



CURVY WIVES OF  
SILVERVALE MOUNTAIN

*Protected* BY THE  
**MOUNTAIN MAN**

A CURVY GIRL, AGE GAP, INSTALOVE ROMANCE

ZOEY ROSE

# Protected by the Mountain Man

Zoey Rose

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# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - Grace](#)

[Chapter 2 - Brad](#)

[Chapter 3 - Grace](#)

[Chapter 4 - Brad](#)

[Chapter 5 - Grace](#)

[Chapter 6 - Brad](#)

[Chapter 7 - Grace](#)

[Chapter 8 - Brad](#)

[Chapter 9 - Grace](#)

[Chapter 10 - Brad](#)

[Epilogue - Grace](#)



# Chapter 1 - Grace

Cold air whips across my cheeks, leaving tear trails in its wake. My feet stumble and scrape against the gravel lining the empty road. The weight of my torn wedding dress pulls at my waist, its lower half heavy in my grasp.

Moonlight pierces through the canopy of trees overhead, illuminating the path just enough for me to see a few steps ahead. It's weirdly poetic how it's night, and yet, it's the first time in so long I feel seen, feel real.

Every step forward feels like an act of rebellion. An act of reclaiming who I am. I'd always been Grace, the good girl, the obedient daughter. But tonight?

Tonight, I'm Grace, the runaway bride.

I imagine my family and my so-called future husband's family in an uproar. Searching, yelling, panicking. *What will people say?*

I can already hear the whispers and feel the weight of societal judgment. But I've had enough of living for others. This is my life, and I won't have it dictated by anyone else.

Car headlights in the distance break my train of thought. I wave, hoping against hope that someone will stop and help. But they zoom past, the drivers giving me just a fleeting glance.

I can't blame them, though. In a torn wedding dress, smeared face, and frantic expressions, I probably look like something out of a horror movie.

Hours or minutes—time seems irrelevant now—later, I see the flickering neon lights of a filling station. The sign of a tiny store beckons like a lighthouse in the storm. My pace quickens; every ounce of energy I have left propels me towards it.

*Just a little more*, I tell myself.

But just as the world seems a little kinder, shadows emerge from the dimly lit areas of the filling station. I freeze as three figures approach me. The blinkering lights reveal their faces—boys, barely out of their teens, their expressions a mix of amusement and drunken curiosity.

“Well, what do we have here?” One of them slurs, the stench of cheap booze heavy on his breath. He comes closer, a smirk playing on his lips. “Never seen a bride at a gas station before.”

His friends chuckle, pushing each other, egging him on. Panic surges inside me. Why now? Why, when I was so close to a moment of relief?

A cold hand lands on my shoulder, fingers squeezing tightly.

“Lost, sweetheart?” the boy taunts, his eyes scanning me up and down.

Every muscle in my body tenses. I remember every horror story, every cautionary tale told to young girls. But I also remember who I am now. The woman who took a leap of faith. The woman who dared to escape her shackles.

I shove him back without a second thought, refusing to be his prey. The chapter of my life that began tonight won't end this way. Not now, not ever.

The boys' laughter is a grating noise, sending shivers down my spine.

“We got a feisty one here!” the first boy exclaims, his grin widening.

Another one approaches, his eyes narrowing, trying to assess me.

“Don't worry, darling. We're all good guys here. We'll take real good care of you.”

I step back, only to be halted by the third one. Like a predator cornering its prey, he smiles, his gaze cold and unfeeling. I can feel the fear gripping me, threatening to take over. The darkness around us feels oppressive, swallowing my desperate cries for help.

The mocking laughter continues, echoing hauntingly in the night.

“No one’s going to hear you here,” one of them jeers, gesturing towards the store. “The guy in there? He knows better than to mess with us.”

Despair washes over me, crushing the last vestiges of hope. Maybe this is it. Maybe this is where my fight ends.

The fleeting hours of freedom I tasted now seem like a cruel joke, a reminder of everything I’ve longed for, everything I’ll never have. The world’s vastness, the numerous cities and sunsets I’ll never see, the love I’ll never experience.

I feel the weight of it all, too heavy for my fragile heart. In a final act of resignation, I drop my arms, letting my eyelids fall shut and bracing for whatever fate has in store.

But the expected onslaught never comes. Instead, there’s a flurry of shouts, muffled thuds, and curses. Panic-filled



screams pierce the night, followed by frantic footsteps retreating.

A tense silence ensues. Slowly, I open my eyes, only to be met with the broad back of a towering man. Muscles ripple under his taut black suit as he yells at the fleeing figures, his voice promising retribution.

“I’ve seen your faces!” he warns. “Run while you can because I’ll be coming for you.”

There’s an undeniable authority in his voice, one that even the intoxication of the three boys can’t ignore, and the echo of their retreating steps is the only indication they were ever here.

For a moment, we stand in silence. I’m torn between gratitude and wariness. I’ve learned the hard way that not all saviors wear capes, and not all heroes have good intentions.

His voice, a touch softer now, interrupts my thoughts, “Are you okay? I’m Brad, the sheriff, and you’re safe now.”

I swallow hard, my voice shaking as I reply, “I think so.”

He turns to face me. The moonlight reveals a chiseled jaw, deep-set eyes, and a look of concern. But it’s the uniform that catches my attention. A sheriff. Yet, even with this revelation, I remain cautious.

“You saved me,” I whisper, my emotions churning. “Thank you.”

He nods, his gaze never leaving mine.

“It’s my job. But it’s also late, and this isn’t a safe place for you. Where do you need to go?”

The question hovers between us, heavy with implication.

Where *do* I go from here? The road ahead seems uncertain, but one thing’s for sure – the story of Grace, the runaway bride, is far from over.

As the words hang between us, I find myself at a loss. I feel like I’ve been on a never-ending emotional rollercoaster, and now I’m face-to-face with a stranger offering kindness.

His blue eyes hold a depth I hadn’t noticed before. A depth that promises safety, understanding, and perhaps even a touch of empathy.

He lets out a soft chuckle, breaking the momentary spell.

“I’m sorry, that was a thoughtless question. Clearly, you’re going through something. We don’t have to talk about it, but let’s get you someplace safe.”

The sincerity in his words and the gentle curve of his lips disarm me. My heart races, and I can’t tell if it’s because of the

fear from earlier or this sudden connection.

“I...I don’t know where to go,” I admit, the weight of it all bearing down on me: the enormity of my escape, the sheer audacity of running from what had been laid out as my future.

He seems to consider this briefly, then suggests, “How about the sheriff’s station? You can rest there, and I’ll grab you some food and clothes. You seem like you could use a change.”

I can’t help the sarcastic laugh that escapes me.

“What do I owe you for that?” My tone is lighter than I feel, but skepticism laces every word.

His expression falters for a moment, “What do you mean?”

I meet his gaze with blunt honesty.

“Nothing’s free. What do you want in return?”

He chuckles softly.

“It’s my duty. Protect and serve. That’s all. I don’t need anything in return.”

His earnestness leaves me feeling exposed, caught off guard. It’s a vulnerability I’m not used to, especially not in front of strangers. He seems to sense my hesitation because he gestures toward his patrol car, its light still flashing dimly.

“I promise you’re safe with me,” he adds with a reassuring smile.

Once we get closer to his car, he opens the door, and I catch a glimpse of his muscular arms, veins prominently tracing their paths. He’s rugged, a stark contrast to the men I’ve known, and yet, there’s a gentleness to him that’s utterly disarming.

He starts the engine and heads toward the station. But after a few minutes of silence, he glances over at me, his expression one of concern.

“Look,” he starts, hesitating slightly. “I have to ask, and I’m genuinely sorry for being direct, but has anyone...hurt you tonight?”

His words strike a chord. Not because of what happened at the gas station but because of the underlying pain I’ve endured for so long. The suffocating pressure, the expectations, the reality of a life I never chose.

Taking a deep breath, I muster the strength to reply, “Not tonight, but I’ve been running from a lifetime of hurt.”



## Chapter 2 - Brad

The warmth of the car contrasts sharply with the cold night outside. The only sound is the engine's hum and occasional rustle when Grace shifts in her seat.

Every now and then, I steal a glance at her. In the dim glow of the dashboard, her face looks serene, and even with the ordeal she's just been through, she is breathtakingly beautiful.

I remember when, just moments ago, I pulled into the gas station, and out of the corner of my eye, I spotted her. She stood out not just because of her alluring form in that white, torn wedding dress but the vulnerability in her eyes, that look of desperation as she seemed to wait for someone to step in.

The memory of her thighs, the thought that they'd fit perfectly around my hands, makes me grip the steering wheel tighter.

But it wasn't just her beauty that caught my attention; it was the danger she was in. Those three guys surrounding her, circling like wolves eyeing their prey. I'd seen their kind many times before. Trouble with a capital 'T'.

I couldn't just jump in without a reason, but the moment they laid their hands on her and her cry pierced the night, all logic

went out the window.

The fight was swift. The surprise on their faces when I stepped into the light, the fear when they realized I was the law in this town. It was satisfaction enough for me when they took off, leaving behind a girl in need and a sheriff willing to help.

Now, inside my car, with the darkness outside and only the illumination from the occasional streetlight, I find myself again drawn to her. The freckles that dance around her nose, the flush on her cheeks. How can someone so young seem so mature yet so vulnerable at the same time?

“We won’t be long now,” I murmur, trying to fill the silence.

“The sheriff’s station is just a few miles away.”

She nods, still lost in her thoughts. Curiosity finally gets the better of me.

“What’s your name, and how old are you?”

“I’m Grace,” she whispers, her voice shaky, “I’m twenty.”

I can’t help but do the math. Twenty-two years. Twenty-two years separate us. The age difference should make me cautious, but the pull I feel towards her is undeniable.

Yet, I must remind myself this isn’t some fairy tale. I’m not her knight in shining armor. I’m just the sheriff, the man who

will help her tonight and perhaps never see her again.

“Is there someone looking for you?” I ask, watching her closely.

She hesitates, her gaze flitting away from mine.

“Maybe,” she finally says, her voice barely audible.

My grip on the wheel tightens. This night is becoming more complicated by the second. But one thing is certain: I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure her safety. Even if it means fighting against the emotions rapidly developing within me.

The car’s engine hums softly, breaking the silence between us.

“Are you worried they’ll catch up to you?” I ask gently, glancing at Grace.

She remains silent for a beat but then nods gently, confirming my fears. There’s a story here, one I hope she’ll eventually share, but for now, patience is key.

Looking at her, I smile reassuringly.

“You’re safe now. I promise I’ll protect you.” It’s a pledge I make without hesitation, a promise forged in the heat of the moment, but one I fully intend to keep.



The soft blush on her cheeks deepens, and she swiftly turns her gaze away, looking out at the tiny rain droplets beginning to run down the window.

“Looks like it might rain all night,” I comment, trying to lighten the mood.

She keeps her eyes fixed on the dark expanse outside, replying softly, “Hopefully not.”

As I pull into the parking lot of the sheriff’s station, I switch off the engine and quickly exit the car. Circling around, I open the passenger door for Grace.

“Better hurry,” I say, nodding towards the building. “Don’t want to get soaked.”

Yet, instead of dashing towards the door, she takes her time, tilting her head back and letting the rain wash over her. I pause, struck by the scene before me.

There she stands, seemingly lost, yet an air about her suggests she knows exactly where she belongs in the universe. The contrast is captivating.

Finally, we both make our way to the station. The lights inside cast a warm glow over the room. I gesture towards a chair.

“Have a seat,” I say, trying to exude an air of calm and authority.

Sitting opposite her, I can’t help but be drawn to her hands. So delicate, so pristine, such a stark contrast to the rugged world she seems to have walked away from.

The urge to take her hands in mine, offer solace, and reassure her is nearly overwhelming. But I force the feelings down. She needs my help, not my emotions.

Leaning forward, I try to bridge the gap of silence between us.

“I’m glad I found you tonight,” I start. “I’ll help you with everything I can.”

Her faint smile is heartening, but her silence and far-off gaze suggest she’s grappling with her thoughts.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

She nods, looking slightly embarrassed, “But I can’t pay...”

I’m taken aback.

“Pay?” I chuckle lightly. “I told you... You don’t have to worry about that.”

In my head, I’m thinking, “*I’d give you the world if you asked for it.*” But for now, food seems like a good start.

“And I’ve told you no one gives anyone anything for free,” she says, her voice tinged with a weariness that belies her age.

The statement startles me.

“Who taught you that?” I ask cautiously, trying to probe into the mystery layers surrounding her.

She opens her mouth as if to answer, then seems to think better of it, closing it again. I can tell there’s a lot more behind those eyes, things she’s not ready to share, at least not yet.

“You know what?” I say, trying to break the tension. “Tonight, just for tonight, let’s prove that saying wrong. Let me get you something to eat. No strings attached.”

I rise from my seat, but I can’t help but glance back at her.

She’s rubbing her arms, shivering, and the sight wrenches at my heartstrings. There’s a vulnerability about her, a rawness that I’ve never seen before, and it calls out to every protective instinct within me.

The luminosity of her amber eyes against her flushed cheeks...

It’s captivating.

*Protect her, a voice in my mind repeats, at all costs.*

In the pantry, I gather some food for her and fetch a warm jacket I know we keep around for emergencies. As I return, I

see Ash, the town's notorious troublemaker, leaning toward Grace.

His hands are cuffed behind his back, but there's a smirk on his face. Deep down, he's a good man but always finds himself on the wrong side of the law. Yet, what surprises me even more is that Grace doesn't look frightened.

I approach them swiftly, "Ash, what do you think you're doing?"

He laughs, his usual devil-may-care attitude evident, "Just asking the lady here what a bride's doing in the police station. If her man's messed up, I told her I'd sort him out."

A rush of jealousy surges within me. The mere thought of another man being close to her, of someone else protecting her, lights a fire inside me.

"Funny," I reply, forcing my voice to stay even, "with such chivalry, I can't fathom how you're always getting arrested."

Ash grins, "Morals only matter when you don't need money in a hurry."

Before I can reply, one of my colleagues strides in, grabbing Ash by the arm and leading him away. The short reprieve gives me a chance to collect my thoughts.

“I’m sorry about that,” I begin, “Ash’s had a rough go of it, but there’s hope for him yet.”

She smiles, the gesture softening the harsh lines of her face.

“He mentioned he doesn’t like cops. But he said you’re fair, and he respects that.”

I’m taken aback by the revelation. A compliment from Ash? That’s new. After a few seconds of gathering my thoughts, I set the food items down in front of her — chocolate cookies and donuts.

“I got this jacket for you,” I say, holding it out, “Do you want me to help you put it on, or would you prefer to change into some fresh clothes? We might have something that’ll fit.”



## Chapter 3 - Grace

Widening my eyes, I drink in the sight of the man before me. How is it possible for someone to be so devastatingly handsome? Towering over most, his muscles ripple beneath the fabric of his shirt, the badge pinned to his chest glinting under the station's lights.

I had never met Brad before, but his demeanor, soft blue eyes, and that gentle, reassuring smile make me wonder if fate's not playing some cruel joke on me. He's the opposite of the man I had been forced to pledge my life to.

"I got this jacket for you," He says, his face a mixture of concern and kindness, "Do you want me to help you put it on, or would you prefer to change into some fresh clothes? We might have something that'll fit."

"I want to keep the dress on for a bit longer," I admit, voice barely above a whisper.

His brow quirks in confusion, but he doesn't press. Good, because I can't explain why I want to feel its cold, clammy texture against my skin. A reminder of my escape. Of the chains I've broken.

“Maybe this will help, then,” he adds.

Stepping closer, Brad delicately places the jacket around my shoulders. His fingers graze my skin, and it’s like my heart catches fire. They’re rough, calloused - telling tales of hard work, but the touch is tender, almost protective.

An involuntary shiver runs down my spine, memories of Tom’s cold hands snaking around me resurfacing. Panic and disgust crash over me like a tidal wave. In a split second, I shove Brad away, his expression shifting to one of shock. The jacket, only halfway on, crumples to the ground.

“Oh,” I gasp, realization dawning. “I’m so sorry.”

There’s a distance now, a divide that seems too vast to bridge. I finally found someone showing genuine concern, and I’m pushing him away, literally.

I can feel the tears threaten to spill, the weight of everything bearing down on me. Maybe I should just run. Start fresh, where no one knows me.

Brad, however, doesn’t retreat. Instead, he bends down to pick up the discarded jacket, holding it outstretched between us like a peace offering. Silence engulfs the room, punctuated only by the distant chatter of the radio.



After what feels like an eternity, he speaks, voice soft.

“I’m sorry, Grace. I shouldn’t have touched you without asking.”

And with that simple, heartfelt apology, a glimmer of hope pierces the dark clouds surrounding my heart. Maybe, just maybe, I’m not entirely alone.

“It’s okay,” I hurry to tell him, the urge to rectify the situation gnawing at me. “I shouldn’t have reacted like that.”

Brad dismisses my apology with a casual wave, but his eyes hold an intensity that’s hard to ignore. He puts the jacket on the floor and sits before me, leaning forward slightly.

“I don’t know what happened to you,” he begins cautiously, his voice heavy with sincerity. “And you don’t owe me an explanation. But whatever it was, I won’t let it happen again. Protecting is what I do.”

His reassurance brings warmth to my cheeks, and I can’t help but smile.

“Thank you,” I whisper, feeling an unfamiliar lightness.

Glancing toward the table, and before I can process what I’m doing, my hand reaches for one of the donuts. As I hold the sugary treat in front of me, a nagging doubt crosses my mind.

Did he mean every word he said? Won't he think I owe him something for this? It's such a twisted thought, a learned reaction from my past, but it's there nonetheless.

Brad, seemingly noticing my hesitation, looks at me with a playful glint in his eyes.

“What are you waiting for?” he teases.

With exaggerated flair, he grabs another donut and practically inhales half of it in one bite.

My eyes widen in surprise, and I find myself laughing softly. Emboldened by his gesture, I lean forward and take a tentative bite. The sugary sweetness is almost overwhelming, a blast of flavor I haven't tasted in years.

Lost in the sensation, I stretch my legs out for comfort. But in doing so, my foot brushes against Brad's. Our eyes lock, the playful atmosphere suddenly giving way to an electric charge.

The world seems to fade, leaving just the two of us suspended in this unexpected moment of intimacy.

I pull back first, breaking the connection, a flush creeping up my face.

“I'm sorry,” I stammer, unsure how else to navigate the situation.

But Brad doesn't respond immediately. He's staring at me with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. After what feels like an eternity, he shakes his head slightly as if pulling himself back to reality.

"Was the donut good?" he asks, trying to redirect the conversation.

Nodding, I flash him a grateful smile, "Yes, thank you."

He leans back in his chair, surveying me thoughtfully.

"Do you have someone you can call to come get you?" he asks.

Hating to admit it, I force out the words, "I have no one to call." I look away, "Nobody's going to come for me. But once it stops raining, I'll be on my way."

Brad's eyes narrow, deep in thought.

"You ran away without a plan B, didn't you?"

It's not a question but rather an astute observation.

"I did. And I don't regret it," I reply, my voice sharper than I intended.

Brad leans back, his muscular arms folding behind his head, the sinewy lines of muscle catching my eye. He watches me

intently, making my heart race.

“I have a bed available in my house,” he offers suddenly.

I blink in surprise, suspicion rapidly replacing my earlier gratitude. Is he no different from all the others? Offering kindness just to expect something in return?

Reading my doubt, Brad quickly adds, “I have a guest room. Hasn’t been used in months. You can have it until you figure out your next step. It’s got its own bathroom, so you’ll have all the privacy you need.”

He pauses, taking a deep breath.

“I know this might sound...off. And honestly, I probably shouldn’t offer. But the thought of you out there, with no place to go... it doesn’t sit right with me.”

His genuine concern leaves me torn. Can I trust him? My gut says he’s different, but what if he’s just a convincing actor?

Gripping the fabric of my drenched dress, my mind races.

Why me? Why couldn’t my life be simple, like others? Every corner I turn, I feel trapped, chained, even after I’ve escaped.

But as I gaze at Brad and his gentle, sincere expression, I realize that maybe, just maybe, I should give trust one last

shot. If Brad proves me wrong, I'll swear off people for good.

But if he's genuine... it can be my much-needed lifeline.

Taking a deep breath, I look into his eyes, "A bed sounds...  
amazing, thank you."

Brad's genuine and warm smile tells me I might have made the  
right choice. But only time will truly tell.



## Chapter 4 - Brad

We leave our seats, silence pressing down on both of us. The rain outside still pours as if the heavens are mourning someone's lost love. We stop at the door, listening to the rhythm of the raindrops, the air filled with tension and unspoken words.

For the life of me, I can't believe what I've done. Invited a woman I just met into my home. A gorgeous woman, at that. Every beat of my heart reminds me of her presence beside me, and I'm torn between wanting to be the protector she clearly needs and the urge to be closer to her than a simple guest-host relationship allows.

"I'm ready." Grace says, breaking the silence, "Let's leave."

I'm caught off guard. Her simple declaration has me fumbling for words.

"Are you sure about the wet wedding dress? We could find you something else to wear."

I try not to imagine her in anything else, or worse, out of that dress. But it's clear she's made her mind up about it.

She shakes her head with a faint smile, water droplets dancing on her flushed cheeks.

“I’m fine, really.”

Opening the doors, we dash out into the rain. It’s a quick sprint to my car. By the time we both get inside, our breaths are ragged, and our clothes are drenched. I steal a glance her way. The rain has given her a certain allure, water tracing a path from her hair down to her neckline, making the dress cling to her every curve. Damn her, she’s beautiful.

A part of me wants to reach out and brush the raindrops from her face, to hold her close and reassure her. But there’s also this primal urge that wants more, that wants to claim her. But not now, not when she’s vulnerable.

I inhale deeply, trying to steady myself.

“It’s only fifteen minutes to my place,” I tell her.

She leans back into the seat, her gaze distant.

“Time is something I have plenty of.” She tilts her head back, her eyes closed, and for a moment, all I want is to make time stand still.

In the quiet of the car, the steady rhythm of the raindrops is almost hypnotic. I would love nothing more than to stay here



with her. Just two souls, separated from the world, with rain as our only audience, talking about anything and everything. But fate isn't so generous, and I sense Grace isn't in the mood to bare her soul.

The engine roars to life, breaking my train of thought. The roads are slick with rain, making the drive treacherous. I keep my focus ahead, but my mind remains with the woman beside me.

Then, out of the blue, she speaks, "Thank you. For everything."

I smile, feeling a warmth spread inside me.

"Just doing my job," I reply, trying to downplay my actions.

But Grace isn't one to let things go easily.

"Do you invite everyone over?"

I chuckle softly, "No, not everyone. Sometimes, you just know when someone needs a little nudge in the right direction."

She turns to me, her eyes searching mine.

"Did you ever need that nudge?"

I nod, thinking back to rougher times.

“More times than I can count. Without my family and friends guiding me, I wouldn’t be here.”

There’s a sudden shift in the atmosphere. Grace turns away, her gaze fixed outside. I instantly realize I’ve hit a nerve. My clumsy attempt at conversation isn’t helping the situation.

It’s been ages since I’ve had a meaningful conversation with a woman, and I feel out of my depth, especially with someone as captivating as Grace.

“I’m sorry,” I quickly say, trying to make amends. “If I said something...”

“It’s fine,” she interrupts, her voice quivering slightly. “I was homeschooled. Never really had friends. So, I don’t know what having that guiding force feels like.”

A pang of sympathy hits me. I want to tell her that it’s never too late, that she can still find those connections, but the words just don’t come out.

Instead, all I manage is an “I’m sorry for prying.”

She takes a deep breath, “It’s okay. It feels good to finally share some parts of me I’ve kept hidden for so long.”

Our eyes meet, and there’s a vulnerability in hers that makes my body shiver involuntarily.

Seizing the moment, I softly say, “You know, I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

She gives a faint smile, and I see a glimmer of hope in her fierce eyes for the first time. It’s a start.

Yet, as much as I want her to open up, Grace’s walls are built high. Her fingers clutch her wet wedding dress, and the sight tugs at my heartstrings. It feels like a cruel irony.

Here I am, the sheriff, the town’s protector, and I feel utterly powerless.

“We’re here,” I say, trying to shake off my thoughts as we approach my house.

The rain has made everything look different - the dark outline of my house, the trees swaying gently in the rain.

“Once we’re inside, I’ll get a fire going. You can take a hot shower if you need to.”

Her smile, gentle and appreciative, warms me more than any fireplace could.

“Thank you, Brad.”

I try to lighten the mood, “Ready for another dash in the rain?”

She laughs softly, the sound like a melody against the backdrop of the rain.

“Getting used to it.” She says, and I am taken aback by her playfulness.

It’s a side of Grace I haven’t seen, “You’ve got jokes, huh?”

A flush spreads across her cheeks, making her look even more beautiful. And without thinking, I reach out, gently lifting her chin so her eyes meet mine. Those mesmerizing amber eyes hold me captive.

“Don’t hide that face. I love your smile,” I whisper.

The world around us fades. The rain, the car, the distant sounds of nature - all of it disappears. There’s just her. I feel an overwhelming urge to pull her close, to feel her lips against mine. Every fiber of my being screams for it. But that wouldn’t be right.

I have promised her safety and comfort. I can’t betray her trust. Tearing myself away, I open the car door, the cold air rushing in.

“We should get going,” I say, my voice strained.

Stepping out, my foot lands in a deep puddle. Cursing under my breath, I glance back at Grace. She is gracefully stepping

out of the car, the wet fabric of her dress revealing more than it hides.

My heart races, and I feel a stirring deep within me. I try to suppress my feelings, but they are too potent, too primal. I tell myself to be her refuge, her safe haven.

But as we walk towards my house, the lines between protector and admirer blur. How am I supposed to shield her from the storm outside when I am battling my own tempest within?



## Chapter 5 - Grace

The raindrops pelt my face, each one cold, crisp, and instantaneously awakening. I blink rapidly, allowing the droplets to wet my lashes.

Turning my gaze to Brad, I see the rain cascade over him. That sheriff suit of his clings, mapping out every contour of his muscles, making my heart race for an entirely different reason than the weather.

Being this close to Brad feels like a juxtaposition. He's the epitome of rugged masculinity, yet I don't sense a single hint of danger. It's disconcerting. I've been around men who tried too hard, and with Brad, everything feels effortless. That undeniable pull towards his lips, so tantalizingly close, gnaws at me. But I push the thought away.

Brad's gesture snaps me out of my trance.

"Come on! Let's get inside!" he shouts over the rain's crescendo.

I nod, sprinting behind him. My heels dig into the gravel, making it harder to keep up, but soon enough, we're at his

front door. He fumbles briefly with the keys before we're enveloped in the warmth of his home.

His fingers rake through his wet hair, the motion so casually sexy that I'm left speechless. How does he manage to look this handsome without even trying?

But I can't fall for this – for him. It's too soon.

*Isn't it?* I try to remind myself of my runaway bride status, chastising my wandering heart. Shaking my head, I inadvertently spray him with a few stray droplets.

“Oh! Sorry,” I blurt out, taken aback by my own thoughtlessness.

His eyes squint, but the soft chuckle that follows eases my guilt.

“Don't worry. It's not like I wasn't already wet,” he says, a teasing glint in his eyes.

My response is a gentle laugh.

Following Brad, I admire the interior of his home.

“Your house is beautiful,” I comment, trying to focus on anything other than how he looks or the flutter in my chest.



“Thanks. I love it here,” Brad replies. “It’s peaceful, just a few minutes from town. And with no neighbors around, it’s the perfect escape.”

I raise an eyebrow, “A sheriff that enjoys peace?”

The incredulity is evident in my voice.

Brad chuckles, “You’d be surprised. Silvervale Mountain isn’t a bustling city. We don’t have daily crimes. Sure, there was a minor spate of robberies recently, but the guy wasn’t even from here. We sorted it out.”

I nod, taking in his words, his presence, and this moment.

Somehow, being here, with him, feels right. But I can’t let my guard down, not yet.

Still, the warmth of his home, combined with his comforting presence, beckons me to stay a while longer. Maybe, just maybe, Silvervale Mountain holds more for me than just an escape.

Maybe it holds a new beginning.

“Give me a moment,” Brad says, moving towards the fireplace.

I watch as he leans down, flicking a switch. Within moments, the gentle crackling of the flames comes to life, illuminating

the room in a warm, amber glow. The heat gradually fills the room, dispelling the chill that clung to us from the rain.

I use this moment to wander around the living room. My eyes land on the couch, and an incongruous detail strikes me: a bed sheet, haphazardly thrown over one end.

Has he been sleeping here? My gaze then drifts to a small table nearby. An empty glass sits there, a lonely sentinel next to an unsealed bottle of what looks like whiskey. The tableau suggests solace sought, perhaps on more than one occasion.

It's curious; these small details paint a different portrait of Brad than the robust and unflappable sheriff I've come to know in this short time. Everyone has layers, but I'm intrigued by what lies beneath his.

What battles is he fighting internally?

The warmth from the fireplace reaches me, thawing the iciness from my skin. I hear Brad clearing his throat, drawing my attention.

“Grace, I think I’ll take a quick shower. You’re welcome to one as well if you’d like.”

His words catch me off guard, making me question their implication.

“Together?” I blurt out, almost instantly regretting it.

His eyes widen in surprise, and he stammers, “N-no, I meant...after me. You can take one after me.”

A blush creeps up my cheeks, but a whirlwind of emotions floods me. I’m grateful for his chivalry, yet I can’t deny the uncharted desire surging within me.

It’s unfamiliar and overwhelming. I’ve never been with a man, never gone past innocent kisses, and now my body yearns for Brad in ways I can’t fully comprehend.

“I’d like that,” I finally say, trying to regain my composure.

“Showering after you, I mean.”

He offers a soft smile, the awkward tension dissipating.

“I’ll be quick. Feel free to make yourself comfortable.”

I nod, thinking about where to sit, “I don’t want to wet anything.”

“It’s alright,” he assures. “It’s just a couch. Better that than you staying on your feet the whole time.”

Hesitating momentarily, I move the bedsheet and perch myself on the couch’s corner, my fingers smoothing the fabric beneath me.

Brad's eyes meet mine, and his voice softens.

“Make yourself at home, Grace.”

He turns to leave, but his words echo in my mind. *At home.*

If only he knew what ‘home’ meant for me, he might never say that. The memories flood back, but I push them down, focusing instead on the crackling fire and the warmth around me.

Lost in thought, I lean back on the couch, the cushion's softness cradling my head. My mind races, trying to recall precisely how I ended up in this place, this situation.

I remember fleeing my wedding, the frantic dash away from everything I once knew, and the menacing encirclement of those three young men. And then there is Brad—my savior, leading me to safety.

But the exact dialogue, the persuasive words he uttered to guide me? It's all a blur. Despite the haze, an unshakable feeling persists: I'm exactly where I should be.

A glint from the small table adjacent to the couch catches my eye, drawing my attention to a delicately framed picture, face down. It feels wrong to invade Brad's privacy, but curiosity gnaws at me.

Carefully, I lift the frame, revealing an image of Brad, a woman who appears to be of a similar age and an older gentleman, his likeness to Brad unmistakable.

Before I can process the photo further, a voice, deeper and more stern than before, interrupts me.

“What are you doing?”

I whip around, startled, and am met with a sight that momentarily steals my ability to respond. Brad stands there, a towel wrapped low around his waist, displaying a torso that could have been sculpted by the gods themselves.

An involuntary rush of heat sweeps up my body, and for a moment, the heavy fabric of my wedding gown feels unbearably confining. A part of me wishes to shed it, level the playing field, and bare my vulnerability as he has bared his.

But the gravity of his question jolts me from my reverie.

“I—I’m sorry,” I stammer, holding out the frame, guilt evident in my voice.

As he steps forward to take it, his proximity is almost unbearable. The raw emotion in his eyes, the strength of his stance, all so overpowering. I instinctively curl into a

protective ball, squeezing my eyes shut, bracing for a blow that never comes.

Cautiously, I peek one eye open. Brad is crouched before me, his face a portrait of shock and confusion.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!” His voice trembles with a mix of concern and guilt.

“I shouldn’t have snooped,” I reply quietly, my gaze drifting away from his.

Brad shakes his head vehemently.

“It’s not about that. It’s just that…” His voice trails off as he retreats to the table, hovering over the bottle of alcohol.

He contemplates it for a moment before placing it back down with a sigh. Then, leaning back, he finally reveals the source of his pain.

“That’s my father in the picture. He… passed away a month ago. And honestly, I haven’t quite come to terms with it.”

The room is heavy with emotions—both spoken and unspoken—as the two of us navigate the vulnerabilities we never expected to share.



## Chapter 6 - Brad

The heaviness of the moment presses down on me. Why did I tell her? Grace, the woman I only met a few hours ago, now knows the rawest part of me.

I hadn't intended on sharing it, but something about the look in her eyes, the concern in her tone, made me crack open that door I had firmly shut to the world.

She's perched on the edge of my worn-out couch, looking lost in thought. I notice her glance, like mine, darting towards the unopened bottle of whiskey. I want to drown in it, lose myself, and let the amber liquid wash away the sting of memories. But not now. Not with her watching.

I suddenly feel the weight of her gaze and look up. Water droplets meander down her porcelain skin, an utter contrast against the fabric of her drenched wedding dress.

She pushes herself off the couch and takes confident steps towards me. Standing before me, she seems taller, the roles reversed. The semi-transparency of her dress reveals the curves I had only allowed myself brief glimpses of earlier.



The heat rises in my face, my pulse quickens. My eyes shift to the bottle again, but I ball my hand into a fist, my nails digging into the palm, using the pain as an anchor.

Before I can construct a thought, she sits beside me, capturing my rugged, calloused hand with her delicate fingers. I try to pull away, but she holds it tighter.

“What are you doing?” My voice comes out rougher than I intended.

She looks at me, her eyes a stormy blend of emotions.

“You helped me, Brad. Now, it’s my turn. You think you’re the only one who’s a good listener?”

“We just met,” I chuckle lightly, trying to steer the intensity elsewhere.

“Exactly. And yet, here I am, in your living room, after you gave me a place to rest. So why can’t we talk? Share our burdens?”

There’s an openness in her eyes, a vulnerability that mirrors mine. I’m trapped, not by her grip, but by the genuine connection I feel with her.

“You tell me your story,” I tease, attempting to lighten the mood, “and I’ll lay my heart bare.”

She scrunches her nose, her lips forming a playful pout.

“That’s a tall order, sheriff. But okay, it’s only fair. Just remember, it’s not a story with a happy ending.”

I lean in closer, our faces inches apart.

“The best stories rarely are,” I whisper.

“My family...they’re forcing me to marry,” she blurts a few seconds later, her voice so fast, it’s like she’s physically pushing the words out of her mouth, desperate to rid herself of the torment they’ve caused her.

Her voice is a trembling whisper, and every word she utters feels like a plea for understanding, a desperate cry for salvation. The weight of her words, the confession of a forced future and a painful past, is too much to bear.

I can feel her hand trembling within mine, the fragile nature of her predicament evident in every slight tremor. Gripping her hand firmly, I try to lend her the strength she needs, hoping she feels the warmth of my solidarity.

Anger simmers within me, a bubbling cauldron of disbelief and rage. It’s inconceivable. We live in an age where individual choice and autonomy are celebrated. The audacity

of a family, her own blood, imposing such a decision on her makes my blood boil.

But I say nothing. I hold my tongue. Now's not the time for my rage. This moment is about her.

She takes a deep breath, her amber eyes cloudy with tears as she delves deeper into her tale.

“After my mom passed away, everything changed. My stepmother never really saw me as a person. To her, I was just a means to an end. And then, one day, this guy, some rich guy, noticed me. He didn't approach me, didn't even bother to know my name. He went straight to my family, making his intentions known, and they...” She chokes on her words, “... they said yes. My own father didn't even fight for me.”

Grace's voice cracks, her pain palpable. Tears stream down her face, her frustration and despair pouring out. The way she speaks, rapid and breathless, it's like she's desperately trying to let it all out, to get it over with. But even then, every word is saturated with years of suppressed emotions.

“I just don't get it. Why? I've always tried to be good, to treat people with kindness. Why doesn't anyone do the same for me?”

The raw pain in her voice, the sheer helplessness, it feels like a vice around my chest, squeezing tighter and tighter. I can't just sit and watch. I need to do something, anything, to shield her from this storm.

Rising from my chair, I take a few strides towards her.

Reaching out, I grasp her hands, pulling her gently to her feet.

Without hesitation, she steps into my embrace, her body wracked with sobs.

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close, letting her pain seep into me, hoping I can offer her some solace. She nestles her head into the crook of my neck, her tears warm against my skin.

With her in my arms, the world's weight feels a little lighter. I run my fingers through her drenched hair, murmuring soft words of comfort.

"You're safe now, Grace. I promise. You're safe with me."

Her face is a canvas of raw emotion, every teardrop painting a story of pain and heartache. But when she raises her eyes to meet mine, I see something more profound—gratitude.

"Thank you," she says, her voice quivering. "Nobody's ever cared for me like this. I don't even know how to react."

“You’re doing just fine,” I murmur, my fingers gently brushing away the wet trails on her cheeks, “If you don’t mind telling me... What really made you leave?”

The silence between us thickens as I wait for her to gather the strength to continue her story.

“It was something my stepmother said a few hours ago,” she admits, her voice dropping to a whisper. “She told me my opinion did not matter, that I had to marry for the family’s sake. But shouldn’t a wedding be about love, about two souls choosing each other? If I went through with it, I’d never be free. Running... it was my last shot at happiness.”

She looks down, and I use my thumb to lift her chin, wanting her to face me, to see the sincerity in my eyes.

“I walked for hours until I stumbled upon the gas station where I found you.” She adds.

I’m lost in the intensity of our moment, my gaze flitting to her lips. The way she draws her tongue over them is unintentionally seductive. The temptation to kiss her is overwhelming.

“Do you feel happy now?” I ask, my voice strained.

Her eyes search mine.

“Not sure if I know what happiness really is, but I can tell you I haven’t felt this safe and content in... I don’t remember when. There’s something about being with you. It’s like a protective shield.”

“You’re right about that,” I assure her, the promise evident in my tone. “I won’t ever let anyone hurt you.”

Our proximity, the electricity between us, it’s intoxicating. But suddenly, the weight of the situation hits me. I step back, needing the distance, trying to find reason in this whirlwind. She tries to pull me back, but I resist. The confusion is evident in her eyes.

“Grace,” I begin, my voice heavy with conflict. “What are we doing? This isn’t... we just met. And with everything you’re going through...”

She cuts me off, her defiance palpable.

“I’m not a child, you know? Yes, I’m younger, but I know my heart, my desires. When I wanted out of that wedding, I left. And now, all I want is to be close to you, to feel your warmth, your protection.”

Her passion and assertiveness catches me off guard. But before I react, she challenges me further, “Don’t you want that too?”

My thoughts swirl. This is complicated, messy. But looking at Grace, seeing the earnestness in her eyes, it's hard to deny my own desires. She's not just another woman; she's a force of nature, and she's drawing me in.

I may be in over my head, but perhaps that's exactly where I need to be.





## Chapter 7 - Grace

The air around us seems to grow thicker, like the tension between two magnets before they crash together. The fire crackles beside us, the orange and yellow flames casting an almost mystical glow in the otherwise dim room.

As Brad's large, calloused hands touch my arms, I feel an unexpected warmth, and not just from the fireplace. His touch ignites something inside me, something raw and untamed that has been suppressed for so long.

I can't tear my eyes away from his and see a mirror of my feelings reflected back in them. The confusion, the desire, the fear.

"I think I should...you know, freshen up while you figure out what you really want," I suggest, my voice surprisingly steady despite the rapid beating of my heart.

He shakes his head, those blue eyes of his darkening.

"No," Brad says softly, "I don't need time to think."

I feel my body tense, excitement and anticipation coursing through my veins. My thoughts race as the space between us

dwindles. The feelings I've been suppressing are crashing over me like waves, and I'm drowning in them.

"What now?" I whisper, breathlessly.

Brad takes a deep, shuddering breath, his chest rising and falling beneath his shirt. I see the pulse in his neck quicken.

Without a word, he leans in, and I follow suit, our lips colliding in a desperate, passionate kiss.

The sensation is electric, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my entire body. His fingers trace along my jaw, gentle yet assertive, making me feel things I've never felt before.

Brad's kiss is intoxicating, his lips warm and firm against mine. It's nothing like the cold, lifeless pecks I received from the man I was supposed to marry.

This kiss is alive, full of promise and passion. I'm left panting when we finally pull apart, gasping for air.

His gaze, fierce and full of desire, searches mine.

"I can't resist you, Grace," he murmurs, his voice husky.

"Every inch of you calls to me."

I blush furiously at his words, my mind whirling. I've never been the object of such raw desire before.

“I should shower first, right?” I mumble, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Brad smirks, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“I want you like this,” he growls. “I don’t want to wait.”

Before I can react, he’s lifting me up effortlessly, carrying me over to the couch, and gently laying me down. He hovers above me, the intensity in his eyes leaving me breathless.

Here, with Brad, I finally feel free. Free to be me, free to love, free to be loved in return. And as Brad’s lips descend on mine once again, I lose myself in the passion of the present.

He kneels in front of me, his intense eyes locked onto mine as he begins to lift the hem of my wedding dress with the utmost reverence. The feel of his fingers brushing lightly against my skin sends shivers up my spine. No one has ever looked at me this way – with such raw, unbridled desire.

With every gentle kiss on my legs, I’m transported to another world. A world where past regrets and fears don’t matter. Only this moment. Only Brad.

He draws nearer to the boundary of my white panties, every kiss leaving a burning sensation on my skin. I’ve never been

exposed like this – vulnerable and open – emotionally and physically.

His fingers firmly press against the insides of my thighs, keeping me in place, a silent demand for submission to the electrifying sensations he's evoking.

"You have the softest skin," he murmurs.

The sincerity in his tone makes my cheeks burn. It's genuine – not the hollow flattery I've grown used to hearing.

"No one's ever told me that," I admit, a whisper lost amidst the fireplace crackling.

His soft laughter warms me more than the flames.

"You better get used to it. I won't ever stop."

His words "won't ever stop" play on a loop in my mind. The future seemed so uncertain just hours ago, and now, looking into Brad's piercing eyes, I see the glimmer of possibilities.

It's astonishing how quickly my life has turned around, from the depths of despair to the heights of passion.

Brad pauses, looking deep into my eyes.

"Grace," he breathes, "I'm going to cherish you every single moment we have. You deserve nothing less."

His next move catches me off guard – a teasing kiss where no one has ever dared before. My breath catches, a gasp stifled by my lips. The pleasure is intense, overwhelming but also unfamiliar, and I grip the couch for support. Suddenly, he stops and looks up, concern evident in his gaze.

“Are you sure about this? Because if you’re not, we stop here. I want you to feel safe, always.”

The genuine care in his words strengthens my resolve. I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything. With a shaky breath, I nod, entrusting myself to him and whatever the future holds.

Yet, as Brad removes my panties, I instinctively use my hands to shield myself from his gaze. His blue eyes blink in surprise, and he pauses, looking slightly confused.

“Grace?” he queries softly, “Is everything okay?”

Swallowing hard, I mumble, “Sorry,” my cheeks flushing with a mix of embarrassment and lingering fear.

“I’ve... I’ve never done this before. And... and the man I was about to marry... he tried many times, and I always had to push him away. I dreaded our wedding night, fearing I’d be powerless to stop him.” My voice quavers, the memories still raw. “But now, tonight, it’s you. And even though it feels

right, I'm... I'm still trying to process it all. Plus, I feel so...  
exposed.”

Brad's expression softens, his eyes filled with understanding.

“Listen,” he begins, his face now resting on my leg, “we don't  
have to do anything you're not ready for, believe me. I can  
wait. But if you trust me, I promise to take things slow. Just let  
me know if you want to stop, okay?”

His words comfort me, and the sincerity in his voice calms my  
racing heart.

“And don't hold back, Grace,” he adds with a mischievous  
glint, “Let go of control. Let yourself feel everything. Right  
now, it's just you and me. Nothing else matters.”

My heart rate quickens, and I take a deep breath, nodding.

Slowly, hesitantly, I remove my hands, letting him see me  
fully. As he takes in the view, his blue eyes widen, filled with  
lust and desire.

“Wow, Grace,” he murmurs, “You're stunning.” And with that,  
he leans in.

His touch is electric, every motion designed to coax pleasure  
from me. I bite down on my lip, trying to stifle the moans

threatening to escape, but it's an uphill battle. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, urging him not to stop.

With him, every touch, every sensation is magnified. The world's boundaries seem to fade, leaving just the two of us in a cocoon of intimacy and desire. As each moment passes, my fears and apprehensions melt away, replaced by a growing tide of pleasure.

For the first time, I truly understand what it means to lose myself in the moment. And with Brad guiding me, I embrace the sensation wholeheartedly.

His meticulous attention to every part of me sends waves of pleasure coursing through my body. His steady and unrelenting rhythm keeps pushing me closer to that edge of blissful surrender.

As I teeter on that precipice, my voice, a mix of moans and cries, echoes around the room. I feel lost, consumed by the pleasure he's giving me, and all I can do is hold on.

His gaze never leaves mine, even as he continues to work his magic. The intensity of his stare is electrifying, making me feel more seen and valued than ever before.

It's a sensation that's both raw and intense, and when I finally reach my climax, it's like a dam breaking, the emotions flooding over me.

The vulnerability remains, but it's different this time. With Brad, it feels right, safe. As I ride out the waves of pleasure, I find myself whispering words I never imagined saying to someone I'd just met.

“Claim me, please. Make me yours.”

Brad's immediate reaction is a mixture of shock and lust. He stands up swiftly, the urgency in his movements evident as he lets the towel fall before me. The sight of him, strong and very much aroused, is entirely new to me.

My eyes widen in both anticipation and slight apprehension. I've only ever heard about this moment, never experienced it firsthand.

As I move to reach out, curious to touch him, he steps back, holding up a hand.

“Not yet,” he murmurs, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

He takes a step forward, and my wedding dress, a symbol of the life I'm running from, is quickly pulled off, leaving me in



my most raw and natural state. Instinctively, my hands move to cover my stretch marks.

But Brad's gaze remains unwavering with desire and admiration.

“Trust me, you're beautiful,” he whispers, slowly taking my hands away from my body. “Every inch of you, including these stretch marks. I'm a man and trust me when I say we cherish every detail. I love your body, and with time, I hope you'll see just how much.”

His reassurance comforts me, and for the first time in a long while, I start to believe it. Brad's strong and calming presence is helping me wash away years of self-doubt and insecurity.



## Chapter 8 - Brad

The rain intensifies, its rhythm a chaotic but alluring backdrop.

“Lift your arms,” I whisper to Grace, my voice rough and thick with desire.

She complies, and I gently help her take off the stunning wedding dress she wears. With one swift motion, I toss it to the other side of the couch.

Now, completely bare on the leather, the soft lighting from the fireplace accentuates every curve and edge of her body; she appears almost ethereal. As her breasts move with her breathing, I notice how she quickly places her hands on her hips, shielding the stretch marks that adorn her skin.

I step closer, closing the distance between us. Gently, I reach down and grab her wrists, feeling the rapid pulse beneath her skin.

“Trust me,” I murmur, looking deep into her eyes.

She nods hesitantly, and I guide her hands away, revealing those marks she seems so ashamed of.

“You’re beautiful, Grace,” I whisper, my eyes roaming her body. “Every inch of you, including these stretch marks. I’m a

man and trust me when I say we cherish every detail. I love your body, and with time, I hope you'll see just how much.”

The room is heavy with tension. The only sounds are the rhythmic pounding of the rain outside, the crackling of the fireplace, and the synchronized beating of our hearts.

Grace's face is flushed, the sweat giving her a delicate glow. She bites her lower lip, and I know that's my cue. Everything seems surreal: time slowing, her gaze never leaving mine, not even when I approach, my intentions clear.

She looks anxious, but there's a glimmer of trust beneath it all. I know I have to be patient and gentle. I lean in, asking once more if she's ready, and the smile she gives in return is all the confirmation I need.

I adjust our bodies, ensuring that we are perfectly aligned. Her warmth beckons me, and I enter her slowly, the sensation almost overwhelming. Each moment, each gasp, each sound she makes is engraved into my mind.

“Brad... please...” she whispers between breaths, her voice filled with pain and pleasure.

I lean in, capturing her lips, wanting her to feel every ounce of passion, adoration, and commitment I feel for her. The

intensity of our movements and the connection we share are almost overwhelming.

Life's unpredictability took me from a night patrol to this passionate moment with Grace. And as our movements become more synchronized, my thoughts drift to the future.

I want her to stay. I want to wake up next to her every morning, keep her safe, and be her refuge. I am ready to fight for us, for every moment we will share together.

Pulling away from our fervent kiss, I whisper, "I have an idea."

Grace's eyebrow arches inquisitively, her eyes filled with mischief.

"Oh? Do tell," she replies, her voice teasing.

With a smirk, I slide my hands beneath her, lifting her effortlessly, her legs wrapping instinctively around my waist.

"I think it's time we move this to the bedroom," I murmur, feeling her face nestling against my beard.

Navigating through the dimly lit house, I reach the bedroom, the door creaking slightly as I push it open. Setting Grace gently on the bed, I look down to find her already beckoning me, that earlier taste having ignited a deeper desire.

Hopping onto the bed beside her, I lean in, pressing our lips together, the taste of her mingling with mine.

“I love how your beard feels again my skin,” she whispers, her voice breathless, “it’s so... different.”

“You,” I say, pulling back to gaze into her eyes, “are absolutely perfect. Kind, beautiful, and undeniably enticing.”

A soft giggle escapes her lips, but the moment of levity quickly transforms back to one of intensity. Without hesitation, I align myself with her, and as I enter, she gasps, her hands instantly finding their way to my back, nails digging in slightly as she pulls me closer.

Her body moves with a rhythm that matches mine, each thrust deepening our connection. The sheen of sweat that forms on her skin in the heat of the moment only makes her more captivating, her half-lidded eyes watching me intently, lips parted slightly as soft moans fill the room.

“Damn it, Grace,” I grunt, trying to convey how much I relish being with her. “You’re... incredible.”

She responds with a shaky breath, murmuring, “I’m close... again.”

I slow down deliberately, wanting her to savor every sensation.

“Let go for me,” I say, each thrust deliberate and deep.

Her back arches, eyes rolling back in sheer ecstasy. Even as her climax ebbs, I feel the pressure building within me.

“I’m close, too,” I warn her.

But Grace’s response is swift and sure, “Don’t stop. I want all of you. Inside me.”

The intensity of the moment, combined with her words, renders me almost powerless to resist. I succumb, losing myself entirely in the pleasure of our shared intimacy, and finally, load after load, I fill her with my seed.

With every ounce of energy drained, I collapse beside Grace, our sweaty bodies finally cooling. Her breath is ragged, matching mine, as she stares up at the wooden beams of the cabin ceiling.

Leaning over, I plant a soft kiss on the sensitive skin of her neck, drawing a content sigh from her.

“I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did,” I whisper, each word punctuated with another soft kiss.

Her sparkling eyes meet mine.

“Every second,” she murmurs, a smile on her lips. “If it were up to me, I’d never leave this place.”

I hesitate, contemplating the gravity of my next words.

“You don’t have to leave,” I tell her gently. Grace’s brows shoot up in surprise, her amber eyes searching mine for the sincerity she hopes to find. “This could be your home, Grace. Your safe haven. And if you ever need more privacy, there’s that guest room I talked to you about.”

She looks down, biting her lip, then says, “Wouldn’t you want to sleep next to me?”

The earnestness in her voice warms my heart.

“Of course I would,” I reply. “I just don’t want to come on too strong or make you uncomfortable.”

She lets out a soft, playful laugh.

“Brad, you quite literally took my virginity. I think we’re well past the ‘coming on too strong’ phase.” I chuckle in return, realizing the truth in her words, “But... I’ve never shared a bed for the entire night. I don’t know how I’d feel about it.”

She adds.

Taking her hand, I squeeze it gently.

“There’s a first time for everything. And tonight’s been full of them, hasn’t it?”

She nods, her eyes glistening slightly.



“Running away from my wedding, being with you in a way I’ve never been with anyone else, and now possibly sharing a bed for the night... It’s a lot of firsts.”

Pulling her closer, I can feel her heart pounding against my chest. I gently brush away the strands of hair clinging to her sweat-dampened forehead as the steady thump of my heartbeat seems to soothe her.

“We’ve ventured into uncharted territories tonight. But,” I add, sensing her underlying fear, “we’re in this together.”

Her voice is just above a whisper when she replies.

“There’s so much we don’t know about each other. What if, after all this, we discover things that change how we feel?”

It’s a fear I’ve also been harboring, but I try to comfort her.

“Every relationship, whether forged in moments or years, requires us to learn about each other. Ask me anything, Grace. I’ll be an open book for you.”

Grace’s fingers trace small circles on my chest as she speaks.

“You know, I’ll be an open book for you too. I mean, there are things about me I’ve never told anyone, things I’m scared to even think about. But, for you, I’ll try.”

I turn to her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and kissing her cheek.

“You never have to tell me anything you’re not ready to share. Honestly, just having you here with me, in this moment, is enough.”

She props herself up on one elbow, looking down at me with those curious eyes.

“How old are you, Brad?”

Chuckling, I retort playfully, “Going for the jugular so soon?”

She shoves me lightly, her laughter infectious.

“Oh, stop it. I just want to know the age of the man who saved me.”

As she says it, the word “savior” sends a shiver down my spine.

“I’m 42,” I confess, tilting my head to the side.

She hesitates for a split second, then says, “I didn’t tell you before, but I’m turning 21 next month.”

I trace the contour of her face with a finger, her skin soft against mine.

“Then we’ll celebrate it together. As the town’s sheriff, I have the privilege of having seats saved in Silvervale Mountain’s best restaurants.”

Her eyes sparkle with mischief, “I’d love that, but if we’re being honest, I’d be just as happy cooking dinner here, for both of us.”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm.

“On your birthday? Not a chance. If anyone’s cooking, it’ll be me.”

She grins, and as our lips meet, the world outside fades. When we part, her gaze turns contemplative.

“Did you ever have a wife?” She asks.

Shifting slightly, I look away for a brief moment.

“No,” I admit. “Honestly, I never really saw myself having one.”

She frowns, trying to understand, “Why?”

Taking a deep breath, memories of the past flooding in, I start,

“I poured my entire being into work. Growing up, being the sheriff was everything I ever wanted - the influence of too many cops and Western movies, I guess. But once I got there,

the reality of the position consumed me. I lost myself in it, and I couldn't figure out how to balance my work life with... well, life outside of it. It wasn't until my friends and family stepped in that I realized how much I was missing out on."

She takes my hand, her touch reassuring, "Well, sometimes life has a funny way of bringing us what we didn't know we were missing."

"Seems so," I say, smiling, happy to be here, happy for us.



## Chapter 9 - Grace

The pattering of rain against the ceiling blends with the steady rhythm of our hearts.

Lying amidst a tangle of sheets, the only illumination in the room is the occasional flash of lightning, briefly highlighting the contours of Brad's rugged face. His scent is a mix of sweat and a hint of cologne – intoxicatingly male.

An hour ago, my curiosity was piqued when I spotted a photo in Brad's living room. The memory comes rushing back to me, and I can't hold back my question any longer.

“If you don't mind telling me, who's the woman next to your father in that picture I saw?” His body stiffens momentarily beneath mine. “You don't have to tell me,” I add hurriedly, “I'm just curious, especially since you said you never had a wife.”

Brad exhales deeply, his warm breath tickling my earlobe. Turning to face me, his gaze is tender but filled with a shadow of something deeper. He forces a smile, a mere lift at the corner of his lips.

“That's my sister, Clarissa.”

Listening intently, my fingers trace patterns on his chest, and I notice the catch in his voice as he continues.

“She left after our father passed away.”

Guilt seeps into me for bringing up a fresh wound. I grasp his hand, offering a reassuring squeeze and a soft smile.

“She said she couldn’t stay in Silvervale Mountain any longer,” Brad murmurs, his voice dripping with pain. “Every corner, every stone, every tree reminded her of him. I... I found a letter one evening. She was gone. Didn’t even say goodbye.”

His pain is palpable, almost a living entity between us. I fight the urge to pull him closer, to take away his pain.

“She blamed me.” The rawness in his voice cuts through me.

“For our father’s heart attack. With all the robberies happening, dad was always worried, and I was so lost in my own world, trying to protect this town, I didn’t see how much he was hurting.”

“I’m sorry I asked,” I whisper, regret evident in my voice.

“No,” he replies, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“We’re sharing our lives. It’s never easy, but it’s worth it.”

A flash of lightning lights up the room again, and I remember the almost empty alcohol bottle.

“Is that why there’s that bottle in the living room?”

Brad pulls away slightly, creating a small chasm between us.

For a moment, he’s silent, seemingly lost in his thoughts. I mentally berate myself for pushing too far.

“You don’t have to te-.”

“No,” he interrupts. “I want to be honest with you.”

Tears prick at my eyes as I watch him grapple with his emotions.

“Whatever you’re going through,” I whisper, “we’ll face it together if you’ll let me.”

He looks at me, his eyes shimmering with gratitude and vulnerability. The storm outside mirrors the storm of emotions between us, and as we hold onto each other, I silently vow to be his anchor.

Brad’s voice carries a depth of compassion that surprises me, “How can you be so kind, Grace? You’ve run away from your own wedding today, and yet here you are, caring for my broken pieces.”



I nudge him gently with my shoulder, feeling a playfulness bubble up despite the heaviness of our conversation.

“There’s no competition on who’s suffering more, Sheriff. We’re in this together, remember?”

A soft chuckle escapes him, the sound almost drowned out by the pouring rain outside.

“You’re right. But for the record, I should be the one taking care of you tonight.”

Our proximity narrows as I kiss his cheek, feeling the rough stubble against my lips. Resting my head against his, I can feel the warmth emanating from his skin.

Brad’s eyes widen as he recalls the past, “After that letter... and with dad gone... I just lost my way. Started drinking more than I should. Actually, the reason I was at the filling station tonight was to avoid being home, drowning in memories and liquor.”

Raising an eyebrow, I tease, “I thought you were working.”

He grins sheepishly. “Well, I usually have someone covering the night shift. But tonight, I wanted to keep busy. I never expected that detour would lead me straight to you.”

A soft smile plays on my lips.

“Told you that fate played a hand in getting us together,” I tell him, “We’re more alike than you think, you know. I spent years internalizing every awful comment from my stepmother, convincing myself that every misfortune was my fault.”

Brad’s gaze intensifies as he draws me closer.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you anymore. You’re safe with me.”

I meet his gaze, my eyes earnest, “And you need to remember, I’m here for you too.”

His lips curve into a playful smile, “I guess we do have quite the future ahead, huh? A few hours is nothing compared to the years we might have.”

The word “years” hangs between us, a promise, a possibility. But the weight of reality crashes in, dimming the moment’s warmth. I think of the entangled mess I’ve left behind, the possible search parties, the rage of a jilted groom, and a family that might never understand.

“They’ll come for me,” I whisper, a lone tear tracing a path down my cheek.

Brad’s jaw sets, his grip tightening, “And we’ll face them together.”

“It might not be that easy,” I say, my voice shaking slightly at the thought of facing my family.

Brad’s face hardens with determination.

“I didn’t become sheriff for nothing. I can handle them.”

“But they can be devious,” I counter, desperation evident in my voice. “They might claim you’re forcing me to stay with you. They’ll do anything to have their way.”

Brad’s hand comes up to cradle my face, his thumb brushing my cheek soothingly. I lean into his touch, finding solace there.

“I have a good lawyer friend. I’ll speak with him first thing in the morning. Even if he says they can legally force you back, I promise I won’t let them take you. You’re mine now, Grace.”

A smile tugs at my lips, my heart swelling at his fierce protectiveness.

“I love hearing that from you.”

“Is that so?” A playful glint appears in his eyes.

He leans closer, capturing my lips with his in a passionate embrace as the thunderous rain outside continues its relentless symphony.

Pulling back just enough to gaze into my eyes, he says, “I’ll stop drinking, Grace. For you.”

Still pinned beneath him, I gently cradle his face in my hands.

“No, Brad. Do it for yourself. I’ll be right here to cheer you on every step of the way. And someday, hopefully, Clarissa will see her anger is misplaced.”

He kisses me again, this one soft and lingering.

“I’ll get rid of that bottle tomorrow. Not tonight,” he murmurs against my lips, “because leaving your side even for a moment feels unbearable. But come morning, and I need to get up. I mean, we still have until 12 p.m.”

I tease him, my mood lightening.

“My dashing savior, off to rescue others?”

He chuckles, the sound warm and comforting.

“It’s not as glamorous as it sounds.”

I grow contemplative.

“I need to find something too, but... I’ve never worked before. My stepmother didn’t let me. Said I’d just be wasting my time and I wouldn’t be good at anything. Now, I’m scared. The

thought of interacting with others, starting anew... It's daunting."

"We'll figure it out together, Grace. One step at a time and, besides, you don't have to work if you don't want to," He murmurs, his fingers lazily trailing patterns on my arm. "I can take care of us."

I shift to look into his deep-set eyes, earnestness shining in mine.

"I want to. I depended on others once and never want to feel that way again. I want to stand on my own two feet and contribute. We're a team now."

His lips curve upward.

"A team," he echoes, pulling me close.

I rest my head on his chest, lulled by the steady beat of his heart. It feels like home, this moment, nestled in his embrace, the world and its worries momentarily forgotten.

"You know, there's a nice coffee shop in town," he begins, fingers playing with strands of my hair. "They've been looking for some help. I know the owner well. Could put in a good word if you'd like."

A soft smile forms on my lips.

“That sounds wonderful. I can picture myself there, serving coffee and chatting with the locals. At least, trying.”

“I know you’ll do great. You’re now your own person, and you won’t ever have to go through anything alone ever again. Never forget that.”

We share a quiet moment, our smiles speaking louder than words. My eyelids grow heavy, fatigue seeping in, and I can’t seem to resist the pull of sleep.

“I’m sleepy,” I admit, “but I don’t want to close my eyes. I want to know more about you, about us. Every detail.”

Brad chuckles softly, ruffling my hair.

“We have our whole lives to share stories. And remember, we’re in this together, every step of the way.”

A soft sigh escapes me.

“I know, but it’s hard to believe sometimes. Part of me still expects to wake in that gilded cage, with my stepmother’s shrill voice ringing in my ears, pushing me towards a life I never wanted.”

Brad gently tilts my face upward.

“This is real. Tomorrow, you’ll wake up right here, safe and sound, next to me.”

Tears shimmer in my eyes, overwhelmed by the emotions of the day.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He nods, drawing me close.

“Close your eyes. I’ll be right here in the morning.”

And as the night deepens and the rain outside turns to a gentle drizzle, I drift into a peaceful slumber, now bound by a newfound love and a promise of a better tomorrow.





## Chapter 10 - Brad

The first thing I notice when I wake is the unusual dip in the mattress. Stretching my limbs, I turn to find Grace, her hair cascading over the pillow like a river of tangled silk.

The soft morning light filters through the open door, highlighting the curve of her cheek, the slight rise and fall of her chest. She looks every bit the dream I can't believe I lived yesterday, and the desire to make countless more memories with her has me smiling like an idiot.

But first, things need to be set straight.

Silently, I peel the blanket off me, careful not to disturb her, and grab a pair of pants. Exiting the bedroom, I am welcomed by the living room, bathed in a soft hue from the few sun rays that escape through the windows. The storm from last night seems a distant memory now.

Yawning and rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I retrieve my phone from the side table, noting the time - 10:13 a.m.

Hesitation claws at me as I dial Dennis's number. It's been months since we last spoke, but our bond has been resilient

through time. On the third ring, I hear the unmistakable deep voice.

“Brad? Is something wrong?”

“Sorry,” I begin, “It’s just... I’ve run into a situation, and I thought you might be the best person to advise.”

Silence.

Then, cautiously, “Alright. What’s going on?”

I clear my throat. “Met a girl. Grace. Her parents are trying to force her into a marriage. She’s an adult. Can they legally do that?”

Dennis’s voice sharpens, “Hell no, Brad! That’s straight-up illegal. We’re not in some medieval period! If she feels threatened, she should contact the police.”

A smirk tugs at my lips, “I think she sort of did.”

His chuckle resonates through the phone, “Always the sheriff, eh? You’re her knight in shining armor now.”

I can’t help but smile, “Some things never change with you.

By the way, how’ve you been? Still in the city?”

“Moved to a small town called Willow Creek,” he replies, a hint of amusement in his tone. “Oh, and speaking of the past,

remember Aaron? Big guy and said he worked in Silvervale Mountain for a while?"

I pause, the name sounding faintly familiar.

"Yeah, reserved guy, kept mostly to himself. Why?"

"Ran into him here. He's changed a bit. Probably the influence of the girlfriend he's got now."

"Aaron? With a girlfriend?" I can't mask my surprise. "Well, good for him. What about you? Anyone special caught your eye?"

His laughter fills my ears.

"Single as ever, Brad. Though, I did meet someone who manages to ruffle my feathers like no one else."

I chuckle, "You know, sometimes hate is pretty close to love."

His laughter grows louder, "Oh, come on, that's you talking. Mr. Believer-in-Love. I'm not made that way."

"Give it a shot, Dennis. Love might just surprise you."

He retorts playfully, "Seems like someone's talking from experience."

There's a moment's hesitation on my end. Should I dive into the depths of last night? The danger, the adrenaline, the pull I

felt towards Grace, and how, against all odds, we ended up wrapped in each other's arms?

Yet, as I'm about to speak, a pounding on my front door interrupts my thoughts.

"Everything okay over there?" His voice brings me back to the phone.

"Hold on," I mutter, catching the edge of tension in my voice.

"Someone's knocking on my door. And not too politely. I'll have to call you back. But hey, thanks for the help. And maybe, just maybe, one day I'll make a trip to Willow Creek."

Dennis's voice softens, "We'd love that, Brad. Stay safe, alright? Take care."

The line goes dead. Deep breaths. Bracing myself, I approach the door, adrenaline fueling my steps. The knocking grows more persistent, loud shouts accompanying each thud.

Yanking the door open, I find myself faced with an older man, a younger one, and a woman. The trio's sudden step back is satisfying.

"What's your business here?" I ask, my voice firm, bordering on anger. "If you need help, say so. Otherwise, I suggest you leave."

But before I can even react, the woman's shriek slices through the air, "We went to every sheriff station in all the towns nearby until we got here, and your colleagues told us everything! We know our daughter is here! She might have run once, but not again. She's our child! She'll do as we see fit."

Recognition hits me like a punch in the gut. These are Grace's parents. And the younger man beside them? The one who wanted to marry her without her consent.

My hands curl into fists, the rage bubbling within. My vision blurs with red. They dared to come here, to my territory, after what they tried to do to Grace? Not on my watch.

I will stand between them and Grace. I will be her shield. They won't lay a finger on her, not while I draw breath.

"Grace was promised to me," the younger man states, his voice quivering, eyes darting nervously. "I will marry her."

For a moment, the audacity of his statement throws me off guard, and then a burst of laughter, cold and mocking, bubbles up from deep within me.

Without warning, I step forward, seizing the young man by the collar of his shirt, effortlessly lifting him with a single hand.

“You,” I growl, my voice dripping with disdain, “are truly pathetic.” I lean in, my voice dark and menacing. “You’re fortunate I know restraint. Otherwise, things would be a lot different for you.”

The younger man’s eyes widen in fear, and he chokes on his words. Grace’s father lunges towards me, attempting to free the young man. But before he can touch me, I fix him with a deadly glare, stopping him in his tracks.

The palpable tension is interrupted by a sleepy voice coming from inside the house.

“What’s happening?” Grace’s voice, groggy and confused, floats into the early morning air. As she steps out, her gaze lands on the scene, and the recognition is instant. “What are you doing here?” she asks, her voice growing stronger.

Before she can react, her stepmother’s hand flies towards her face, but I catch it mid-air, gripping her wrist firmly.

“You’ve crossed a line,” I warn, the threat evident in my tone.

“Leave. Now. We don’t want you here.”

“Is that true?” Her father asks, now staring at Grace.

The pain on her face is hard to watch as she addresses her father, tears streaming down her face.

“Of course it is! Why would you let them do this to me? How many times did I cry out for your help? You never did anything!” Her voice cracks, “I don’t want that marriage. Not to him.”

Her stepmother’s cold and sharp voice interrupts her, “You ungrateful child. This isn’t the end. Everyone will know the sheriff is taking advantage of the people he’s meant to protect.”

Before I or anyone else can react, Grace’s hand strikes her stepmother’s face, her voice firm and unwavering.

“Brad was there for me when no one else was. I won’t let you jeopardize his reputation or his job.”

The tableau is frozen – the stepmother, hand to her reddening cheek, eyes blazing with fury; the father, seemingly torn between his wife and his daughter; the young man, humiliation evident on his face.

Releasing the younger man with a push, I speak, my voice echoing the finality of my decision, “Never come back here. If you do, I guarantee you’ll regret it. Forced marriages? Threats? This town will have a field day when they hear about it.”

Grace's stepmother, still seething, shoots one last venomous look at both of us.

"This isn't over," she hisses.

"This is over," I tell Grace's stepmother, my voice steely. "You will move on with your lives and forget about Grace. If you ever think about trying anything, I promise you'll regret it."

Her face contorts into an ugly sneer, but she says nothing. She just turns, her eyes narrowed, walking away with the young man, throwing a derisive remark about Grace's choices.

Her father, however, hesitates, looking at his daughter with mixed emotions.

"Is this how you feel? I thought you just didn't get along with her because you were so... feisty."

Grace's voice rises in pitch, echoing the hurt she feels.

"You're an idiot if you never saw the pain I was in. If you never noticed she was against me from the moment you got together."

He seems to be searching for words, for some kind of answer.

But it's the stepmother's voice that beckons him away. He hesitates one last time, looking at his daughter, before turning and walking away without a word.



My heart aches for Grace. It's clear how badly she's hurting. I turn to her, needing her to know she's not alone anymore.

"I'm here," I tell her, pulling her into my embrace as she cries against my chest.

"They just expected me to return with them," she sobs. "After everything. How could they?"

"They can't hurt you now," I whisper, trying to console her. But her next words catch me off guard.

"What if they try to ruin your job? What if they try to take you down?"

"Grace," I say, looking down into her worried eyes, "I've been the sheriff for years. I've done my job with integrity. And if they try to spin this, they'll have to explain their own actions. We have the upper hand."

Her smile, though watery, is a beacon of hope.

"Now, how would you feel about a vacation? Somewhere away from all this, just us. Maybe even a place with a pool?" I ask her.

Her eyes widen, and then she looks down, her voice meek.

"I don't have money for a vacation."

I chuckle, “I’ve been saving for a while, waiting for the right time and person. And now I’ve found her. Grace, will you be my girlfriend?”

Without another word, she closes the distance between us and kisses me, our lips meeting in a promise. As the sun climbs higher in the sky, casting its golden light around us, it feels like a new dawn.

A brighter future, one we’ll share together.



## Epilogue - Grace

I step out of the kitchen, holding onto the warm cup of tea Brad made for me. The morning light filters through the window, bouncing off our cabin's wooden walls; a sense of calm engulfs me.

Brad's cabin is our home now, a sanctuary from the outside world filled with love.

"Is your father coming over for lunch today?" Brad asks, pulling me from my thoughts, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

I nod, a smile forming on my lips.

"Yes, he is."

It's still so surreal to me. A year ago, I wouldn't have believed anyone if they'd told me that my father would be a regular presence in my life.

After years of feeling abandoned and belittled because of my stepmother, the woman who took every chance she got to put me down, my father finally came around.

He called me one day out of the blue, his voice filled with regret. The years of turning a blind eye to my stepmother's

cruelty had finally caught up with him, and he had left her. He apologized for every moment he let me down, every tear he let fall from my eyes.

It didn't make everything suddenly better, but we are trying.

“Hey,” Brad says, bringing me back to the present. “You okay?”

I nod, feeling warmth wash over me, “Just lost in thoughts.”

Deciding to check on our little miracle, I walk to our bedroom. There, in his baby crib, is our child, Frank, named after Brad's father. His chubby cheeks move slightly with each breath, and his little fists are clenched.

It's incredible how he has Brad's eyes and my nose. I softly lift him up, and the moment he stirs, making a small whimper, I start caressing his back.

“Your grandfather is coming today, Frank,” I whisper with a chuckle, realizing I'm basically talking to myself. It's a silly habit I've developed.

As I turn to leave the room, Brad's figure appears in the doorway, his eyes dancing with joy.

“You look gorgeous,” he whispers, his voice dripping with emotion. “You and Frank... you're the best things that ever

happened to me.”

My heart swells, and I smile, holding Frank close.

“You saved me, Brad.”

Brad’s hand reaches out, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear before leaning down to plant a tender kiss on my forehead. The world feels perfect at that moment, but the sound of a knock interrupts us.

Brad nods towards the door.

“I’ll get it,” he says, leaving me to feed Frank.

As I make my way to the living room, I hear the familiar sound of my father’s voice mingling with Brad’s on the porch. Considering their initial apprehensions, it’s fascinating how well they get along now. Life is unpredictable, but for once, it seems like everything is falling into place.

The door opens wider, revealing my father’s warm and eager eyes. As he spots Frank and me, his pace quickens.

“Grace!” He exclaims, a tone of genuine care in his voice.

“And my little grandson! How are you?”

I can’t help but smile at this new version of my father.

“Hi, Dad. We’re both doing great,” I say, tilting my head to indicate Frank. “Want to hold him while I grab his baby food?”

His eyes widen in enthusiasm, “Of course!”

Carefully, I pass Frank into my father’s awaiting arms. As he cradles the baby, he gazes down with pure wonder.

“I wasn’t the best father,” he murmurs to the tiny bundle in his arms, “but I promise I will be a good grandfather.”

Feeling a surge of courage, I decide to tackle a topic we’ve only danced around.

“Dad, what happened to my stepmother after you left?”

He lowers Frank into the crook of his arm and sighs heavily.

Looking up, he meets my gaze.

“I honestly don’t know. The moment I asked for a divorce, she said I was an idiot and that I’d never find someone like her.”

He pauses, sadness tinting his eyes. “Sometimes, late at night, I wonder if she might be right. Maybe I’ll end up alone, and maybe that’s my punishment for everything.”

I shake my head firmly.

“You won’t be alone forever, Dad. Besides, finding someone better won’t be hard.”

He chuckles, glancing over at where Brad stands, watching us protectively.

“I wonder if, someday, I can find something like what you and Brad have. Something genuine and resilient.”

Brad steps forward, putting an arm around my shoulder.

“She’s my world,” he says, his voice low and full of conviction. “I really couldn’t ask for better.”

The room feels brighter as my father nods in approval.

“I’m just grateful my daughter found someone like you.”

I wrap my arms around Brad’s waist, burying my head into his chest. My heart feels so full it might burst. Everything has fallen perfectly into place, from Frank’s little giggles to my father’s understanding nods to Brad’s strong heartbeat.

It’s almost too good to be true: a wonderful child, a devoted boyfriend soon to become husband – we’ve been talking about having little Frank walk down the aisle with our wedding rings – a home that’s filled with warmth, a job I adore at the town’s coffee shop, and the renewed bond with my father.

The pain of the past seems distant, like shadows before dawn. Everything I ever dreamed of is here, and I couldn’t be more grateful.



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