

The Woman by The Lake

A Misted Pines Novel

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTERS

Chapter One

Weaver Cabin

Nadia

The mailbox I was told to look out for, as suspected from the description, was hard to miss.

There were four huge planters surrounding it frothing with peach, pink and orange impatiens. The mailbox itself was a shiny stainless steel with the words WEAVER CABIN painted on the side. It was held aloft by a twisted branch, which, only when I turned in and got close, could I see was actually burnished steel with fake, metal leaves on it.

Last, it was unique and incredibly pretty.

And seeing it made some of the anxiety I had about the decision I'd made start to ebb away.

The lane to the cabin meandered with gentle curves and was edged in small boulders, many of which had bright-green moss growing on them.

The lane was also longer than I expected.

It'd be quite a hike to get my mail in the morning.

And it meant my home for the next year was seriously secluded.

Finally, the cabin came into view, and the instant I saw it, the reservations that had recently sprung up about the seclusion of Weaver Cabin vanished.

One story, smallish, with a carport attached that would protect my SUV from the elements on all sides but the front. The roof of the timber house was blue tin, and a porch ran the length of the face of the structure.

On the porch was an arrangement of two rocking chairs—one yellow, one red, both with cute pillows on them—sharing what appeared to be an old whisky barrel as a table, which was topped with an arrangement of fresh wildflowers in a mason jar. At the other side of the veranda, there was a porch swing with a fluffy pad and more sweet pillows.

Yes, a porch swing.

There were lanterns scattered about, along with a plethora of different sized pots and hanging baskets, these filled with more impatiens, plus petunias, begonias, pansies and fuchsias.

It was colorful and charming. A hundred times better than the pictures I saw of it when I was deciding where to go, and those pictures had captivated me, so that seemed impossible.

But there it was, right before me.

Colorful and charming also pertained to the man standing on the porch, not to mention his beat-up, old, faded-white Ford pickup parked off to the side.

He had white hair pulled back, probably in a ponytail, a farmer's cap on his head. Scruffy white beard. Weathered skin. Plaid shirt.

And faded denim overalls.

Overalls!

Yes, that anxiety was fading fast.

I swung around the front, switched off the ignition and exited my vehicle with a small smile on my face.

"You Miz Williams?" he called.

I didn't wince at the name I'd never changed and tried not to use, but it was the name on all legal documents.

Including rental contracts.

"Yes. But I'm Nadia. Are you Dave Weaver?" I called back, moving across the gravel path to the wooden front steps (all lined with pots of flowers, including parts of the gravel).

He held up a hand, palm out, to stop my progress.

I halted.

"I get how it is, gel."

The "g" in "gel" was hard, and I had a feeling he meant the word as "girl."

He kept talking.

"These days, heck, all through history, you gotta be careful. My Brenda was supposed to meet you so you'd feel comfortable during the walk-through. She got to feelin' bad, so, my apologies, but it has to be me."

Before I could fully process what he said, he unexpectedly tossed a set of keys toward me, and fortunately, I moved fast enough and caught them.

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He continued speaking.

“I’ll keep my distance as I show you around.”

Ah.

He meant me being in the middle of nowhere with a strange man.

It was lovely he thought of that, because, considering his Green Acres Santa look, I hadn’t.

He swept a hand around to indicate the entirety of the space.

“Brenda told me to put the pillows out so you’ll get the full effect. And you can do it if you want, but she said she’d come and water the plants, but she won’t come unless you know she’s comin’.”

Considering I had little else to do, taking care of all these flowers sounded like a good meditative task to have.

A responsibility.

Something that counted on me.

Yes, that seemed a good thing to do.

“If she tells me how much water they need and how frequently they need it, I can take care of it,” I told him and shot him another smile. “I’m not known for my gardening chops, but I can learn.”

He nodded. “I’ll give her that heads up.” He hooked his thumbs in the straps of his overalls and carried on, “As a welcome home, we got the essentials in there for you, so you don’t have to head back out and grab yourself some groceries. Not like the market is close.”

That was nice, though my trunk was filled with about fifteen bags of groceries because I’d had that same thought.

He went on to share, “Coffee. Creamer. Milk. Some bread and cold cuts. Oatmeal. And Brenda added her world-famous taco meat with all the fixin’s, so you have some dinner. There’s also a bottle of champagne in there for you too.”

“Wow,” I replied, not hiding my surprise. “That’s very generous.”

And it was.

Shockingly so, considering how well-kept this adorable cabin was, on top of the fact the rent was very inexpensive. It was, essentially, a one room cabin, but if the pictures were anything to go by, it had kitchen, living and bedroom areas, as well as a reading nook.

I didn't need much, so I hadn't been perusing mansions. Everything I'd looked at was kind of like this, but this cabin was by far the least expensive, and because of that, I worried all the fabulous photos had been taken twenty years prior and the place would be a wreck.

Unless the inside told a different tale, it was not.

"Let's get you in," he said, turning toward the door. He turned back. "We got the boxes you sent. Me and Doc stacked 'em up inside. You got anything in the car I could help you with?"

First...Doc?

Who was Doc?

Second, I had two big suitcases, a carry on, a laptop bag, my purse, and the aforementioned groceries in my car.

"I'm excited to see the inside," I told him.

He studied me, his eyes went to my SUV, which visibly had stuff in it, then he shrugged, opened the screen door, the main door, and walked in.

I followed him.

The minute I stepped over the threshold, I stopped dead.

I noted vaguely he was still giving me a wide berth so I'd feel safe, and was heading all the way across the space.

But this vaguely was *vague*.

Because, if the outside was colorful and charming, the inside was downright quaint.

Lots of windows let in a dappled sunshine, due to the fact the trees grew close to the cabin.

To the left, the living room area, with a denim-covered couch, which at that very moment, I fancied I could hear screaming, *Come and take a nap!*

Accompanying this was a worn-in, but not worn-out, leather club chair. A low coffee table decorated with some coffee table books, which looked to be about flowers and nature, and another jar of fresh-cut wildflowers. Interesting lamps, side tables and a beautiful, braided rug underneath it all finished this cozy space.

Onward from that was an iron bed with a white wedding ring quilt, the rings in the key shades of pink and peach. Bright-white eyelet shams on European pillows over double stacks of pillowcases with pale yellow sheets that had tiny pink polka dots. Full, bolster along the front of the euros in yellow and peach stripes. One of those amazing throws made of huge threads of yarn was tossed diagonally across the bed, and it was pale green.

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The elaborate footboard ended with an old trunk, and the nightstands beside the bed were mismatched.

The one I couldn't fully see on the opposite side was distressed white with faded flowers painted on the drawer. The other one I could totally see was a porcelain blue, three-drawer, with ornate flower handles and the middle bulge and bowed feet of French Provincial design. Both nightstands had adorable, shabby chic lamps on top.

At the end of the large, open space, to the left, was a room, the door opened. I could see the sun shining through it and an old-fashioned, white mosaic tile floor. The bathroom.

Across from that, at the back, were two more small rooms, doors closed.

But in the middle, between the bathroom and those rooms, was a short hallway that led to the back door. It had a built-in bench with cubbies underneath, a blue gingham pad on top, and hooks on the wall above it.

To the right, the kitchen area, with pale-green cabinets, butcherblock counter tops, and shelves, on which sat a variety of pastel-colored stoneware and antique-looking glassware. There was a bar/island with three old barstools painted soft yellow, pink and blue, and a farmhouse sink with copper faucets. An interesting, copper light feature with three lights ran along the island. All the appliances looked modern, even new, and were stainless steel.

Next to the kitchen, closer to where I stood, was a six-seater farmhouse table painted in yellow with mismatched chairs. A big vase sprouting with more wildflowers sat on the top.

Rounding this out, directly to my right, the space had built-in shelves, partially filled with books and knickknacks, but with plenty of room to add to the library and the look. In the corner was a gorgeous, cushiony, pink reading chair with a leather ottoman pouf and two side tables, the better to hold beverages and plates of food and rest books, with an overarching lamp that would light your way as you dove into dozens of different worlds.

Even if all of this was amazing, the pièce de résistance of the cabin was an open fireplace in the center of the space, with a stonework, dome chimney that dripped down from the ceiling. It had love seats on either side. One that had a curve and was a dove gray, the other, a traditional shape in a pink and cream plaid.

The floors were wood, with lots of rugs. The walls were timber clapboard. And wispy curtains flanked the windows that had blinds currently raised.

And the twenty boxes I'd sent were all neatly lined up and stacked behind the couch, which had its back to the room so you could watch the flatscreen affixed to the wall.

I loved it. Every inch of it. There was nothing I would change.

In other words, it was perfect.

Perfect for why I was there.

Perfect if what happened hadn't happened.

Perfect in a way I knew I could live the rest of my life there.

"Walk-in closet," Dave Weaver said, slapping his hand on one of the doors beyond the kitchen. He moved to the next one and slapped that door too. "Storage. Also furnace. Water heater. Washer and dryer. If you bring in the outside pillows, you can put them in here and they won't muck up the joint, seein' as my Brenda bought a lotta them. Things get too hot, there's AC units above each door."

He pointed above where I stood, and I twisted to look up to see a slender unit over the door.

I twisted back when Dave kept talking.

"Remotes for the AC are in a drawer in the kitchen. Fireplace is wood burning. There's a wood pile beside the shed outside. Shed has more storage if you need it. There's also some gardening stuff in there."

He moved to the kitchen and put his hands on the counter.

Once there, he continued talking.

"We get storms. They take out the electricity. It doesn't happen all the time, but it happens. Because 'a that, this place has a generator outside. You know how to start up a generator?"

I shook my head.

"You want me to show you?"

"I..." I looked around the cabin, and I did this as I thought about all the stuff in my car, including the fact the closest grocery store was a good twenty-minute drive away, and there was stuff that needed to go in the freezer, which now really needed to be put away.

"I'll call Doc," Dave Weaver said, clearly reading my mind. "I think he's back for a spell. I'll ask him to pop by in a day or two, show you how to start up the generator."

There it was again.

Doc.

"Doc?" I asked, taking a couple more steps in.

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“Doc.” He jerked his chin to the side. “He lives up the trail a ways. Only other house on this lake. Good man.” He pointed to the wall where I saw an actual landline, cordless phone. Next to it was a small blackboard with a list of numbers written neatly on it. “Cell service can be spotty,” he shared. “Landline’s the way to go out here. I got our house number, Brenda’s and my cells on that list. Also, Doc’s landline and cell. You need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me or Brenda. But if you call Doc, he’d get here a lot faster.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly.

“Wi-Fi stuff is in the storage closet. Password is on the blackboard.”

I nodded.

He moved into the kitchen and his hand disappeared as he indicated something where he was standing. “Microwave is a shelf microwave. Brenda said it messed with her vision to have it visible.”

Brenda was correct.

“Right,” I replied.

“There’s a rope hammock rolled up in the storage room. The hooks for it are on the trees, south side of the pier, close to the water. Enjoy it. All we ask is for you to move it in if there’s weather comin’.”

A hammock.

Seriously.

This place was *perfect*.

“No problem. I can do that,” I assured.

He tipped his head to the side. “You want me to help you carry stuff in now?”

Truth told, I was exhausted.

I’d flown to Seattle yesterday and taken a commuter flight to Misted Pines that morning. From there, I taxied to the car dealership to pick up the SUV I’d purchased from afar, off to the grocery store, then here.

I hadn’t run a marathon, but travel took it out of me.

I hated grocery shopping with a passion, and I’d had to do a huge shop to outfit a new house, and now it was late afternoon. I wanted the stuff inside, the groceries put away, my bags unpacked so I knew where my jammies were, not to mention my toothbrush put in its place.

After that, I was going to heat up Brenda's world-famous taco meat, eat, drink champagne, and probably pass out.

And Dave Weaver might be in his sixties, but the wrinkles on his face said more like eighties. He was also somewhat rotund. I doubted he was a danger to me, but what I knew was, I could outrun him.

"You've been so kind, what with taco meat and milk and this place being so gorgeous, but yes, I could use the help," I accepted.

"My pleasure," he muttered, coming my way.

We headed out to the car, and within a few minutes I rethought his age, considering he could heft around a lot of luggage and groceries.

It was all inside in record time, and for that, I could have kissed him.

"I'll let you be," he said, going straight to the door after he set the last grocery bags on the kitchen counter. "Again, you need anything, don't hesitate to call. It's urgent or you're worried, get a hold of Doc. He'll sort you out."

I was wandering his way as I replied, "Thank you. So much. For everything."

He touched his forehead with a finger, bid me a, "Hope you're happy here," and he ducked out.

The screen door swooshed closed on a well-oiled mechanism before it snicked shut.

I went to the door, and through the screen watched him walk to his pickup.

I waved from where I stood.

Dave waved back as he drove away.

I then went right to the groceries and put away the stuff that needed fridge and freezer.

That was all I did before I headed to the back hall and out.

Once on the back porch, I again stopped dead.

Wicker chairs to my left that had fluffy pads on them, more pretty toss pillows, an ornate, white wrought iron table between them, and lots more pots brimming with flowers. To my right was a wicker loveseat with a coffee table in front.

And in front of me, the vista was pine trees and a tranquil body of water that could be described as a small lake or a very (*very*) large pond. A short pier sat on the lake, with two bright-red Adirondack chairs on it, which was all that could fit.

Leading off to the right, a stone-edged path led to a small shed, firewood stacked high on one side with a roof over it. Oddly, on the other side, was another stone-edged path, or what looked to have been one at one time.

Unlike everything else about the cabin, quite a number of the stones had been kicked out of place or had fallen away or been rearranged by the movement of critters. The path itself was not clear and graveled but seemed older. The gravel on top not fresh but embedded in the dirt.

And it seemed to lead to nothing.

I could see another trail, closer to the lake, that ran either side of the backyard, indicating there was a well-used walking path around the lake. This one, all dirt but also stone edged, disappearing on both sides into the pines.

I stepped out into what was my new backyard, even if it had no lawn and was mostly just earth, and walked to the edge of the lake.

I looked right.

Winking in the sun, I thought I saw some windows, but they were mostly hidden by trees. If there was a house among those pines, considering where the winks were coming from, it wasn't one story.

What wasn't hidden was the pier at that edge of the north side of the lake (I was on the east, and nothing was anywhere else).

That pier was much larger, had an arm at the end, and what looked like a small outboard fishing boat with a bespoke tarp fitted perfectly on top. The boat sat in the water tied to the pier.

I liked that fitted tarp, it said my neighbor took care of his belongings, and that boded well about this unknown *Doc*.

I felt better having a neighbor.

I needed to be alone.

I needed to sort out my head.

No, I needed to sort out my life.

But this was the literal middle of nowhere, and I felt safer with someone close.

Especially that someone being this Doc person, who clearly had the respect of Dave Weaver, someone I could tell was a nice guy.

I drew in a breath and took in everything around me, including turning to gaze at the back of the cabin.

This view was as adorable as the front.

I heard nothing but the wind rustling the trees, a faraway bird call.

I closed my eyes and felt a gentle breeze touch my skin.

It might have been my state of mind, but that didn't negate the strong, eerie, yet peaceful sense of something saying, *Welcome home*.

Regardless of the eerie part, the anxiety that clogged my decision to move out here for a year drifted away.

Because this was perfect.

Absolutely perfect.

I'd made the right decision.

I could be here...

And I could figure it all out.

I opened my eyes and headed inside to put away the rest of the groceries, unpack, heat up taco meat...

And settle into my new home.

Chapter Two

Doc

Nadia

I woke from a dead sleep feeling creeped out and confused.

It was dark. A kind of *dark-dark* I'd never experienced. There was moonlight coming in the windows, but not much, and everything I could see was shrouded in shadows.

For a second, I didn't know where I was.

Then I remembered I'd moved into Weaver Cabin outside Misted Pines, Washington, that very afternoon.

I started to relax, thinking that was why I'd woken. I was in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar feel.

And then I heard it.

What woke me.

It sounded like scratching on the window.

Not the brush of pine needles.

Something like...

Fingernails.

Full-body pinpricks of fear and adrenaline assaulted me as I lay perfectly still, listening to that sound.

It kept going.

The last of the sleep left me as I listened, and as such, the sense of vulnerability of being recently unconscious also faded away.

It couldn't be fingernails.

Right?

I was a down-to-my-soul city girl.

My *dedulya* took us to rustic places, but only if there were five-star hotels in the vicinity, or luxurious houses with daily maid service and a personal chef available.

I'd been fishing (once, because I didn't like it).

I'd been hiking (I liked that all right, if there weren't too many bugs, though I much preferred hiking the Rue Saint-Honoré in Paris—what could I say? I was my mother's daughter).

I'd never been camping (and had no desire to do so, note aforementioned bugs, but also, who in their right mind would want to sleep on the ground?).

I didn't mountain bike, canoe, bird, climb, and no way I'd ever hunt.

Truth be told, I had no idea why I'd picked this cabin.

Wait. I did.

I needed something completely different. A shake-up of my life. I needed to be away from the people and places I knew in order to figure out who I was, now that the only thing I was sure about was, who I thought I was, wasn't me.

What I did know: I might be in the middle of nowhere, but I wasn't in a horror movie.

Whatever that noise was had an explanation. Someone who was used to the outdoors, nature, etcetera, would know exactly what it was.

But that someone wasn't me...yet.

And I wasn't going to climb out of bed and figure it out. I could investigate tomorrow.

The scratching continued, and it was creepy as all hell.

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Honestly, it didn't sound natural.

But it had to be.

I reached to the nightstand, grabbed my ear buds, put them in, took my phone from charge and cued up a sleep story.

With the narrator murmuring into my ears, I couldn't hear the scratching anymore.

Even so, it took me forever to fall back to sleep.

The next morning, I was stiff and grouchy from lack of sleep, and it being fitful when I got back to it.

Even though it was early May, there was a chill on the morning, so I'd put my pink cashmere robe on over my sleep shorts and cami, pulled on some socks, and I was sitting cross-legged on the wicker loveseat on the back porch, cradling my coffee and scowling at the lake.

What I wasn't doing was figuring out how to hack through the mental detritus that covered the entrance to the path I needed to take to learning who I was, now that I knew who I thought I was, was a total lie.

I was also realizing I lived in a one-room cabin—as adorable as it was—that had some books, a bunch of boxes I needed to unpack, which would probably take me an hour, and a TV that was supposed to be connected to Wi-Fi so I could load my apps on it, which might take fifteen minutes.

This meant I had a little over an hour of things to do, I was in a crappy mood, not only that day, but the entire year yawned before me, and I had no idea how to crack the seal on figuring myself out, but also, I didn't have any motivation to do so.

It was on this cranky thought, I heard noise, then caught movement out of the sides of my eyes.

It was the same side of the house the scratching came from last night (though, last night, it sounded like it was at the window by the reading nook, which was closer to the front of the house, and this new sound came from closer to the lake).

Therefore, I tensed, and those pinpricks of fear came back, attacking my skin.

Then *he* came into view.

With grave emphasis on *he*.

Sweat slicked body, covered only by a pair of cutoff jean shorts, and running shoes on his feet (*sans* socks—I mean, who ran in jean shorts and shoes with no socks?).

His dark hair was too long. Not *long*-long, like lumbersexual long, but the wet curls not only hugged the sides of his face, but also all around his neck. His all-over-tanned body was fit and buff—ankles to neck lean, defined muscle. He sported chest hair, fuller between his bulging pecs, a smattering from collarbone down to everywhere, a dense line leading down the center of his six-pack and into his shorts.

And he had a masculine face hewn by a loving hand. Strong nose. Hollowed cheeks. Prominent brow. Square jaw covered in dark scruff.

Gazing at him, I felt a stirring, the power of which I hadn't felt in seven years.

In fact, considering it had been seven years, that stirring felt more powerful than any I'd ever had before in my life.

His head turned to me as he ran into the clearing. He stopped, put his hands on his hips, that gorgeous chest rising and falling with his quickened breaths. He started walking toward me, and he smiled.

A slash of perfect, white teeth made a normally extraordinary visage deliciously *criminal*.

"Hey," he called.

The sound of his deep voice shook me out of my stupor, and I replied, "You're in my yard."

He stopped walking and his head swiveled slightly on his neck, shifting a bit to the side, his ear dipping toward his perfectly muscled shoulder.

"Sorry?" he asked.

"You're in my yard," I repeated.

He looked down at his beat-up running shoes, then again to me.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Run through it every morning a few times when I'm home."

The *when I'm home* bit was intriguing.

I refused to be intrigued.

"Well, I live here now and"—I swung my coffee cup out—"as you can see, I'll be taking my coffee on the back veranda in the mornings. So from here on in, if you'd refrain."

His lips were quirking as he asked, "The veranda?"

I swung my coffee cup again. "The back porch."

“I know what a veranda is,” he shared. “Just don’t know anyone who’d call it that when it’s attached to a shack in the woods.”

I was offended, not only on my behalf, since I now lived there, but on Dave and Brenda’s. They clearly put a lot of work into this place and kept it in tip-top shape.

“This isn’t a *shack*,” I refuted with some heat. “It’s a *cabin*.”

“Same thing.”

“Hardly.”

He pointed toward the south but didn’t take his eyes off me when he proclaimed, “It takes me five seconds to run through your *yard*.”

His inflection on *yard* was not at all missed.

Sure, it wasn’t a *yard*, per se, but instead, a big patch of dirt with a healthy scattering of trees that ended in a lake.

It was still my *yard*.

“I’m Doc,” he introduced himself, taking another step forward, clearly not of Dave’s bent to keep his distance so I, a woman alone in the wilderness, would feel safe. He was now only maybe ten feet away.

And I knew with no doubt I couldn’t outrun him, and I definitely couldn’t overpower him.

That muscle.

Lord.

And this was Doc, my helpful neighbor who was going to teach me how to use the generator.

Fabulous.

“The next part is you telling me who you are,” he prompted when I made no reply.

“I’m a woman who functions a lot better after she’s enjoyed two *solitary* cups of coffee.” I lifted my cup. “This is cup number one, and I’m not halfway done.”

This amused him, greatly, and I knew that because the smile he gave me was bigger, wider and whiter than the last one.

That stirring came back.

Terrific.

“I’ll be quiet when I do it,” he assured. “And I won’t bother you.”

“You won’t run through my yard,” I returned.

“You won’t even know I’ve come and gone,” he told me.

I had a feeling every heterosexual woman in a hundred-mile radius knew when he'd come and gone, certainly if he ran in cutoff shorts through her yard, so I wasn't buying it.

"I won't because you won't be running through my yard," I retorted.

"It isn't a big deal," he said, and he still sounded amused, not like he was getting annoyed, which made this whole conversation worse than if he'd stop being *a man*, listen to me and do as I requested without an irritating conversation.

"Is there a reason I'm repeating myself?" I demanded.

He dropped his head and lifted his hand to me. A hand, not incidentally, that was big, had long fingers, looked strong, and I could see even at this distance, was calloused from work. But he didn't do this to hide him losing his temper.

It was to hide his laughter, something he failed at doing, since those powerful shoulders were shaking with it.

Who was this guy?

No.

Nope.

I didn't want to know.

I arranged my face in another scowl, which only made him bite back a bark of laughter when he lifted his head and saw it.

Obviously, this made my scowl scowlier.

"You don't want me running through your yard, you got it," he acquiesced (finally!). "I won't run through your yard."

I nearly said *thank you*, but decided against it, because I shouldn't have to thank him for not doing something he shouldn't be doing in the first place.

I didn't run.

But I did know, if you did, you ran on roads.

You ran on sidewalks.

You ran on public trails.

You didn't run through people's yards.

When no one lived there, okay (sort of).

But I lived there now, so...not okay (definitely).

Therefore, I just stared at him.

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He didn't hide his hilarity (though it wasn't vocal) when he said, "Nice to meet you Solitary Coffee Lady."

I did nothing but raise my brows.

His hilarity became audible with his chuckle, which was as rough and attractive as the rest of him.

He then turned, *ran through my yard*, and disappeared in the pines.

Ugh.

Whatever.

I sipped my coffee.

Stared at the lake.

Put that conversation behind me.

And felt the crushing weight of a year in the pines with nothing real to do, except the impossible, settle on top of me.

The sun was shining, glinting off the peaceful waters of a lake that was a good twenty yards away.

And still, I felt like I was drowning.

***The Woman by the Lake* will be released June 11, 2024**

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