



HUSBAND SKILLS

MARRYING THE BOSS

CASSIE MINT

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One

Dani



It's amazing how different a bar feels once all the crowds are gone. Only an hour ago, King's was so packed I couldn't hear myself think. The thump of dozens of boots against the floorboards rattled through my bones, and the air was thick with sweat, booze and summer heat. Country music wailed from the speakers up high on the rafters, interrupted now and then with heavier rock classics. Everyone shouted to be heard.

Now, you could hear a pin drop. If a moth flapped through here, attracted by the lights, its tiny little wings would stir up a breeze.

It's just me, the heavy silence, and my boss. Kingston Holt.

We're locking up together, like every Saturday night. This quiet is more oppressive than the earlier racket, somehow.

Charlene told me that when *she* locks up with Kingston on Tuesdays and Thursdays, she keeps the music on and sings and dances around the tables as she cleans. Don't know how

she could ever be so bold with our surly boss, but the thought of her dancing just for him makes my insides go all scrunchy.

Does he roll his eyes at her?

Or does he like it?

Ugh. How did she get so brave?

If I ever tried something like that... well, I can't even imagine it. Can't imagine breaking the routine the boss and I have settled into over the last six months since I started working here. It's always the same, every week without fail.

First, Kingston spreads out his bookkeeping stuff on top of the bar, right at the end where I make sure to wipe down first. Then he pores over the numbers for the night, forehead creased as he works, the golden light from the lamp above him bringing out the deep tan on his forearms.

His shoulders strain against his black button-down shirt—rolled to the elbows, like always—and his dark hair gets messier as the night goes on, his hands tugging on it absentmindedly.

Now and then, his pencil stops scratching, and my mouth goes dry. Because I know that if I look up from whatever I'm doing—loading and unloading the dishwasher for the millionth time, probably, or scrubbing down tables, or mopping the floors—he'll be watching me with those coal pit eyes.

Staring. Assessing.

Measuring me up like a bug to be pinned to a cork board.

Goosebumps prickle over my bare arms, but I keep scrubbing in silence, pretending I don't feel his eyes on me.

This here's why my Mama was so set against me tending bar at King's. She's a die hard fusspot, it's true, but this time there was a kernel of truth in all her flapping.

"That man is dangerous, Danielle," she hissed at me, over and over, but I took the job anyway, even knowing what I know. What *everyone* knows.

Kingston Holt is not to be trifled with.

Ever.

He's frowning down at his books again, so it's safe to steal a glimpse. I hide behind the fall of my dark hair, peering at him between the strands as I unload the dishwasher again, the glasses hot and sparkly-clean in my hands. They clink softly as I place them on the shelves.

My boss glares at his books like he could bully them into submission—and in fairness, if anyone could scare an inanimate object, it's him. His nose is crooked from being broken at least twice, and there's a pale scar running through one thick eyebrow. Intricate tattoos weave across his skin under his shirt, wrapping around his forearms and peeking out from behind his collar.

And most of all, he's *big*. Kingston Holt fills up a room and then some. He's nothing but hardness—all muscle, sinew and bone. Square jawed and glowering.

Swallowing hard, I look back to my task, plucking out the last clean glass then starting to fill the tray up again with the dirties crowded on the bar. I've done this so many times, I don't have to think at all.

Some nights I have dreams about loading and unloading this dishwasher. That's the whole dream, too. No aliens or ax murderers to spice things up. Just the rhythmic task, this never-ending cycle, until my lower back aches and my palms are scorched from handling all that hot glass. As if I didn't get enough while awake.

"Drink some water," Kingston rumbles when I'm done with the glasses. Only the mopping and the tables are left, but this order is part of our routine too. I nod and crouch down to rummage in my bag under the bar, pulling out my stainless steel water bottle, and chug three mouthfuls of lukewarm, metallic water.

Like hell am I gonna dirty up one of the King's glasses again. Those puppies are *done*.

When I clear my throat and stand up, I move too fast and all the blood rushes to my head. Gripping the edge of the bar, I sway in my black sneakers. White spots flash before my eyes.

"Danielle?" Kingston says. His voice is so low, it's like on a whole other register. His hand hovers above the pages, pencil gripped tight.

This is *not* in the script, but I shoot him a wobbly smile. "I'm okay, just woozy. I'll be fine in a second."

The pencil drops. And for a big man, Kingston can move in a flash, because the next moment he's *here*, looming over me. Callused hands brace my shoulders.

“You're dizzy?” he asks.

Well *now* I sure am. But I bite my lip and shake my head, because even though Kingston Holt is scary as hell, this is the best job I've ever had, and I don't want to mess that up. He runs a tight ship, and I don't want him to ever think me a slacker.

“I'm good. I'm fine.”

Kingston grunts and leans down, peering closely into my eyes. He clearly doesn't believe me, and with him this close... I forget to breathe.

He smells like spice and sweat and cedar wood. *Fresh* sweat, and oh lord, why does that make me want to lick his neck?

This man is dangerous, like my Mama said. Rumor has it he did time once as a young man—and not for a nonviolent crime. Besides, he's at least a decade older than me, maybe even pushing two, and he makes me look like a puny little matchstick girl next to his massive body. He could crush my shoulders with a single squeeze of his fingers.

“Sit down for a minute,” the boss says, and it's not a suggestion. Like everything from him, it's a command. He drags a stool over and steers me to it, plopping me down so abruptly I grab his forearms for balance.

We freeze.

Kingston drops his gaze slowly, so slowly, staring at my hands on his bare skin. They look so pale and fragile against his inked, corded muscles.

“Sorry.” I snatch my hands back like he burned me, but it’s too late. This is all wrong. All out of our usual routine, and as my boss straightens up again to his full height, my cheeks burn with embarrassment. “S-sorry. I’ll finish up with the tables and everything in just a second.”

Kingston grunts. He watches me for another long moment, scratches the stubble on his chin, then finally, *finally*, turns away.

Kicking my heels against the legs of my stool, I feel like the world’s biggest melon. All this fuss for a little head rush. But I know better than to hop up too soon, even with my head clearing fast, not when the boss ordered me here. He’s the king of this castle.

So I scrub my damp palms down my jeans and stare dry-eyed around the bar. The bare brick walls, the dark floorboards, the wooden rafters in the ceilings—it’s all more familiar than my bedroom back home at this point.

It looks smaller, somehow, with the crowds all gone. You’d never believe we fit half the town in here every Saturday night.

Oh, folks are scared of Kingston Holt, but that doesn’t stop them coming here to drink and gawk. Personally, I think they

like the taste of danger; the little thrill that comes from drinking in a dangerous man's bar.

Hey, it's not like I can judge. Being around my broody boss gives me the same shivers as when I was a little girl, seeing a tiger for the first time in the zoo.

He's powerful. Magnetic. So primal, even in that button-down shirt.

"Feelin' better?"

Heart jolting, I lurch up off my stool. "Yep! Uh-huh. Way better."

This man will never catch me slacking on the job. I want to work here until I go gray, like Arabella and Mindy who work the lunchtime shifts. This place is the best, even when I go home at night with sore feet and sticky hair.

"Go easy," is all Kingston says, frowning as I magic up the cloth and cleaning spray.

"I will," I promise, and then I have to start at the table in the farthest corner and face the wall, because I can't bear for him to see me blushing like this.

Mama fusses over me nonstop when I visit her at home, but it's different when Kingston does it. It's not annoying.

It's delicious.

And I won't let it go to my head, I swear, but for tonight...

I'm giddy.

Two

Kingston



It's worse than usual tonight, watching Danielle pedal away into the shadows on her rattly old bike. The moon is swollen overhead, cratered and glowing, and it casts a silvery light over the country roads.

Still don't like her cycling home like that, already tired from a full day's shift. What if she gets light headed again? What if she has to pull over and walk? That little shoe box of an apartment she rents next to the library is two miles away. What if her feet are sore? Or what if someone gives her trouble?

I inhale sharply, cracking my neck as I walk slowly to my own bike—though mine's a motorized beast, custom made to fit a giant of my size. All leather and chrome. More than anything, I want to follow her home and check she gets back safe, but the rumble of my engine stalking her through the streets would only freak her out. Besides, what gives me the right?

The other ladies who work here get themselves home just fine. The men, too. I never lose a wink of sleep worrying about any of *them*, so why am I so wound up over Danielle?

Maybe it's because the others all drive or get picked up. She's the only one cycling home in the moonlight on a push bike with a damn basket on the front.

Yeah. That must be it.

My boots thud against the concrete parking lot, and an owl hoots somewhere in a nearby tree. Down in the valley, the lit-up sprawl of Beaver Creek town lets off a hazy glow.

The stars are faded above town. Harder to pick out when you're down there, in the thick of it. But out here, up at the top of the valley and away from the outskirts, the stars wink like broken glass in the ink-black sky. Like a dropped pint glass shattered across the bar floor. Poetic, right?

Shit, this is why I don't talk much. If folks knew how much nonsense rattles around my thick skull, they'd wouldn't tread nearly so carefully around me. Never mind the rap sheet or my busted knuckles.

My bike rumbles to life, engine purring between my thighs. I flex my fingers on the handles and crack my neck one more time.

It gets stiff, always craning over those books at the end of the day's shift. Not to mention stealing glances at Danielle as she loads and unloads the dishwasher over and over. Wrapping

up the admin always takes me twice as long when she locks up.

Look: I know I shouldn't stare. 'Specially as her boss. That's creep behavior. But she always bends at the waist in the most tormenting way, her dark hair sliding over her pale shoulders, her tight jeans hugging her pert little ass. Like she *wants* me to look. Like she knows what she's doing to me.

Wishful thinking. That's what that is.

Loneliness can make a man crazy.

The road is bumpy at first—potholed and winding, with two bushy strips of dried grass clinging to the edges of the road like sideburns. But the closer I get to town, wind whipping my shirt against my body, sweat cooling on my skin, the smoother the ride.

It's late. There are a few stragglers weaving their way along the sidewalks, laughing and leaning on each other, singing country classics up at the moon and getting the words all wrong. But most of the windows are dark, the curtains pulled tight.

Beaver Creek is hunkering down for the night. I should too, but when I hit the road that runs alongside the town square, I don't turn left like I should. I carry on and weave right, slowing down as I pass the town library.

Okay. So it's not the library I'm checking in on. Sue me. It's the next building over, where a bike with a fussy little

basket has been chained to the railing, tucked out of the way of the steps.

My ride shudders, but I slow to a crawl, heart thumping as I stare up at the building. A window on the second floor glows bright, but the view's cut off by a pair of those gauzy white curtains. Thin enough to let the light through, but not enough for stalkers like me to peer in.

A shape moves in that room. A shadow, sliding past the window. Small and slender, with no details but that's okay. I know Danielle's shape.

It's her. She got home safe.

Good. Fine.

I pull away, engine roaring, and let the slicing wind cool down the hot flush on my cheeks.

* * *

My own place is on the top floor of a converted warehouse on the south side of town, with big windows and skylights and my own allocated underground parking spot. Beaver Creek doesn't really *do* fancy, and I sure as hell wouldn't blend in if it did, but the parking spot is a slice of alright. I like laying down my head at night knowing my bike's safe.

Strolling into my home tonight, I pluck the next two buttons of my shirt open and let the sides sag. It's an open plan space, big enough that when I flick on the kitchen lights, they don't reach the edges of the living room area. The walls are

bare brick, just like at King's, and the floors are brushed concrete scattered with thick pile rugs.

It's quiet in here. Maybe I'm too high up, or maybe the glass windows are too thick, but even watching a group of ranch hands swaying along the street in all shades of plaid, hooting and hollering down there, the sound doesn't penetrate. It's silent.

Danielle always locks up the bar without a peep. All the others put on music, happy to finally pick the tracks, but not Danielle. When we close up together, I spend the last hour hearing nothing but her soft breaths and the clink of glasses. That, and the steady thump of my own heartbeat.

Doesn't she like music?

Or doesn't she feel confident enough to put it on? Maybe she's scared of me—like most of Beaver Creek. Too nervous to ask. She's worked for me for six months now, but it's possible. Sometimes when I ask her questions, all she can manage is a squeak in reply.

For some reason, that don't sit right with me. The idea that she's scared, I mean—not the squeaking thing.

Nope. I kinda like that.

Kicking off my boots, I wander to the refrigerator. It's stainless steel and nearly as tall and broad as I am, because if there's one thing I can do in life, it's eat. I cook, too, not that anyone would expect that particular skill of me.

Right now, though, I'm not hungry. I pull out a beer instead, and pop the cap off using the edge of the granite counter. If my Ma could see me pulling that trick, she'd tan my hide—but she's long gone now, gone somewhere my antics can't hurt her anymore.

Besides, I paid for those counters. I can chip 'em if I want, since it's not like there's anyone ever here to see.

Fuck, I'm maudlin tonight. Moping around in the gloom, sipping cold beer from the bottle. Trailing back to the windows to stare down at the street, my free hand shoved in my pocket. Wondering about Danielle for the hundredth time tonight.

Sometimes it feels like life, people, joy, all of it, are *out there*. Out through this thick plane of glass, unreachable to me for some reason. Always out of reach. And I'm up here in my fancy apartment that's bigger than the trailer I grew up in plus our nearest three closest neighbors besides, trapped like a gecko in one of those vivarium things. The special heated tanks. My cousin Alf had one before his dad sold it for liquor money.

You don't need to look far to see the devil's work—not if you're paying attention. Just look for the little kid crying 'cause his dad sold his pet to get drunk.

I always swore to myself that if I ever had a kid, boy or girl, I'd get the kid a puppy. That's what *I* always wanted and never had. And not a mean-looking creature with big teeth like

folks would expect of me now, either, but one of those soft, golden ones they use to sell toilet roll. A family dog.

Tipping my bottle back, I savor the slide of cool beer down my throat. Then I swallow and gust out a sigh, staring blindly at the street below.

There's no one out there anymore, but I'm not really looking anyway. Not really seeing. I'm trapped in my own head, chasing thoughts and tryin' to grab them by the tail.

Thoughts like: I'm a grown man. Have been for a long, long time. I could've gotten myself that dog I always wanted years ago, but I didn't. Why is that?

And even deeper thoughts, the shadowy ones hidden in the nether regions of my brain, like: I could have a kid too. Could try to find myself a good woman and settle down. Why don't I do *that*? What's stopping me exactly?

The image of Danielle flickers across my mind's eye, faster than a blink. Her long black hair, slipping over her pale shoulders. Her piercing blue eyes and the dusting of freckles on her cheeks. Her heart-shaped face and pointy little chin.

I cough and shake my head, banging on my chest as I fight to not inhale my beer. Where did *that* come from?

But the thought lingers long after the glass bottle clinks into the recycling. Long after I've washed up and loosened up with some stretches and sprawled in my big, lonely bed, chest bare in the moonlight. Long after I should be fast asleep.

I could be a husband.

I could be a dad.

Shit, I *want* to be those things. I do. So how does a battered old ex-con like me make that happen?

Three

Dani



Monday's shift is easy as pie, with only a handful of regulars scattered around the bar. The Beaver Creek high school football coach is holding court at a booth in the corner, surrounded by serious looking fathers who nod along with his pronouncements like he's the second coming. It's kinda funny, but they're really no trouble at all.

Gives Charlene and me plenty of time to chat between tasks. I won't lie and say *this* stuff comes easy to me—acting natural, trying to be funny and charming all day—but that's why this job is so good for me. It forces me out of my bedroom-library-bicycle loop to meet people and make nice.

Mama's always going on about how I'm too solitary. About how it's unnatural, and if I were ever in a pickle that she couldn't fix, I'd be sorry then about making no friends. As if I make her fix my pickles now!

Well, I *have* friends. I always make Charlene laugh at least a few times during our shifts, and last week we went to see a movie together. So nyuh.

“The boss is acting weird today,” Charlene says now, bumping the cash register closed with her hip. That move looks slick, but Charlene’s always bumping stuff with her hip. She’s got this itty-bitty waist and then these wiiiiide hips, and the men in town go crazy for her figure. So that must be nice, but she also forgets how wide she is and bounces off all the furniture.

I’m more straight up and down. Lord, I *wish* I had those curves, but no one’s cracking jokes about my figure in the men’s room, I can promise you that. I blend into the background.

“Weird how?” I ask, like I haven’t paid constant attention to Kingston Holt since he opened up for us this morning at eleven. It’s habit. Can’t help it. I track him with my eyes, and whenever he speaks in that low rumble, I’m hyper-attuned to his words.

Don’t think he’s being weird though. Scary, sure. Surly and quiet and frowny as ever. But weird?

“He keeps looking over here,” Charlene murmurs, barely moving her lips. When she tilts her head, a waterfall of red hair shifts against her shoulder. She’s real proud of her hair. Shrieked louder than a banshee last week when she found a few grays. “More’n usual.”

The boss stomps out of the stock room doorway, a heavy crate of beer bottles held easier in his arms than a feather pillow. His black shirt stretches over his broad chest, and his forearms are corded with muscle beneath his rolled sleeves.

Sure enough, his dark eyes zoom right in on where we're whispering behind the bar, his thick eyebrows coming down. Even across the room, you can see that silvery scar cutting through his left brow.

Gulping, I snatch up the nearest cloth. "Maybe he thinks we're slacking. I'll go wipe down those tables."

"Mhm."

They're not messy, but I don't want Kingston Holt to be mad at us. Mad at *me*. Even if he weren't my boss, I wouldn't want that. So I scuttle over to the tables like my hair is on fire, and I don't come back until I've wiped down every surface in the bar.

Charlene smirks at me when I return, bottles clinking as she restocks the refrigerators. Kingston must've brought her the crate. Did he say anything?

"Weird," she says again. "Told you so."

"Because he brought those beers over?"

"Because he's still staring at you, munchkin. Even now. Look."

Oh, I don't dare. My neck's suddenly all stiff. What if I turn around and catch him staring at me like she says? What if it *means* something?

Or even worse: what if it doesn't?

"Maybe he's mad at me for something," I say, misery clogging my throat. When I squint into the foggy mirror

behind the bar, I can just about see a dark shape leaning in Kingston's office doorway. The head is turned this way. "I got all woozy on Saturday and made a meal out of it. He had to sit me down and make a fuss."

Charlene snorts, bending over to work. Bottles clink into place, and cold refrigerator air washes over my bare legs. Thank god. My legs are shiny with sweat, and my back is sticky under my clothes. This summer's shaping up to be a real doozy. "Bet he hated that," she says.

My stomach sinks. "Yeah."

Did he? Did he hate it?

"Kingston Holt is *not* a caretaker," Charlene goes on.

No. I mean... isn't he?

"Bet that's why he never married." She bumps the refrigerator shut in a poof of frozen air. The beer bottles are all stacked perfectly in there, the labels facing forward. Charlene's neat like that. "Well, that and doing time."

"Uh-huh."

I'm nodding along, but no one's ever actually told me why Kingston Holt went behind bars. The whole town gossips about it, even all these years later, but they do it in that really infuriating way where everyone assumes you already know all the details. And if you ask for more info, it's like you must have been left in the dark for a reason, so they hush up. Those lips are zipped.

Maddening.

And maybe Charlene would spill the beans, but definitely not in Kingston's own bar. Not with the man himself leaning in that doorway, scowling over here like we're problems he needs to solve.

"It's you he's watching, you know," Charlene pipes up a few minutes later, when we've lapsed into companionable silence. I've been restocking the straws and napkins, and she's been loading the dishwasher with dirties, humming along with the background songs that warble from the speakers. "Not us. Just you."

Me? *Why?*

Wiping my clammy palms down my shorts, I give her a panicked look. "Do you think it's my outfit?"

It *is* pretty casual. Usually I wear jeans to work, but it's hotter than Satan's armpit today, so I'm in cut-off denim shorts. They're modest, though. No bare ass cheeks hanging out the back. And on top, I'm wearing a faded old band t-shirt I found in a thrift store, knotted at my waist.

Can Kingston tell I've never listened to this band—that I just liked the skulls and roses artwork? Does he think I'm a poser?

Or maybe this band got canceled because they turned out to be bigots or something, and now I'm making an accidental statement. Shit. Why didn't I at least google them? Everything is such a freaking minefield these days.

“Your outfit’s fine, munchkin.” Charlene calls me that even though I’m only a few inches shorter than her, but I don’t mind. I like having a nickname; it makes our interactions feel cozy. “But maybe you should head over there and ask if Kingston needs anything. Take the bull by the horns, you know?”

She’s right. Gah. I *know* she’s right, but my belly is full of hot snakes at the thought.

“Go on.” A firm hand between my shoulder blades nudges me out from behind the bar. My steps are clumsy, my sneakers scuffing against the floorboards. “Go on and clear this up, because I can’t stand him staring over here all shift. I’m gonna get a twitch.”

“Okay.”

But as I weave between tables, trying to swallow around the lump in my throat, my day gets even weirder. Because the boss waits until I’m close, then jerks his chin at his office and walks in there. To his *office*. The backroom.

I follow, heart thumping madly. Why does he want to speak to me alone? Is he gonna fire me?

Even Kingston barely spends any time in this room. He prefers to do his admin stuff out in the bar where he can keep an eye on things, either scowling down at his paper records, or lit up by the screen of his laptop. This can’t be a good sign.

Whenever I peek through the doorway on quiet shifts, this office seems abandoned. Like a tiny ghost town. But now

Kingston nods for me to shut the door behind me, and we're closed in here together with the dark wood desk and an ancient spider plant.

He should really water that.

My fingers twist together, hands clasped in front of my stomach.

"I'm sorry," I blurt, right as Kingston says, "I got something for you."

He pauses. "What are you sorry about?"

"Uh..." I stare up at him, palms sweaty as they cling together. You know, I used to say I wanted to be an emergency room nurse when I grew up, but thank god my grades were nothing special, because I'd have been terrible at that job. A few seconds under pressure and I'm ready to crack. All woozy again. "Saturday night? The head rush thing?"

Kingston's frown deepens. Lord, he's an intimidating man, with those muscles and scowls and the feral edge to him. He fills any room he steps into; looms so tall it makes my neck ache. When I draw in a shaky breath, the air smells like spice and the faint tang of hot metal.

Why am I *into* that? What is wrong with me?

"Don't need to be sorry about that." He's as gruff as ever, low words rumbling between us.

I nod hastily. "Okay." If he says so. "Then I'm not sorry after all."

Kingston's mouth curves up a smidge, his creased forehead relaxing. Oh *shoot*, this man is handsome when he stops glaring. What would a full smile look like? Bet it would knock me out at the knees.

"Good," he says. "Well. Then I got you something."

Heavy footsteps lead him around the desk. He yanks the middle drawer open, scooping something out and setting it on the scratched wood.

Neon pink fabric slithers into a pile. Forgetting to be scared for a moment, I step forward and poke it with one finger. "You got me a high vis?"

To wear at work? That'll look very strange.

"Yeah." Kingston sniffs, scratching the stubble on his jaw. "For when you cycle home at night. So drivers can see you in the dark."

Huh. That is... very thoughtful. Now I have a lump in my throat for a whole new reason.

"Wear it in the day too," he says, and it's not a suggestion. It's a command. I press my lips together, fighting to ignore the shivers skating down my arms. "Any time you get on that bike, I want you in this vest."

I nod, holding it up so it dangles between us. "Sure, boss. It's so fashionable, too. All the fellas will faint when I cycle by."

And I'm just messing around, just trying to coax out one of his amused grunts, but that scowl slams back down. Dark eyes

bore into me, so brown they're nearly black, and his chest rises and falls beneath his shirt.

The top two buttons are open, like always. Through the sliver of his shirt, you can see tanned skin. The edges of a dark tattoo. His collarbone. The beginnings of his black chest hair.

Oof. I let the neon vest drop.

“Got you something else,” Kingston mutters, even though he's gone all closed off again. He scoops one more thing out of the desk drawer and tosses it on top of the pile of neon fabric. It's small and square—made of black plastic and covered with buttons.

“Um.” Picking it up, I turn the object in my hands. What the hell is it? Sometimes, characters in old books and movies talk about pagers. Is this a pager? “Thank you?”

“It's a personal alarm.”

...Oh.

Kingston shifts his weight, the floorboards creaking beneath his bulk, and if I didn't know better, I'd swear *he* was nervous. Impossible.

“If you're ever in trouble, any kind of fix, you press that big button on the front.” A thick finger stabs toward the button in question, and I hold it up to the sunlight spilling through the open window. “A siren'll go off, making a whole racket, and it'll send a text to my phone with your GPS coordinates. I'll come get you.”

Oh. Wow.

“Day or night, you press that button,” he says.

I’m gonna cry. I’m sniffing already.

“I want you to carry this on your person, Danielle. Carry it everywhere. Keep the batteries charged.”

“Okay,” I rasp, and jeez, my throat is clogged. No one’s ever done something like this for me before. No one’s ever *cared*.

Oh, my Mama loves me, don’t get me wrong. But that’s a biological imperative. Besides, she’s of the opinion that once you’re out in the world, you can damn well learn to manage on your own. Then she fusses and clucks because I’m not doing things *her* way, even though she refused to get involved. I love her too, but damn.

This is different. This is like... the earth shifting under my feet. When I blink, my eyes go all blurry.

“Thank you,” I whisper, and I know I’m making Kingston uncomfortable now, because he clears his throat and shifts his weight again. I don’t care. He needs to know how grateful I am. “This is the nicest present anyone’s ever given me,” I tell his chest, eyes still too blurry to meet his gaze. My chin wobbles. “You’re a really good man.”

A puff of air. He sounds strained when he asks, “You think so?”

“Yeah. *Yes*.” How could I not after this? I’ve had my theories about Kingston Holt being secretly noble for months, but here’s the cold, hard proof. “A *really* good man. The best.”

He makes this pleased, rumbly noise. Something about it makes my insides go all shivery, but I don't have time to process that.

Because: "Then maybe you can do me a favor," Kingston says. "I need help with something. But, uh. It's personal."

Four

Kingston



I shouldn't ask favors when Danielle's eyes are all wet and shiny like that, but if I don't do it now, I might never push myself over this verge. I've been staring at her for hours already today, trying to figure out a script. Working out what I'm gonna say. Working out what I *want* from her, exactly.

I'm still not sure. But here goes.

"You can say no." Feels important to state that out loud. 'Course, I'd prefer to think that she knows that already, but I'm not an idiot. I'm her boss, and that complicates things. "This ain't work related. You can say no, and nothing bad will happen."

Danielle sniffs hard, tucking the alarm I gave her in her shorts pocket. "Okay..." She blinks up at me, all teary-eyed and discombobulated, waiting for me to spit it out already.

At least those were happy tears. I'd want to slam my head against the brick wall otherwise.

"I need, uh. I need help." Christ, does this have to be so hard? Of course I need help. By the way I'm stalling, choking

on my own tongue, I need all the help I can get.

“With...?” Danielle prompts, gifting me a shy smile. It’s wobbly but perfect, and it boosts me enough to suck in deep breath. I stand taller and force out the words.

“I’m ready to settle down.” It all comes out in a rush, and my tone is all wrong. I sound angry, but it’s just that I’m so nervous.

Danielle blinks. A pink flush spreads over her cheeks. “Oh,” she whispers.

“Well, yeah. So I need practice,” I say, forcing my way through the rest of this conversation, because the faster I say it, the faster I can go hide out in the stockroom until my heart stops galloping. “I haven’t, uh. Haven’t dated all that much.”

Try ever. Oh, there were some awkward teenage dates in high school, but nothing grown up. Nothing *real*. Then I went in the slammer for six years, and no woman with any sense gave me a second look once I got out. Told myself I didn’t care about that, and I mostly meant it, but now...

“You want to date me? As practice?” She’s even pinker now, and flustered as hell. Keeps plucking at the tied knot of her t-shirt. “Like a dress rehearsal?”

My gut settles, and I nod once. “Yeah. Exactly. So when I meet the right woman...”

I trail off, getting snarled in the tangle of my thoughts. Because it’s hard to picture this imaginary right woman,

especially with Danielle in front of me. Whenever this girl is near, all other women are shoved from my mind.

Even when she's *not* near, for that matter. Danielle has lived rent-free in my brain for the last six months.

But she's too young for me. Too sweet, too off limits by far. She'd never want an old brute like me, and it's best not to even kid myself about that. Better to be realistic.

"You want to practice your boyfriend skills," she says flatly. It's hard to read the tone of her voice, but her shoulders are tense. They've climbed up around her ears.

"Husband skills," I correct. If I'm doing this, I'm not messing around. I want the whole nine yards. "You can tell me what I'm good at. Where I'm rusty, and where I need work. And I'll, uh..."

Shit, what can I offer in return? Didn't think this far ahead. Didn't even think I'd have the balls to ask this of my beautiful bartender. What now?

But I don't have time to come up with some kind of payment, because Danielle's nodding already, chewing on her bottom lip. Those piercing blue eyes are fixed to the floorboards, and even when she speaks, she won't meet my eye.

"Deal. I'm in."

My heart judders, then starts thumping again even harder. "You are?"

“Yeah.” The toe of her sneaker digs at the floor. “You can practice your husband skills on me, Kingston Holt. I don’t mind. But—” she looks up, suddenly alarmed, “only outside work. I don’t want this to affect my job.”

Holy shit. She’s really in? “Agreed.”

It’s more than I ever hoped for. More than I dreamed. And she doesn’t want anything in return? Seriously?

She must expect to get *something* out of this too, but for the life of me, I can’t imagine what that is. But fine—if this sweet young thing doesn’t mind an older, scarred up ex-con wooing her for a few weeks, I sure as shit won’t complain.

“Alright. So... maybe I’ll take you out tomorrow? On a date?”

She puffs out a laugh, and her eyes are all damp again. Those are still happy tears, right? “Yeah. Maybe you should.”

I wait until she’s gone, staggering back out into the bar with the pink neon vest clutched against her chest, then I sag against the desk for support.

Jesus Christ. Can’t believe that worked.

Now what?

* * *

I watch from the King’s back door as Danielle strolls to her bicycle at the end of her shift, her little hips swaying as she walks. It’s still light out, the sky tinted lavender. The parking

lot's dusty after so many weeks without rain, and the patches of grass lining the concrete are all dried and crunchy.

Out by the road, the air shimmers over the baking tarmac. It's been hot as sin today, but Danielle's chugged plenty of water. I've been keeping tabs.

Words line up on my tongue, but I swallow them back. Not going to call out to her—no, I'm gonna see if she wears the vest without me reminding her.

Danielle's bike slumps against the chain link fence that lines the back of the King's property. That's where she locks it during her shift, weaving the bike lock between the metal loops, then sliding the key into her pocket.

It's pretty far from the back door. Never noticed that before.

I swear: by her next late shift, she'll have one of those bike stands right by the doorway. Directly under the security light.

Danielle wanders over at a leisurely pace, gathering her black hair in a messy topknot, then tying it in place. Her neck is pale and slender. Her t-shirt has slipped off one shoulder, and her backpack gapes open at the top.

She crouches, fiddling with the bike lock. It comes undone after some jiggling, then it goes away in her backpack, stuffed in without ceremony. From across the parking lot, I watch the flash of hot pink as she pulls out the vest.

It's big on her. Should have thought of that, because even though I bought a women's size, it drowns her. Drops way past

her hips. But Danielle knots it at her waist, just like her t-shirt, and when she slings her leg over the bike, she's smiling a secret smile.

Good girl.

The words drift across my brain, but I don't call out to her. I grit my teeth and linger in the doorway, watching from the shadows as Danielle starts pedaling, working harder at first then picking up speed across the parking lot.

She slows and looks both ways before joining the road, though there are no trucks around. Not even the rumble of an engine. It's so quiet you can hear the weak breeze stir the grass.

Then my new practice wife pedals away, bicycle creaking, until she's swallowed up by Beaver Creek valley.

Five

Dani



If you asked me a few days ago to guess where Kingston Holt would take a lady on a date, I'd have said to a dirt bike rally or something like that. Maybe to a rock concert in the nearest city, or riding his motorbike through the desert, or slamming whiskey shots in someone else's bar.

I'd have guessed something wild and carefree. Something befitting a man with cracked knuckles and silvery scars on his arms—a man who all the toughest locals give a wide berth.

So imagine my surprise when Kingston texts me the next day to say he'll pick me up at seven. When he says we're going for dinner and dancing. I stare down at my phone, the paranormal investigations podcast I was just listening to while I scrubbed kitchen counters suddenly going all muffled in my ears. Who cares about ghosts at a time like this?

Today's my day off, and it has sucked. Usually I like the free day—the chance to bake and catch up on errands and stretch out on the sofa with a library book. I buy myself these tiny boxes of Belgian chocolates as a special day off treat, and

I let them melt in my mouth one by one, flicking through the pages of my latest read.

Not today. Today I've been agitated. Pacing and fiddling. Climbing the walls with nerves, and arguing with myself in my head about why I should never, ever have agreed to this with Kingston Holt.

Even when the thought of dating him—though only for practice—makes my heart pound. *Especially* then.

So his text punches me square in the chest. Knocks the air clean from my lungs.

This is really happening.

Tonight. At seven.

“Dinner and dancing,” I murmur, scanning the short text for the dozenth time already. “Dinner and dancing. Dinner and *dancing*.”

Maybe I don't know my boss at all. I'd never have taken him as a romantic. Is this gonna be fancy? Oh, shoot.

A panicked glance around my apartment doesn't help my nerves. Oh, it's clean and tidy enough, with paintings by local artists on the walls and a few potted plants to give bursts of life. But it's still a shabby little one-bed with cracks on the walls, a sagging sofa, and mismatched mugs on the kitchen shelves.

Will Kingston want to come inside?

Jeez. Will his shoulders even *fit*? His head will probably brush along the ceiling.

And what am I gonna wear for dinner and dancing? For a date that's not even real? Oh lord, this is such a mess already.

Don't know what compelled me to ever agree to this arrangement. And as I stomp into my tiny bedroom and yank clothes hangers from right to left in my closet, I nearly text to cancel at least ten times. Suddenly, all my clothes seem tired and faded. Ill-fitting with loose threads. What if Kingston thinks I've made no effort?

But... it shouldn't matter what he thinks of me. After all, if he *really* wanted to date me, that would be different—and he'd have said so.

So, this date means nothing. It's only practice.

To him, anyway.

* * *

The Ellisons' barns are lit up so bright, you can see them glowing in the side of the valley. The music is loud too, the rhythmic strumming and plucking of a live band drifting on the evening air, winding its way into Kingston's truck cab as we get nearer.

He drives in silence, stealing glances at me out of the corner of his eye. He's neatened up his stubble for tonight, and got a haircut somehow since yesterday. It's still dark and thick and kinda messy on top, but it's neatened up around the back and sides.

He smells faintly of cologne. It's a good smell. *Real* good.

But he's wearing a black button down shirt.

"Okay," Kingston grumbles as we swoop around a curve in the road. We're climbing up higher into the valley, the wind tugging at my hair through the open window, and I'm glad he thought to bring his truck rather than perching me on his motorbike in this flimsy summer dress. "You've got feedback already, I can tell. Spit it out."

I press my lips together, fighting a smile.

My boss's hands clench on the steering wheel.

It's funny... I've been so stressed about this date all day. So paranoid and unhappy, second guessing everything, beating myself up for making such bad decisions—but the second Kingston rang my doorbell, his low voice rumbling through the intercom, all those cares drifted away.

I was so thrilled to see him.

I'm *still* thrilled to see him. Right here in the flesh, driving me to our first would-be date. Smelling like the centerfold of a fancy men's magazine.

God, I just want to stick my nose in the crook of his neck and inhale. Just want to climb inside his shirt and live there like a baby kangaroo, pressed up against his heated skin.

"It's your shirt," I murmur when I can trust myself not to break into giggles. "You're wearing your work shirt. You should change when you take your lady out."

My boss straightens, affronted. “It’s fresh on. I showered after work.”

“I know, but still. A different color—”

“I’ve only *got* one color.” He sounds so pained, and I can’t hold it in any longer. I sputter out a laugh, and after a short pause, Kingston shoots me a strained smile.

“Got it,” he says, thumbs drumming on the steering wheel. “I’ll buy more shirts. *Different* shirts. Anything else?”

“Nope.” I sink back against the warm leather of my seat, smiling out at the first stars as they wink high in the sky. The sun’s setting, the valley’s warm but not baking hot, and I’m wearing a pretty flowered sundress that I stuffed in a drawer once and forgot all about until today. I feel like a princess. “So far, so excellent.”

Oh, Kingston likes that. His smile widens, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and it’s a good thing he’s watching the road or else he’d see me panting after him like a little beast.

Kingston Holt *never* smiles. But when he does?

Empires could fall.

“You smell nice,” I say, because I love paying this man compliments. Love seeing him puff up all pleased. “I like your cologne. And you looked so handsome back there on my stoop. Like a hero from a movie. When I came downstairs, I thought I might swoon.”

It’s Kingston’s turn to choke out a laugh, but he can’t hide his pleasure at my words. A faint flush dusts his cheekbones,

and his eyes sparkle as they watch the road.

“Not likely, Danielle.”

I dare to poke his shoulder. “Well *I* should know.”

A few minutes later, we pull into a dirt parking lot, surrounded by trucks and cars and bikes from other locals looking to blow off steam.

It’s midweek, and Beaver Creek ain’t a big county. Still, we know how to let loose, and a barn party’s the best way. Don’t need big numbers when you’ve got high spirits.

And I’m so glad this is what Kingston meant when he said dinner and dancing: food trucks and beer coolers and a good ol’ boot-stomping, hell-raising country band.

No worrying about which fork to use or how to dance to fancy music. No worrying about whether my outfit looks cheap. Now *this* I can do.

“Five stars!” I crow, leaping down from the truck before Kingston makes it all the way around the hood to help me. He scowls and I poke out my tongue, slamming the passenger door shut. “I love a barn dance.”

“I’d have helped you down,” he says, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. It’s kinda cute—he seems genuinely put out that he couldn’t help me down from the truck.

“I managed just fine. Did you know that I’m a grown woman? I tie my own shoe laces and everything.”

My boss looks heavenward, but he softens when I approach and tuck my hand in the crook of his elbow. We turn away from the truck, toward the lights and music.

“I’d have lifted you down,” Kingston says as we wander across the packed dirt toward all the chaos. “That’s the point, Danielle. Lifting you down would be a treat.”

Huh. Guess we’re practicing my wife skills too, because I never considered that. Would *I* like it? Feeling Kingston’s big hands on my waist, lifting me down like I weigh less than a feather?

Oooh. Definitely.

Okay, I’m never leaping out early again.

“Next time,” I promise, patting his arm, and Kingston rumbles and draws me closer, tucking me against his side. Lord, he’s so big and warm and muscly and *fine*. Can’t believe he wants to date me—even as make-believe. This is like the best daydream ever.

“You like barbecue?” Kingston asks, steering me toward the scent of meat.

Um, *yeah*.

“Course I like barbecue.” It’s so nice walking with him like this, jostling and swaying into each other. Teasing and chatting. “What do you take me for?”

“Right. Come on, then.” My boss steers me toward a nearby food truck on the outskirts of the crowd, but not before

he ducks down to murmur in my ear. “I want to see you get all sticky, Danielle. Want to see that little appetite run wild.”

Holy hell.

I gulp, my mouth already watering.

His wish is my command.

Six

Kingston



This is practice. It's only practice. I keep reminding myself of that fact, reciting it over and over in my brain, but it's so goddamn hard to remember. I can't picture some imaginary other woman here with me, not when Danielle is so sweet and solid and *real* as I swing her around the dance floor. Not when her shouts of laughter make my chest ache.

I picked the wrong girl to practice my husband skills on. Because even though we're only on our first rehearsal date, it's clear already: Danielle is my dream woman.

A little too young for me, sure. Definitely too employed by me. And sweeter than I deserve.

But my heart and body are both insistent. She's it.

What a mess.

"Jeez! I'm about to drop dead from all this dancing, boss man." Danielle beams up at me, clinging to my elbow as I lead her away from the fray. Her cheeks are flushed permanent pink from all the exertion, and her piercing blue eyes are bright.

“Husband tip number two: your lady will get tired. Find her a spot to sit down and catch her breath.”

We both cast looks around the open barns and the lit up food trucks, but there are no seats to be had. Every chair’s taken by a grinning local, fanning themselves against the sticky nighttime heat.

“Or not,” Danielle says. She really is tired, swaying against me.

Well, that won’t do. And my solution may not be glamorous, but it’s better than her being uncomfortable.

“Up we go,” I mutter, and it’s the only warning Danielle gets before she’s scooped into my arms, cradled against my chest. She squawks in alarm, but those arms loop around my neck, and barely a breath later, she’s melting against me. A sigh shivers against my ear.

“I wasn’t hinting.” Slender fingers play in my hair, scratching at my scalp. Feels so fucking good, I can barely process it. She’s really touching me like that? On purpose?

“I know that.”

Danielle’s not the type to hint and *suggest* and tiptoe around a topic. That’s why I asked her for help with my husband skills—figured she’d give honest feedback. Well, it’s one of the reasons, anyway.

“You’re a nice weight, Danielle.” I hitch her higher against my chest, feeling so pleased at the pull on my muscles. “You feel good and solid. Real.”

She snorts, thumping my shoulder, but she's not mad. "Okay, tip number three. Don't call your lady *solid*, Kingston. She's your date, not an oak cabinet."

"Even if I love it?" I'm ducking too close to her, murmuring in her ear, and it's probably crossing a line, but Danielle doesn't shift away. She tips her head toward me too, until we're whispering together like thieves.

"Even then. Hey, where are you carrying me off to? Gonna throw me in a ravine?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll toss you in my truck and take you home."

Really, I just carry her to the edge of the action—far enough away from the crowds and the band that we can hear our own ears ring, but not so far that we're cloaked in shadows. Then I lean my back against the nearest barn and slide down the wood, sitting on my ass on the crunchy dried grass.

Danielle could get down now if she wanted, but she stays in my lap. Wiggles to get comfy, her little ass pure torment against my thighs. Her hair slides inside my shirt collar, tickling my neck.

"This okay?" she asks after a beat, and she sounds so breathless.

"Yeah." Okay? *Okay?* A cheap drive-through burrito is *okay*. Having Danielle slung across my lap is a revelation. "You're good."

Danielle hums, and my arms squeeze her tighter. Don't ever want to let her go—even with the locals doing a double take when they walk past and see us. Even with folks staring and gossiping behind their hands. I don't care if every soul here knows that she's too good for me.

Maybe it's selfish. Maybe I'm no better now than back when I did time.

But I want this woman. Want her plastered against me, giggling in my ear. Want her scent in my lungs and her heat seeping through my clothes.

This ain't practice anymore. Not for me.

“Your future wife is gonna have the best time, Kingston.” My pretty little bartender scratches at my jaw, and I could swear that sadness flits across her blue eyes. There and gone—so fast I might've imagined it. “You don't really need my help, you know. You're already nailing this. Way better than...”

She trails off, eyes rounding in horror, but it's clear enough what she was gonna say. I play with a lock of her black, silky hair so she knows that it's fine. I'm not offended. “Way better than you expected?”

An apologetic shrug. “I guess so. Yeah.”

See what I mean? She's honest, even when it's easier to lie. And Danielle's never cruel about it, always framing things so people's feelings don't get hurt, but she never bullshits either. What she thinks is what you get.

“Because I'm a mean old ex-con?”

My girl puffs out a strained laugh. And this is a tough conversation, no two ways about it, but we're still playing with each other's hair. Connected. Reassuring each other without words.

"Maybe," Danielle admits. "At first glance, anyway. But do you want to hear my theory?"

My heart knocks against my rib cage. "Always."

"I think you like it, Kingston Holt—having that bad reputation. I think you like keeping folks at arm's length. People drain you."

It takes a moment for me to recover, because yeah: this woman can read me like a road sign. But then I squeeze her gently, knocking her more firmly against my chest. Her soft flowery dress slithers over my thighs. "You're not at arm's length. *You* don't drain me."

"No." Another happy sigh; another teasing smile of her pink lips. "Guess I don't."

"You never have, Danielle."

A kiss brushes my cheek, so fast and light and yet shocking to my core. "It's Dani," she whispers in my ear. "The people I'm close to call me Dani."

Well, drag my carcass over to the barbecue grill, because I'm done. I'm out. Dead as a dodo. She's killed me.

"Hey, want to get a beer?" She's already up, scrambling to her feet, and she won't meet my eye. Embarrassed, I guess,

though there's no need to be. I boost her up then stagger upright behind her.

“I'm driving, but *you* can get a beer. There's a cream soda somewhere with my name on it.”

Dani grabs my hand and drags me back toward the crowd. The air gets thicker again, hotter and busier, the racket pressing on my ear drums, but I can shake all that off with her fingers tangled in mine.

Is this still pretend for her? What is she getting out of this exactly?

And how the hell do I convince her to make it real?

* * *

Dropping Dani home is an exercise in self restraint. I pull up at the sidewalk outside her apartment, peering up and down the empty, moonlit street. When I kill the engine, we both sit in silence for a long moment. The truck clicks and groans and settles as it cools, and my mouth is suddenly dry. It's long past midnight, but neither of us reach for our seat belts.

“So,” I say when I can't bear the mounting tension for a second longer. I'm still gripping the steering wheel, holding on like it's my personal life raft. “Any feedback?”

Dani breathes out a laugh and ducks her head. A curtain of dark hair swings forward, blocking my view of her blushing face. “Nope. It was a killer first date, boss. Your lady's gonna love it.”

The only lady whose opinion I care about right now is sitting next to me. Fumbling her seat belt open and reaching for the passenger door handle.

“Wait,” I bark out, rougher than I intended, but there’s no time to apologize. No time to do anything except launch myself out of the truck and round the hood in three steps, yanking the passenger door open.

Dani promised I could lift her down this time. Damn right I’m gonna collect.

She blinks at me, flowery sundress sliding up her soft thighs. Without a word, Dani reaches out and braces her hands on my shoulders.

“Out you come.” It’s so easy lifting her down from the truck. Like taking the coffee pot down from my kitchen cupboard. Or, you know... something more poetic.

And I’ve had her in my arms once already tonight, but it’s still a rush. Still makes my throat tighten and my heart race. I lift her down as slowly as I reasonably can without looking insane, milking this moment for as long as I can.

Then Dani’s feet hit the ground, and she slips away, hurrying to her door. Because I freaked her out? Made her uncomfortable? Shit.

This is practice. And I may have forgotten that, but it doesn’t mean *she* has.

“Sorry,” I mutter when I join Dani by her front door. She pauses where she’s fumbling with the key, shooting me a

wide-eyed look over her shoulder. “Didn’t mean to make this weird.”

Her mouth rounds, and I scratch the back of my neck, peering up at the moon. It’s not full anymore but it’s still big and bloated, hanging over the valley.

“You didn’t—”

“I won’t touch you like that again, I swear.”

Not unless I’m invited.

But that clearly won’t happen, because Dani swallows hard and nods. She scrabbles with the key for a moment longer, then she’s rushing inside, leaving me alone on the stoop.

“Thank you for tonight,” my bartender says in a rush, already half-closing the door. What, does she think I’m gonna barge in there? Force my way inside? Shit. That thought makes me sick.

And now I’m noticing how flimsy the lock on her front door is, and that she lives alone, and... shit.

None of my business.

It’s none of my business.

But I can’t help myself. I scowl down at my dream woman, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Got the alarm I gave you?”

Dani nods quickly and pats her little cross-body bag. “I carry it everywhere, like you said.”

Good... that’s good. That helps.

“Keep it charged,” I mutter, then turn on my heel like I’ve forgotten the most basic manners. Maybe I have.

“Goodnight!” Dani calls after me, and I wave a hand without looking back. Climb into my truck and slam the door closed.

I’m being rude, I know. Pushing her away again after a perfect night.

But I can’t let her see my face.

Can’t show how much it kills me leaving her there alone.

Seven

Dani



For the rest of the week, Kingston acts completely normal. He's back in surly boss mode, all professional and distant, with no mention of our night at the Ellisons' barns and no suggestion of a second date.

Meanwhile, *I'm* not acting cool. No, sir. On Saturday afternoon, when I squeeze past him in the stock room, the faint whiff of his cologne makes my tummy flip. When he sets up his laptop to work on the bar, I stare at him like I've never seen an attractive man before.

Kingston doesn't look up. He barely notices I'm alive, and after all that warmth and affection and teasing the other night... this is torture.

But maybe he's done practicing. Or maybe he's already met his future lady. I did say he didn't need me, didn't I? So... yeah.

I sigh and slump over the bar, wiping sad circles with a cloth, and I know I'm being pathetic but I can't seem to kick my own ass into gear.

So Kingston doesn't want me. He never claimed that he did! It was only ever practice, and he passed with flying colors. I can't be butt hurt now, after telling him that he didn't need me after all. Can't stumble around King's with a tight throat and dry eyes, physically craving the huge man in a black button-down shirt like an addict jonesing for her fix.

"Something's weird with you." Charlene's balanced on her toes, fixing up her makeup in the mirror behind us. We're in a lull, and she likes to put her face on again before the evening crowds arrive. "Why are you all twitchy, munchkin?"

Because I had one dress rehearsal date with our scary boss and lost my mind over him. Had the realization way too late that he's my dream man.

Because Kingston's within earshot right now, glowering down at his laptop screen, but he hasn't spoken to me once today.

Because I miss him.

"Um." Can't tell her any of that, but Charlene raises an eyebrow at me in the mirror. She's brushing mascara over her dark lashes, her mouth half open. Why is that? Why do us girls all gape into the mirror like goldfish when we do our lashes? "I dunno. I'm just in a weird mood, I guess. Woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"All week?" she says, clearly disbelieving, and yeah, she's not wrong. I've been *off* for days—ever since Kingston dropped me home and ran to his truck like his shirt was on fire.

I know I fumbled that interaction. That final stage of the night. But did he really just... give up on me? Just like that?

He was never really dating you, the mean little voice of logic whispers in my head. God, I hate that voice, and Charlene's still watching me in the cloudy mirror.

"It's my period," I blurt, and flush bright red when I realize Kingston must've heard me. Perfect.

Well, it's *not* my period, but it shouldn't be embarrassing either way, should it? I'm a human woman, with all the associated bodily functions. This is fine. I'm fine.

When I steal another glance down the bar, Kingston's watching me with those dark eyes. Frowning. Oh, shit.

"I'll grab more orange juice," I say, scuttling sideways along the bar and spilling out into the main room. "Be right back."

"Get cranberry too!" Charlene calls, and I wave at her over my shoulder as I charge between tables. It's a Saturday afternoon, and that means the customers we have are scattered around the bar, talking in the sunshine spilling through the windows. It's calm and sleepy. Not like my own frazzled energy at all.

I charge into the stock room and slam the door behind me, then lean my back against it. Breathe in... and out. In... and out.

The handle jiggles behind my back, then the door shoves open. I go flying, catching myself on the napkin shelves. A tub

of straws explodes all over the floor.

“Shit!” Kingston’s *here* suddenly, patting me down, those big hands traveling over my body. “Shit, Dani. Did I hurt you? Fuck. I’m sorry.”

We’re crammed in the stock room. More of a stock cupboard, really, and there’s a layer of paper straws all over my sneakers. Kingston looms above me, dark eyes tight with concern.

“Uh.” It takes a few seconds to unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth, but I finally manage it. “No, you didn’t hurt me. It’s all good. Um. Hang on.”

My head swoops as I drop to my knees, gathering big handfuls of paper straws and shoving them back in the tub. We can’t use these straws now, but they need cleaning up anyhow.

My heart stops as Kingston kneels too. Even crouched on the ground, he takes up so much space. Takes up all the air in this tiny room.

The straws look like tiny pale toothpicks in his big, scarred hands. He grips the tub too, trapping my fingers beneath his warm, dry palm.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, trying to clean up even faster. My cheeks are burning, and I’m glad the single light bulb in here is so weak. Bet I’m redder than a tomato right now.

“S my fault,” Kingston says, and god, this is so awkward again. Why did I ever agree to that date? Now I’m heartbroken

and my favorite ever job is ruined too. “Shouldn’t have followed you in here like that.”

...He what?

He followed me in here?

“For supplies?” I croak, hoping and praying that Kingston came in here for literally any other reason. To grump at me about work stuff; to ask for another practice date. Anything if it means his eyes are on me.

The straws are mostly cleaned up now, and I fish under the bottom shelves for the stragglers. They come out dusty, trailing gray wigs of fluff.

“No. For your period,” Kingston says, and I blink at him stupidly, the gross straws forgotten in my hand.

“My period?” What period?

“It can hurt, right? Heard you tell Charlene about it.” Oh, yeah. *That* period. “Well, I brought you some painkillers. Just basic stuff.” My boss rocks back on his heels and digs in the front pocket of his jeans, and I frown up at him in a daze.

“Here.” The dirty straws are plucked from my hand, and a cardboard box drops onto my palm. My knees throb against the floorboards. “Take two with water. And sit down if you need a break anytime this shift. Or wait, do you need to go home? I’ll drive you.”

I can smell him again in these close quarters. Spice and cedar wood cologne: as delicious as I remember. Blushing in the dim light, I wet my lips.

“It’s not really my period.” I try to give the medicine back, but he waves me off and my hand drops into my lap, thumbnail digging at the cardboard. “Charlene saw I was acting weird, and I... I panicked.”

“Oh.” Kingston scratches his stubbly jaw, and he seems weirdly disappointed that I’m not riding the crimson wave. What, was he actually excited about fussing over an achy, ill-tempered gremlin? Because that’s what I’m like on the rag—but I guess navigating that *is* a husband skill of sorts. “So why are you acting weird?” he says.

And it’s such a boneheaded question. So ridiculous that it’s either scream or laugh, and I choose laugh, cackling like a crazy lady. Kingston rears back in alarm.

“Why?” I hoot, swiping at my eyes, my medicine box rattling, and though this laughter is real, the brewing tears are too. “Why do you *think*, you big lug? You took me on one practice date then dropped me like a hot potato. Haven’t spoken to me since. Hot tip for dealing with your future wife: women don’t like that much. It sucks ass.”

“I didn’t drop you.” My boss is all huffy, but he lets go of my hand when I tug the straw pot away, tossing it in our to-be-recycled box, and he lets me use his shoulders for balance as I wobble to my feet. “I was giving you space, Dani. Didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. When I dropped you home the other night, you acted more skittish than a wildcat.”

“Because you—you flustered me!” And Kingston is doing it again, damn it. Melting my brain with his proximity.

Chasing away all the sensible thoughts in my head and leaving me with nothing but bone-deep *yearning*, logic be damned.

Kingston doesn't want me.

He's never claimed to want me.

But he's so tall and strong. So masculine and stern. He could lift me up easier than a pillow and press me against the stock room door. Kingston could kiss me senseless in here, and no one would know. Doesn't he want to practice those skills too?

"I'm not done if you're not done." Kingston pushes to his feet, my neck twinging as I stare up at him. He sounds pissed off, though god knows why. "I got tons more skills to practice, Dani. Plenty of rough edges to smooth."

And call me an idiot, but I'm so relieved. Even as I die a little inside, my heart blooms in my chest, and I nod up at him.

Maybe none of this is real.

But we're not done with each other yet either.

Eight

Kingston



Locking up alone with Dani has always been a special kind of torture, even long before things got complex between us. It's... otherworldly, you know? Too tempting by far when it's just the two of us in the whole bar, with starlight shining through the open windows and the doors propped open to coax in a breeze.

The dishwasher humming.

Her soft breaths.

Her shy smiles in my direction.

Those are new—but fuck, it's hard to focus tonight. And I should get my numbers done, should finish all this endless goddamn admin that no one tells you to expect with running a business, but there's only one thought pulsing in my brain right now and it's this: *Dani. Dani. Dani.*

She really thought I dropped her? All because I kept my distance for a few days?

Wasn't trying to put her off or hurt her feelings. Anything but. No: I figured here I am, her big, too-old, surly boss, and

there *she* is. Too sweet for me by far. And it was kind of her to help me out with that practice date, but from the way she skittered away from me at the end of the night, I figured she'd had enough already.

When it comes to Dani, I swore to myself that I'd never, ever push. I'd never make her unhappy.

So I held back. Went back to being her boss and nothing more. But maybe I should've talked to her about it first—cleared the air.

Christ. This relationship stuff is worse than balancing the books.

“Did we do okay?” Dani asks, her soft voice drifting through the quiet. I jolt and look up, finding her wiping down a nearby table.

Another shy smile. She's wearing those shorts and a baggy black t-shirt knotted at the waist, and as Dani bends forward to scrub, her t-shirt slips off her shoulder, revealing a delicate glimpse of collarbone.

Fuck.

What was the question?

“The bar,” Dani says, nodding at the spread of paper records beside my laptop. A pink flush creeps over her cheeks, but she doesn't scuttle away this time. She keeps looking at me, hoping for an answer. Her hair's half pulled back, half tumbling over her shoulders, and all glossy like a starry night

sky. “Did we do okay today? The evening crowd seemed lively.”

Oh, they were lively alright. Hooting and hollering, singing along to the music and pushing chairs aside for a makeshift dance floor. We had six glasses smashed this evening, but the culprits kept buying rounds for the whole bar, so I ain’t complaining. Whiskey shots are pricier than glass.

“Yeah. We did okay.”

Dani nods and goes back to her cleaning, flipping the chairs and stacking them on top of the table before she moves on to the next lot. She hums a tune under her breath as she works, but it’s too quiet for me to make out.

“So what other husband skills do you need to work on?”

She asks me that when her back is turned, like she doesn’t want me to see her reaction. Dani’s bent over, scrubbing at a table, and her peachy little ass short circuits my brain.

How am I supposed to string a thought together in these conditions? When I’m alone with this woman late at night, and she looks like *that*? When she asks me these sweet questions in her husky voice? When I can remember the feel of her in my arms?

Nearly kissed her senseless in that stock cupboard earlier. Nearly grabbed that peachy ass and lifted her up, pressed her against the door, and rutted between her perfect legs.

But I promised her I’d keep this arrangement away from her job, didn’t I? So I can’t do those things here. Can’t do

those things *anywhere*.

“Uh,” I say, trying desperately to wrangle my brain into gear. Husband skills. Yeah. “You know. The usual.”

Dani snorts, and when she glances back at me over her shoulder, her smile is sly. “The usual husband skills? Trapping spiders and mowing the lawn? That kind of thing?”

“...Sure.”

She’s outwitting me, I know she is, but I’ve barely slept all week with wanting this girl, and now she’s alone with me, teasing in that soft voice. Can’t think straight. I duck my head and focus on the books.

“Why do you keep paper records, Kingston?”

Her voice by my elbow makes me jump. Cursing quietly, I toss my pencil down and turn to Dani, grabbing her by the waist without warning and lifting her onto the bar. And she squeals, but it’s a delighted kinda squeal. She grips my hands on her waist and holds them there when I move to let go.

With her sat up on the bar, she’s finally at my eye level.

“I keep ‘em because digital records can get lost. It’s another back up. And because I think better on paper, that’s all.”

I know it makes me a relic. Believe me, I’m all too aware that I’m a dinosaur compared to my pretty bartender, but she hums and nods like it makes perfect sense.

She's still holding my hands on her waist. Her grip slides down, until she's wrapped her fingers around both my thumbs. So fucking cute.

"If I ask you another question, will you tell me the truth?" Dani says. Her heels swing gently where they dangle in the air, and my heart's booming like a firing range at being this close to her. At having my hands on her body. Piercing blue eyes watch me, waiting for my answer.

"Course."

That's one husband skill I *don't* need help with. I've always known: if I settle down with a woman, if I find my partner, I won't ever lie or keep secrets. Life's too goddamn complicated already without making things worse.

And maybe it's deluded, but a big part of me's thinking...

Dani could be that woman. You know, if she'd have me.

"Why were you in prison?" she asks.

I jolt back, but Dani squeezes my thumbs and pulls me close. And, okay, she can't be *too* horrified with me if she wants to keep my touch on her waist.

But god, I'd hoped to avoid this conversation for a good long while yet. Hoped I'd have more time to convince her first that I'd be gentle with her; that I'm trustworthy. That she's safe with me.

Shit.

Well, nothing for it except to drive headlong into this brick wall. I told her I'd be honest, and she asked.

“I got in a lot of fights back when I was a young man.” My voice is so rough, I almost don't recognize it. Scraping and raw. “I was so fucking angry at the world, Dani. Felt cheated already by my deadbeat dad and the rundown trailer I grew up in. Felt like the odds were stacked against me from the start. And it's no excuse, I know it's not, but all I had back then were big muscles and scarred knuckles and a chip on my shoulder, and I went around making sure everybody knew it.”

I'm not proud of this history. Spent six long years in the slammer, contemplating all the better things I could've done. Other ways to channel that frustration and make something of myself.

Instead, back then, I was an ass. No two ways about it, and surely this story will put Dani off me forever. Her big, mean boss is one thing—but a man with stains on his conscience is another.

“There was one fella I always hated. He grew up near me, and he had the same angry streak I did, but where I went looking for trouble with grown men my own size, he liked to pick on women. He was good-lookin', so he could always get girlfriends, but before long they'd cower around him. They'd go from happy, laughing girls to scared, silent shadows.”

Dani's pretty quiet herself, her lips pressed together as she listens, but her feet kick up and hook around the back of my thigh. I shuffle closer to her, my heart thumping.

It's hot in this bar. My throat is dry. My shirt itches.

Does she hate me already? Can she see where this is going?

“Anyway, one night I'd already had a few drinks. I was out at the creek with a big crowd—can't remember what we were celebrating, but there was a big bonfire and music and folks were getting rowdy. Sneaking off together into the bushes, you know? And I didn't care much about skirt-chasing, but I *did* want a fight that night. You need to realize that, Dani. I went out looking for trouble.”

She wets her lips, staring at me. Her pulse taps away below her jaw.

“Well, I found that fella I hated in a copse by the creek. He was shoving a woman up against a tree, laughing when she whimpered. And the sight of that...”

Even now, a red haze settles over my vision. I blink it away, my gut tensed and aching, and my palms are damp where they press against Dani's t-shirt.

I hate this story.

“Well, I tore him off her. Threw him to the ground. Beat that fucker unconscious and then kept... kept going.”

Dani swallows. Her voice is a whisper. “Did he die?”

I shake my head slowly. “No. I got hold of myself before then, thank god, and he recovered well enough. But that's still the worst thing I've ever done, and I deserved those six years behind bars. Gave me a lot of time to think things through.

When I started beating on him, his evil little hide deserved it—there’s no doubt in my mind. But once he couldn’t fight back and I kept going... I was no better.”

Dani’s sharp inhale slices my chest. She sits up straighter on the bar, tugging me closer with her feet around my thigh, and I inch forward, though god knows why she wants me so near.

Her little hands squeeze my thumbs. “You *are* better. You’re the best man I know.”

I snort and say, “Then you should meet some other men,” even though the words taste sour as they come out.

Dani wrinkles her nose. “No thanks. Most of the men I’ve known have been more like the guy in your story. That, or useless drunks. Or not evil, but more interested in their video games than their girlfriend. Who wants that, you know?”

Yeah, she should definitely meet some other men. We’ve got plenty of letdowns among us, no surprises there, but there are some good guys too, and they’d trip over themselves to win a girl like Dani. I sure would.

But I’m not selfless enough to point that out a second time.

“So are you still angry at the world?” Dani lets go of my thumbs at last and spreads her palms over my chest, fingertips rubbing at the fabric. Can she feel my heart lunging toward her?

My smile is strained. “Hard not to be sometimes. Life isn’t fair if you’re not born rich, and that’s a fact. But I’m not out of

control like that anymore, and there are...”

She flicks my shirt button open. I clear my throat, my thoughts suddenly spinning wild, and step forward to close the last few inches between us, pressing my body right between her soft, spread thighs.

“There are some good bits,” I rasp, my head pounding with how much I want this.

“Good bits?” Dani tilts her head, teasing, and flicks another button open. Christ, I love her smile. “Which *bits* are good exactly, Kingston?”

All of her. Anything attached to Dani is the best goddamn *bit* I’ve ever seen.

But it’s not just the physical stuff. It’s her voice too, and her smile; the way she teases and soothes. The frowny little pout she gets when the dishwasher gives her trouble, and the way she sings under her breath as she mops the bar floor.

I’m so gone for this woman. Look at me: I’m toast.

And when I gently grip a handful of her hair, Dani whimpers and gazes at me like I hung the moon. When I lean forward, she meets me partway.

Our kiss is long and deep.

I’m not practicing for anyone but her.

And when I stagger back a few minutes later, breathing hard, lips tingling and my cock so hard it hurts... I’m born again. Made new.

Nine

Dani



I wake up at four AM after tossing and turning with a nightmare. My apartment is dark and stiflingly hot, even with the windows thrown wide. My pajama shirt sticks to my sweaty back.

Kingston.

My heart is still racing, even hours since our kiss. My fingertips brush my lips, my hand shaky in the gloom.

Was the kiss just practice too? Did it mean anything to Kingston at all? Hell, did he even like it?

“Gawwwd.” Flopping over, I bury my heated face in my pillow. Every bone in my body aches from exhaustion. I’m not sick—just so, so tired.

It’s like the crash after an adrenaline rush. An electric blackout after a power surge. Kingston’s kiss amped up all my senses, sent me soaring, put my whole body on edge in the best way, and now... I’m coming down hard. Crashing back to earth.

Images prick at my hind brain as I lie there, face smushed into the pillow. Snippets from my bad dream. I was working the bar in King's, pouring drinks and loading the dishwasher like usual, and then the clock struck midnight and the crowd changed. Suddenly, everyone went from t-shirts and jeans to formal tuxes and fancy dresses, and the chairs magicked into neat rows with a gap down the middle.

It took me a while to realize what was happening in the dream, even though Kingston stood at the front of the room in a black tux. He smiled down at a mystery woman dressed all in white, a veil covering her features.

When they said 'I do', the dishwasher groaned and rattled so loud by my hip, I thought it might start an earthquake. The folks in the back row turned around and glared at me, like I was ruining the mood. And when Kingston and his bride kissed, the mirror behind me shattered and rained broken glass to the bar floor.

Broken mirrors are seven years of bad luck, right?

What are demon dishwashers? Five years? Ten?

Doesn't matter. It was just a stupid dream.

My tears soak into the cotton pillow case, and it takes me a long time to fall asleep again.

* * *

"Woof," Charlene says when I trudge into King's for my shift at eleven. She's already behind the bar, hips swinging to the country track humming from the speakers. Her red hair is piled

up on top of her head, and she's got a dish towel draped over one shoulder. She eyes me with concern. "You okay there, munchkin? You look like you've been dragged through a hedge backwards."

"Yup."

Too tired for full sentences. Too worn down by life. All I can do is drag my sorry carcass across the bar, squeezing behind the cash register and dropping my backpack on the floor.

"Alright..."

Charlene squints down at me as I crouch gingerly, moving slower than an old age pensioner. My backpack feels like it weighs a ton as I shove it in my assigned nook, even though there's barely anything in there. Just the pink vest and personal alarm that Kingston gave me, a cheese sandwich wrapped in foil for my break, my phone, my keys, and a bottle of water.

"I'm sensing a mood," Charlene says.

"No mood." A headache flares behind my right eye as I speak, and I wince and dig at it with my knuckles. Good thing I was too wrecked this morning to bother with make up. I'm still crouched by Charlene's feet, trying to scrounge up the willpower to stand up again. Where did I put those painkillers that Kingston gave me? "Just a bad night's sleep."

The toe of her sneaker nudges my thigh. "You sure about that? Because you're acting like someone drove over your kitty then posted it through your letter box."

Ew. I reach up and grip the edge of the counter, heaving myself up like I'm scaling a cliff side. My head pounds. "I don't have a cat."

"Not even a flat one?"

"Nope."

A customer comes to the bar then, saving me from further interrogation, but I can tell Charlene's worried. She keeps shooting looks at me over her shoulder where I'm slumped against the fridges, waiting for my turn to serve.

The first hour drags, but then King's gets busier, and soon we're in our rhythm. It's not so bad. When we're moving in sync like this, absorbed in our tasks, I feel less like death warmed over, and I don't have time to replay that nightmare over and over in my head. Nor the kiss.

Not even when Kingston leaves his office and comes over to check on stock levels in the refrigerators, his dark eyes flicking to me as he counts.

Is it extra hot in here? I pluck at my gray t-shirt, shifting closer to the electric fan on the counter.

Kingston's in another black shirt today, but this one seems newer. Crisp. Did he buy more in other colors too, like I said? Which one will he wear when he takes his future lady out for the first time? Will they go to an Ellisons' barn dance like we did?

Ow.

Ow, ow, ow. My poor heart.

“You really don’t look good, munchkin.” Charlene leans around me to address Kingston. “Don’t you think she looks bad, boss? She’s been like this for hours now. Can’t you let her take a nap in your office for a little while?”

Kingston straightens up beside me and turns me by the shoulders to face him. He has to duck down a little to catch my eye, and when he does, his big forehead creases with concern.

There’s that silvery scar cutting through his eyebrow. His crooked, twice-broken nose. His dark, dark eyes—darker than a coal pit—and his spicy, cedar wood smell.

Shoot. I love this man so much. And he’s using me as an understudy for his future bride.

“You good, baby?” Kingston rumbles.

Baby. Beside me, Charlene sucks in a breath. She’ll hold it for all of five minutes until Kingston’s gone, and then she’ll explode all over me. You mark my words.

“Yeah. ‘M fine.”

Heartbroken, unaccountably exhausted, and weak with longing for this man. But, you know. Peachy otherwise.

“You need to go home?” His big hands are warm and steady on my shoulders. “I could drive you.”

Charlene’s practically vibrating beside me. I can feel her fizzing with all that trapped gossip. This’ll be around the whole bar in a blink.

“I’m good,” I say again, terser this time. “I just feel funny, okay? Stop fussing over nothing. You’re both such mother hens.”

And this isn’t how you speak to your boss, not if you want to keep your job for another day, but Kingston doesn’t glower at me. He glances over my head at Charlene, says, “Watch the bar,” then steers me out from behind the counter and toward the back office.

I sigh and trip along, weaving between tables. Folks laugh and chat all around, oblivious to how I’m self-destructing over here. Not realizing that I’m ruining everything in the space of ten minutes.

Whatever. *That* is the spot where Dream Kingston married another woman, and I glare down at the floorboards and scuff my feet as we pass over it. Stupid nightmare. Why’d I wake up so scrunchy and mean today?

Feels like there’s acid sloshing around my insides. Feels like *I’m* the kitty who got run over and pushed through a letter box.

Because what if Kingston meets his dream lady soon? What if I have to watch them together? What if I can’t hide my misery? So humiliating.

“Take a seat,” Kingston says when we reach his office, closing the door behind us. The sounds of the bar are suddenly muffled, and we’re alone again with his thirsty houseplant. And Kingston obviously means the leather swivel chair behind

his desk—the only chair in the room—but I prop my ass against the table’s edge instead and fold my arms.

If I’m gonna get fired, I want a clear run at the exit.

Kingston gusts out a long, belly-deep sigh. I raise an eyebrow. We stare at each other.

And listen, I *know* I’m being a brat; I know that he’s being good and kind and trying to take care of me as my boss, but I can’t bear this for a minute longer.

I want Kingston Holt so badly, and he’s using me like a tool. For *practice*. And I know, he’s doing it with my consent, but still—I’m doubled over with how much that makes my insides ache.

“Talk to me,” Kingston commands, and now he sounds pissed off too, folding his arms to match my stance, two fighters squaring off. Can hardly blame him. “Whatever it is, spit it out, Danielle. Is this because I kissed you? Because if you didn’t like it, you could’ve said no.”

If I didn’t like it?

Didn’t *like* it?

That kiss ruined me for other men, and he thinks I didn’t *like* it? The audacity of this jerk! Doesn’t he know he’s scooped out my heart and tossed it on the ground? Didn’t he think about that when he married another woman?!

...In my dream.

Before he married her in my *dream*.

Holy shit. I've gone insane.

“Oh my god.” There's nowhere to hide but my own hands, and I clap them over my eyes. My words are muffled, but I force them out, because obviously I owe this poor man an explanation. “I'm so sorry. I think I'm—I'm losing my mind. I had this horrible dream last night and now I'm acting like such an ogre.”

My cheeks burn hotter than ever, because lord, this is humiliating. My soul's on display, and it ain't pretty. My shoulders cave forward, and my eyes are squeezed shut, but I hear Kingston shift his weight. The floorboards creak under his bulk.

The same big, muscly bulk I had pressed against me yesterday, kissing me senseless on the bar. Back when everything was perfect, and I felt like doing cartwheels around the parking lot. Back before I let sleep deprivation and wild jealousy ruin everything.

“A dream,” Kingston says flatly. “You're mad because of a dream.”

“Uh-huh.”

This is it. This is when I get dumped, fired, and probably committed all in one go. Can't say I don't deserve it after acting so weird and mean.

“Was I in it?” he asks. I nod behind my hands, and his voice drops lower. Goes tight with dread. “Did I hurt you? In the dream?”

Only my heart. Ugh.

“No,” I sniffle, because I hate the tension in my boss’s voice, and the way he’s barely breathing right now. It’s so quiet in here, my teeth are on edge. “But you married someone else, right in front of me. A-and I know that’s the plan, and it’ll happen eventually—you getting married, I mean, not that I’d be forced to watch. But it broke my heart and I guess I woke up crazy. I’m sorry, boss. Shit. I’m so sorry.”

I’ve always been a babbler. Not in everyday conversations so much, but when I’m upset all these pent up emotions build and build, crowding tight inside me, until the cork finally pops and it all comes spewing out in a rush.

Kingston is silent. Even when I stop breathing and strain my ears, he doesn’t make a peep.

It’s no use. I peek between my fingers.

The maddest man in Beaver Creek county stares back at me.

And he’s big, and broad, with his scarred eyebrows lowered and his dark eyes glinting, but I’m not scared he’ll hurt me. Never scared of that.

I’m scared he’ll send me away.

Because all I want is to be near this man. All I want, for the rest of my life, is to roll over in the morning and feel his warmth by my side. Feel the dip in the mattress. To hear his heavy breaths and see the pillow creases on his cheek, and then to burrow closer and smell his bare skin. I *love* him.

Would Kingston ever consider me properly? You know: as a date? I know I'm younger and I've just thrown the world's most ridiculous tantrum, but besides all that, I could be good for him. I know I could.

I'd love him, for starters. I'd show Kingston Holt that not everyone looks at him and sees an ex-con with scarred knuckles. When *I* look at him, I see a safe harbor. I see home.

"You're upset because I married someone else in your dream," Kingston repeats. Hearing it out loud a second time, I wince.

Yeah, I'm a complete nincompoop. This is so embarrassing. "Yes," I whisper, still peeking through my fingers. "Sorry."

Kingston curses under his breath, then crosses his office in two strides. He plucks my hands away and smooths my hair back from my blushing face.

"Not gonna happen," he says, and it's with the voice he uses when folks get too rowdy in the bar. His laying-down-the-law voice. *No one* argues with Kingston Holt when he uses that tone.

Except... *it is* gonna happen. Right? And it'll break me when it does, so I scrounge up the courage from lord knows where to answer back. "Um, yes it is. The whole point of us practicing was so you could marry someone else one day—"

"Not. Gonna. Happen."

Kingston scowls down at me, crowding me closer against the desk, and if I didn't know him so well by now, I might actually be scared.

As it is, I bite my lip as shivers coast over my skin. Of course I want him closer. I'll *always* want this man as close as he can get, especially when he's so tall and strong and manly and nice-smelling. Seriously, why aren't the ladies of Beaver Creek tripping over themselves to get a slice?

No.

I've had enough dumb jealousy for one day. Better nip that thought right in the bud.

"So you changed your mind about a wife?" I ask. My neck aches from peering up at my surly boss, but my bones are less leaden than a moment ago.

He shakes his head. "Nope."

"Then what—"

Kingston talks over me, still looking madder than a pole cat. "I changed my mind about marrying anyone else except you, Danielle."

Danielle. Hoo boy.

If he's calling me by my full name, I'm definitely still in trouble... and yet here I am, squirming with joy. Feels like fairy lights are glittering inside me.

"You want to marry *me*?" I ask, needing to hear it again.

Kingston grunts and nods, but he looks a fraction less mad when I put my hands on his chest. His heartbeat thumps against my palm, and it's frantic enough to give him away. He's not as calm about this as he seems.

“Me,” I say again, in case he hasn't noticed that I'm a complete basket case. “The girl who just had a meltdown because of her dream last night.”

“You,” Kingston agrees.

I've never grinned so wide in my life.

“But I'm a nut job,” I say, tugging him closer by the shirt.

“Then you're my nut job.” With that, my boss ducks his head and kisses me for the second time. And...

Heat. Molten heat.

It seeps through my veins and spreads under my skin. It twists in my low belly, and makes me squirm against the edge of the table, panting into Kingston's mouth.

He takes no mercy. He kisses me harder, deeper, my head bowing back with the force of it, and all I can do is cling to his shoulders for balance.

“Mine,” Kingston mutters, finally tearing his mouth away to trail hungry kisses down my throat. Impatient hands tug at my shirt, my shorts, the tie in my hair, half undressing me but mostly getting me all ruffled. “Get these off, Dani.”

Dani. Okay, we're getting there.

Pushing onto my toes, I kiss Kingston's stubbly throat as I pop the button of my shorts open and tug the zipper down. I rest my ear against his chest as I kick my sneakers off one by one, listening to the *boom, boom, boom* of his heart.

Need to lean back to get my t-shirt and bra off, no way around that. But when I do, I find Kingston gazing down at me with something like awe, and despite the heat, goosebumps prickle over my suddenly naked body. I fight the urge to cover myself with my hands.

"You gonna lock the door, boss man?" No one ever knocks on Kingston's office door, but theoretically they might. And I may be feeling bold enough to get naked on my boss's desk, but I'm definitely still shy about anyone but Kingston seeing me like this.

"Fuck."

Kingston lunges across the office and slaps the lock on so fast, I blink. Who knew such a big guy could move like that? He rockets around the desk, too, tugging the ancient blinds into place, even though no one ever wanders around the back of King's. Nothing to see there except cracked dirt and old weeds—and my bare ass, I guess.

"I think we're good," I say when Kingston glares up at the vent near the ceiling. Frankly, if some peeper crawled up there, they earned the view.

The office felt so small and cramped a minute ago when we were arguing, but now it takes a geological age for

Kingston to walk back to me. The ache in my belly builds and builds, until I whimper as he finally gets near.

Another hand in my hair, masterful and strong.

Another deep, searching kiss that makes my bare toes curl.

Kingston lifts me onto the desk, easier than a feather. He spreads my legs and steps in between, hands roving up my hips, my waist, my rib cage. Everywhere he touches, sparks sear my skin.

Two scarred, callused hands cup my boobs, then pinch and tug at my nipples. I bite down hard enough on my lip to bruise, and my head spins as Kingston kisses across my shoulder, stubble scraping.

This is happening. This is *real*.

And I knew he'd be like this: rough but gentle; sinful yet sweet. The whole town sees Kingston Holt in 2D, but *I* see the whole man. The whole complicated, perfect package.

“Oh,” I say when his fingers slide between my legs, spreading my slickness. “*Oh*,” when he rubs at my clit.

“Mine,” Kingston says one more time, before lowering to his knees. And my big, mean boss fixes me with a look that says: *don't you fight me on this*, then seals his mouth between my thighs.

Ten

Kingston



Part of me knew Dani would be like this in the throes: thrashing and moaning, squirming like a wildcat, tugging on fistfuls of my dark hair. She's salty and sweet with an earthy tang, and I love how goddamn wet she was before I licked her even once.

She wants this. Wants *me*.

Not just my tongue pushing inside her—she wants my ring on her finger. She wants to braid our lives as tightly together as they could go.

And sure, I started this whole journey hoping for a kid and a floppy-eared dog, but all that has faded far into the background. What I *really* want, far more than any of that, is Dani. Dani for the rest of my life.

If she wants a dog, great. If she'd prefer a cat or a goldfish or a mouthy parrot, we'll get one of those.

And if she doesn't want a baby—that's fine. We'll be a happy family of two.

But if she *does* want my baby in her belly...

Heat coasts over my skin beneath my clothes, and my abdomen twists. Need inside her right now. Need to rut.

“You want me to run out and get a condom?” I say, my words muffled against her slick, swollen flesh. Dani moans and tugs on my hair, and that’s not a helpful answer. I swat her bare ass and try again. “Baby. You want me to get a condom?”

There’s a machine in both the bathrooms. Don’t care who sees me charging into the men’s room and fumbling change into the slot—if Dani doesn’t want to risk a baby, she’d better tell me now.

“N-no.” At her refusal, I groan brokenly and plunge my tongue inside her channel, fucking with her my tongue. Showing her what I’m about to do next, even as her words drive me wild. “No. Don’t. I—I want it all.”

Me too.

Want to fill her up until she drips onto my desk.

Want to feel her bare, with nothing between us.

And I know from our chats that neither of us has done this before. There’s nothing to risk except a surprise gift in nine months’ time, and god willing, we’ll be married by then anyway.

I’m not about to waste time. I’ve found my woman, the only woman for me, and I’m all in. Let’s get this show on the road, you know?

“You good?” I say, lurching to my feet, head spinning. This whole adventure started with a head rush, but shit, it

better not end with one now. “You feeling good, Dani?”

“So good,” she breathes. She’s sprawled on the desk, slick thighs spread, hands propped behind her, and I’ve never seen a better sight in my life. She pouts at my chest as I straighten up in front of her. “That stupid work shirt, Kingston, I swear to god. You wore it for our first date, and now you’re gonna screw me in it.”

I grin. “You bet I am.” Because she’s not really mad—she’s got that twinkle in her pretty blue eyes. My girl’s playing with me, and I love it. No one else in the world ever dares. “Maybe I’ll marry you in it too.”

A mock gasp. “Black is for funerals!”

“Sorry, baby. No one will sell me a shirt in another color. They all say I’d look ridiculous.”

Dani rolls her eyes, but she can’t hide the smile tugging at her mouth. “As if anyone would ever say no to you.”

That’s true—and sure enough, there’s a line of new shirts in my closet at home. But Dani does sometimes. My pretty little bartender says no to me, and puts her foot down. She tells me her boundaries and I respect ‘em, and that’s how I *know* she’s okay when I step between her legs again.

I tug my belt open with a clink and pull down the zipper of my jeans, drawing out my bare cock into the still office air.

Dani blinks down at the sight, her eyes going round.

Yeah, it’s a bit of a monster. She can take it though—and look at her. She’s licking her lips, a greedy glint in her blue

eyes, squirming against the desk. She wants it, alright. She wants it bad. She's panting.

This woman is perfect for me.

"We doin' this?" I ask, rubbing the ruddy head up and down her slit. Dani gasps and wriggles closer, notching the first inch inside, and Jesus Christ.

She's so hot. So slick.

She's heaven.

"Please," Dani begs.

Well, she'll never have to ask me twice. And as I grit my teeth and press forward, heart rioting in my chest; as my thoughts fly clean out of my brain at how *good* she feels, so tight and right, I know down to my bones.

I'm home.

This is where I'm meant to be.

Fucking this woman. Loving her. *Cherishing* her beautiful little ass, until she can't remember anyone's name but mine. No more bad dreams about weddings after today. No more doubt.

She's *mine*.

"That okay?" I ask between clenched teeth, tendons straining in my neck. Even as I ask, I press forward another inch, because yeah—Dani's bucking off the desk, scrabbling at my shoulders, trying to yank me closer. She's as mad for this as I am. "Dani. That feel okay?"

“Better’n okay,” she says, and her words are slurred, her head tipped back. I lick a stripe up her pale throat, and the desk creaks beneath us as I thrust deeper, burrowing my way between her thighs.

She’s tight. It’s a stretch. Can’t say I slam in there with no troubles and start pounding away—no, it takes us a while. Takes some adjusting and pausing, breathing into the crook of each other’s necks. Takes some figuring out the height difference, bending my knees a little to match the desk, but we get there in the end. And when we do...

“Holy shit,” Dani mumbles, clinging to the work shirt she pretends to hate. Her blue eyes are hazy, and there are pink spots glowing on her cheeks. “I can feel *everything*. I can feel your pulse in there, Kingston.”

Fuck. Yeah, me too.

Screwing my eyes shut, I shift my hips around. Feeling her from every angle, her tight channel gripping my shaft.

“Oh god,” Dani babbles, her forehead dropping to my chest. “Oh god, oh god, oh god...”

When I draw out slowly, she holds her breath.

When I thrust back inside, her perfect tits bounce and she lets out a hushed moan.

Oh, yeah. There are folks on the other side of that door. People drinking and chatting and poor Charlene serving customers and wiping down the bar. I’ll pay her extra for this shift before she heads home; I’ll buy everyone under this roof

a free round, because I've never been in a better mood than this in all my life. I'm soaring up near the clouds.

"Keep quiet, baby." I fuck her slowly at first, grinding between her legs, then build up a little speed. The wooden desk creaks and sweat slides down my spine, but Dani bites down on my shoulder and muffles her moans there.

Good.

Don't want anyone hearing this. Don't want her getting any side-eyes.

I won't let anyone cheapen this. Maybe to the outside world this would look like something seedy, an older boss taking his pretty bartender into the back room, but *we* know better. We know this is for keeps.

"Good girl," I mutter, pressing the words against her glossy black hair. It's so silky, snagging on my stubbled chin. "That's it, baby. Squeeze me tight. Let me deep. Fuck, Dani, you feel so good."

She makes a muffled noise, pressing her face harder against my shirt, and I swallow hard and grip her thighs tighter. Plunge deeper with every thrust.

Creak.

Creak.

Creak.

That's it: I'm getting a new table. Something three inches taller, too. And I'm covering over that goddamn vent.

“K-Kingston.”

Hell yeah. Hearing her say my name like that, all breathy and pleading as I rock between her thighs—that’s the sweetest sound I ever heard. Snaking a hand between us, I find her nub and rub circles above it. Dani gives a strangled wail, her legs tightening on my hips.

Yes.

She’s a miracle when she comes. Like the summer storms that soak the valley sometimes, with thunder rumbling and lightning cracking and rain pounding the baked dirt, with the taste of electricity on the air. Dani clings to me and shudders, her whole perfect body trembling with the force of it, and I keep rubbing and thrusting and murmuring sweet words until she slumps forward, limp in my arms.

This is the best moment of my life.

“I’m gonna keep going,” I warn her, thrusts getting choppy. “Tell me to pull out, baby. This is your chance.”

Dani scoffs against my throat, then kicks her heels against my ass, forcing me closer. The sweet feelings crowd in my chest, thick enough to burst.

“Okay. Okay. You ready for this?”

“Uh-huh.” Weak hands tug on my shirt. “Do it, Kingston. Come inside.”

Christ.

Well, with encouragement like that, I couldn't stop now if I tried. There's nothing I can do except screw my eyes shut and burrow as deep as I can go, pleasure slicing through my belly like a knife. It feels so good it almost hurts, each spurt rocketing through my shaft and filling my girl up. Wet and warm. Claimed at last.

Dani sighs happily, snuggling against my chest.

"You're gonna be sticky." I heave for breath.

"Good," is all she says, pressing a kiss to my chin. "Though you can wipe down the table."

* * *

One year later

I'm slinging one leg over my bike in the King's parking lot when my phone goes off in my pocket. My heart stops then starts again, double time, because I know that special sound.

It's been a whole year since I gave Dani that personal alarm, but she's never had any trouble. Never pushed the button.

Until now.

"Shit." My hands are clumsy as I yank the phone from my pocket, checking the text with her GPS coordinates. A little map of Beaver Creek shows on my phone screen, with a pin on a familiar building downtown. My throat clenches tight.

She's home?

Are there intruders? A drunken neighbor? A fire?

I've never torn out of the King's parking lot so fast in my life. Gravel sprays behind me, and it's a good thing I already locked up the bar for the night, because otherwise I'd leave the lights on and the door wide open, thieves be damned.

Nothing matters except my wife. Getting to Dani. Keeping her safe.

Why'd she press the button? What the hell is going on over there? Gunning the engine, I tear along the starlit roads, thanking the lord there are no other drivers out this late on a Tuesday.

My phone stops pinging before I'm halfway home. Don't care. I push the bike faster, wind whipping my shirt, and screech up outside our building in five minutes flat.

No time to park nicely. No time to do anything except kill the engine, lurch off the bike, and sprint for the front doors. I punch in my code, and my hands are shaking so bad that I get it wrong the first time. Letting loose a string of loud curses, I punch in my code again, then barge through the doors when they click.

The building lobby is quiet. The elevator stands silent and ghostly, but I sprint for the stairwell. Not gonna risk getting trapped in there, or cornered. Not when Dani is in danger.

Top floor, though. Lord above, I am not built for all this cardio, and I'm wheezing and sweating like a madman when I finally burst out of the stairwell on the top floor.

Our door is closed. The building is quiet. Warm light glows around the edges of the door.

Mouth dry, I creep closer. If someone's inside there with her, I need to be smart about this. The stakes could not possibly be higher.

With one shaking hand, I grip the door handle.

"I'm sorry!" Dani blurts, rushing forward as soon as I push the door open. She's dressed in a silk camisole and pajama pants, her new baby bump pressing against the fabric. I check her from head to toe, ears pricked for other sounds in the apartment as I stride to her, but there's nothing. Not a scratch on her. "I'm so sorry! I was playing with the alarm in bed, thinking how sweet it was for you to give it to me, and then my thumb slipped, and once it started wailing I couldn't get it to stop. God, I'm sorry! Were you worried?"

Was I *worried*? She gave me a goddamn heart attack! I drove here fast enough to fly!

"S'okay," I mutter, sweeping her up in my arms. In truth, I'm rattled as hell, but I'm not about to yell at my pregnant wife. Not when for five awful minutes back there, I thought I might've lost her.

"The neighbors definitely hate me now. It was so loud, Kingston, and two of them came knocking before I could switch it off."

"Good." That means if she ever needs help for real, they'll all *have* to pay attention.

“I apologized, obviously. But it’s so late, and—”

“I don’t care about their beauty sleep, Dani.” The sofa groans as I settle us down on it, my wife draped across my lap. Her bare legs glow in the moonlight spilling through the windows. “I care that you’re safe. They can all suck it up.”

And if they have complaints... well let’s face it, they’ll never whine to me. Sometimes being the bogeyman in town has its perks.

“I’ll bake them cookies,” she declares, with a sharp nod. Yeah, she’ll win them back over, no problem, because she has a real way with people. Who could stay mad at such a sweet girl?

Dani wriggles on my lap to get comfier, and her eyebrows bounce when she feels the hard bulge inside my jeans.

I shrug, not sorry at all. “All this adrenaline’s gotta go somewhere.”

And Dani snorts, but then her smile turns sly. She scrambles off my lap, dodging my hands, so slippery when she wants to be—then kneels between my spread knees. As she reaches for my belt, I lean back with a deep sigh, because yeah, I need this right now. I really need this.

And Dani has the sweetest, most sinful mouth you could ever dream of.

“Poor Kingston,” she coos, the scratch of my zipper cutting through the quiet apartment. “Have you had a rough night?”

My laugh is gravelly. “Just a scare.” Thought I’d lost the most important person in the whole world. Thought I’d die of panic.

Dani drops a gentle kiss on the head of my shaft. “Let me make that up to you.”

And as I tip my head back, my heart rate finally slowing, and feel Dani’s sweet, wet mouth enveloping my length...

Yeah. We’re already even.

And next it’s her turn.

* * *

Thanks for reading Husband Skills! I hope you loved it. :)

For more pining bosses, check out the other books in the Marrying the Boss series:

[Wife Project](#) by Chloe Maine. *Nothing makes me happier than helping my serious, reclusive boss...but his next project requires a wife!*

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And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

Teaser: Fight Dirty

I dither on the sidewalk, my clammy palms tucked into my hoodie sleeves. It's evening, the sky pink above the city rooftops, and all around traffic rumbles and feet thud against the sidewalk.

Lights change and horns blare. It's my favorite time of day.

Tonight, though, I'm too wired to enjoy it.

I'm downtown, where the delicious scents of curries and roasting meat mingle in the air and crowd out the traffic fumes and cigarette smoke. My stomach growls under my baggy layers, nudging me to go somewhere else, *anywhere* else on this block so long as they serve something spicy and sweet. Any of these restaurants with their steamed over windows will do.

But I ignore it. I'm a girl on a mission.

Tonight, I'm going to find Jax Sutherland, and I'm going to talk to the famous fighter, and I'm going to persuade him to teach my reedy ass how to fight.

I *am*, damn it.

Shifting from foot to foot, I stare up at The Corner. I wet my lips. The lights are bright inside, all the doors and windows thrown open, and the grunts and thumps of fights float out to the sidewalk. I hide a wince.

The sign above me is black and white, all business and no frills. Men and women pass by in a steady stream, entering the boxing gym with neat workout clothes and staid expressions, while the folks coming the other way are flushed, sweaty and rumpled. They all look like they've been electrified.

That doesn't seem so bad. Right? I like an adrenaline rush as much as the next girl. At the fairground, I'm always the first one making a beeline for the roller coaster, and I'm...

I'm stalling again.

Come on, Casey. Get your ass in there.

As I fidget before the doorway, the scraps of paper crinkle in my hoodie pocket. They may be lighter than a fistful of feathers, but every time I notice them, it's like they're weighing me down to the bedrock beneath the city.

They're the reason I'm here. The reason I can't fail tonight.

I *need* to speak to Jax Sutherland, and it's that reminder that finally gets my feet stumbling forward, my shoulder brushing the door frame as I enter.

The Corner is even bigger and brighter and louder than it seemed from the street, the walls painted white and lights dangling in wire cages overhead. It's a few degrees warmer than outside. Music thumps from speakers clustered on the walls, a steady beat without any lyrics, and all around pairs of people square off, swinging fists and ducking, weaving, kicking.

There's a boxing ring in the center of the huge room, and punching bags hang from thick chains all around the walls. Mats are piled high near the door, and a few pairs have dragged mats down to the floor so they can grapple, rolling together in a vicious tangle.

“Holy shit,” I mumble, drifting forward in a daze. Despite my time spent lurking on the sidewalk outside, I am not prepared.

It's just so *big* and loud and overwhelming. When a flushed man with a shiny bruised eye looks my way, I flinch, skirting around the edge of his mat. He looks like he could pick his teeth with my bones—and mean enough to do it, too.

Focus, Casey.

Jax Sutherland. Jax Sutherland. How the hell am I gonna find him in here? This boxing gym is like a cavern hidden downtown in the city, the ceilings soaring high overhead and the open room sprawling wide. There must be dozens of pairs fighting here, spread out so much that they're lost in their own private worlds.

Fingers trembling, I fish my phone from my pocket, walking slowly through the maze of mats and sparring fighters. The photo of Jax Sutherland is already loaded on my screen—and I frown down at it like I haven't stared at him for hours already. Like I haven't committed his scowling hazel eyes and broken nose to memory. Like I'm totally, one hundred percent normal about this complete stranger.

Nope. I check each man I pass, glancing down at the photo now and then. No. Nuh-uh. Hair too light. Too wiry. Too young.

This is Jax's gym, and god knows I could probably just ask someone if he's here, but I'm too much of a weenie to engage any of these brutal fighters. So I wander through the labyrinth, flinching at every loud grunt and smack, and by the time I reach the boxing ring, I'm sweating like I've had a workout too. My stomach's still squirming, but now it's pure nerves.

Two men square off in the ring, both bare-chested with black sweatpants hanging low on their hips. Both are tattooed; both slick with sweat, bare arms shining in the bright light. They both look like they could squish me like a bug.

But only one makes my cheeks flush bright pink.

Jax.

I check my phone again to make doubly sure, my hand so shaky I nearly fumble and drop it.

Yep. That's Jax Sutherland. The man pummeling his opponent, forcing him back into a corner; the man with a hard jaw and a fierce glint in his eyes. He's an inch shorter than the other man, but he makes up for it with broad shoulders and that calm, relentless attack—the one that earned him the nickname 'The Terminator'.

No displays of emotion. No gloating or whining. In his day, Jax Sutherland took down opponent after opponent with merciless precision, and watching clips of his fights in my bed

last night... well, it made my tummy swoop. And it's weird, but seeing him *now*, a little older and somehow even calmer...

I shove my phone back into my pocket, and I will *not* fan myself. I will be normal about this.

The fight is short, and part way through, Jax Sutherland's hazel eyes drift over to me—and stay fixed. Sparks skitter under my skin, and I flush even warmer. God, why didn't I put on makeup to come here? Why did I wear my slobbiest, baggiest workout clothes? I look like I rolled around in a pile of laundry and came here in whatever stuck to my limbs.

Maybe that's why Jax is staring. But he takes a blow for that moment of distraction, his head snapping back, and then he looks away. The fight gets faster. Meaner. Flecks of sweat fly out of the ring, pattering against the floor, and I bite my lip, my whole body tense.

The music throbs. Punches smack into skin. Grunts float from all around, and I'm dizzy with how out of place I am here. I *hate* violence—I'm twenty one years old and I still think carefully about any movie that's over a PG rating, for god's sake—and if anyone so much as brushes past me, I might burst into tears.

But I'm here. I've come all this way, and I've found Jax Sutherland.

The papers crinkle in my hoodie pocket, and I blow out a deep breath.

I'm doing this.

For once in my life, I'm going to be brave.

* * *

Check out [Eight Dirty!](#)

xxx



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT insta-love with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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