and then it’s only us. Only our little family.

“Would you like to hold him?” she whispers at me, her green eyes soft with love.

I reach out, and she hands me the baby. My body trembles with both nerves and excitement.

As I hold the baby boy, I know it. I feel it deep in my bones. He’s my son. This boy is my son, and I already love



him more than I thought possible.

I sit on the edge of the bed and pull Natalie against me. She leans closer and the three of us share the same air and the same warmth.

This is the happiest moment of my life. I can't help but tear up, love filling my chest until it spills.

I kiss Natalie's temple as she adjusts the covers around the baby's face. Our baby's face.

"I love you," I whisper into her hair.

She looks up at me, those green eyes I love so much burning like the sun. And she doesn't have to say anything. I feel it. This love that has claimed me.

# EPILOGUE



## NATALIE

### Ten Years Later

The unmistakable aroma of freshly baked cookies wafts to my nose as I bustle around the kitchen, making last-minute preparations.

I love it whenever Abigail and Noah visit, but we have five kids among us now, and that means lots of snacks. It's always an adventure. Opening the oven, I pull the cookies out.

My heart swells with pride at the sight of my handiwork, a veritable feast laid out on the counter. I've been trying my hand at pastry and I've decorated so many cupcakes I don't think we're eating them all in a week.

"Kids!" I call out, hoping they're close enough to hear me. I loved the old house, but we had to move when I got pregnant again. We needed the space. "You guys better be getting ready!"

"Relax," Hunter drawls as he saunters into the room. "The little rascals are ready. Parked in front of the TV, noses deep in their video game."

I shake my head, but can't help grinning. "You spoil them rotten, you know."

"Guilty as charged," he admits, the corners of his mouth quirking up into that irresistible grin. "But, you know, here and there, I must spoil their mother rotten, too, and that's how I create time for it."

Before I know it, Hunter's towering form closes in, pinning me against the cool granite countertop. A mischievous glint dances in his deep blue eyes, sending shivers down my spine.

"Oh," I blow out, lowering my voice. "So it was a plan."

He smirks. "We've got about fifteen minutes before our guests arrive. Any ideas on how we can spend that time?" His breath is warm on my skin, teasing tendrils of hair brushing against my ear.

My cheeks grow warm as desire flares within me. The playful banter between us feels electric, charged with a current that threatens to sweep me off my feet.

"Well, I'm not sure," I tease, trying to ignore the way my heart races in my chest. "What do you propose?"

Hunter's hungry smile tells me he expected this answer. A hand of his traces down my hip and up the inside of my thigh, under my skirt. I shiver when his fingertips brush against my covered slit.

My husband's lips stroke up the column of my neck. "I adore when you shiver like this against me. And I know it's because we can be caught at any moment." His whispers grow heated against my ear. "The kids are just around the corner. Abigail and Noah are on their way. One of the neighbors might knock... We never know."

I grab onto his shirt, my nipples tightening against my bra. "Oh, Hunter," I breathe out, parting my legs wider.

He presses two fingers to my pussy, tracing my slit up and down, teasing, teasing. "That's it. I love the way you moan my name. It'll never get old."

Hunter moves his hands and dips his fingers into my panties. I gasp and he kisses me, devouring the sound. The counter digs against my hip painfully, but my husband's fingers circle my clit and I might be losing my head.

My eyes roll back in bliss. His other hand finds my breast, flicking my nipple with his thumb. He's so good at this. My husband is so good at reading exactly what I need, how I want

it, how hard... He's taken his time to learn, to study. And I love him for that.

Hunter manhandles me behind the counter. He shoves some dishes out of the way and bends me over. I gasp, looking over my shoulder at him.

He smirks. "If you don't make a sound, there'll be no problem."

He pins me down, a hand between my shoulder blades, the other between my thighs. Hunter shoves my panties down around my knees and his fingers find my entrance and I lose it.

I have to bite down hard on my bottom lip. A moan climbs my throat, and it takes everything in me not to let it escape. Hunter plays me, teasing me to the edge of an orgasm, holding me there...

And when I'm about to go, he shoves his pants down and enters me.

I choke on his name. My husband pounds into me mercilessly. That's how I like it when we don't have time. Hard, raw. He thrusts harder, his thick cock stretching me. It's heaven.

My inner walls flutter around him. I cover my mouth with both hands. Hunter reaches up and grabs my shoulders, keeping me in place as he ravishes me.

I come undone, climaxing around his cock so hard my knees give off. But Hunter keeps me up. He always does.

With a male grunt that gives me goosebumps, he pours his load into me. Hot and thick. A second later, he pulls out and adjusts my panties around my hips once more. I'm still shaking, but he's already zipped himself up and made sure my clothes are in place.

Hunter smiles, that wicked, wicked smile I love. "You're such a good girl for me," he teases, knowing that nickname gets me going.

I reach out and cup his cock, still hard for me. Always hard for me. "Unlike you. You're so bad."

“Just because that’s how you like it.”

“Can’t deny that. I’ll pop in the bathroom and then I think we’re ready...” I whirl around, knowing very well Hunter won’t let me go.

As expected, he holds my arm, and I let him bring my body against his. There’s something about the way he manhandles me—only when it’s hot, only when I want it. Hunter turned something I feared into something I crave. Hunter buries his face into my hair and growls, and it’s so sexy I feel myself going wet all over again.

“No cleaning up,” he whispers into my ear. “Remember what I promised? That I’d always come deep inside you and keep you filled?”

I bite my bottom lip and bat my lashes at him. “But... the guests.”

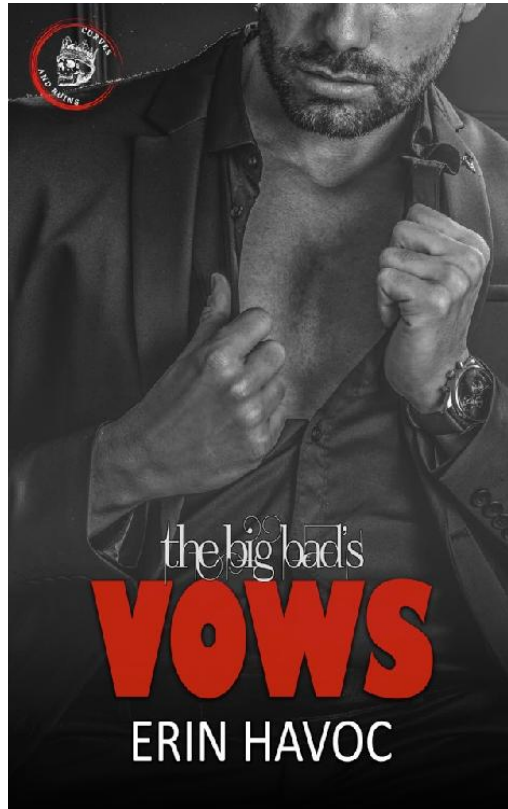
Hunter squeezes my hips between his hands. “I want to know you’re dripping, sweetheart. Besides, we’re past ready for a third kid, aren’t we?”

And I can’t help but smile. This man. He’s everything to me.

He’s everything I never knew I needed.

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. If you'd like an exclusive short story, join my mailing list.

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