



COURAGE COUNTY  
*Curves.*

*Stalked* BY THE  
MOUNTAIN MAN

MIA BRODY

STALKED BY THE  
MOUNTAIN MAN

COURAGE COUNTY CURVES

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# ACE

THIS IS WRONG. I SHOULDN'T BE HERE. IT'S WHAT I TELL myself as I pull my pickup truck to a stop in front of the hardware store on the edge of town. The prettiest woman in all of Courage County works here. It's more than her blue eyes, luscious lips, or even those curves that feature in all of my dirty dreams. It's the way she bounces through life, full of enthusiasm and light.

I want to take her to my cabin, tie her to my bed, and never let her leave. I'll keep her satisfied with orgasms and filled with my come until she's growing my babies. It's a fucked-up way to think about my best friend's daughter.

I never thought about her before she kissed me. Never even realized she was a grown woman. Then about four years ago at her mom's funeral, she pressed those soft pink lips against mine. Pushing her away was the last thing I wanted to do.

Unfortunately, it was the start of my obsession. From that moment on, I've wanted Mackenzie day and night with a need so strong that it torments me. It drives me to make these lumber deliveries in the middle of the day when the sun is high in the sky, and her customers are less likely to be around.

I could push her up against the nearest wall. I could kiss her breathless. Would she shove me away? Would she slap my face? The thought of her fighting back makes more heat flood through my veins. I want to earn the right to claim her, the right to devour and consume her.

I shake my head at the foolish ideas and put the first pile of lumber on my shoulder. I'm bringing it around back where deliveries go. I'm making the delivery for Rogue, taking the leftover lumber he didn't use on a recent project and returning it to the hardware store he owns.

She does videos online. She teaches single girls how to do home repair projects. It turns me on like nothing else to see her holding that power drill and explaining the different bits to her audience.

As it is, every time I plan to visit the hardware store, I have to take myself in hand at least once. Usually twice. It's the only thing that helps me get through seeing her.

She's my dark obsession. My need to claim her is a daily battle. One day, I'll lose that battle. I'll sweep her into my arms and carry her back to my cabin where I can shelter her. Soothe her. Seduce her.

A noise stops me in my tracks and interrupts my thoughts. It's Mackenzie's voice, strong and firm. But there's a note of something else underneath it, something I don't like. I pause to listen as she says, "If you put the money back, I won't tell my dad."

"Your old man won't miss it." I don't recognize the voice, but I suspect it's the part-time employee that Rogue hired last month. I had a bad feeling about the shifty-eyed kid, but I didn't intervene. Figured it was better not to stick my nose in.

"That's not the point. He's taken you under his wing. It would break his heart if he found out you did this." She's being way too soft on him. I'd have already wrung the skinny kid's neck by now. Some people only learn when you teach them the hard way. It's why I got those scars from the boys' home. I got taught a thing or two about minding my tongue and my temper.

Slowly, I set the lumber I'm carrying on the ground. Years of undercover missions have taught me how to infiltrate even the most heavily fortified buildings. Moving around the corner of the hardware store undetected isn't difficult.



“Who’s going to tell him?” The kid’s voice is getting more belligerent as I approach. I know why Rogue hired him. Our time together in the boys’ home made me harder, meaner. But for some reason, it didn’t have that effect on Rogue. Gave him a heart for the underdog.

“I won’t lie for you.” There’s no mistaking the anxiety in her voice now. She’s covering it with a layer of bravado. But I can read between the lines. Years spent studying her have made me an expert on Mackenzie.

I creep closer as the little weasel says, “That’s because you’re a dumb bitch.”

There’s the distinct sound of flesh hitting flesh, and I see fucking red. I race for the jackass, not caring that I’ve lost the element of surprise.

Within two seconds, I tackle him and pin him against the wall. My hand is around his throat. His feet dangle, and he tries to scabble for purchase. He claws at my hand, but I ignore him as if he’s nothing more than a buzzing fly. Instead, I look to Mackenzie.

She’s bleeding.

She’s fucking bleeding.

I glance at the bastard’s hand and see he’s wearing rings. He hit her with rings on. “You die today, motherfucker.”

My vision tunnels to this one moment, to this one threat. I have to keep her safe. I always have to keep her safe. Ever since the moment she kissed me, something flipped inside my head. I don’t think of her as my friend’s innocent daughter. I think of her as what she is—my woman.

“Don’t hurt him, Ace,” Mackenzie calls out. She’s the one bleeding, and she’s concerned about this lowlife who’s wet his pants.

“He forfeited the right to his life the moment he put his hands on you,” I growl in response. “No one touches what’s mine. No one hurts you. No one makes you bleed. Not without answering to me.”

“He’s just a kid,” she insists.

He’s maybe a year or two younger than her, so he’s not a kid. He’s a grown man capable of making intelligent decisions. He’s going to die for this dumb one, and if I end up serving time, I’ll do it with a smile.

“Please,” she says the word quietly, and I’m a monster. A monster because the sound goes straight to my cock. I keep imagining her saying that when she’s spread out in my bed, and I’m slamming nine deep.

I release the little shithead. “If I see your face in this town again, I’ll take you apart piece by piece.”

He drops to his knees and gasps, sucking in oxygen. He claws at his neck, sputtering and coughing.

I barely resist rolling my eyes at his theatrics. This kid wouldn’t make it a day in the military. Hell, he wouldn’t make it in the boys’ home that I grew up in.

“Get going now before my restraint snaps,” I grind out the words.

The kid doesn’t need to be told twice. He quickly scurries away.

I turn my attention to Mackenzie. The sight of blood on her face has me wanting to run after the guy and make him nothing more than a stain on the road.

Mackenzie touches the spot and lets out a whimper. That one whimper is the only thing that saves that kid’s life today. Summoning what little humanity I have left, I soften my voice, “Let’s get you patched up.”



# MACKENZIE

IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR CODY TO GO ON BREAK. I PRETEND TO busy myself by rearranging a display of tape measures. While I'm doing it, I discreetly watch him. The mirrors are meant to let me keep an eye on the store, but they're more for show than anything. There's not very much crime here in Courage County. Our town is safe. Sleepy. The way my father likes it.

"About to go on break," Cody calls out.

"Sure, I'll be right up there," I tell him and act as if I'm changing the price. Then I move around and straighten things that don't need to be. The entire time I'm holding my breath as a wave of nausea rolls through me.

Within a few seconds, I hear the soft click of the register. My heart sinks. This hardware shop is my dad's pride and joy. He built it when he moved our family here fourteen years ago. I spent more time in this shop following my dad around than I did in school.

It would break his heart to know the guy that he's been mentoring has been stealing from him for the past two weeks. When I first noticed the cash discrepancies, it was small amounts. Ten dollars here or there missing at the end of the day.

But the amounts are slowly getting higher as he gets bolder. A hundred dollars from yesterday's till was gone. With that kind of money, my dad will catch on. At least he will if I don't do something. That's why I follow Cody outside for his break.

He comes out back to smoke a cigarette and stare off into the distance. I don't know much about him or where he comes from. Usually, my dad has a good sixth sense for people, and I tend to like the ones that he brings around. But there's something about Cody that I never quite liked.

I wait until his back is turned and work to keep my voice even, "If you put the money back, I won't tell my dad."

After all my dad has done for Cody, he doesn't deserve to be treated this way. He let Cody crash at his place for a few days and gave him a job. A good paying job even though the guy has a work history that never includes staying longer than a month or two at one place. He gave my dad some sob story about coming out of the foster care system and how hard it is to get on your feet. I'm not so sure I believe him about the foster part.

Cody snorts and turns to face me. "Your old man won't miss it."

I want to tell him off. I want to yell at him that he's a shit person. I choke back the words and instead focus on what I want—to keep him from hurting my dad. He has the biggest heart of anyone I know. "That's not the point. He's taken you under his wing. It would break his heart if he found out you did this."

Too late, I realize my mistake. All I want is for my dad to be OK, but Cody has taken this as a sign of weakness. He crowds closer to me, so close that I automatically take a step back. I bump into the brick wall of the hardware shop. I hate that I let him back me into a corner.

Cody smirks. "Who's going to tell him?"

"I won't lie for you," I answer. Maybe if he sees that there's no way out, he'll come clean to my dad. It wouldn't be the first time that he's forgiven someone.

I don't imagine the look of evil that crosses over Cody's face. "That's because you're a dumb bitch."

Before I can even process it, his hand is up and delivering a stinging smack to the side of my face. I bite down on my lip

hard enough to draw blood, refusing to give him the satisfaction of crying out.

A savage roar fills the air. The sound is so primal and so masculine that it sends an involuntary shudder down my spine.

I blink, and Cody is no longer in front of me.

But Ace is next to me. He's holding Cody against the wall by his throat. I've never seen Ace wear that expression. He looks like a fierce warrior descended from the heavens to slay mortals. He's strong and stunning and so damn sexy.

"You die today, motherfucker." The corded muscles in Ace's arms are holding Cody up, pinning him in place and rendering him helpless. I remember when he wrapped those strong arms around me at my mom's funeral. I'd never felt so safe, never felt so precious as I did in that moment.

I could say I don't know why I kissed him when he held me, but that would be a lie. I was standing there thinking that this man I'd crushed on for years was right here in front of me. I was thinking that life seemed short—too short, so I did the impulsive thing for once in my life. I leaned up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his.

He teased my mouth open and stroked his tongue along mine, stoking a fire within me that had been quietly burning for years. It was only when I whimpered that he finally broke the kiss and pushed me away.

Fuck, that hurt so much. It cracked my heart open, but I knew right then something happened inside of me. A piece of my soul became his, and I don't ever want it back.

"Don't hurt him, Ace," my voice is soft. He is a warrior, but I think I'm his queen. I think we both know it, and he's spent the last four years fighting it.

"He forfeited the right to his life the moment he put his hands on you. No one touches what's mine. No one hurts you. No one makes you bleed. Not without answering to me," his voice is rough. His chest heaves, a wild look in his eyes.

"He's just a kid." I'm not sure if that's the right thing to say. When Ace doesn't answer, I add softly, "Please."

Ace growls, sounding again like that wild animal, but he drops Cody to the ground. “If I see your face in this town again, I’ll take you apart piece by piece.”

Cody gasps and writhes on the ground. I don’t think he’s hurt. Ace is not only strong, but he’s also a former soldier. If he’d wanted to end Cody, he could have done it before I even had a chance to react.

Impatience flickers across Ace’s face. “Get going now before my restraint snaps.”

Fortunately, Cody does have some semblance of self-preservation. He’s on his feet and heading for his truck before Ace has the chance to make another threat.

Now that I know Cody is safe, my face throbs. I bring my fingertips to my cheek and pull my hand away, noting the sticky blood. I whimper at the sight. I’m not squeamish, but I’ve never liked seeing blood.

Something in Ace’s expression softens, “Let’s get you patched up.”

“I have a kit in the back room,” I murmur, suddenly uncertain of myself. I’m not used to feeling this way around anyone. Well, anyone except Ace. He’s always the one that tangles my thoughts and makes it hard to breathe. To focus. To concentrate.

*No one touches what’s mine. No one hurts you. No one makes you bleed.*

He puts a hand on my elbow. The rough callouses on his fingers dig into the sensitive flesh of my arm, and I like the feeling. I like how hard and rough he is, yet his touch is gentle. He guides me toward his truck.

When he opens the passenger door, I expect him to reach for a medical kit. Instead, he puts his big hands around my hips and lifts me into the truck. He moves my body easily even though I have generous curves.

Ace puts a hand on my knee. “Stay.”

I love the idea of him issuing commands and telling me exactly what he wants me to do. Would he be like that in the bedroom? Would he tell me to spread my legs and show him my pussy?

He returns a second later with a medical box. He sets it on the floor and rifles through the contents with ease. I don't think he was a medic, but he did save my dad's life.

"Don't tell him about this." I don't know what happened the day he saved him. There's a lot I don't know about my dad or Ace. They're both so quiet and stoic. What little I do know has been cobbled together from whispered conversations when my mom was alive.

He snorts, but when he reaches for my face, he's gentle. "The kid doesn't deserve your protection."

"It's not him I'm protecting. It would break Dad's heart if he knew the kid he took in and treated like a son had been stealing from him. It's better if he thinks he ran off."

Ace grunts but makes no promises. He finishes tending to the spot, putting a butterfly bandage there. I doubt I needed one, but it still makes me feel warm inside. "Thanks for putting me back together again."

He cups my face, and our breaths mingle as we share the same air. For one wild moment, I think he's going to kiss me.

I wet my lips and wait. My heart is pounding painfully in my chest. My palms are clammy. My body is tingling. From the look in his eyes to the hot skin of his palm, I feel his heat everywhere.

The sound of crunching gravel as another vehicle approaches the store breaks the spell. He drops his hand, and the moment is lost.

I go for an easy, unaffected smile. I'm not sure if I'm doing it right. I'm not sure of anything at this moment except that I want Ace's lips on mine. Need them. "Sounds like I have customers."

"You should close up early today."



I gesture for him to step aside. When he does, I'm not disappointed. This whole day hasn't been a big disappointment, reminding me of all the stupid girlish hopes I've managed to push down over the last few years.

Once again, my world has tilted on its axis. I'd almost convinced myself that my pesky crush was over. Then Ace had to go and do this. He had to defend me and look so damn hot doing it. He had to patch me up, put his hands on me, and make me feel cared for. "I'm fine. It's fine."

I'm not fine. It's not fine.

With every step toward the parking lot, I can feel his eyes on me. I can't look back. I won't look back. It will shatter me.



# ACE

IT'S BEEN SIX WEEKS, AND I'VE CROSSED THE LINE FROM wrong to sick. I knew it the day I ran off Cody. I crept around Mackenzie's house, checked the perimeter, and watched over it the whole night to make sure the little shit didn't try to come back. Maybe on the surface, it sounds fine. Noble, even.

Problem is, I haven't stopped. I'm there every night. When I'm not doing these wilderness tours for macho tourists who are convinced they can magically become rugged outdoorsmen in a weekend, I'm following her. Watching her.

At the hardware store when she's working.

At the coffee shop when she's meeting with friends.

At her home when she's recording her videos.

I'm always there, just out of sight.

Sometimes, she pauses. Almost like she senses me.

Fuck, I hope she does. I hope it makes her wet between her legs to know that I'm nearby, waiting, and eager to pounce on her perfect little body.

Even now as I trail her and her friends around the autumn festival, I'm barely hanging onto my control. I'm worse than an animal. I'm a monster, toying with his prey, willing her to sense me. To sense the danger she's in. Would it excite her to know the depraved ways I want her? Would it make the little pearl between her thighs swell to sense my clawing need?

She throws her head back, laughing at something her friends said. All that creamy exposed skin has me wanting to

sink my teeth into her flesh. Would she claw at my back, nails digging deep into my skin? Would she sigh my name or would she scream it?

One of her friends glances over her shoulder and spots me. I pretend to busy myself looking at a display booth filled with clay creations. I'm getting sloppy if a civilian can spot me in a festival this crowded.

I wait until her friend has stopped paying attention then I resume following the group, but more carefully this time. Like I do every night, I promise myself this is the last time.

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### *Mackenzie*

I PULL MY CAR TO A STOP IN THE DRIVEWAY OF MY DAD'S cabin. He built it the summer my mom died. He disappeared into the mountains. He'd surface into town occasionally to take lumber from his store. He was a ghost, barely talking to me back then.

Sometimes, I can't believe she's gone. Even though it's been four years, I still find myself trying to dial her number on my phone. I still find myself wanting to text her when I need someone to talk to.

I wonder what she'd say about Ace. He's been my constant shadow since that day with Cody. He's trying to be discreet, or at least, I think he's trying to be. But despite all of his training and all of his careful efforts, I can still sense when he's nearby. He's the other half of my soul. How could I not feel him?

Something in the bushes moves, and a small brown rabbit hops out. Rabbits were my mom's favorite, and the sight makes me smile.

"Miss you, mama," I say as I get out of my car. I jog up the wooden steps and walk in with the sodas tucked under my arm. The running joke in our family is that I'm a kitchen disaster. Put a power drill in my hands and I know what to do. Put a spatula in my hands and chaos is sure to follow.

As soon as I walk into the kitchen, I take a big appreciative inhale. It's casserole night. It's always casserole night.

Daisy, the yellow Labrador that Dad took in a year ago, sticks her cold nose to my hand. I pause to greet her before smiling at my dad.

He's at the stove, wearing the apron my mom got him that has a pun on it. He pulls the casserole out and beams at me. "Just in time, honey."

I kiss him on his weathered cheek and show him the sodas. "My contribution."

"Good, good. Ace is here too."

My heart starts pounding. I haven't seen him since that afternoon. At least, not other than his quiet stalking which neither of us has acknowledged.

I know Ace told my dad what happened because he sat me down for a lecture the next day, insisting that I bring any problems with the hardware store to him. He was furious with Cody though he seemed mollified by the fact that Ace had shown up when he did.

My dad might own the hardware store, but he left me in charge of it the day I graduated high school. That was the day my mom got the phone call about her biopsy results. At first, I delayed college and ran the store to help them out. But now six years later, I love that little shop and the regulars that show up each week.

Throughout my mom's battle and her eventual death, the shop gave me something I desperately needed: a purpose and a reason to get out of bed each morning.

Dad is rarely involved in the shop now. He's more of a silent partner. He sometimes comes into town when he's working as a handyman. But other than that, he stays tucked away in his little mountain cabin where he works on his motorcycles and talks to his dog.

I excuse myself to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. Normally, Thursday nights are my night to have dinner with my dad. Ace isn't here. We rarely see each other.

Ever since that kiss at my mom's funeral, he's barely acknowledged my presence.

"Act normal," I whisper to my reflection. Yeah, I can totally act normal. I can pretend that what's happening between me and Ace isn't weird. I can pretend that I don't lie awake in bed, trying to define this strange bond between us.

Leaving the bathroom, I join my dad and Ace at the table. He's made tater tot casserole this time, the one with the mushrooms in it. He makes it the same way my mom did except for one difference. She always pulled out my mushrooms.

While the two of them talk, I nudge the food around my plate and try to plan video content for my channel. I have an online video channel and blog where I help women learn how to conquer everyday home repairs.

It started when a pipe under my sink was leaking, and I fixed it myself. I felt so empowered that I didn't have to call my dad or another handyman that I decided I wanted to help other women experience the same feeling.

My content is resonating, and I have millions of loyal followers. I even have an upcoming meeting with a TV show executive. It's a formality at this point. They're going to offer me my own show, a chance to travel the world and help even more women.

My dad turns to me, interrupting my thoughts, "What do you think about that Michael fellow?"

I frown and try to remember who he is. "You mean that guy who keeps coming into the hardware store to pick up deliveries?"

"That's the one. He works on the Kringle Ranch now. Seems like a good man. Hard worker." Dad nods to himself. If there's one thing my father respects, it's a hard worker. My dad has never slacked a day in his life.

"Why? Do you want me to interview him for a job at the hardware store?" Michael has always seemed nice. He's flirty, but I've never paid him any attention.

“I want him to date my daughter,” Dad says as casually as if we were discussing the weather.

I sputter, spitting out some of my soda onto the table. I reach for a napkin to quickly blot it. “Come again.”

Dad scowls at me, his bushy eyebrows coming down over his dark eyes. “You’re too old to be this single. You need to be dating. You need to be having fun.”

Across the table from me, Ace has gone still. I’m not even sure he’s breathing anymore. I quickly avert my gaze, so my dad won’t notice. “I am having fun.”

Dad beams at me. “Yeah, what’s his name? Bring him around.”

I sigh. “No, I mean I’m having fun building my video channel and my blog. I’m getting more visits every day, and it’s my passion.”

“Passion is a great thing to have. But nothing says you can’t have passion and a man too,” Dad points out. He’s not one of those people who believes a woman’s place is in the home. He supports my video channel, but he’s also convinced that marriage is one of the best things that ever happened in his life.

Ace is still not moving. His hands are clenched into fists, and for a moment, I wonder what he would do if I did date somebody else. Would it prompt him to take action? Would he try to claim me or would he merely let me go?

I’ll never know the answers because I can’t stand the idea of another man looking at me. I never want to feel anyone’s hands on me except for Ace. He’s my one and only, and he’s never going to claim me. Not unless there’s a catalyst, something that pushes him. As soon as I think it, an idea pops into my head. I might have the catalyst I need.





# MACKENZIE

I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS A GOOD IDEA, AND MY HANDS ARE shaking as I clench the steering wheel tightly. I can't see his headlights, and there's no sound of a rumbling truck engine. But somehow, I still know that he'll be there tonight.

I know my possessive mountain man will be stalking me. He'll be prowling outside my window, waiting for me to get home. I can only hope that he finds me as irresistible as I find him. Otherwise, I'm about to make a fool of myself. Such a big fool of myself that I'm certain I'll have to change my name and disappear from North Carolina entirely.

When I get home, I go through my normal routine of checking locks and shutting windows. Courage is a safe place. It's not that I have to do this. My dad drilled it into my head when I was young that the last thing to do at night is to check the locks and shut the windows.

I think maybe he wasn't safe growing up. Maybe that's the reason he's always watched over me so carefully. If only he knew that now his best friend has taken over that role. It's his best friend who creeps up to my windows late at night and listens to my soft, breathy moans as I touch my heated flesh.

Just the idea of Ace listening—or better watching me—get off has my cheeks going red. Still, I can't change my routine. If this idea is going to work, then Ace has to think everything is as usual.

I don't close the curtains in my bedroom. I never do. I prefer to leave them open because I live on the edge of town.

My bedroom window overlooks the forest with the moon shining down.

I used to leave it open because I liked the view of the moon. I liked the way I felt so safe and cozy with it as my nightlight. Now, I leave the curtains open because I know that Ace is appreciating the view.

Tonight, I take my shower. I use my fruity bodywash, the one I usually skip when I'm in a rush and trying to put together projects for my video channel. The spot between my legs hurts, but I don't let myself touch it. Not yet.

Instead of leaving the bathroom in my robe and slippers like I normally do, I wrap a threadbare towel around my body. It's sheer with holes in several places. It's also too small and barely wraps around me. It was meant to go in the scraps pile, to be used as a cleaning rag. But this is a far better use.

When I walk, the material gaps and creates a tantalizing view of my figure. At least, I hope it's tantalizing enough to encourage a certain mountain man to make his move. Just the thought that he's watching me somewhere out in the forest right now makes me wetter between my thighs.

I move around my bedroom, puttering around and making sure to bend low as I put things away. If he's watching, he's catching the view down my towel to my full breasts.

I want to give Ace a show that he'll never forget. I want the image of my naked body burned into his brain.

The entire time I pretend to straighten my bedroom, I'm aware of how sensitive my body is. My nipples are hard points beneath the sheer cotton, my thighs are tingling, and my clit is pulsing.

I've been at this game for over twenty minutes, and there's still no indication that Ace is paying any attention to me.

With a frustrated groan, I flop back on my bed and reach for my nightstand. I pull out my favorite vibrator, the one I bought after Ace showed up at the hardware store and ran off Cody.

That night, I had to have something between my legs. Something that would let me close my eyes and pretend it was his big cock ramming deep into my body.

Grabbing it, I flick the toy on. This is the part of the night when I normally go beneath the covers, burrowing deep into the warmth. But tonight, I don't. I spread my legs wide. I put my feet flat on the bed, my pussy pointed straight at the window.

I flick the device on the lowest setting. I've only managed an inch inside of my sopping wet channel when my phone rings out. The sound startles me, and I drop my vibrator next to my nightstand. I curse and reach for the toy then I see Ace's name on my phone.

It's him. He's the one that's calling me.

My mouth goes dry, and my heart thuds.

I reach for the phone and answer the call, but I don't say a word.

"Close your blinds." His words are a gritty command. He is a man on the edge, desperately clinging to what little control he has.

The realization gives me a boost of confidence. As I suspected, this isn't one-sided. He wants me too, even if he can't admit it.

"Maybe I want to be watched," I answer in a breathy tone and grab for my vibrator. I position it at my entrance. "Maybe that makes me even wetter."

Ace roars on the other end of the phone. "Any creep could see you."

"Then he'd probably see this," I answer as I push the silicone toy in deep. I groan as it stretches me, imagining that it's him. He's the one that's inside of me. He's thrusting and pumping, sweat clinging to his forehead. He's taking care of me, filling me up.

I moan his name.

There's another snarl on the end of the phone and then the sound of a zipper. His zipper. He's taking it out, clutching his massive cock.

"It's so big," I imagine that he's tugging on it, showing me what he's about to shove deep into my body. "So hard."

"That's right. It's big and hard for you. You made me this way, and now you'll pay for that," Ace grunts.

I whimper at his dirty words.

"Touch those titties," he commands.

I don't have to be told twice. Not when he's talking in that low, raspy voice of his, issuing commands like he owns my body. With one hand, I cup my breast, massaging the aching globe. I pinch my nipple, not sure which of us I'm tormenting more.

It's not enough. I want him.

"I need...something," I whimper.

"I know what you need. You need my cock, making you scream. I'll thrust deep, give it to you so good. I'll bend you over and take you from behind. Show you who's in charge of that sweet little pussy."

The image that fills my mind has me coming. It's his name on my lips. But unlike every other time, I don't try to whisper. I don't try to be even a little bit quiet. I let myself go, enjoying the best orgasm of my life all because of my dad's best friend and his filthy mouth.



# MACKENZIE

“ARE YOU OKAY? YOU SEEMED REALLY OUT OF IT TODAY,”  
Ginger tells me.

We’re leaving Gabby’s cabin where we have our dirty book club meeting. The women of Courage County gather frequently to discuss their favorite naughty reads. Normally, I’m a pretty active contributor to the conversations. I love smutty books and talking about them with my best friends. But I guess Ginger picked up on the fact that I wasn’t quite feeling up to it.

After last night, I laid awake in my bed and listened to every creak and groan in my house. I kept waiting for Ace to show up, kept wishing he were there to wrap his strong arms around me so I could fall asleep against him.

I know it’s crazy, but the feeling of rejection lodged itself deep in the pit of my stomach. I know he came. I could hear it when he moaned and swore under his breath. It’s not that I feel used. It’s that I wanted something more. I wanted more than a quick orgasm. I wanted intimacy with Ace. It was my mistake, and I know that.

“I’m fine,” I tell Ginger with a bright smile as the sun finally dips low. It’s painting the mountain in bright hues of orange, making our beautiful town look like it’s made of gold. I think maybe it is. I think Courage County is magical. At least, it’s always felt that way to me.

She scowls and tugs on my arm, pulling me away from the other women and toward her car. “Tell me.”

To my embarrassment, I have to blink back tears. I let the story flow freely holding back none of the juicy details.

Ginger won't tell anyone. She runs a sex-positive podcast online. She's all about encouraging women to explore their sexuality. If anyone will be supportive, it will be her.

She frowns when I finish telling her the whole story. "What do you want in all of this?"

"Ace," I whisper. "I'm not sure he feels the same way about me."

"Oh, he feels things for you," Ginger says.

A spark of hope tries to light up in my chest, but I quickly stomp it down. She might think that, but it doesn't mean it's true.

"I think I need to find another guy." The thought makes me feel like my chest is caving in. There's no blood in my veins anymore. It's syrup, sticky and unmoving. "But I don't want anyone else."

She cocks a hand on her hip. "Do you trust me?"

I nod miserably. Ginger has some great advice and hanging out with her has led to some amazing times. She makes life fun for everyone. I think maybe that's because she was a foster kid, and she tries hard to make people like her.

She gives me a grin. "Let me help you with this."

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I GAZE AT THE WAREHOUSE WITH THE PULSING LIGHTS AND thumping music. People are coming and going into the club in a steady stream. In the parking lot, they're laughing and swaying as they guzzle their cheap beers and stagger to their cars for late-night hookups.

There's no sign, but I know without being told that this is Vortex. It's a nightclub in a town not far from Courage County. I've never been here, but I've heard the rumors. Wild stuff happens inside this place.

“Do you remember when you said you trust me?” Ginger asks.

I swallow and wipe my damp palms down my too short dress. I’m more of a blue jeans and T-shirt kind of girl. Put a hammer in my hand, and I’m happy.

Ginger came by after work. She brought a dozen dresses and outfits, making me try on several until she found a black minidress that makes my short legs look incredibly long. It has a deep V-neck that makes it look like I have tits instead of my flat chest. She insisted that I skip a bra to draw even more attention to my body.

She had me pair the dress with fashionable ankle boots before she did my hair and makeup. The bright red lipstick is a color I wouldn’t have normally chosen, but I have to admit. I’m rocking this look.

“I’m not good at the flirting thing,” I admit and shrink deeper into the seat of her car. The truth is that I want to call this off. I want to go back home and putter around in my garage and pretend that my heart doesn’t ache every time I think about Ace.

“Five minutes and then the best thing ever will happen,” Ginger promises in a sing-song voice like she knows a secret she’s not telling me. She flicks on a light and pulls down the visor to re-apply red lipstick to her face.

“I don’t want to get hit on by some frat boy,” I complain.

She rolls her eyes. “That’s not the best thing ever.”

“Then what is it?” I demand, my patience wearing thin. I should have stayed home. I have chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream in the freezer. I have smutty books and a great vibrator. This night could be so much better by myself.

“You’ll find out what the best thing ever is,” she says with a cryptic smile as she leaves the car without looking back for me.

I sit inside for twenty seconds, warring with myself. Finally, my curiosity wins out. Ginger is fun and spontaneous.



If she's promised me a good time, then something good will happen.

I have to hurry across the parking lot, nearly tripping in these ridiculous shoes. I catch up with Ginger as she exchanges a couple of words with the bouncer. Then we're being let inside the nightclub.

She tugs me toward the front of the bar and orders two shots. She shoves one at me. "No questions. Down it."

I do as I'm told, the liquid burning my throat. I cough and slam down the tiny glass. "What the fuck was that?"

"Pure pheromones, sweetie." She claps me on the back.

I've managed to get my sputtering under control when a frat guy approaches us. I let Ginger chat, ignoring him.

The music is thumping so loudly that it's hard to hear anything. The press of bodies all around us is making the warehouse so hot it feels like I can't breathe.

My head hurts, and I'm pretty sure I'd rather be anywhere but here. Ginger gestures toward the guy and introduces me as her friend. At least, that's what I think she said. It's hard to know.

He asks me to dance, maybe. He seems to mime the act of dancing.

Ginger pushes me toward him.

I start to argue with her, but the look she sends me is urgent. She wants me to dance with this guy. Maybe he has a cute friend that Ginger is interested in. I barely swallow a groan and follow him onto the dance floor.

He immediately tries a dirty bump and grind. His sweaty hands go underneath the thin material of my dress to grip my thighs.

"Not cool." I put a hand on his chest, not liking the feeling of another guy on me. There's only one man I want crowding my space. Only one person I want copping a feel under my dress.

“Don’t be like that,” he shouts at me.

Before I can tell him to get his hands off of me, they’re gone.

Ace has stepped between us. He says something, in an urgent tone that causes the man to pale. He immediately melts into the crowd, unwilling to face off against Ace.

My mountain man turns to me, his eyes blazing with fury and his jaw locked tight. “We’re going now.”

I put my hands on my hips. He hasn’t talked to me in three days. He hasn’t even acknowledged my presence, and yet he thinks he can come in here and control my life. “I was dancing with him.”

“Not anymore.” Without warning, he picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder. “You’re leaving.”



# ACE

I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL EVERY MAN IN THIS ROOM FOR laying eyes on my girl. Some part of me knows it's not logical, but fuck being rational. They've seen her. They've seen my beautiful girl in her short dress and ankle boots. They've seen her tits. The way they're hard points beneath her dress. That's only for me. She'll only ever be for me.

“What are you doing? Why are you acting crazy?”

I grunt but don't respond as I stalk my way across the dance floor. I think we both know that I'm way past the point of being logical.

Because I don't answer she pounds on my back. The slight motion causes her pussy to grind against my shoulder and her dress to fly up, revealing the outline of pale globes.

I put my hand on her ass to cover anyone from seeing up her short little dress. I can't deny how right it feels for my hand to be there on her ass, holding her still against me.

No one even bats an eye at the fact that I'm carrying a struggling girl out of the club. As if I needed even more reason to dislike the place. It's been three days since that phone call with Mackenzie. Three days since I came so hard I nearly blacked out.

I can still hear her breathy moans and whimpers in my ear. Still feel how hard I gripped my cock as I listened to the beautiful symphony my woman made in the throes of ecstasy.

I should have done something. I should have reached out to her after that. But every time I went to call her, I talked

myself out of it. What does a broken soldier like me have to offer a curvy innocent virgin? Just thinking about that makes me grind my teeth together.

“Put me down,” Mackenzie snaps.

I stop in front of my truck and set her on her feet. Then she’s pitching forward again from the sudden change in posture.

I step in front of her, so she doesn’t fall. But also because I need to feel her against me, need to remember that she’s mine. Or I might go back to the club and kill all those fuckers who saw her.

I push her up against my truck.

She grips my T-shirt. Her eyes are dilated as she stares up at me. Confusion and anger swirl in her gaze.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I demand, my fury growing. Was she looking for a hookup? Was she aching between her thighs and looking for another man to ease it?

That thought has me putting a hand on either side of her head, caging her in and pressing up against her. My cock instantly responds by getting even harder. If this keeps up, I won’t have any oxygen north of my belt.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I repeat.

“Looking for a man,” Mackenzie huffs out, full of attitude and sass. Doesn’t she know that only makes me want to fuck her more?

“Those weren’t men. Those were boys,” I spit out fury rolling off of me in waves.

I might be vibrating with anger, but there’s no fear in her stance. She juts her chin at me. “Same difference.”

“I’ll show you the difference.” I lower my head, my lips seeking hers. Her arms go around my neck, and she pulls me even closer. I sweep into her mouth, taking control of the kiss, stroking her tongue in long, sensual glides. Fuck, she tastes amazing.

Four years of passion and longing are poured into this kiss. She tastes even better than I remember. She whimpers and grinds her hot little pussy against my jeans. I know what my girl needs, and I've been dying to give it to her for weeks now. Years even.

I slip my hand up the bottom of her skirt and shove my fingers into her panties, stroking her folds. She's already wet and the needy sound she makes goes from her body into mine, stoking my fire even more.

I break the kiss long enough to growl at her. "Mine. You're mine."

She nods and tries to fuse our lips again.

"Say it. Say you're mine."

"Yours," she agrees. "Just. Please."

I cram a finger into her tight pussy. The image of her on her bed with her legs spread comes back to me, and I know I won't be able to stay away tonight. Tonight, she'll be in my bed, and I'll be taking her in every position imaginable. I'll do filthy things to her that will have her blushing for days.

I trail kisses along her jaw and nip at the sensitive skin of her lobe. "This is wrong. Forbidden, filthy," I say the words and her channel clenches tightly around my fingers. I realize she likes this. She likes the idea of being my dirty girl.

I circle her clit with my thumb.

"We shouldn't be doing this. It's wrong," she agrees even as she rides my hand without abandon.

"But you're still going to come for me," I tell her. "You're going to come on my fingers right now, but not before I say you can."

She moans. "But I'm so close."

I kiss her hard. "Not until I say."

She swallows, but I don't miss the way her eyes dilated when I told her that. "You can come on the count of five. One."

I add a second finger to her channel, stuffing them deep.  
“Two.”

She gasps at the thick intrusion. She’s so tiny. I know it has to be a lot to take. But I’m a big man, and I won’t be going easy on her when I’m in this pussy. It’s better if she learns that now before I’m balls deep, pounding away.

“Please,” she whines.

“Not yet.” I put my lips on her neck and suck. I love her soft skin. The smell of it, the taste of it.

“Three.” I find that rough spot at the front of her channel. I arch my fingers, and she practically melts into me. She’s panting now. Her eyes are glazed. She’s desperate for the release that only I can give her.

I squeeze her ass cheek. “Four.”

She whimpers again.

Her pearl is even slicker now, bigger than ever before.  
“Five.”

I push against it, and she detonates right there in my arms. She comes so hard that I have to support her body through it.

It’s a fucking miracle to watch my woman, to know that I was the one who did that. It makes me want to roar in masculine pride. I’m the one who satisfied her. I’m the *only* one who gets to do this with her.

When she’s sated, I pull my hand from her panties and lick my fingers clean. I love the way her cheeks turn red. I want her to know how much I enjoy her sweet flavor.

Sadness flickers across her face, and I know she’s expecting me to walk away now. But instead, I lean close and whisper in her ear, “You’re coming home with me tonight.”





# MACKENZIE

“YOU’RE COMING HOME WITH ME TONIGHT.”

It’s not a request. It’s a demand. I should probably tell him no. I should push him away and tell him I’m tired of the way he runs hot and cold. But instead, I nod limply. I’m too spent from the delicious orgasm he gave me to argue.

“Good girl,” he murmurs and drops to his knees in front of me.

He reaches for my tiny dress again. For one heart-pounding moment, I think he’s going to lick my pussy right here in the darkened parking lot. Even though I came, more moisture gushes from my body at the thought.

He reaches for my panties and growls at me as he works them down to my ankles. I shift, letting him pull them off past my shoes.

He brings them to his nose and inhales deeply before shoving them into his pocket. He stands again, kisses me roughly, then tugs my hand toward his truck.

I plant my feet, standing my ground. He can’t be serious. “I don’t have any panties,” I hiss at him.

He grunts and steps closer, invading my space once more. “You lost the right to panties when you put them on for another man.”

Then without waiting for a response, he scoops me up and sets me gently in his truck. He fastens the seatbelt around me, pausing to tweak my nipples as he does.

I arch into his touch, my body craving it. I need him again already.

Ace chuckles under his breath, well aware of what he's doing then closes the truck door.

I grab my phone, thankful that I had the foresight to tuck it into the top of my dress earlier tonight. I quickly text Ginger so she doesn't worry about me, letting her know that I've left with Ace. She replies with an eggplant emoji followed by a smirk.

I put my phone on the console as Ace slides into the driver's seat. As soon as he gets the vehicle out of the club parking lot, he issues another command in his dark, gritty voice. "Touch yourself."

"Here? Now?" I glance around, not sure why I'm suddenly feeling shy. It could be that we're in a moving vehicle. It could be that I wasn't expecting Ace to come into the club tonight and publicly claim me in the parking lot.

"It's the only way you'll be able to take me."

I whimper at his words and squeeze my thighs together again.

"Do it now. Let me hear the sounds your pussy makes when it's wet. I want to listen as you splash in your own juices."

I should object. I should tell him no, but I don't want to. Besides, it's obvious from the route he's chosen that Ace is taking back roads.

There are a few streetlights, and they're spaced far apart. Even if someone did look in his vehicle, they wouldn't be able to see anything through his tinted windows. The thought makes me feel bold, and I remember how it felt three days ago when I played with myself while he watched.

I manage to shift and maneuver, bunching up the material of my short dress around my hips. My bare ass is against the soft, buttery leather of his seat as I slide my fingers through my folds. They're still so wet and sensitive from earlier that I whimper at the sensation.

“Describe it,” Ace grits out. “Tell me how my pretty pussy feels.”

I like to hear him calling my pussy pretty. I like hearing him call it his even more.

“Soft,” I stumble out and stroke myself again. “Wet and hot and achy. So achy.”

I run my fingertips higher, aiming for my clit.

“No, I’m in charge of your pleasure now. You don’t get to come again until I’m inside you.” His knuckles are white around the steering wheel. I think of how his big fingers were inside of my body only a few minutes ago.

I make a little whimper of protest even as I instantly move away from my little bud. I love the idea that he’s in charge of my pleasure.

“Put one of your fingers in your hole. Only one.”

His crass words make my cheeks burn. I do as he said but it doesn’t feel like enough. When he did it, I felt so full. “I need more, please.”

“Good girl asking for permission. You can add a second finger.” His voice is quiet yet filled with authority. It makes me want to obey him more.

Frustration fills me. “My fingers aren’t as big as yours.”

“You want to be bouncing on my cock.”

“Yes, please. I need it.” I want him to pull the truck over on the side of the dark mountain and bend me over the hood. I want him to shove my dress up around my hips and slide deep into his pussy, demanding that he gets to touch what’s his.

“You can take a little more. Thrust them deep.”

“I can’t. I’m almost there. I’m going to...I’m going to...” I’m panting and my muscles are tensing, preparing for the release.

He puts a hand on my knee. His touch is gentle and reassuring but also possessive and commanding. “Stop touching my pussy. You don’t get to come.”

It takes every bit of my self-control to stop touching myself. I pull my slick fingers from my aching channel, even emptier than I was before.

“Put those fingers in your mouth. Lick them clean.”

I do as he instructed, my flavor exploding on my tongue. I’ve never done this before, never tasted myself. I kind of like it.

“You’ll get used to having things in your mouth. I’ll shove my cock down that pretty throat every day.”

I’m so close to the edge. His words are threatening to push me over, but I clench my thighs together and steel my resolve. I want to make him proud of me. I want to earn his praise.

“You’ll get used to my come. It’ll always be dripping between your thighs and down your chin. I’ll be your new favorite flavor. Teach you how to beg for it on your knees,” he promises right as he pulls the truck into his driveway. It’s a good thing too because I don’t think I’m going to last much longer.

He barely cuts off the truck and then he’s yanking me into his cabin. I wish I could pay attention to it, so I could memorize everything about his home. But this need is about to drive me mad. There’s only one thing I can focus on.

The moment he slams the door shut, he reaches for my dress. He grabs it by the deep V, hauling me closer.

“If I ever see you wearing clothes you put on for another man again, I will punish you,” he promises right before he rips the fabric from my body.

Suddenly, I’m standing in front of my father’s best friend with only my heels on. The thought makes me feel powerful and feminine. But also naughty and forbidden.

Ace puts a hand on the back of my neck and guides me down. He bends me over his foyer table. It’s the perfect waist height for him.

“You waited for me so good,” he says. “Now I’m going to reward you by sinking nine deep into this tight little pussy.”

He yanks on his pants, and I hear the whisper of his belt as he pulls it free. Then he's sliding inside of me and filling me up in one thrust.

I cry out at the sudden, sharp intrusion. Ace is too far gone to even give me a moment to adjust. He's thrusting wildly, gripping my shoulders, and telling me that I'm his and that he's going to take me like this every day. He tells me I'll learn to take his cock in every position.

He reaches for my clit, and I come on his hand, flooding his cock with moisture. Then Ace is coming too. He's filling me with long spurts of his seed, creating a sticky mess between my thighs.

I collapse against the table as he continues to rut into me, drawing out his orgasm. I love the feeling of being used by him, of knowing that it's my body giving him this pleasure.

When it's over, he collapses against me. His chest is on my back, his body covering mine. For a moment, I close my eyes and let myself pretend that this was more than amazing sex. I let myself imagine that one day we could be a real couple.



# ACE

FOR A MOMENT, IT'S QUIET. THE DEMONS IN MY HEAD THAT torment me are silent. When I'm buried deep in her body, they're not screaming at me that my life is worthless. That I am worthless.

I collapse against her, letting her body milk mine. I let myself imagine what could happen if she weren't on those birth control pills. As soon as I do, the pain washes over me. I've never had a family. Never will.

I pull slowly from her body.

She moans, her tight channel still trying to clamp down on me. She's insatiable, ready for me again. But even knowing how horny she is for another round, I can't do that yet. I need to care for her first.

The urge is as primal as it was when I was rutting into her. I need to care for my woman now. I need to fawn over her and reassure myself that she's fine.

I scoop her into my arms, and she goes willingly. She's so damn compliant, always letting me carry her and do with her what I want.

I step over the tatters of her dress and walk into the bathroom easily. I turn the water on and while I wait for it to warm, I drop to my knees to help her out of her shoes. She's dazed, so I speak softly to her, encouraging her to put her hands on my shoulders for balance. I pull her shoes off gently. I'm eye-level with her pussy at this height, and I love the

puffy, pink folds. I love how they're swollen and sticky with my come. It makes my mouth water for a taste.

Forcing myself to my feet so I can't devour her again, I take off my clothes and toss them carelessly into a pile on the floor.

In the shower, I start with her hair, wetting it down and massaging her scalp. The entire time she's staring up at me with a soft smile on her lips. There's so much trust in her eyes that it about guts me.

For a moment, I let myself imagine what it'd be like to have someone to come home to. I imagine that I'm someone worth giving a damn over, someone that would have a pretty wife to smile at him.

This could be the afterglow. But even as I think those words, my soul knows I'm lying. I've loved Mackenzie with every beat of my heart for the last four years. Nothing will change that. Not time, not distance, and not even another man. There's nothing that will stop me from loving Mackenzie.

I lather my shampoo into her hair then I rinse it before rubbing my body gel all along her curvy figure. I love that she's going to smell like me for the rest of the night, especially after that hellhole I dragged her out of.

She arches into my touch. I took her so roughly, and yet she's still looking up at me with stars in her eyes. I have to find a way to convince her to stay forever. I can't let her go now that I've had her. I won't survive that.

I towel her dry before I carry her into my bedroom. There's a guest room in my cabin but hell if I'll let her stay there. My queen belongs in my bed.

I gently place her between the sheets. I don't dress her because I like the idea of her naked in my bed. I start to move back to the bathroom, a towel slung low on my hips. I was so damn focused on her that I left the water running.

She calls my name when I return. Fuck me, I want to memorize this moment. Her wet hair is falling around her shoulders in ringlets. Her smile is soft and her naked tits are on



display. They're tiny. I think she hates them. At least, if the way she's always tugging at those padded bras is any indication. If it were up to me, I'd never have her wear a bra again. Or a shirt for that matter.

She pats the bed beside herself. For a moment, vulnerability flickers across her face. "I know this wasn't anything but sex. But could I hang out for a little while?"

My throat is thick, and I swallow hard. I want to tell her that she's mine forever and that's how it's going to be. I want to tie her to this bed and make her swear she'll never leave me. But I have to make her fall in love with me first.

I manage a nod, settling in the bed beside her. I pull her onto my chest and rub her back. I'll have to come up with a plan to keep her here in the morning. This can't be the end of us. I won't let it be.

"Tell me something," I say to her. I've never been a cuddle type. Never really desired intimacy with a woman either. But it's different with Mackenzie. I want to hold her every night for the rest of our lives and learn all of her secrets.

SHE HESITATES. "YOU CAN'T TELL HIM ABOUT IT BECAUSE IT'S not official yet, and it would be a lot of travel. Plus, it could still fall apart. But the home channel wants me to do my own show."

"Like your videos?" I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her cheeks pinken. "You know about those? I mean, it's not exactly a huge secret. I just can't imagine that you need home repair tips. Look at this place. It's beautiful."

I grin at her. "It's not the home repair tips I keep coming back for."

"You're the only one I've told," she admits softly.

Pride fills my heart. Both at the fact that I'm the only one who knows and at what she's been able to accomplish with her show. "You're incredible."

Her fingertips skim along my chest, absently circling it. Even fully sated from earlier, my body hums to life under her touch. “There’s still a lot to work out, and I don’t want to disappoint him.”

I know that it would break Rogue’s heart to think she stayed for him and gave up her dream. But those aren’t words that need to come from me. He needs to be the one to reassure her that she can go after her dreams. “If you want to do it, you should.”

Her voice is quiet when she speaks again, “He’s all I have left.”

She doesn’t have to say it. Rogue is all I have left too. The three of us are a broken little family, and I’ve already betrayed him in the worst possible way.



# ACE

THE SHRILL BEEP OF A LOUD ALARM HAS ME ON MY FEET before I'm even fully awake. The smell of smoke hits my nostrils as I'm pulling on my sweatpants. It takes me a split second to get my bearings, to remember that I'm in my bedroom. And there's smoke. *Fuck, why is there smoke?*

Flinging open the bedroom door, I race toward the sound only to find Mackenzie in the kitchen. She's holding the fire alarm in one hand and looking sheepishly at me.

I take in the charred pancake on the stove and scowl at her.

I march across the kitchen, snatch the fire alarm, and replace it on the wall with a few clicks. Then I'm over at the stove. I quickly scrape out the burned pancake into the trash and reach for the box of batter. "You could have burned the whole place down."

How she managed to mess up a pancake mix that only calls for water, I'll never know. I mix fresh batter and pour some into a pan, pointing at her with the spatula, "Sit."

She does as I said without sassing me, and I turn to glance at her over my shoulder. She's sitting there with her hands clasped together, and her lower lip out. She looks like a kid at the principal's office. If she hadn't scared the hell out of me, I'd almost find this amusing.

"What the fuck were you doing?" I demand. "You don't even like breakfast."

I've spent the last six weeks watching her every move. It's taught me a lot about her. She doesn't usually eat her first meal

of the day until around noon. Hell, she doesn't even have a cup of coffee before then.

"I thought..." She blows out a breath and looks away.

I flip the pancake, and that's when it hits me. Me. I'm the breakfast eater.

Suddenly, I wish I hadn't stormed in here like that. Yeah, she scared the hell out of me, but I could have been a little bit gentler. A little more human. "There are other things you could've woken me up with, sweetheart."

"Just wanted to do something nice for you," she mutters. Her words warm me, and I rub at my chest. I'm not sure why it hurts in there. I want to take care of Mackenzie, not the other way around.

"You're a menace with a spatula," I growl. "You could have burned the whole place down."

"You mentioned that already." For the first time since I came in here, she smiles. I think she understands now. She scared me. I smelled smoke, and I reacted.

"But I'm great with the power drill."

I turn off the stove and stalk across the room, putting a hand on the back of her chair and caging her in. As I crowd her space, her eyes dilate and her breathing catches. "And you look so damn sexy with it."

She blushes under my praise.

I lean down and fuse our lips together. I thought it was a trick of the night, but no, she tastes as sweet this morning.

She moans into my mouth, and I reach for the t-shirt of mine she's wearing. With a flick of my fingers, buttons skitter in every direction. "There's something else I want to taste for breakfast."

I was so obsessed with her last night, so desperate to get in her that I didn't get a taste of her. "I'm craving your sweet pussy juices on my tongue."

She calls my name when I pick her up and set her on the edge of the table.

I lay her out and open the shirt like I'm unwrapping a gift. She's not wearing panties, and damn if that doesn't make me harder.

When she tries to close her legs, I scowl at her. That's all it takes for her to slowly part them again. "You're beautiful. Fucking beautiful, and you don't ever hide this pussy from me."

With that, I drop to my knees on the floor and position her legs on my shoulders. Without waiting for her response, I dive in and lick her hot seam.

She's warm against my face, already trying to wiggle away from me. I press my arm across her waist, pinning her hips down. She tastes so good. It's unbelievable. It's better than any fantasy I've ever had of her.

She's panting, begging for release. Her juices are in my beard and dripping down my face. I don't care. I want more of it. I want all of her. I'm a greedy bastard because I want all of her juices, and I won't ever share her.

"Why are you so angry?" She reaches out and smooths my furrowed brow.

"Mine. You belong only to me," I snarl as I dive back in and suck on her clit. More moisture gushes out of her pussy, and I work one of my thick fingers into her channel.

I'm amazed at how tight she still is. I gave her a good stretching last night, but it's obvious that I'll have to take her regularly. The idea excites me, and I add a second finger as her low, throaty moans fill the air.

I crook my fingers, hitting that magic spot. She wails for me not to stop, not to ever stop. She doesn't have to worry about that. This king will live on his knees for his queen. She comes with a cry of pleasure so sharp the sound is music to my ears. I work her through it, kissing her and petting her and murmuring things against her skin as she comes on my face.

When it's over, I take a seat in the chair and pull her into my embrace. She wraps her arms around me and buries her face in my neck, pressing small kisses to my hot skin.

“I'm playing hooky today. Want to hang out with me?” I hold my breath as soon as I make the offer. Good sex is one thing. Choosing to spend time with me is another. My heart pounds, and for some crazy reason, I feel vulnerable. I haven't wanted something in a long time, but I want her to say yes to this request.

The smile she gives me lights up my whole world. “Let me recover first.”

I kiss her forehead. “Take all the time you need.”





# ACE

“I WANT YOU TO TAKE ME ON ONE OF THESE FAMOUS wilderness tours of yours,” Mackenzie tells me after I’ve ravaged her for the second time today. I ate her out for breakfast then bent her over the kitchen island and took her again.

I like being with Mackenzie. She makes me feel alive for the first time in a long time, like there’s a little bit of color in my world. After spending so much of my life in gray, unable to feel anything at all, it’s a thrilling sensation. Maybe that’s been part of my fascination with her. This girl makes me feel that my life might somehow be worth living.

“What do you mean one of my wilderness tours?” I ask, glancing out at the weather today. It’s perfect hiking weather, but I can think of better ways for us to get in a workout. Granted, most of them involve her on her back.

She pads to the front door and retrieves a black bag that was left on the porch. Her friend dropped off an overnight bag for her. She searches through it, pulling out a pair of black panties.

I fight a groan, remembering when she pranced around in front of her open window before she gave me the show of a lifetime.

She hears my groan and glances over her shoulder, giving me a sassy smirk. “I could stop wearing panties.”

“If you don’t cover that pussy, I’m going to keep fucking it,” I tell her, meaning every word. She’s my new obsession,

but I don't think she understands how deep that obsession runs. How much I crave her every moment of every day.

“One of my tours. Did you have a specific one in mind?” I ask, turning away to rake a hand through my hair. She hasn't complained yet, but she has to be getting sore. I'm a large man, and I'm anything but gentle when I take her. I'm more savage animal until I know she's full of my come.

She slips into the underwear then puts on her blue jeans followed by a plaid t-shirt of mine. She knots it at her hip before reaching into the bag and producing sneakers. “Which trail is best for the underprepared?”

I think for a second. There's a gentle sloping trail that would work. It's great for beginners and secluded enough that I could pull her away into the underbrush and feast on her without innocent hikers stumbling upon us. “I have one in mind.”

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“WOW, I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS WAS HERE,” MACKENZIE SAYS softly as we walk along the beginner trail that's near one of the flowing rivers. “This view is incredible.”

“This river leads to a basin a few miles down. There's a hot spring nearby too,” I explain as I take her hand. It's right to be touching her this way. She leans into me, letting me wrap an arm around her shoulders.

Rogue called my phone twice earlier. I ignored it both times, letting it go to voicemail. He's called me every day for years, and I always answer. Except today I didn't. I'll make sure to call him later, but right now, I want this time with Mackenzie.

We walk in a comfortable silence until she asks, “Why did your parents name you Ace?”

I frown, ignoring the pain in my chest that always starts when the topic of who I am comes up. “That's my nickname.

You know the story. Rogue probably told you it a million times.”

Sadness flickers across her face. “He doesn’t...well, you know what he’s like. He’s not very touchy-feely.”

It strikes me that Rogue and I are two peas in a pod. We both stoically face everything, keeping our pain and grief lodged deep inside. I’ve always thought that was a good thing, but maybe when it comes to my girl, it’s not.

“He had to have told you something.” I don’t want to reveal too much. My story is intertwined with his, and maybe there’s a reason he’s never shared it with her.

She shakes her head. “I asked a couple of times when I was little, but he was always vague about his past. I don’t even know if I have grandparents on his side.”

Fuck, she’s wondering about the people she comes from. “He’s an orphan...same as me.”

“Oh.”

An uncomfortable silence falls between us for a few long minutes as I try to decide what to tell her. I don’t want to keep secrets from her, but I’m not sure how she’s going to look at me once she knows. “Do you remember a few years back when a group of men got together and sued a boys’ home?”

She thinks for a moment then says, “Do you mean the one that made national headlines for abusing the boys?”

We weren’t part of the lawsuit. Neither Rogue nor I wanted to publicly relive that nightmare for the world to watch. As it was, the coverage started up the panic attacks for me again. I don’t imagine that it didn’t fuck with his head too.

I give her a jerky nod. “That home is where we came from.”

She’s silent though she does press closer, burrowing into my side like she wants to offer me comfort.

“It was where the unadoptable boys got sent. You reach a certain age in the system, and nobody wants you. So they created a place for kids like us.” I still don’t know the exact

purpose of the institution. Did someone really start it with the best of intentions? Or was it a sick experiment, meant to break us psychologically?

Decades later, I'm still not sure about the answers to those questions. All I know is I've infiltrated prisons in remote countries that were kinder and more humane to their prisoners than the workers were to the foster boys sent to that shithole.

"One of the kids tried to pull a knife on your dad. I disarmed him and took the weapon. After that, he started to call me Ace. Said I was his ace in the hole. I guess it kind of stuck," I swallow hard.

We only made it out of there because we had each other's backs. We were brothers. We're still brothers. Except I know what color his daughter's pussy is. I know how she tastes coming on my face. It's a fucked-up situation, and I still don't know what I'll do about it. The only thing I can't do is give up Mackenzie. Not now when I finally have her.

"So, then what's your legal name?"

"Real name is Anders." I don't want more questions so I squat down on the trail, tugging her down with me. I point to the markings on the path. "See these? Bunny tracks. A big one and several little ones. Probably a mama and her kits."

Her gaze doesn't leave my face. "It's OK."

Fuck, I didn't realize I was that easy to read. I blow out a breath and say everything in a rush, like one long sentence, "I was found in a parking lot, umbilical cord still attached."

I don't look at her. I can't look at her. I don't want to know what she's thinking. I don't want to see the look on her face when she realizes I've never been worth keeping around. But then she wraps her arms around me.

She doesn't say anything. She doesn't have to. She just holds me, somehow sensing the storm this has brought up inside of me.

I see a psychiatrist twice a month, mainly so I can keep my prescriptions active. All of the asinine questions never help.

But Mackenzie's quiet acceptance, her willingness to sit in silence with me, eases a small part of the ache.

After several long minutes, we get back to the trail. I feel oddly lighter with her knowing about my past. I expected that she would turn away from me, that she would understand how damaged I am. But then she was there, wrapping her arms around me.

"I wish I'd known," she tells me as she watches a flock of geese flying overhead. "Maybe there's something I could have done for my dad. Kind of makes sense now why Christmas makes him a little bit sad. He always works so hard to make sure everyone else gets their holiday wish."

"He doesn't want you to know. He'd never burden you with his shit," I explain so she doesn't blame herself.

"Is that why you both went into the Army? I know you guys signed up so young." She doesn't realize that seventeen isn't young when you've lived the kind of life we did. We were men far before our years.

"We both figured anywhere had to be better. We served in different platoons for years until we were transferred into the same one."

"And that's when you saved my dad again." The smile she gives me is bright. "You're like his guardian angel. You left the military too, not long after he was injured. Is that why? Did you miss him?"

I hesitate, wondering if I should share this other piece of information with her. But she's already heard a lot, and she hasn't flinched. "I was medically discharged."

She's quiet again.

My lips curve into a wry smile. "Apparently, the military won't hand an assault rifle to a man who doesn't believe life is worth living."

She visibly swallows. "Wow. Sorry, that's probably not the right thing to say. I didn't know."

I shrug, feeling raw as I tell her, “I’m on meds now. My brain broke years ago, and I don’t know how to fix it. I keep popping pills and hoping I can stay out of that dark hole.”

She stops walking and puts a hand on my arm. Her blue gaze is bright with compassion. “You’re not broken.”

“I feel pretty broken,” I admit, looking away. I don’t like the way she’s looking at me. I don’t want to be the one she saves and looks after. I want to be her safe harbor, the one who is her steady rock.

“You still deserve love. You still deserve good things, and I really hope you find them,” she tells me softly with her cheeks going pink.

I crush her to my chest, knowing she’s wrong. I don’t deserve anything good. But I’ll take anything my curvy angel is willing to give me.



# MACKENZIE

ACE'S SHOWER IS A TIGHT SQUEEZE. IT WASN'T BUILT FOR TWO people. But I kind of like that. I like the way our bodies are pressed up against each other. I like the steam and the heat and the intimacy of him running his hands over my body, tenderly caring for me. I like that when I step out of the shower, I smell like him.

“What are you smiling about?” He asks, drying my body on a towel. He pauses to press a soft kiss to my stomach. His beard tickles my sensitive skin.

“Just happy,” I tell him as I thread my fingers through his thick hair. I love touching him. I love everything about Ace.

He smiles. It's a real one, and I think it's the first one I've ever seen from him. “I'm happy too. You make me happy.”

His words give me a warm glow. Before I can suggest other ways to make each other happy, my phone rings from his bedroom. “That's probably Ginger. I promised I'd call her tonight.”

He nods. “Have your call. I'm going to order some food anyway. Does Ernie's work for you?”

“Sounds perfect.”

He drapes one of his big shirts around my shoulders. He carefully buttons each button, stopping to tweak my nose when he's done. “Don't take too long on that phone call. I still have plans for you tonight, sweetheart.”

He kisses me one last time before he leaves the bathroom.



I glance at the mirror and see my cheeks are flushed. I tingle all over from his sensual promises. I can't believe after so long of wanting him, that we finally have each other. Except I don't know how long we'll get to be together. If my dad tells Ace that we can't be together, will he walk away from everything we've shared?

The thought of tearing apart the two men I love most in the world hurts me. No, I'll find a way to break this gently to my dad. Maybe I'll tell him I'm seeing someone and wait a few weeks. Then I'll slowly introduce the idea of Ace. Maybe that won't hurt him so much.

My phone rings again, and I answer Ginger's call this time. "Girl, I have been *dying* for details!"

I chuckle. "Ace is amazing."

"And...?" She prompts. "What's the equipment like? You've got to give your girl some insight here. What's he like in bed? Is he one of those sweet, tender guys or—?"

"Definitely not sweet and tender," I tell her as I leave the bathroom and walk into Ace's big bedroom with its dark furniture and masculine smell. I think again of the filthy things he said when he drove me to his cabin. "He's commanding and dominant, almost like he knows my body better than I do. It's such a turn-on."

"But?" Ginger asks, sensing my hesitancy.

"I'm afraid that my dad is going to be so angry when he finds out. He'll feel like I betrayed him." I sink onto Ace's bed and sit cross-legged. "Part of me wishes I could go back in time and do all of this differently. I wish I could give my dad some kind of warning to let him know what was about to happen."

"You have to follow your heart," she advises. "I think your dad will want you to be happy."

"I'll tell him tomorrow. He'll be at the hardware store for the monthly check-in." Part of me is scared to tell him. What if I'm here thinking that this thing between us is permanent and Ace only sees it as a fling?

Before I can dwell on the thought, I hear someone at the front door. There's a loud, banging sound then Ace is talking in a low, urgent tone.

I tell Ginger goodbye and step into the hallway. As soon as I do, I recognize the angry voice. It's my dad. He knows I'm here. I swallow and pause, taking time to listen.

"Why the fuck didn't you answer your phone? What the fuck is the matter with you?"

"I was with someone. She's here now," Ace's voice is calm, even.

"You have someone here? I don't care what whore was spreading her legs for you. Answer when I call!" Dad yells right before he reaches for the nearest wall. He punches it, his fist going through the drywall.

"I wasn't with a whore." There's a steely note of determination in Ace's voice. "I was with my future wife."

"I don't give a fuck!" Dad insists. I've never seen him like this. I've seen him angry a couple of times, but he's never lost control or resorted to anything violent.

Ace doesn't flinch. He stands there, quiet and still in the middle of the storm that is my father.

I study my dad's face, but it's not the red-mottled color I had expected. Instead, it's pale white. His eyes are wide in his face.

Unbidden, a memory returns. A moment when I was about seven or eight. My father hugged me before bed. "Daddy didn't mean to yell. He was scared. You didn't do anything wrong."

Earlier that day, I had been dancing too close to a candle my mom had left burning. I'd knocked it over and accidentally caught the kitchen curtains on fire. My dad had come in and put it out while yelling at me. His face was white like today. That was when I learned that my dad doesn't express fear like other people. It usually comes out as anger. But why would he be afraid today? What could he be so terrified of?

I want to help him. I want to ease whatever fear is tormenting him.

Stepping forward, I say weakly, “Hi, Daddy.”

Dad does a double take, looking from Ace to me and back again. All of his fury stills. He shakes his head, jaw slack. “No. No.”

A heartbeat of silence passes. It feels like a lifetime.

“How long?” Dad’s voice is a growl.

“A day or two,” I admit. I’m not sure which one of us he’s talking to.

My dad’s gaze never leaves Ace’s face. “How long?”

“Four years.”

My heart skips a beat. He’s wanted me that long. Ace has wanted me for four years, and he’s never said anything. Never made a move.

Dad doesn’t say anything else. He shakes his head one more time. He’s not looking at me. He won’t look at me. He turns, leaving the cabin without a word.

I stare, unblinking at the front door. My ears are straining, listening to the sound of his motorcycle fading in the distance.

Suddenly, I’m crying. I’ve been selfish, and I’ve ruined everything. I did the one thing I was trying to avoid. I pulled the two men I love most apart. They’re like brothers, and I’m driving a wedge between them.

Ace puts his arms around me, offering comfort even though I don’t deserve it. “I messed everything up.”

“No,” he insists in a firm tone, “This is my fault.”



# MACKENZIE

HE SITS ON THE COUCH AND PULLS ME INTO HIS LAP. HE wraps a blanket around me when I start to shiver. “There are things you need to know about your father’s reaction today. It had nothing to do with you, and everything to do with me.”

I sniff. “You want me to go. I should go. I’m sorry.”

I try to leave the comfort of his embrace, but he tightens his hold on me. “Let me explain.”

I wait, barely breathing. I didn’t expect my father to be happy when he learned that the two of us were sleeping together. But I also don’t understand what just happened. I need someone to help me make sense of this.

Ace is silent for a long moment, searching for the words. Finally, he starts speaking in a raspy tone, “A few years back, Rogue woke in the night. He had a horrible feeling, so he drove for hours to see me. He arrived at my place right as dawn was starting.” He swallows hard. “I was sixty seconds away from pulling the trigger. I had it all planned out, every last detail.”

My blood runs cold at his admission. I don’t know how to process this. I don’t know how to help him. I desperately wish I could reach back in time to that man.

I cup his face, lifting it so that he’s looking into my eyes. “I’m sorry that things were so dark for you.”

“My last mission had gone sideways. I thought the darkness would always be with me. It felt like it was swallowing me whole, eating me from the inside out. I thought

the only way to make the pain stop was to end things. Then Rogue showed up and stayed with me until I could see a psychiatrist. For seven months, he was my constant companion.”

“In my freshman year of high school, Dad went away for several months. Mom said that he was camping with his buddies. They never told me.” It makes sense that they didn’t. They were protecting Ace.

“He could’ve had me committed involuntarily, but that’s not like him. Instead, Rogue took me into the wilderness. He stayed with me. I was never alone for seven months. Even when it was time for the appointments, he always drove me. He watched over me.”

Admiration for my dad only grows. I’ve always known that he’s loyal. He never missed one of my mom’s cancer treatments. He was there at every appointment, her constant rock. It sounds like he was the same for Ace. I can’t imagine the strength it must have taken him to share all of this with me today. “You were so brave.”

“I don’t feel very brave,” he admits in a broken whisper. “I feel like I’m a coward. Every day, the shame is there. Rogue went through the same stuff, and he didn’t fuckin’ crack up. I told you. My brain broke.”

I take my face in his hands. I wish I could make him see himself through my eyes. “You are not broken. You are a warrior. You fought back against a cruel institution when you were a kid. You fought through a war when you were a soldier. Now you’re fighting against the demons in your head. I think that takes a special kind of bravery.”

There’s a sheen of tears in his eyes before he blinks it away. He lets out a shaky breath. “What happened tonight wasn’t your fault. I don’t want you to blame yourself for a second. He’s mad at me, for scaring him.”

I nod and put my head on his chest. It’s not the way I wanted my dad to find out, but it’s done now. We won’t get a second chance to introduce him to the idea of us. The thought reminds me of what Ace said when my dad first showed up.

“Did you mean what you said, about me being your future wife?”

He rubs a slow circle on my back. “Yeah, I did. If you’ll still have me.”

I glance up at him, his beard ruffling the top of my head. “I’ll always want you. No matter what.”

He brushes a kiss across my forehead before I settle back against his chest. My voice is muffled by his t-shirt when I ask the question, “What are we going to do if he doesn’t forgive us?”

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### *Ace*

TWO DAYS. IT’S BEEN TWO DAYS SINCE ROGUE SHOWED UP and caused a scene. Two days now she’s worried the relationship between them has been permanently destroyed.

I keep reassuring her that he’ll come around, but I can’t sit by and see her in pain, so it’s time to deal with this. Even if Rogue—the man who’s been my brother—hates me forever, I have to go to him. He’s not going to hurt Mackenzie. I won’t let anyone do that on my watch.

She’s busy at the hardware store today which makes this the perfect time to talk with him. I check his cabin, but he’s not there. He’s not on any of his usual handyman projects. That only leaves one last place he would go, and that’s the lake.

I drive the long, winding route to the spot where Rogue likes to go when he needs to clear his head. Sure enough, I find him on the dock with a fishing pole in his hand.

He’s staring out at the water. His brow is furrowed, trying to make sense of everything. I don’t know if I can fix what I broke between us. But I’ll fix what’s going on with him and Mackenzie. No one gets to make my girl cry.

“Wondered when you’d get here,” Rogue says as I approach the dock. He probably heard my truck coming from a mile away. All that time spent in recon means Rogue is a man who knows how to sense even the slightest change in his environment. It’s a skill that’s kept both of us alive more times than I can count.

I take a seat beside him on the dock. Shit, I remember doing this since the time we were little things, angry at the world with no one to watch our backs but each other. “You don’t have to forgive me.”

“Good, because that’s not happening,” he answers.

“But you do have to answer your daughter’s calls,” my voice is tight. If this were anyone else, I’d settle it with my fists. But he’s her father which means I’m trying to ignore my baser instincts.

He grunts. I don’t think he was ignoring her to hurt her. There was simply nothing left to say. In our world, that means we shut the fuck up. “She’s not like us. She thinks you’re furious at her.”

His movements on the fishing rod stop, and he goes completely still. “She thinks I’m angry?”

“She thinks you’re never going to forgive her. That you don’t love her anymore,” I admit.

“Are you fucking with me?” Rogue demands, looking me in the eye.

I hold his gaze steady and sure. I’ve watched lesser men wither under the weight of Rogue’s stare. “Fix it before I kick your ass.”

I go to leave, but Rogue’s voice stops me. “What is this about for you?”

“I just want to love her,” I tell him, and my voice cracks, betraying my emotion.

“See that you do,” he answers. I know right then that even though Rogue is furious, things are going to be OK. He won’t forgive me today or tomorrow, but he will in time.





# MACKENZIE

“IS YOUR DAD STILL MAD AT YOU?” GINGER ASKS AS SHE SIPs her coffee across from me at Courage Cookies, a little bakery in town.

We’re here today with Susie. She’s the community manager at the gym. She’s new to town, but Ginger invited her to hang out with us. I like her bubbly personality and the way she finds the bright side of everything.

“I think he’s furious with me. He won’t even return my calls,” I tell her miserably. I haven’t heard from him in two days, and I’m starting to think that maybe I won’t ever. What if my dad never talks to me again? What if by falling in love with his best friend I messed everything up so badly that he can’t ever forgive me?

Ginger drums her fingers nervously on the table. “Do you blame me for my ridiculous plan to make Ace jealous?”

I think back to that night at the club. “That was your plan?”

“Duh, that’s why I took you there. How else would I get Ace to drag you back to his cave like a total Neanderthal?”

I laugh despite my sad mood.

Susie does too. “You’re devious.”

Ginger gets a serious look on her face. “Maybe that’s what it takes to get his attention.”

“Who?” Susie asks.

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking,” I tell Ginger, but I know it’s probably already too late. Once she gets an idea in her head, she goes for it.

She shrugs and gives me a mischievous smile. I’m pretty sure that she’s thinking about seducing her brother’s best friend. I explain this much to Susie, and she nods along. “Is he cute?”

“He’s big and grumpy and so handsome,” Ginger sighs dramatically. “But he won’t pay me any attention because I’m just Greer’s younger sister.”

Before we can talk more about Ginger and her unrequited crush, the bell above the door for Courage Cookies rings. The three of us look up to see my dad striding toward the table.

He never falters. He keeps his gaze on me the entire time.

I study his weathered face, his blue eyes so like my own. I’m trying to decide if he’s furious. A big scene in public isn’t his style, but then I’ve never pushed him this far.

I hear Susie’s breath leave her lungs in a whoosh as her cheeks go pink. It’s a strange reaction to my dad, and I file that one away to think about later.

Ginger gathers the remnants of their food and gestures with her head toward the door. “We’re going to go now.”

As soon as they get up and leave, Dad takes the seat across from me, the one that Susie vacated. He frowns and sniffs the air then frowns again.

“Hi,” I squeak the word. I’ve never felt nervous in front of my dad, probably because I’ve never kept a secret from him.

Dad looks uncomfortable. “Ace says you think I’m angry.”

I drop my gaze to a water stain on the table and trace it absently with my finger. “I mean, I understand if—”

“Look at me.” His voice is clear and strong, brooking no argument.

I glance up at him, expecting to see fury written across his features, but instead, all I see in his eyes is kindness. “I’m not

angry.”

My shoulders slump. Somehow, that’s worse. “Disappointed.”

He glances around the little bakery before his gaze comes back to rest on me. “I saw four years ago when you kissed him. He pushed you away, and I thought that was the end of it. Stunned is more like it.”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “Is it that big of a surprise? I mean, he’s the best man you know, isn’t he? Doesn’t it make sense that I would fall for a man who’s as courageous and strong as my dad?”

He scoffs. “You can do better.”

Fury rolls through me. Ace is the strongest, most selfless person I know. He’s put his life on the line for my dad repeatedly. “Better than a man who saved your life?”

“Better than men who come from nothing. Men who have been disposable their whole lives. But you—you’re something special. You deserve the best.”

I swallow hard. For the first time, I see this isn’t about me. The way my dad and Ace grew up scarred both of them in very different ways. My heart aches for the boys they were. Boys who were denied love and affection. “I love him.”

Dad winces.

I continue, “And do you want to know why I kissed him that day? Because I was at my mom’s funeral, and all I could think was that life is short. Mom left with no regrets. She loved with everything in her. And the thing is that I’ll never regret loving him. Or you.”

Dad blinks, his eyes having misted over. “No gushy stuff with him. Not in front of me.”

I nod solemnly and nudge the plate of cookies toward him.

He accepts the peace offering and chews the food slowly.

It’s probably not the best time to bring it up but there’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while, and I want

him to know this. “I don’t like you being alone.”

“I got my girl,” he answers far too easily.

I know he’s about to dismiss whatever I say, but I still need to get it out. “Daisy is a sweetheart, but you need a woman, Dad. It wouldn’t make me mad or sad or anything. I’m grown, and I know that no one can replace Mom.”

He frowns. “Why are you saying these things?”

“I want you to be happy. If you find another chance at love, I want you to take it. Don’t hold back because of me.”

He waves a hand. “I tell you what to do, young lady. Not the other way around.”

I fight a smile. He’s used that line on me since I was a little girl. “So, we’re OK?”

He chuckles. “We’ve always been okay, kiddo. Just needed a couple of days to wrap my head around it.”

My heart is growing lighter with every passing second. “Is it cool if I bring my new boyfriend to our weekly dinners?”

“If he ever breaks your heart, I’m kicking his ass. I don’t care how long we’ve been friends,” he promises with a twinkle in his eye.

I grin at him, and this is the moment that I know we’re all three going to be OK. We’re going to muddle our way through this and figure it out because that’s what family does.



# MACKENZIE

I WIPE MY PALMS DOWN THE SIDE OF MY JEANS BEFORE I WALK into the restaurant. This is the meeting that I've been working toward for the last two weeks. I role-played the meeting with Ace several times. But each time, we ended up making out for hours. After that, I switched to role-playing with Ginger, who is a much better interviewer.

"You have nothing to be nervous about," I remind myself as I approach the table where the middle-aged TV executive is waiting for me.

Shelley gives me a warm smile. She gestures around Liquid Courage, the bar turned restaurant. "I love this. It's such a cute, quaint little town."

I search her face for any sign that she's looking down on me or my hometown. When I don't find it, I relax. "I love it here."

We order our drinks, and as soon as they appear, she tells me, "I think you know why I'm here. We want to offer you a contract. A show on the home channel."

She rattles off their viewership stats, proposed salary, and several other details. Finally, she explains that I will travel around the world to help single women with their various home repair projects.

She's enthusiastically gesturing with her hands when she says, "Your personality and your warmth come through with every video. It's not that you help women with home repairs.

You make them feel empowered, that they can do anything. We want to bring more of that positivity and can-do spirit.”

It’s everything I wanted, everything I’ve been working for. But I’m not so sure that I can leave. It’s more than Ace or my dad. I love this small town. I love that all my friends are here. I love that I know everyone.

I nod. “I think you’re right. Part of what makes my show popular is that I help women feel empowered. But I also think part of what sells it is Courage County itself. The world loves peeking in on the small town and watching as I visit the various shops.”

“This is a really good opportunity,” Shelley says, pushing back.

“It is, but Courage is my home. I don’t want to spend my time traveling from place to place. I want the show to be local, set right here in my hometown.” When I talked about this with Ginger, I realized I’d rather walk away from this opportunity than leave the hometown I love.

Shelley leans back in her seat and regards me.

I continue, “I watch your channel, and you don’t have a show like mine. Your demographics indicate that your viewers would be open to this kind of content.” I rattle off the statistics I found and the research I did, pushing across a manila folder to her.

She opens it and reviews the presentation. She nods. “I’ll have to fight to get approval, but if I can, then we have a deal.”

I give her a big smile. Inside, I’m turning cartwheels. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

She nods, and we enjoy a quiet meal together, spending the rest of our time chatting about my hometown.

After our food, I take her on a tour of Main Street. She pulls out her cell phone several times to record footage. When it’s time for her to leave, she tucks her phone in her bag and gives me an encouraging smile. “I’ll see what I can do with the big man. But I can’t make promises, so we’re going to hold our breath.”



I thank her again, feeling a lightness in my heart. Even if the opportunity passes me by, there will be plenty more. I believe that good things are coming for me.

As soon as she's gone, I drive to Ace's cabin.

He opens the door, and I fling myself into his arms. Excitedly, I start babbling on about my meeting with Shelley. "I think it was a success and it's all because of you. Because of the long hours of practice together."

I lean up on my tiptoes to kiss him deeply, only stopping when I hear a throat clearing. I pull away from him and glance over his shoulder to see my dad there.

My cheeks heat. "What are you doing here?"

Since he found out about me and Ace, we've had our usual weekly dinners. The only difference is that Ace is there now, and he holds my hand. I love the way he's not afraid to show me affection in front of my father, not worried about what he thinks.

"I'm here to celebrate your big break. I heard we have the next TV star living right here," Dad answers.

At our last dinner, I mentioned the interview was coming up, but I didn't say when. Ace must have told him.

I chuckle. "It'll still take some time, and it's not a done deal yet. We're waiting now."

Ace puts his arm around me and pulls me close. He kisses my forehead. "I'm still so proud of you."

I beam up at him, thankful to see that he and my dad are hanging out again.

The three of us enjoy burgers on the back deck before Dad leaves. I watch him go. "I hope one day he finds a sweet girl. He deserves that."

Ace gazes down at me. "He's not the only one that deserves all the love in the world."

Then, before I even know what's happening, he drops to one knee and pulls a ring box from his pocket. He opens it to

reveal a beautiful sapphire ring surrounded by diamonds. The jewels sparkle in the evening light. “You’re proposing to me.”

He gives me a wry grin. “More like making you aware of my plans. Because sweetheart, I plan to make you my wife and spend the rest of my life loving you.”

He slips the ring on my finger and stands, pulling me into his arms.

“I love you too,” I promise, my heart overflowing with love and gratitude for this man and all the amazing things he has brought into my life.



## ACE

“YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SEE THE BRIDE BEFORE HER wedding,” Mackenzie hisses like this is going to stop me. “It’s bad luck.”

“Good thing I don’t believe in luck,” I tell her as I prowl into my bathroom. She’s out of the shower, towel wrapped around her curvy body. Her skin is flushed and pink.

She wanted to spend last night apart to make our wedding romantic. I allowed it but under the rule that we would both be in my cabin. I may have slept in a different bedroom, but I had to know she was under my roof.

“All of our friends and family will be here soon,” she says as I stalk toward her, backing her up against the bathroom door.

It’s been a month since I proposed to her. I gave her four weeks to get the wedding preparations together. Rogue wasn’t happy about that, but Mackenzie was more than ready to tie the knot. She suggested eloping to Vegas. I vetoed that idea quickly. Rogue deserves the opportunity to walk his daughter down the aisle.

I flip the lock. “It’s a good thing the door locks then.” The smile I give her is predatory, and she swallows hard.

I put a hand on her chin. “I can’t have you walking down the aisle in front of all these men without knowing that my come is dripping from your sweet little thighs.”

“There’s only one man I’ll have eyes for at that ceremony,” she quickly reassures me. The fluttering pulse, her dilated

eyes, and her flushed cheeks all tell me that's true. But there's a beast inside of me that won't be satisfied until he knows he's marked her, claimed her as his own.

"Well, just in case you forget who you belong to, I'm going to fuck one more reminder into you," I yank her towel down, so her beautiful body is exposed to me. Her tiny tits are heaving. Her nipples are already pointed, and I reach for one, rolling it in between my fingers.

She's so damn beautiful when she's aroused. She's beautiful all the time. Especially when she's aching for me, arching into my touch, and making that adorable mewling sound in the back of her throat. There's something special, something sacred about being inside my woman.

I jerk on my sweatpants, so my cock springs free. The fucker has been hard for her all night. I thought it was going to kill me, sleeping away from her scent.

Putting my hands around her hips, I pick her up and impale her on my cock in one smooth motion.

She cries out, her hot pussy squeezing me so damn tight. She instantly begins grinding against me, searching for that magical release.

I bring my hand down on her perfect globes, smacking the tender flesh. I love the sound it makes and the red handprint it leaves behind. "We don't spend nights apart anymore."

I spank her again, making sure it's sharp enough to drive my point home. I don't plan to repeat this lesson. "You'll be punished if you ever suggest it again."

She cries out in ecstasy, nodding frantically as her hot little body works my cock. I reach for her clit and play with it, giving her what she needs. Then like that, she's coming all over me and marking me as her man.

Her body milks mine, pulling my release from me in long, hot spurts.

When it's over, I lay my forehead against hers and listen as both of us resume our normal breathing.

“Are you OK?” I ask softly. Sometimes, I worry that I’m too rough with her. But I’ve learned my girl likes it that way. She likes it when I manhandle her, when I take control and tell her how things are going to be.

“Perfect,” she whispers, her breath fanning my face. “But I think I need another shower.”

The doorbell rings, letting me know that our friends and family are arriving to celebrate our nuptials.

“I wasn’t teasing earlier,” I tell her as I slowly pull out of her body. I reach for the place between her thighs, rubbing my seed into her skin. “That’s the only way our male friends get to witness this. Otherwise, they’re all going to be blindfolded for the ceremony, so they can’t see how fucking delectable you look in that little white dress.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but her cheeks darken even more.

She glances up at me shyly. “OK.”

I pull my clothes back on my body. “I’ll let our friends and family in.”

“Yeah, you do that, and I’ll restart my heart,” she teases as she clutches at her chest.

I kiss her forehead before I leave the room. I’m the luckiest man in the world because today I get to marry my soulmate.

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### *Mackenzie*

I FLOAT THROUGH THE WEDDING PREPARATIONS, FEELING LIKE I’m living in a dream world. Everything is perfect, exactly as I envisioned. I’m going to marry my mountain man right here in his big backyard where we’ve invited all of our friends and family to share this with us.

Ginger has turned the lawn into a magical fairytale land complete with twinkling lights draped over the Spanish moss

and stone benches. Even though it's October, the day is unseasonably warm, and I'm grateful for that.

Ginger has finished my makeup when there's a rap on the guest bedroom door where we've been getting ready.

My dad waits until he's been given permission then he enters the room. He stops short the moment he sees me. He swallows hard. "You look like your mother."

I blink rapidly, trying not to mess up my mascara. "I miss her."

"She'd love this," he quietly reassures me as he pulls me in for a hug, careful not to crush my dress against his suit.

"Are you really okay with this?" I ask, still against his chest.

He steps away, so that I can look him in the eye. "Ace is the best man I know. He'll take care of you."

I beam up at him, grateful to have his blessing and equally grateful that the awkward moments between the three of us are finally over. We're finding our way again now even though things don't look like they used to.

There's the sound of loud shouting in the hallway.

"Let's get you out there before that son of a bitch tears in here and demands you marry him on the spot." He rolls his eyes, but it's obvious that he doesn't mind Ace's antics.

After a flurry of activity, everyone is in place, and I'm standing under the archway leading down the wedding aisle with my dad.

"You look beautiful," Dad whispers before he presses a soft kiss to my cheek. He adjusts my veil. Then like that, the two of us are floating down the aisle to the world's most handsome mountain man.

Ace and I repeat our vows to each other, his voice growing thick with emotion as he talks. He slips the ring on my finger and presses the lightest kiss to my lips. "I love you, Mrs. Anders."

“I love you too,” I promise as the pastor announces us as man and wife. I turn to our friends and family, feeling like my chest might explode from happiness.

This is the start of a new adventure with my mountain man, and I can't wait to spend the rest of our lives together.



# EPILOGUE

## MACKENZIE

“HAVE A GREAT DAY, KENYA,” I TELL THE OTHER WOMAN AS she leaves my old home. It’s not exactly my home anymore. Now, I’m using it as the set for my TV show.

Three days a week, the film crew comes to record the show. Since the launch, it’s been a smashing hit. Not just with American audiences, but globally too.

I enjoy knowing that I’m helping so many women tackle their home repair projects. The messages and emails I get are the best part. I love seeing the excited comments from women who are developing a deeper sense of self-confidence when it comes to their home repairs.

Ace is very supportive of the show, and he was even a guest star on one of the episodes. No surprise that it’s my most popular episode. Women around the globe love a hunky mountain man. Especially one that is as kind and caring as my husband.

His only problem with the show was the crew. We have a small crew of seven members. Originally, five of them were men.

He insisted the show should be an all-female crew to empower women. I knew what he was really doing. He doesn’t want me spending long hours around other men. But the network loved the idea, and somehow, we now have an all-female crew that helps me plan, edit, and film the home repairs.

As Kenya gets into her car, I move around my space, checking locks and closing the windows. Suddenly, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I'm not alone anymore. The thought sends a little thrill through me.

I know exactly who's watching me from the shadows.

The moment I lock the door, I pull my hair free from my braid and shake it loose. The flowing tresses go everywhere. My hair is shinier now, and my skin glows. I wouldn't have noticed except Ginger pointed it out earlier today.

We started talking, and I realized that I couldn't remember the last time I had my period. She left and returned a couple of hours later with a pregnancy test she bought from the next town over.

I took it immediately, and to my delight, we're growing a little life. I don't know how far along I am, but I made an appointment with Dr. Cash.

Now so much is making sense, like the fact that my breasts have been extra sensitive, and I feel like I'm always on the edge of an orgasm. As soon as my hair is down, I unbutton my shirt and let it pool on the floor by my feet. My skirt is next, and I step out of it.

Goosebumps race across my skin as I hear a noise. The slightest sound of someone moving around. My nipples tighten in anticipation.

I run my hand over my fluffy stomach down into my panties, stroking my wet folds. I sigh softly. "If only my husband were here..."

There's a menacing growl, and I have to work to hide my grin. He's behind me in an instant. His lips are against my ear.

"You need something?" He asks as he replaces my hand with his, touching my pussy to find me sopping wet. I've been that way ever since I realized I was carrying his baby.

"I have to tell you something," I whisper as he puts his thick fingers inside my tight channel. It's been over a year, and he's still so big. He always has to prepare me to take his massive cock.

“What’s that?” He finds that spot on my front wall. He strokes twice then I’m exploding against his hand.

I lose all sense of words, babbling incoherently about the pleasure he’s giving me as I ride out the orgasm. Before I can even come down from the high, he scoops me up and sets me on the kitchen counter.

He thrusts his massive cock into my aching pussy. I clutch his shoulders, taking him deep and screaming through another orgasm. It feels so good to be filled by him, and it feels even better now that I know I’m carrying his baby.

“Whoa, whoa,” Ace calls out softly. “What’s wrong?”

He reaches for my face, wiping away a tear that has escaped.

“I’m so happy,” I whisper.

Relief crosses his features. He’s always so worried about me, always obsessed with making sure that I’m happy. He slowly pulls from my pussy and tucks himself back into his pants. “Me too, little wifey.”

“It’s about to get even better,” I tell him.

He pauses in tucking himself away and frowns. “You want another round?”

I know it wouldn’t take much. My husband is always horny for me. He’s always ready to go, willing to satisfy me however I want or need.

I take his hand and press it to my belly. “You’re a daddy now.”

He falls to his knees, overcome with emotion. He pulls up my shirt and presses soft kisses to my stomach. He looks up at me, his eyes filled with tears. “You did this. You gave me a baby.”

I run my fingers through his hair. “We made a family together.”

“I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of you and our little peanut,” he promises.

I laugh at the nickname and throw my arms around his shoulders. “I want to celebrate this little life together, and I have the perfect idea in mind.”

He scoops me into his arms and carries me to his truck. As we start up the winding mountain road, he threads his fingers through mine. We can’t stop smiling at each other the whole ride. Our lives just got so much sweeter, and I can’t wait to raise a family with my mountain man.

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**Want a bonus scene with Ace and Mackenzie? Sign up for my weekly newsletter and [get the bonus here](#).**

## READ NEXT: KIDNAPPED BY THE MOUNTAIN MAN

*This filthy mountain man is taking what he wants—his best friend's little sister!*

### **Ginger**

Grizz has been staring at me for a lifetime. My brother's best friend lights my body on fire, but he'll never make a move unless I push him. That's why I show up at his cabin and pretend I'm looking for another man.

But I didn't count on the fact that he would tie me to his bed and say filthy things to me. I think I've just been kidnapped by the mountain man.

### **Grizz**

I'm a wicked man. I look at my best friend's little sister and think depraved things. She's too good, too innocent for the things I want to do to her.

When she shows up at my cabin in her short little dress, I know I can't let her leave. The beast has been awoken, and he's claiming this curvy woman.

If you love a dominant, filthy mountain man who takes what he wants, it's time to meet Grizz in *Kidnapped by the Mountain Man*.

[Read Grizz and Ginger's Story.](#)

# COURAGE COUNTY SERIES

Welcome to Courage County where protective alpha heroes fall for strong curvy women they love and defend. There's NO cheating and NO cliffhangers. Just a sweet, sexy HEA in each book.

## **Love on the Ranch**

### Her Alpha Cowboy.

Pregnant and alone, Riley has nowhere to go until the alpha cowboy finds her. Will she fall in love with her rescuer?

### Her Older Cowboy.

Summer is making a baby with her brother's best friend. But he insists on making it the old-fashioned way.

### Her Protector Cowboy.

Jack will do whatever it takes to protect his curvy woman after their hot one-night stand...then he plans to claim her!

### Her Forever Cowboy.

Dean is in love with his best friend's widow. When they're stranded together for the night, will he finally tell her how he feels?

### Her Dirty Cowboy.

The ranch's newest hire also happens to be the woman Adam had a one-night stand with...and she's carrying his baby!

### Her Sexy Cowboy.

She's a scared runaway with a baby. He's determined to protect them both. But neither of them expected to fall in love.

### Her Wild Cowboy

He'll keep his curvy woman safe, even if it means a marriage in name only. But what happens when he wants to make it a real marriage?

### Her Wicked Cowboy

One hot night with Jake gave me the best gift of my life: a beautiful baby girl. Will he want us to be a family when I show up on his doorstep a year later?

## **Courage County Brides**

### The Cowboy's Bride

The only way out of my horrible life is to become a mail order bride. But will my new cowboy husband be willing to take a chance on love?

### The Cowboy's Soulmate

Can a jaded playboy find forever with his curvy mail order bride and her baby? Or will her secret ruin their future?

### The Cowboy's Valentine

I'm a grumpy loner cowboy and I like it that way. Until my beautiful mail order bride arrives and suddenly, I want more than a marriage in name only.

### The Cowboy's Match

Will this mail order bride matchmaker take a chance on love when she falls for the bearded cowboy who happens to be her VIP client?

### The Cowboy's Obsession

Can this stalker cowboy show the curvy schoolteacher that he's the one for her?

### The Cowboy's Sweetheart

Rule #1 of becoming a mail order bride: never fall in love with your cowboy groom.



### The Cowboy's Angel

Can this cowboy single dad with a baby find love with his new mail order bride?

### The Cowboy's Heiress

This innocent heiress is posing as a mail order bride. But what happens when her grumpy cowboy husband discovers who she really is?

## **Courage County Warriors**

### Rescue Me

Getting out was hard. Knowing who to trust was easy: my dad's best friend. He's the only man I can count on, but will we be able to keep our hands off each other?

### Protect Me

When I need a warrior to protect me, I know just who to turn to: my brother's best friend. But will this grumpy cowboy who's guarding my body break my heart?

### Shield Me

When trouble comes for me, I know who to call—my ex-boyfriend's dad. He's the only one who can help. But can I convince this grumpy cowboy to finally claim me?

## **Courage County Fire & Rescue**

### The Firefighter's Curvy Nanny

As a single dad firefighter, I was only looking for a quick fling. Then the curvy woman from last night shows up. Turns out, she's my new nanny.

### The Firefighter's Secret Baby

After a scorching one-night stand with a sexy firefighter, I realize I'm pregnant...with my brother's best friend's baby.

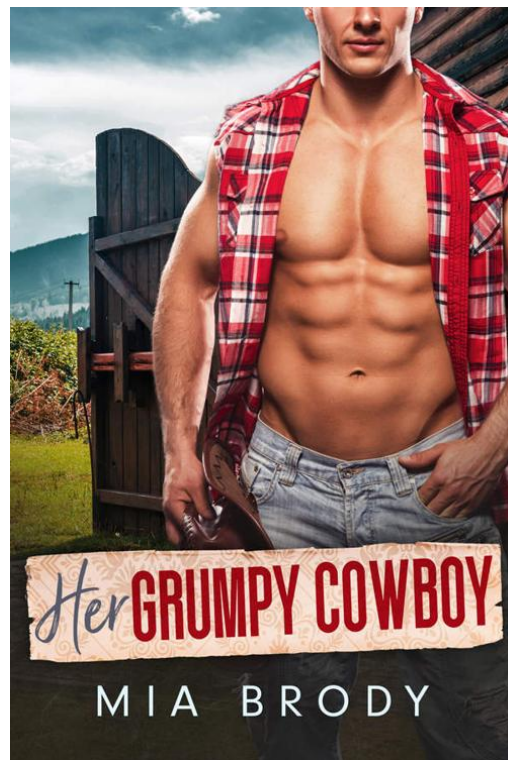
### The Firefighter's Forbidden Fling

I knew a one night stand with my grumpy boss wasn't the best idea...but I didn't think it would lead to anything serious. I definitely didn't think it would lead to a surprise pregnancy with this sexy firefighter.

# GET A FREE COWBOY ROMANCE

Get Her Grumpy Cowboy for FREE:

<https://www.MiaBrody.com/free-cowboy/>



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Of course, you can also share your thoughts with me via email if you'd prefer to reach out that way. My email address is mia @ miabrody.com (remove the spaces). I love hearing from my readers!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mia Brody writes steamy stories about alpha men who fall in love with big, beautiful women. She loves happy endings and every couple she writes will get one!

When she's not writing, Mia is searching for the perfect slice of cheesecake and reading books by her favorite instalove authors.

Keep in touch when you sign up for her newsletter: <https://www.MiaBrody.com/news>. It's the fastest way to hear about her new releases so you never miss one!

