



*Mail Order Bride
for the*

SCROOGE

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

EMBER DAVIS

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Mail Order Bride for the Scrooge (Mistletoe Love Series) by Ember Davis

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Contains explicit love scenes and adult language. The suggested reading audience is 18 years or older.

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For anyone who has ever wanted to start a new life and go on an adventure.

I hope a hot, reclusive mountain man is the pot of gold at the end of it for
you.

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CHAPTER 1

LAKE

I haven't let myself think about what I'm doing while I've been on the road for the last few days. Because I knew if I did, I would turn my car right back around and go back to Seattle. I don't want to go back though.

I want something new, something fresh. I want a life that is all mine.

Going to Jasper Ridge is my chance, even if I'm going to marry a stranger. People have done wilder things, right? I never have before, but everyone should rebel a little in their lives at some point.

At least that's what I keep telling myself as the last few miles tick by before I get to Jasper Ridge. My GPS is only taking me into town and then I have written directions to get me to the cabin where Gannon lives.

Gannon Parsons.

That's pretty much all I know about the man, other than he's former military, he has a dog, and he lives out in the woods.

Honestly, this sounds like the beginning of a true crime podcast the more I think about it. The one time I try to be impulsive in my life and I'm going to be murdered because of it.

My brother will find a way to raise me from the dead just to kill me if this all goes badly. He's the reason I've never given into the little voice in my head, the one spurring me on to make bad decisions and live life to the fullest. He's always been overprotective, but when I turned 18, I learned I had no idea what the word really meant. Not when it comes to Nico at least.

Nico, or 'Crucify', as his Devil's Saints MC brothers call him, was pissed on the day I turned 18. It was the day after my high school graduation and the same day our parents packed up their RV with all their stuff and put our house up for sale. I'm pretty sure they didn't look back as they drove away either.

Honestly, I was surprised they stuck around that long. They were only

around physically. Barely. Mentally and emotionally was a whole other thing. I'm still not sure, six years later, why they had kids. It wouldn't surprise me at all to find out we were both accidents, with me being an even bigger one than Nico, considering he was eight when I was born.

Nico was my protector and the only steady person I had in my life right from the start. Should an eight-year-old boy have been changing my diapers and making sure I had something to eat? No, it was never his responsibility, but he took it on anyway.

When he moved out of the house to live in the DSMC clubhouse, I was heartbroken. He didn't let more than a few days go by without seeing me and bringing by groceries or anything else I needed.

I remember one day when I had a really hard day at school, and I was angry, sad, frustrated, and lonely all at the same time. When Nico came by in the afternoon, I scowled at him with all the ferocity my little twelve-year-old self could muster.

When he asked me what was wrong, I huffed, "As if you care. Just go back to your little clubhouse. I'm fine here on my own."

The part about being fine was true. Nico taught me how to be self-sufficient from an early age and gave me the skills he had to learn on his own. Looking back on our childhoods, it could have been worse—our parents could have been abusive or hateful. But it's not like being neglected makes you feel all warm and cozy.

I could almost taste how much hurt I was radiating that day, but Nico didn't get mad. He didn't yell at me or tell me I was being ungrateful. And he didn't turn around and leave, even though I told him to. He sat on the couch and pulled me into his arms, giving me a hug full of reassurance.

"I'm not leaving you behind, Lake," he assured me. I wasn't even aware how scared I was of being left behind until he said those words. "I needed to move out so I could work. Being part of the club means I have people at my back, and because of that, you do too. I had to move out so I could take better care of you. I'm sorry that it means I'm not here for you all the time."

Even though it made me feel like a weak baby, I cried into his chest. He soothed me and listened to me tell him all about my twelve-year-old woes.

Were they big ones? It certainly felt like it at the time, but now I don't even remember what exactly had me in a tizzy. I do remember how Nico made it all better.

He always made things better until I got old enough to feel like I was being smothered instead of protected. He tried his best to keep his life with the DSMC separate from me. When I turned 18 and our parents hit the road, he didn't have much of a choice but to let me into that world, at least a little bit.

By then, Nico wasn't living in the DSMC clubhouse anymore. He had his own place and he moved me in right away. I was grateful, but it was clear he didn't like me hanging out with his brothers. I loved it because I was surrounded by guys who were respectful of me, probably because they were afraid Crucify would kill them. By then he had worked up to the position as an enforcer for the club.

I was just glad to feel like I had some freedom. But that freedom only went so far. Nico still looked at me like a little girl. He still didn't want me to date or have my own life. I started to feel like I had to balance on a tightrope constantly.

I started working in retail to save some money and ended up getting my own place. Nico was not happy about it, but he didn't fight too hard either.

Even without continuing school, which was a huge sticking point between me and my brother, I was able to work up into management. I'm proud of that, but there was nothing about my job I found fulfilling. It was a paycheck and I put in effort because I of my own worth ethic.

I've felt lost and unhappy for a long time.

Something clicked inside of me when Nico called me last week. There was regret in his gruff voice, "I have to go out of town on club business. I can't tell you more than that." I rolled my eyes, even though he couldn't see me, because I knew he couldn't talk to me about club business. "I don't think I'll be back in time for Christmas."

My heart sank because we've been the only family we have had for so long. We always spent Christmas together, even after he moved out and I was still a kid. He always made the time around the holidays because he knew our

parents never would. I always felt bad for the little boy he used to be because he didn't have anyone around to make the holidays special, not like he tried to do for me.

"Christmas won't be the same without you," I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice, even as a thought was bubbling up inside of me.

When we hung up, I sat for a long time thinking about my life. Nico had a whole life which involved his club, and I wasn't a part of it. I didn't have many friends and my job had become something which wore down my soul. The holiday season was the hardest in retail and I was in the thick of things.

I hadn't dated anyone in a long fucking time. I was lonely and a little sad. I tried to tell myself it was just the holiday doldrums, but I wasn't very convincing. The longer I sat with myself, the louder the little voice in my head got.

Go. Run. Find somewhere new, where you can live your life and have some adventure. Nothing is holding you back.

If you ask me how I found the ad for a mail order bride for a guy in Wyoming, I can't tell you. I'm going to chalk it up to fate and think of it as a good thing. The moment I saw the ad talking about a former military man in Wyoming looking for a wife, I couldn't ignore it. It felt right.

I sent an email with a photo, as requested, and a long diatribe about who I am. I didn't even realize I had so much to say about myself until I was pouring my heart out to a stranger, who might or might not turn out to be a psychopath. Granted, I hadn't considered that aspect until only miles outside of Jasper Ridge, but still.

When I got a response asking about how long it would take me to get to Jasper Ridge, along with some information on my soon to be husband, Gannon, I sat and stared at my laptop with a goofy as fuck grin on my face for far too long. I called my boss, quit, and started packing without remembering to even respond at first.

Now I'm on an adventure I never pictured for myself, but it could be the start of something beautiful. At least, I hope it is.

I needed something, anything really, to give me a fresh start. Even if I

don't end up marrying Gannon because we don't click, then maybe Jasper Ridge is the right place for me anyway. It's beautiful around here.

Even if I decide to keep moving, I know for sure I'm not going back to Seattle. I can't go back. Life needs to move forward, and I've allowed myself to continue to be the abandoned little girl I've always been. I want more. I want to grow.

Just as I cross a sign signifying that I'm in Jasper Ridge, my phone rings. I know, without even looking, it's Nico. He's been calling regularly, and I've been lying to him about what I'm doing and where I am. When he finds out the truth, he's going to be pissed.

"Hi, Nico," I chirp when I answer with a press of a button on my steering wheel. Nico's the one who bought me my ride. I tried to refuse it, but he insisted on getting something safe for me and I couldn't say no then. "How's your trip?"

"Lake," he growls, "since you've been acting strange as fuck, I sent Rites by your place. He just told me you moved out. You want to explain to me what the fuck is going on?"

I swallow hard as I grip the wheel tighter. I wish I could say my mind is racing with a million different lies and excuses, but it's not. It's blank of everything except the truth.

"I'm in Jasper Ridge, Wyoming," I admit reluctantly. "I saw an ad for something, applied, and was chosen."

I take a deep breath because that was vague as hell and when I tell him the truth of the ad, he'll freak out. I wince as he starts cursing up a blue streak. He even busts out a few combinations I've never heard before.

He snarls, "What the fuck do you mean you saw an ad and now you're in fucking Wyoming?"

Uh oh. Two fucks in one sentence. That is never a good sign.

I sigh, hoping I don't destroy the relationship I have with the only family I have left. "I love you, Nico. You saved me. You've been teaching and protecting me my whole life."

"Because you're my sister. It's my job to protect you, but how the hell am

I supposed to do that right now?” He sounds like he’s on the verge of a rage filled panic and it makes my chest feel tight. I can’t even enjoy driving through the town and it looks kind of cute in that postcard sort of way. It’s nothing like Seattle. He growls, “Why the hell would you go to Wyoming?”

“You’ve been my rock for so long, but I realized that I’m not really living. I need the chance to do something on my own and to find my place,” my voice cracks. “You’ve found your place with the club. I love that for you. It’s where you’re supposed to be, but now it’s time for me to find the same. I’m taking a chance.”

“Fuck,” Nico sighs, one word filled with pain, torment, and a little resignation on the side.

I glance at the paper with the last part of the directions and know I need to focus so I don’t get lost. I hate upsetting my brother, but I’m not even sure how this is all going to play out yet.

“I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about how I was feeling, but I need to go.”

“You better call me and give me more details. Friar is dealing with some shit here in Tennessee, but if you need me or if I don’t hear from you my ass will be in Wyoming so fucking fast your head will spin.” There’s a warning in his voice, “I mean it Lake.”

“I know you do.” I find myself smiling as I promise, “I’ll call you and fill you in. I promise.”

“You better,” he grumbles before hanging up.

Talking to Nico makes me feel a little better, at least I’m not running away without him knowing it anymore. It was eating at me more than I realized. I know I’ll have some more explaining to do, but what can he really do? At least now I know how far away he is, it’s an advantage I didn’t have before.

I wonder what he’s doing in Tennessee while I make the last bit of the drive into the mountains. Honestly, I’ll focus on anything other than meeting the man I’m probably going to marry in just a matter of minutes.

I let out a small gasp when I stop in front of a stunning log cabin home. It’s not nearly as rustic as I thought it would be. It’s also a lot bigger than I

imagined. It doesn't look like a place a killer would live, but, then again, what does a psychopath's home even look like?

I step out of my car on shaky legs and start to head toward the porch which looks like it wraps around the structure. I'm just lifting my foot to the bottom step when the front door swings open and I lock gazes with the deep blue eyes of the hottest man I've ever seen, and after being around my brother and his club that's saying something.

His shoulders are so broad I'm fairly sure he's going to have to turn to the side in order to step through the doorway. He has a beanie pulled down on his head and his beard is a little long, but neatly trimmed and clearly taken care of. The flannel he's wearing is stretched across his chest and makes him look cuddly.

What does not make me want to curl up on his lap is the thunderous look on his face. It's almost enough to have me step back, but I don't. I've come too far to run away now.

Before either of us can say anything, a huge Alaskan Malamute barrels past his legs and bounds down the porch steps. I grip the railing to stop him from taking me down to the ground.

"Storm, sit," the man barks and the dog sits at my feet but looks up at me with pleading eyes.

I sink down in front of him and pet him. It gives me comfort and a little strength when I need it. His fur is so soft and thick; I bet he'll be a great cuddle partner.

"Hi," I smile at the man as I stand and a giddy excitement about this whole arrangement fills me. This is my chance. "Are you Gannon?" When he nods, my smile stretches just a little bit wider; I won't mind be married to this man at all if we're only going by his looks. "I'm Lake. I'm your bride."

Gannon's eyes go wide, and his voice is a rough growl, "You're my what?"

Well, shit.



CHAPTER 2

GANNON

What the fuck is going on right now? I was just about to check on dinner when I heard a car pull up outside of my home. I don't get many visitors out here and was instantly on alert. I wasn't the only one. Storm started pacing, but he wasn't agitated or alerting me to any danger.

The whole situation had the hair standing up on the back of my neck. I learned a long time ago to listen to my instincts and trust them. It saved my ass more times than I'd like to admit while I was serving. If only my instincts had kicked in when I needed them the most.

But that's all in the past. At least, it's what I try to tell myself.

When I cautiously approached the door and looked through the window, I was surprised as fuck to find a woman climbing out of her vehicle. She had awe on her face as she looked at my home and, for some fucking reason, that had pride puffing up my chest.

I quickly pushed down my reaction and swung my door open before she could take a step up to my porch. No fucking way was I going to let someone looking to sell something get to my front door.

All the air left my lungs when I got an unobstructed view of the woman. Even now, after she said the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, I'm having a problem breathing and getting my dick under control.

She says her name is Lake. It suits her, somehow. I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful woman.

Her dirty blonde hair hangs a little past her shoulders and her body is slim, but she has curves in all the right places. It looks like the jeans she has on are painted on her damn body. And her legs, fuck me, they look like they go on forever. I'm not sure how tall she is yet, but if I had to guess I'd say 5'7", which is still shorter than my 6'4".

But at least I won't squish her like a bug.

I shake my head, still hearing her words repeating in my mind.

I'm Lake. I'm your bride.

I'm Lake. I'm your bride.

I'm Lake. I'm your bride.

My bride? What the fuck is happening?

Storm is panting at her feet like he's never been pet in his life. While he's generally a friendly dog, I wouldn't say he takes instantly to many people. He's looking at Lake like he already knows she's his mistress and it makes my gut feel uneasy as fuck.

Lake's eyes dart around a little before she looks at me again. There's a wariness to her now she didn't have when I stormed out of my house. Knowing I'm the one making her feel that way feels like a knife twisting in my gut, but I'm having a tough time processing her words.

I try to sound a little less demanding and gruff, but I fail, "You said you're my bride? You must be mistaken."

Lake's eyes narrow slightly and she juts her hip out, her hand slamming down on it like she's gearing up for a fight. It's sexy as hell and my cock perks up and takes notice. That fucker hasn't been interested in a woman in a long fucking time.

If she really is our bride, then I can sink into her and fuck her full of my seed while she screams my name. No one would even hear her with how far up the mountain we are.

Fuck, inappropriate. She's a stranger.

But the thought does have some merit.

"You confirmed that you're Gannon," there's a hint of sass in her voice which makes my cock throb behind the fly of my jeans. "Gannon Parsons, right?"

"That's my name, but I don't know anything about you being my bride."

She narrows her eyes at me and steps up onto the porch, closing the distance between us without even a hint of fear on her face. I don't know if

she's a little unhinged or if she just isn't afraid of me.

There was a time when no one was afraid of me, back when I was growing up in Jasper Ridge. I had friends, even though my parents were crap. The town still accepted me and opened their hearts to me and my brother, Slade.

It wasn't until after I came back from serving that I noticed a change in the people around me. I don't think they were trying to be hurtful; I suspect they could see the broken pieces of me the same way I could feel them. People are still kind to me in town, but now they're a little wary, like they aren't sure if I'm going to snap at any moment.

The only people who treat me the exact same are Slade's best friend's parents, Elaine and Albert Lang. Hollis' family basically took Slade in after I joined up and I'm grateful as hell they did. The whole reason I joined was to try and give Slade a better life than I had with my parents.

But none of that answers the question of why the hell this woman is standing in front of me now and what I'm going to do with her.

"Gannon, there was an ad," she speaks slowly as if she's talking to an animal which might lash out or bolt at any moment. She's not far off. "I'm not sure how I came across it now, but I did. It was an ad for a former military man living in the mountains to find a bride. Someone who would be willing to live out in the middle of basically nowhere. Someone to build a life with, get married," she blushes the prettiest shade of pink, "and, you know, all the other stuff that goes along with getting married."

"Sex," I deadpan, and Lake looks down at the wooden beams of my porch as she stands in front of me.

"That is part of being married," Lake's voice is a little defensive and I realize I need to stop being a dick.

"I didn't put out an ad for a bride," I tell her honestly.

I would fucking never. I haven't considered being in a relationship in years. Being alone in the woods has suited me just fine since I've come back from the service. Adding another person to my world never even occurred to me.

Do I sometimes get lonely, especially with Slade off at college? Yes, but

with Storm at my side it's hard to be truly lonely.

I miss my brother. He'll be graduating soon and will probably be drafted into the NFL in the spring. I'm glad he's gotten to go to school and follow his dreams of playing professionally. It's everything I wanted for him and the entire reason I went overseas.

Lake lets out an exasperated sigh. "I don't know what to tell you, Gannon. I found an ad and responded with an email and a picture along with writing a little about myself. How else would I have found this place? It's not exactly right off the main road or anything."

I should tell her to turn around and go right back down my mountain. I should tell her I don't want her here. Then she shivers a little and I realize how cold it is.

I'm being an asshole when I don't need to be.

I step back into the house. "How about you come inside and warm up? Maybe we can get to the bottom of this," I offer.

The smile she gives me is pure fucking sunshine and it has my heart pounding in my chest. As she walks by me, Storm following close behind, I get a hit of her scent—pears and ginger. I clench my fists at my sides to stop myself from reaching for her.

What the fuck is this woman doing to me?

It can't be natural. I've never reacted this way to a woman.

For every one of my senses to be heightened because of a woman who shows up outside of my house and claims to want to marry me? Because of some ad?

It all seems too good to be true.

I come up behind Lake as she looks around the spacious living room with vaulted ceilings. The bottom floor is an open floor plan and the back wall, where the dining area and kitchen are, is a solid wall of windows. It makes for a perfect place to watch the snow come down in the winter.

I'm also partial to the spring showers and storms, but that's just me. I find, when the outside weather feels like it matches my inner turmoil, I don't hate

the outside world quite as much.

“This place is gorgeous,” Lake breathes, and I stand up a little taller.

“Thank you. It took a lot of blood, sweat, and time, but I’m proud of it,” I admit and then frown. When was the last time I spoke this much to another person? And willingly. I don’t like it. My voice comes out harsh, “Do you have the ad, at least?”

Lake spins around, looks up at me and blinks her big brown eyes a few times. Her eyes are so fucking expressive. It’s one of the reasons I didn’t send her packing right back down the mountain. With eyes like hers, she couldn’t lie to me even if she tried.

The other reason I can’t bring myself to kick her out is that there’s something about her. Maybe it’s all in my head or the isolation is starting to get to me, but the thought of sending her away has fire licking along my skin and anger bubbling up to the surface.

I’m not pleased that someone has tried to meddle in my life, but it’s not lost on me that this woman feels like an angel sent by fate. I’m not so far gone I can’t recognize a gift when it’s handed to me.

Storm looks at her like she hung the moon and I have a feeling he’s not far off.

Her shoulders sag and she seems to curl in on herself. “You really don’t have any clue about the ad,” her small voice, a little broken and defeated, doesn’t pose it as a question.

“I really don’t, Lake.” I take a step forward and almost reach for her but stop myself at the last second.

I want to comfort her, but I also don’t want to cross some line. She was lured here under false pretenses by someone. I don’t get to take liberties just because she came looking for me.

I don’t think I do anyway.

She nods sadly and heads over to the couch, plopping her big bag down next to her. I’m only mildly surprised when she pulls a laptop out of the monstrosity. Who knows what she could hide in that thing and never find.

“Of course, he doesn’t know about the ad. Why would he when this is the first time you’ve done anything impulsive or for yourself? Of course, it would turn out to be a big waste of time and totally embarrass you in the process,” she mutters to herself while booting up her laptop and clicking a few buttons.

I wipe a hand over my mouth to stop myself from chuckling at how adorable she is when infuriated and frustrated.

I want to take those feelings away and give her everything she wants and needs.

Woah.

Where the hell did that come from?

She’s not a puppy. I can’t just keep her. Right?

No. I can’t just keep her.

“I can’t believe I quit my job, packed up all my shit, and then drove all this way for this to happen,” she is still muttering, and I find myself stepping closer to her as her voice drops in volume. “Should have known it wouldn’t be so easy to strike out and do something for *me*. Nico is going to have a fucking field day when he finds out about this.”

I growl possessively, “Who is Nico?”

Lake’s eyes snap up to meet mine and widen in surprise at finding me looming over her. I wait for the look on her face to turn fearful, but it doesn’t. No, it turns needy and wanting.

I cross my arms across my chest and ask again, “Who is Nico?” Something else she was saying under her breath registers, and I add on, “And how far did you come all by yourself?”

Lake juts up her chin, defiance written across her features in a way I’m surprised to find sexy as hell. “I’m from Seattle and Nico is my brother.” I blow out a harsh breath of relief as her eyes travel down the length of my body, snagging on the obvious bulge in my pants—on the way down and back up—before she meets my eyes again. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Nico is a member of the Devil’s Saints MC and made sure I learned how to protect myself in various ways.”

“Various ways,” I echo and try to tell myself not to bury my dick inside of her sweet pussy right fucking now. I shake my head and grunt, “You know how to fire a gun?”

The smile she sends me is sweet with a side of sin. “I’m a damn good shot. Nico took me to the range all the time after I turned 18 and our parents took off.” My heart aches because I know that kind of pain. Before I can say anything, she shrugs one shoulder like her sob story is no big deal. “Nico stepped up and tried to give me a home, but he’s also incredibly overprotective.”

“Is that why you answered the ad?” Fucking hell, when was the last time I asked this many questions of another person?

She nods slowly and sighs. “I wanted something just for me.” She eyes me and turns the computer in my direction. “I said all of this in my email, but it’s clear to me that you never got it. Here,” she shoves the laptop toward me, “I saved a screen shot of everything just in case there wasn’t a connection to the internet here.”

As I sit down on the couch next to her, our thighs touch. The heat of her sears through my jeans and does nothing to stop how fucking hard I am for this woman. I’m not sure what the hell is going on still. How has she gotten under my skin so quickly?

I start with a copy of the ad, then her email, and the response. When I’m done, I lean back on the couch and blow out a breath, my head tipping back as she gently takes her laptop from me. I feel her move and when I turn my head toward her, she’s pulled her shoes off and has tucked one leg under the other, her brown eyes studying me in a way which makes me want to ask her to stay.

But I shouldn’t. Right?

“I didn’t put the ad up, but it’s clear they were talking about me. I’m not sure what to do here,” my voice is gruff. I hate being unsure; it’s a weakness I can’t afford.

“I came here to marry you, Gannon.” She giggles and rubs her face with her hands and when she looks back at me, I can see how tired she is. “I’m not sure what to do here either.”

“Then lets just see what happens?” Her eyes widen and I’m quick to add on, “I just mean, I have plenty of room. You can stay here, and we can figure it out.”

My eyes are drawn to the way she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. I want to bite her lip. Desperately.

“Okay,” she whispers before looking around and scrunching up her face. She tilts her head to the side as she looks back at me. “Why don’t you have any decorations up?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a festive mood,” I grunt.

She nods, but I can see the wheels in her head turning and I know I’m in trouble. She answered the ad about me to get a fresh start and have an adventure. I can’t shake the feeling I’m the one about to embark on one as well.



CHAPTER 3

LAKE

Laying in Gannon's guest room, I don't know whether I'll be able to sleep tonight or not. I'm warm, cozy, and my belly is full of the most delicious stew I've ever eaten. But I'm unsettled. Probably because I'm not sure what to do with myself now.

I came to Jasper Ridge to marry a stranger only to find out he had no idea I was coming. Someone put the ad up on his behalf to find him a wife. I don't think I've ever been more mortified in my life than when I realized he really didn't know what the hell I was talking about as far as being his bride.

If a hole could have opened up right then and there, I would have been happy. I would have also taken an avalanche, but Storm would never deserve that kind of ending. Gannon's pup is the most adorable and fluffy thing I've ever seen. I would marry the gruff man in the room next door to mine just so I don't have to leave his dog.

Poor thing wanted to come in here and sleep with me, but Gannon put his foot down. I almost pouted because I was looking forward to curling up with Storm and getting a little comfort from him. Maybe he'll find a way to sneak in later. One can only hope.

Storm isn't the only one I hope sneaks in later, but for completely different reasons. There's something about Gannon I can't ignore. I've been trying to disregard the pull I feel toward him since the moment I figured out he wasn't eager about finding a mail order bride—one he didn't order—on his doorstep.

The man could have kicked me out and sent me right back down the mountain, but he didn't. I swear I saw heat in his eyes a few times as well.

While we were eating the stew that he'd been cooking all day, his eyes were practically glued to my mouth. He took in every bite while his face was a mask of satisfaction and hunger. I'm not sure what to make of the whole thing.

I'm attracted to him, but there are also shadows in his eyes. I've seen them

in the eyes of some of Nico's club brothers; the ones who served. I don't need to know the details to know he carries mental scars from his time in the military. I haven't seen enough of the man to know if he also carries physical scars.

I scrub my hands down my face and try to rid myself of the mental image of Gannon shirtless. Oh, fuck, then there's Gannon naked.

Everything about the man is thick. It would be a shame to find out he's not packing some heat behind the fly of his jeans. Considering the bulge that he was sporting all day around me, I'm sure he has nothing to be ashamed of in that department.

Nope.

Can't go there. It would be wrong to make myself come in the house of the man I came all this way to marry. The same man who had no fucking idea I existed.

He is a good man though and after only meeting him hours ago, I would marry him. I'm not sure what it says about me, but I can't deny it feels right being around him.

I don't even mind that he's a little gruff and grumpy. Then there's the way he reacted to me asking about holiday decorations. He looked like I had just kicked Storm and threatened to shoot him or something. By the way, just to be clear, I would never do either of those things. At worst, that fluffy pile of dog is at risk of me cuddling him to death, but that's about it.

Gannon gave me Scrooge vibes when he told me it's been a long time since he's been in a festive mood. It made me want to get in my car, drive back down the mountain, and buy all the decorations I could find. I could easily make it look like the holidays exploded all over Gannon's gorgeous cabin.

I'm not sure the man in question would be happy with me if I were to do it, but I want to. Desperately.

There's something magical about Christmas and the holiday season. It's a time for hope, family, and love. I didn't have a lot of those things while growing up, but Nico always tried to make the holidays special for me, even if it was something small like a mini candy cane.

When you don't have a lot and when you don't have many people in your corner, you appreciate the little things. My instincts are screaming at me that Gannon hasn't had a lot of people to help him find the holiday spirit. It wouldn't surprise me to know he won't let them try and he shuts down anyone who does.

I tried asking him about his family today over dinner, but he was very tight lipped about the whole thing. He grunted, "I don't have any family. Not really."

I arched an eyebrow, recognizing something shifty in his answer. I pushed him just a little, "No one?"

He shrugged one muscular shoulder and shoved another spoonful of stew into his mouth. When I kept staring at him, I swear the man rolled his eyes at me. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from smiling at him. It was kind of adorable in a giant teddy bear sort of way. I don't think he would have appreciated me saying that out loud though.

"I have a brother," he told me reluctantly. "He's in college."

"He's in college," I repeated, hoping he would give me a little more.

He didn't.

"There aren't any people in town you're close to?" I felt I needed to try harder. Not only to learn about the man I had already married in my mind, even if he didn't want me, but to also try and figure out who would have put up the ad.

Whoever did clearly cares about the man. Why else would they want him to have companionship in his self-imposed isolation?

"Slade, my brother," he gave me a pointed look and I found myself smiling, "has a best friend he grew up with. Their family kind of adopted him after I went into the service and wasn't around anymore. The Langs are the closest thing I have to family in town."

I could have squealed with excitement because it felt like a huge victory getting him to share, but I kept it under control. There was something kind of sad about what he wasn't saying. Something I recognized.

I hummed and nodded and took a few bites of stew, wanting him to be a

little off balance by me not continuing to lob questions his way. The silence between us wasn't awkward, which was a totally new sensation for me.

I've never been great with silence. Probably because I grew up with a lot of it around me. When I was alone, hating the silence because it made the feeling of no one caring about me reverberate through me, I would listen to music.

There were a lot of depressing soundtracks in my past, but also ones full of joy and happy songs for the times when I wasn't wallowing in my loneliness. So many of my classmates had parents who breathed down their necks. I just had an overbearing brother. In some sense, I was lucky; at least it's what I told myself.

When we were almost done with our dinner, I asked softly, "Do you think it was Hollis' parents who put out the ad?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," he growled without even looking at me.

I figured he was done with talking for the night and we slipped back into silence, even as we cleaned up after our meal. He tried to wave me off when I went to help him, but I wasn't having it. I can be stubborn as hell when I need to be.

If he wanted to be alone, he was going to have to say it. He didn't and it felt like a win, like I was getting a little peek over the wall the mountain man had built around himself.

I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to climb his walls completely. He might not even give me the chance to try.

The thought makes me sad.

I came here resolved to get married. The thought of not having the opportunity, strange as it may have been before I found myself in this position, doesn't sit right with me.

I know Gannon and I could be good for each other. It's a bone deep surety I've never felt before with another person.

Do all marriages have to start with love? I think I could love the man given a little time. Hell, I'm halfway there just because he feels so solid to me.

A pained sound, a mix between a moan and a groan, has me sitting straight up in bed. What the fuck was that? It didn't quite sound like a wild animal, but it wasn't all that far off either. I strain in the dark, listening it to happen again.

The moment it does, I know it's coming from Gannon's room. If there wasn't so much pain in the sound, I might think he's jacking off, but there is no pleasure mixed in it. When I hear it a third time, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end and I'm out of bed before I even realize I'm moving.

He needs me.

I don't know how I know, but those words repeat in my soul as my heart beats in time with them.

He needs me.

I open the door to his room a crack and peek into his room. His large body is covered in sweat while his face is contorted in a grimace which has tears filling my eyes while he twists and writhes on his bed. He's kicked the sheet and quilt off his body, leaving all of him exposed to me.

When I say all of him, I mean it. All. Of. Him.

He's naked and it's a glorious sight.

But I should not be ogling a man who is clearly having a nightmare.

Not the time, Lake.

Does that mean I won't file the image away for my own personal use later? I absolutely will.

My footsteps are heavy as I make my way into his room. Storm, who is sitting on the other side of the bed with his head resting on the mattress as he watches Gannon, looks at me with the saddest fucking eyes I have ever seen on a dog. He looks like he's about to cry and I'm not even sure dogs can cry.

I shake my head knowing I'll be looking that shit up later. The internet is a wonderful place.

Fuck. Focus, Lake.

Gannon makes the sound again and it makes me want to curl into a ball

and sob. For him. For his pain. For the torture he's clearly enduring while trapped in his own mind.

I don't tiptoe closer to the bed; I plod and try to make as much noise as possible. I want to wake him, but there are warning sirens going off in my head to not get too close. I don't think Gannon would ever hurt me, but by the expression on his face, which should be smoothed out in sleep, I have a feeling he's not in his right mind right now.

"Gannon," my voice is loud in the room and his eyes snap open. His head turns slowly toward me and the haunted void staring at me has me climbing onto the bed on instinct. He gasps as I cover his body with mine and cling to him. "Gannon," I sob out and bury my face in his neck.

"Lake?" He sounds unsure and I can feel his body vibrating underneath me. I squeeze him tighter, hoping I'm not making a mistake. "I was," he cuts himself off and shakes his head before he splays his large hand over my back and starts to rub up and down my spine. Like he's comforting me. His voice cracks, "Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

I shush him and kiss his neck, needing to do something...anything. "You didn't wake me. I couldn't sleep. Maybe I shouldn't have come in here, but you sounded like you were in pain. Then I saw your face and I knew you were having a nightmare. I'm sorry if I crossed a line." Tears are streaming down my face, and I don't know why, but seeing him in pain hurts me. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, little present," he murmurs, and I feel the way the muscles of his throat move as he swallows hard. "I have," he blows out a breath, "nightmares."

As his breathing returns to normal, I become very fucking aware he's naked. Probably because he's now hard and my pussy is positioned almost directly over him.

"You're naked," I whisper against his skin.

He barks out a laugh and I jerk upright while straddling his hips and look down at him in wonder. His laugh is rough, but it's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. I want to hear him laugh more. All the time, really.

"I am," there's a challenge in his voice he backs up by arching an

eyebrow.

I rock my hips without even thinking about it, and he groans before his large hands come down on my hips. He doesn't hold me in place, but I can feel the control he's holding onto with the way his fingers flex against my body.

When I slide between his legs, he lets me go, his gaze curious and full of heat. "What are you doing, Lake?"

"I don't know," I whisper and grip the base of his shaft. When I look back up the length of his body, I force myself to ask, "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," he grits out through his teeth.

He's so hard and pre-cum is already dribbling out of the top of his cock and down his length. It's so fucking sexy, and it makes me feel powerful. I probably shouldn't do this. But the need to taste him, the need to make him feel something other than the remnants of his nightmare, is riding me hard.

I slide my tongue around the crown of his cock, and he lets out a guttural sound which has my thighs clenching. When I slide him between my lips, his eyes are practically glittering in the low light from the moon coming in through the large windows in his room. The light dances along the planes of his body, highlighting his muscles as they bunch.

I take him as deep as I can before sliding back up while increasing my suction. When his fingers slide through my hair and pull it back into a ponytail, I expect him to take control. He doesn't.

The way he bites his lip as he watches me, awe written across his face, makes me feel bold. I start to bob up and down his cock as I roll his balls with my hand.

"Fuck, little present," he growls. "You have no idea how heavenly your mouth is. I could die a happy man with your lips wrapped around my cock."

His words spur me on, and I move faster, wanting him to feel good, wanting to erase whatever gripped him in a torturous loop. I want to erase the memory of the way his face was contorted in pain. This is the way.

It's the only way I know how, and it feels right.

When he starts to pump his hips, I relax and let him fuck my mouth as I keep moving. I can feel his pulse in the veins running up his length as his balls start to tighten in my hand.

“Fuck,” he barks. “So close.” Something glitters in his eyes, something possessive that sends a shiver down my spine. “You’re going to swallow my cum like a good little wife, Lake.”

It’s not a question and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I moan around him when he’s buried as deep in my mouth as I can get him, the head of his cock hitting the back of my throat. The sound he makes has me on edge and I’m not even touching myself. But this isn’t about me. It’s about him and slaying his demons.

He needs me.

It’s crystal clear to me. I’m right where I’m supposed to be.

As Gannon’s fingers tighten in my hair and he roars out my name, I swallow down his cum and let the warmth of him fill me. I make sure to swallow everything he gives me, loving the look of pride in his eyes. When I slide my lips back up his length, I make sure to clean him as I go.

Gannon blinks at me when I sit back on my heels, his arms falling to his sides for a moment before he’s reaching for me and rolling us until he’s wrapped around my back. He cocoons me in his warmth and my eyes flutter and start to slide closed.

“Give me a moment and then I’m burying my cock inside of you,” he growls against the back of my neck.

I pat his arm and shake my head. “That was all for you. I wanted to slay your demons.”

“Lake,” he croaks, disbelief ringing through one word in a way that makes my heart feel lighter.

He needs me.

I’m going to keep him.



CHAPTER 4

GANNON

I keep my breathing slow and even as I hold Lake in my arms. The moment I woke up, everything flooded back to me, including the nightmare I was having. It wasn't a new one, just one of the many that won't let me be at peace.

I came up to the mountain for a lot of reasons, the atrocities I've seen and participated in being a major one. When I decided not to reenlist, I knew my experience was going to stay with me. There are counselors and support groups, but I resisted the help.

I knew not getting help was only going to hurt me. Maybe it's why I refused. As punishment. As penance.

Why should I be able to rest easily at night? Why should I enjoy the life I have when men I stood shoulder to shoulder with won't have the same opportunity? They left behind families and people who loved them.

I know I have Slade, but he has his own life, one which doesn't involve me. I don't want it to either. I'm not the guy I was when I was raising my brother. I'm not the guy I was when I joined up, thinking it was going to be a way to give him a better life.

I guess, in many ways, it did give him a better future.

I help to pay for his college and the rest is covered with football. I wanted him to have opportunities I never had and he's making the most of them. Hell, now he even has a woman, Salem. He's sharing her with Hollis. While I don't necessarily understand it, I'm not even a little bit surprised.

They were always close, brothers in their hearts.

The men I grew close to like that, the ones I relied on to have my back, weren't all lucky enough to live through our last deployment. It eats at me and their loss echoes through me almost constantly.

Except for last night while holding Lake in my arms.

I look down at the mess of blond hair obstructing my view of her. At some point we shifted during the night and her head is resting on my chest. Normally being touched makes me feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin. I was never a touchy-feely person, but after my time in the military, even the thought of someone hugging me was enough to send me into a spiral.

I don't know if I have anything to offer this woman. And that pisses me off.

She deserves the world.

Fuck, she packed up her life because she planned to marry me. That takes fucking grit.

Lake's eyes flutter open, and I'm caught in her brown depths. Her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink, and she ducks her head slightly. As she looks up at me from underneath her eyelashes, I know I won't be able to let go of this woman.

She came all this way for me. I don't know what forces were at work or who decided they were done with me isolating myself, but they gave me a gift when they sent Lake my direction. A gift I need. A gift I'll cherish.

"Morning," her voice is a little rough with sleep, but it still washes over me in the sweetest way.

It's almost enough to erase my embarrassment that she's already seen into the darkest corners of me. I hate it, but I admire the fact that she didn't cower away from me. She didn't run away screaming.

She helped me and gave me something else to focus on other than my ghosts.

"Lake," I murmur softly and watch as the worry in her beautiful eyes dissipates. "I'm sorry about last night."

Her eyebrows pull together in the most adorable way. If she were standing up, she would probably have her hands on her hips. The mental image is almost enough to make me laugh.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Gannon," she purrs my name and my dick throbs.

I was not aware I could be any harder than I already was, but there it is. My body wants her. My heart wants her. I'm just having an issue wrapping my head around how this little present is here with me right now.

But that doesn't mean I'm giving her back.

Hell no.

Since she knows I didn't put the ad up, is she going to want to leave? It didn't seem like she did last night, but if I want her to stay then I'm going to have to convince her she belongs here with me. On this mountain. In this cabin.

She could fill it with life in a way I haven't been able to. I have no doubt she can breathe life into every part of me and mend the broken pieces of me.

But is that fair to her?

Her nails lightly scraping across my chest, her fingers tunneling through the smattering of hair there, pulls me out of my thoughts and I focus back on the woman in my arms. She smiles at me and it's brighter than the sun cresting the horizon and making the room glow around us.

"There you are. Where did you go?" Her voice is gentle and full of so much caring that it hits me right in the middle of my chest.

I shake my head and try to swallow around the emotions clogging my throat. I shouldn't blurt out how I never want her to leave. I should keep it to myself until I make her fall for me.

"You can talk to me, Gannon," she whispers, "or we can lay like this in silence. Just don't hide in the darkness when you can walk in the light."

My eyes widen when she kisses my chest right where my heart is pounding. I don't know what to say to her. I want what she's offering so easily. Everything in me craves to walk in the light right beside this woman.

It doesn't make any fucking sense, but it's true all the same.

Before I can figure out how to make this woman understand the jumbled mess of my mind, her stomach lets out a sound which can only be described as a feral racoon and her eyes widen. She sits up quickly and slaps a hand over her mouth and her abdomen, as if either would help.

I chuckle and it feels rusty in my throat. I laughed yesterday with Lake and the last time I had done that...I'm not even sure. Hell, the last time I really smiled before Lake showed up in front of my home was when I met Slade and Hollis' woman, Salem. She's a spitfire and perfect for the guys.

I tease her, "Hungry?"

The glare she shoots me could melt the paint off the walls, but before she can retort, her stomach makes the sound again, but this time louder. She tilts her head back and groans, "This can't be happening."

I bark out a laugh and climb out of bed, stretching my back as I look out of the huge windows in my room to take in the view. I can feel Lake's eyes on my ass, and I smirk. I'm glad she likes what she sees. It'll make this whole thing a lot easier.

I'm not above using my body to prove to her she belongs with me and that she's mine.

I glance over my shoulder and her head jerks up to meet my eyes, her cheeks turning a darker shade of pink that makes me feel like I can't catch my breath. She's fucking stunning.

"Come on, little present. Go and get dressed and I'll get breakfast started," I cajole her.

She nods absently, her eyes running up and down my body. My chest puffs up a little bit and I find myself strutting into the bathroom to take care of business before I feed my woman. I hear the soft patter of her feet as she leaves my room to go into the guest room that I gave her last night.

How quickly can I get her in here with me permanently? I shake my head when I pull a pair of sweatpants on. I called her my wife last night, not really realizing it, but I remember the moment in perfect clarity.

It felt fucking good.

I'm putting some eggs, bacon, and toast on two plates by the time Lake walks into the kitchen and dining room. I feel my jaw drop open when Storm leaves his breakfast to go over and greet Lake. She drops down on her haunches and gives him a big rub down and buries her face in his neck to rub her face along his thick fur.

My dog has never chosen a human over food. Never.

I eye my dog suspiciously and try to push down the feeling of being jealous of my damn dog.

When Lake looks up at me and smiles, I'm right back to feeling like I'm at the top of the world. How the fuck does she do it?

"Eat," I growl, mentally face palming myself for being so gruff with the woman whose heart I want to own.

She doesn't scowl or get upset, she simply smiles wider and gives Storm one more squeeze before she stands and heads toward the table. I put one plate in front of her and she looks up at me with hopeful eyes. "Is there coffee?"

I lean down and kiss her forehead without even thinking about it. "Of course," I murmur against her skin, loving the way she blinks up at me when I stand back up and head toward the kitchen. "How do you like yours?"

"Um," she stammers, "with milk or creamer or whatever and sugar?"

I gather the milk and sugar along with two mugs of coffee before heading back to the table. I watch her like a hawk as she mixes her coffee the way she likes it, brings it up to her lips, and makes a sound of contentment which goes straight to my dick when she takes a sip. I'll make it perfect for her next time.

"If you like flavored creamer, we can head down the mountain and go to the grocery store. I need to pick up a few things anyway." I rub the back of my neck as she gives me her complete attention. "A storm is supposed to come through here tomorrow, but it's not supposed to last long."

"A storm?" She sounds a little worried as she bites her bottom lip. "We get snow in Seattle, but I have a feeling it's nothing like you get here."

I nod and then point outside. "We'll take a little walk after breakfast, and I'll show you some of the land so you're familiar with it. I'll show you where the generator is and where not to go, just in case."

"I'd like that," her sweet voice is like a balm to my ragged soul.

I nod and then we dig into breakfast, not talking, but neither of us seeming to mind. I'm eager to show her my land, a giddy excitement bubbling up in

my chest I haven't felt in years. Actually, have I ever felt it before? No, I don't think so.

When we're done, I grab our plates and put them in the sink before I disappear down the hall to my room to get dressed. When I come back, she's wearing hiking boots and a jacket that looks weather appropriate. I almost fall to my knees in front of her to worship her.

Normally no one can read me, but Lake must be able to because she just giggles and waves a hand down her body. "I used to do some hiking around Seattle. I figured it would work here?"

"It's perfect," my voice is husky as I close the distance between us and grab her hand.

When I open the back door, Storm is off like a shot. He rolls around in any patch of snow he can find that hasn't melted away yet. Lake laughs as she watches him, the sound lighting up the forest in a whole new way, a way I want to hold onto.

I show her the storage shed and how to work the generator, just in case, and then I show her one of the trails I walk often. She takes everything in, her brown eyes wide and reflecting the beauty of the only place which has provided me with a sliver of solace from my inner hell.

"It's beautiful," she murmurs, and I can only nod because my eyes are locked onto her, not taking in the surrounding forest or the view from the ridge where we've stopped. She glances at me and blushes. "I meant the view."

I make a humming sound and give her hand a squeeze. I don't remember the last time I held hands with a woman but having her hand in mine feels so fucking good.

"On my last deployment," I surprise myself with the words I'm saying, but I don't want to stop them, "I lost a few guys in my unit. It was the last straw for me. It was time for me to reenlist or get out anyway. I decided to come back to Jasper Ridge, but I couldn't handle being in town. There were too many people who looked at me like a hero. I know it wasn't my fault that not everyone came home, but..." I trail off and squeeze my eyes closed.

Lake's arms wrap around my waist as she tucks herself against my chest.

“I can’t understand what you went through, but I do know loss changes you. Sometimes the people don’t even have to die for you to lose them. My parents taught me that.” She looks up at me, the pain in her eyes tugging at my heart. “It hurts and it’s okay to feel that hurt for a long time. Maybe forever.”

I cup her face in my palms and give her just a little bit more of me. Because she deserves it. Because I want her to know me. “My parents taught me that lesson too. I tried to protect Slade from it, but then I enlisted.” I shrug and look away from her, her eyes too probing and seeing too much.

She cups my jaw and turns my head back toward her. “You did the best you could. I don’t have to know the man to know he loves you.” She cocks her head to the side and grins. “How could he not, and if he doesn’t then I’ll kick his ass.”

In the forest I’ve called home for a long fucking time, my laughter echoes through the trees.

Yeah, I’m not letting go of Lake. She’s mine.



CHAPTER 5

LAKE

I've never gone grocery shopping with a man. It's a new experience, but I'm not sure if this one is a normal one or not. I thought he would be rushing me through the whole thing and be annoyed because I want to go down every aisle so I can get a feel of what they do and don't have a store that's new to me.

He doesn't seem bothered at all. Granted, it's a little hard to tell with the scowl on his face. Then there's the way he stares down anyone who comes too close to us, his expression turning downright murderous if it's a man, but I think that's just Gannon. It should probably make me feel like a piece of meat or a toy, but it doesn't. It makes me feel like I'm special and like he's watching out for me.

Which is kind of strange. Nico always looked after me, but when he would warn people away from me, I found it very fucking annoying. It felt like he was controlling me.

I smile up at Gannon who is grabbing another item I glanced at and putting it in the cart. I put my hand on his arm and suck in a sharp breath when his dark blue eyes swing down to meet mine. "I barely looked at that, Gannon," I chastise him gently.

He flashes me a sheepish smile and my heart starts to pound in my chest. I don't think he's the kind of man to hand out smiles often. I find myself hoarding each one I get and holding it close to me, like a dragon with anything sparkly and pretty.

"If you want it, now is the time to get it, little present," he murmurs softly.

I want to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him, but we haven't crossed that line since I had his cock in my mouth last night. We haven't talked about it either. I don't know if he's ignoring it because he regrets it or what is going on in his head.

I glance at his lips, and he lets out a low groan as his arm bands around my

waist and pulls me flush against his chest. “You can’t look at me like that, Lake.”

I watch his mouth form each word, soaking up how his lips look soft and plush. “Look at you like what?”

“Like you’re desperate for me to kiss you,” he growls softly.

My cheeks heat and I try to step back out of his hold. Desperate. I do feel desperate, but it’s probably not a good look for anyone, least of all me since I’m the one who walked away from the life that I was living to marry a stranger. A stranger who had no idea I even existed.

Yeah, desperate is not what I’m going for.

“No,” the word is harsh and has me freezing in place. His forehead comes down and rests against mine. “I didn’t mean that to sound bad. It’s already taking all my self-control not to lift you up, press you against the shelf and devour your mouth and then fuck you like my cock has been begging me to.”

I gasp and my hands grip his arms. Even though he’s holding me, I feel unsteady on my feet. I think that’s just the effect he has on me.

“You want to kiss me?”

He lets out a pained noise as he tips his head back and looks at the ceiling for a few beats. When his head tips forward again, there’s a hunger in his eyes and an answering pull in my body. He wants me. I could do a fucking happy dance right here in the middle of the grocery store. Which probably would not be good since I don’t know any of these people.

I give him a crooked grin and sass, “I’m not sure the shelf is sturdy enough for all that anyway.” I pout a little and bat my eyelashes at him which has him grinning down at me. “Pity. Raincheck, though.”

Gannon leans down and kisses the corner of my mouth. It’s just a peck and over far too quickly, but I feel the jolt of the contact all the way down to the tips of my toes.

“Gannon? Is that you?” A woman’s voice coming from behind the giant mountain man who I didn’t even realize was shielding me from anyone else who might be in the aisle, has us both jerking back to the here and now.

Gannon turns slightly and the corner of his mouth tips up. Jealousy instantly fills me, but I do my best to push the feeling aside. If he had a woman in his life, whoever put the ad out there for him wouldn't have done it. I'm fairly sure. Probably.

I strain my body to look around him and find a couple, who are probably in their early 50s, staring at us with avid interest written all over their faces. Gannon turns and smoothly tucks me into his side. I wrap my arms around his waist like we've done this a million times.

I hope I'm hiding my smug as fuck smile right now. With the way the woman's eyes light up, I suspect I fail. Oh well.

It feels right to be tucked in next to Gannon. It probably shouldn't, but it does. It feels natural in a way I've never experienced before.

"Elaine and Albert," Gannon's deep voice has me looking up at him and then at the couple in front of us. I think he's mentioned them, but I can't place it. He glances down at me and winks. "These are Mr. and Mrs. Lang. They're the parents of Slade's best friend, Hollis."

I gasp and nod, smiling at the couple. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Lake."

"Lake," Elaine's smile grows even wider. "It's a pleasure to meet you, dear. Are you new in town?" I swear her smile takes on a sly bend when she adds, "How did you two meet?"

Gannon straightens slightly and I'm not sure if it's because he caught the knowing look in her eye or if he's not sure how we should answer her question.

I wave a dismissive hand. "You know how these things go. How we met doesn't matter as much as the fact that we did."

Gannon grunts in agreement and I give him a squeeze. Elaine claps her hands while she presses her lips so tightly together it's clear she's trying to prevent some words from escaping.

Albert looks at his wife lovingly, "You're quite right. As long as you find the right person, the how isn't as important."

Elaine is almost vibrating, but then she takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Her voice is chipper, but there's a loving, motherly quality to it which

puts me at ease, “Since Hollis and Slade are going to Denver for part of winter break with Salem, I was going to reach out to you to see if you’d like to come down the mountain and spend Christmas with us.”

Gannon grips me a little tighter and shrugs one large shoulder. “I’m not sure, Elaine. We’ll talk about it and get back to you. I don’t want you cooking too much food if we decide to stay at home or if the weather takes a turn before then and we can’t get down.”

“You let us know, son,” Albert’s voice is full of amusement as he looks between us. He looks at Elaine and winks. “I wouldn’t hate to have my wife all to myself for the holiday.”

Elaine blushes and I almost let out a sigh at how adorable they are together. I can only hope we’ll be the same way when we’ve been together as long as these two have. I stand a little straighter at the thought.

Am I really assuming I’ll be with Gannon for that long? Do I think this is all going to work out? He wasn’t even the one to put the ad out there. He wasn’t really looking for a bride.

Maybe I shouldn’t get too attached.

When I glance up at Gannon, he’s already looking at me, his dark blue eyes studying my face intently. He gives my shoulder another squeeze and leans down to kiss my temple. I melt against his side and decide I’m going to just see what happens.

Why not? I’ve already come this far.

Elaine lets out a small squeal before she rushes over to us and wraps her arms around us. “Oh,” she gushes, “this just makes me so happy. Christmas wishes really do come true.” When she pulls back, her eyes are a little glassy with unshed tears. “I hope you’ll come down to celebrate,” Albert makes a huffing sound behind her, and she waves a hand at him without looking at him, “but we’ll understand if you want to spend this first holiday together alone.”

“Come on, sweetheart,” Albert reaches out and pulls her away from us gently, “let the kids finish their shopping and head back home. We have more things to find on your list as it is.”

“Oh, the list,” she exclaims before she blows us kisses and waves as she hustles down the aisle.

I find myself watching after them with a big smile on my face. “They’re good people.”

“They are,” Gannon intones, and I look up at him.

“They love you very much,” I remind him softly, my gut telling me Elaine had something to do with the ad and not wanting Gannon to be mad at her. “It’s obvious. You’re family to them.”

He nods and then starts to lead me in the other direction. We lapse into a comfortable silence as we walk, and I eye the contents of the cart. We have a lot of food. Probably too much. And a lot of snacks.

I had a look through Gannon’s pantry and kitchen earlier and he is not the kind of man to do a lot of snacking. The fact that he got all this stuff for me makes me want to skip through the grocery store and shout at the top of my lungs.

When we take a turn and head into the produce section, I’m met with two people scowling at each other and whisper yelling near the squash. My eyebrows pull together as I try to figure them out, but the longer I watch them the clearer it gets.

They look similar and, with the way they are snapping at each other, they must be siblings.

“Jade,” the man is exasperated, “no one wants your whipped squash for Christmas dinner. Potatoes. There are supposed to be mashed potatoes on the table.” He grimaces and mutters to himself, “Whipped squash is an affront to everything the holiday stands for.”

Jade slams her hands down on her hips, clearly getting ready to lay into her brother and I find myself giggling softly. They both turn toward the sound, and I freeze. I didn’t mean to garner their attention and now they have curious expressions on their faces.

Gannon lets out a sigh, but it’s not filled with annoyance, at least not at me. I don’t think. He leads me closer and nods to the siblings, “Jade. Jasper.”

“Gannon,” Jasper greets back with a chin lift.

I blurt, “I’m sorry for giggling. It’s just the two of you remind me of my brother and myself.”

Jade grins at me and sticks her hand out between us. “Hi. I’m Jade. I’ve never seen you around here before.”

Jasper rolls his eyes, his voice full of sarcasm toward his sister when he informs me, “Jade thinks of herself as the one-woman welcome wagon of Jasper Ridge.”

“He’s not wrong,” she slaps her brother’s chest with her free hand as I shake the one that she’s offered me. “There’s so much to love about our town. I like people to know it and feel welcome.”

“It’s a beautiful town. I’m Lake. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jade’s smile is wide as she looks between Gannon and me. “I have a feeling I haven’t met you before because this one was keeping you up on the mountain.”

I laugh and shrug. “I just got in yesterday.”

“We came down to get some supplies before the storm hits,” Gannon grumbles.

Jade nods and then leans closer to me as if she’s going to tell me a secret. “Maybe you can convince Gannon to come down for the Christmas parade this year. We miss him around town.”

I glance up at Gannon as Jade gives me the details while making sure to add that the weather will have come and gone before the parade in a few days. I smile at her, excited at the idea of going to the parade and getting my scowling teddy bear into the holiday spirit. I wink at her and then she says a breezy goodbye as Gannon leads me away. We’ve barely taken two steps before she starts right back in on her brother about why her whipped squash is superior to mashed potatoes.

I find myself chuckling under my breath as something inside of my chest settles into place. Everyone I’ve met has been so nice. Not only that, but they care about the gentle giant who kisses the top of my head as we finish up our shopping.

I think I’m going to like it here in Jasper Ridge. It feels like home in a way

nothing else has.

I hope I get to keep this feeling. I'll fight for it if I have to.



CHAPTER 6

GANNON

The last few days while we've been stuck in the house together have been amazing. I've gotten to know Lake in a way I never knew I needed to know another person. She's fun, smart, funny, and she has brought so much life to my world.

The loneliness I had to studiously ignore is something I hardly remember now, and it's only been a few days. I swear the woman is magic, but when I touch her, she's all fire.

I didn't even have to convince her to sleep in my bed at night, even though she's keeping her stuff in the guest room. I kind of hate that her stuff is in there. I crave to see her stuff mixed in with mine in the room I want to permanently share with her. It's something I know I need to come out and say, but I've been so wrapped up in her that I forget almost the moment I think about it.

It's been torture having her pressed up against me all night while not burying myself inside of her. I'm not sure what I'm waiting for. I can see in her brown eyes that she's just as hungry for me as I am for her. I want her to know I want *her* and that my attraction to her and need for her has nothing to do with her being here or being convenient. I want her to know I see *her*.

Which is why I've put forth the effort to get to know her. All her likes and dislikes. The music that makes her smile or makes her all emotional. Her favorite movies and the ones she won't watch. The food she craves late at night. The places she loved to visit and the hikes she went on when she was in Seattle. The way her brother took care of her and how her parents abandoned her long before they set out on the open road in an RV without even looking in the rearview mirror.

It wasn't a one-way street either. I've shared things with Lake I've never told another person. I told her about how I got through the long grueling days and nights while I was deployed. I told her about my parents not giving a shit about me or Slade. I let her in on the guilt I still carry around with me for

joining up and leaving Slade behind when he probably needed me the most.

She listened to everything without judgement, her beautiful eyes imploring me to lay it all at her feet so she could see the mess of me. Then her eyes would soften with understanding, and she'd wrap her arms around me while her fingers stroked through my hair. Her touch was healing, and I feel more whole than I have in years.

She's done something to me. It's like my eyes are open to the world for the first time in a long fucking time. The colors aren't muted anymore and the beauty of the forest surrounding us hits me in a new way. I came up the mountain to get away from everyone, but there is also life teeming on the land surrounding our home. I never allowed myself to notice it before beyond sharing space with the life around me. I never let it in.

With Lake at my side, it's like I can't help but feel it.

And it is *our* home.

I want her to stay. I want to make this cabin I built as a cave of solitude and regret into a real home. I think she's the only one who can make it feel warm and cozy. Because of her magic. Because of the way she looks at me with charmed affection which isn't faked or contrived.

The whole mail order bride situation and her staying have been the only things we've avoided talking about over the last few days. I know we need to address it, but I'm scared. I don't want her to go.

I might not have been the one to post the ad, but whoever it was got it right when they chose Lake for me. I don't know how it's possible, but it is. If it wasn't Elaine, then I swear it had to be Santa and I got on his nice list somehow.

Lake is the woman I never knew I should have been dreaming about and wishing for in the darkness of the scariest moments of my life. If I had known she was the light I would find, it would have helped me get through the shit life has thrown my way. I would have kept my head held high instead of giving into the demons twisted in my soul.

I know now.

Lake turns around when I walk into the bathroom to find her leaning over

the vanity as she puts on some makeup. I groan because the view in front of me is something I couldn't even picture in the best fucking dream I've ever had.

Her perfect ass is on display and encased in red lace panties which match the bra she has on. I saw the dress and thermal leggings on the bed when I walked into the bedroom, but I didn't give them much thought. Now I am. Now I can't think about anything other than how fucking perfect my timing is.

My cock is hard enough to pound fucking nails and I want to bury myself inside of her until I don't know where I stop, and she begins. I want her to feel me for fucking days. I want my seed dripping out of her until she smells like me, and everyone knows who she belongs to.

It's depraved. But I don't fucking care.

Lake raises her eyes in the mirror and meets mine as I stalk closer. I grip her hips and hold her in place, my denim covered dick pressing against her ass to make sure she knows just what she does to me. When she pushes back and lets out a little whimper, I know I'm not going to be able to stop myself from fucking my woman.

Not anymore.

We've been so good. We've held back while we've gotten to know each other. Now, I know.

She's it for me and I have to claim her. I have to make her mine.

"Gannon," she moans and tries to circle her hips, but the grip I have on her doesn't give her much room to move.

I make a humming sound and let go of one of her hips to slide the tips of my fingers up her spine. When I get to the clasp on her bra, I undo it quickly and watch as the straps sag down her arms. Sexy as fuck.

Her eyes sharpen a little as she puts down the makeup she was using and grips the edge of the counter. I slide my hand around her ribcage and underneath the lace cup of her bra to cup her round, full breast.

"You wouldn't be trying to distract me so we miss the parade, would you?"

I smirk at her in the mirror and her eyes turn molten. “I’m not going to lie to you, little present. I don’t want to go to the parade, but you want to. I’m not going to disappoint my woman and it’s a chance to show you off to everyone in Jasper Ridge while showing them who you belong to.”

I pinch her nipple and her mouth falls open as she moans and jerks in my hold. Her voice is husky, “Who I belong to?”

“Me,” I growl and scoop her up in my arms, hardly paying attention when her bra falls to the floor. With only a few strides I’m standing next to our bed and laying her down on it. My eyes eat up her almost naked body. I reach down and squeeze my length through my jeans, needing some relief before I blow my load in my pants. “Fuck, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Lake,” I growl.

Her hands are shaking a little with anticipation as she moves them to cup her tits. I watch, frozen in place and soaking it all up. She’s way too fucking good for me, but I’m not going to let anything stand in my way.

“I’ve been taking it slow with you. I wanted you to know this wasn’t about getting inside of you.”

I look into her eyes and watch as they soften as she looks at me. “I know, Gannon. I want you.” Her hips rotate like her body is seeking friction and needing it desperately. “I need you. Please,” she’s breathless as she pants the last word.

My control fucking snaps. I tear my clothes from my body and crawl over her without taking my eyes off her. She looks her fill as well and the appreciation in her gaze is all I need to see.

Mine. All fucking mine.

“Don’t have condoms,” I grunt, “didn’t need them.” A wicked smile full of victory curls her lips. I know I’m barely making sense as I tug and push her lace panties down her legs until she kicks them away. “Don’t want anything between us anyway. Nothing between us ever. Want to fill you with my cum. Need it,” I growl the words, a primal sound coming from deep in my chest.

As I settle over Lake, she wraps her legs around my hips and her arms around my shoulders. Her touch electrifies me, and I snarl, our lips almost

touching. I watch as her eyes dilate.

She whispers, "I'm on the pill, Gannon."

I narrow my eyes, my muscles bunching at the thought of some fucking pill stopping me from getting my woman pregnant. She'll look so fucking good round with my child. And then she definitely wouldn't leave me.

I don't know if I'll be a good dad, I never really thought about kids before, but I know that I can do anything with Lake at my side.

"I'll find them later and flush them," I threaten.

If I said that to almost anyone else, they would be shoving at my chest and telling me to go fuck myself. Not my woman. Nope.

My cock throbs as her nails dig into my back, and she pulls me even closer. She doesn't say anything, but the little begging breaths leaving her lips are enough of a dare for me. If she thinks I won't follow through, she's going to find out she's very wrong.

I've had the last few days to fantasize about a lot of things, but one thing I could never shake was knocking my woman up. Maybe it's a primal need, but it sure as fuck is one that I've never experienced in my life before.

I have a feeling it's because of her. All because of her.

I put just enough distance between us, as I balance on my forearm next to her head, to grip the base of my cock and slide the head up and down her slit. "Fucking soaked for me. You like the idea of me filling you with my cum and you carrying my baby," I snarl.

"Gannon," my name is a plea on her lips. "Need you inside me."

Her back arches when I tap the crown of my dick against her clit. Her breasts pillow against my chest and I can feel her hard nipples begging for my mouth.

Soon. Really fucking soon.

"I'll take care of you," my voice is thick and from the way some of the lust clears from her eyes, she knows I'm not just talking about fucking her. I'm talking about everything. I'll always take care of her.

As much as I want to fill her hard and fast, I take a deep breath and clench my jaw as I slide inside my woman slowly. “So fucking tight. Wet,” I grunt, “needy pussy.”

Her eyes widen and slam shut as I fill her completely and rotate my hips to give her clit the friction she needs. “Holy shit,” she whines, her neck arched, and her hair fanned out around her like a fucking halo, “feels so good.”

“Eyes on me,” I command, and I’m met with her beautiful brown orbs again.

I start to move above her, pulling back and then thrusting forward. Every time I sink inside of her feels better than the last. She’s wrapped around me as I fuck her, the needy, heat-filled sounds she makes has me moving faster and harder without even realizing it. I want more of those fucking sounds.

I kiss her hard before I lick and nip down her neck and chest. I stare at the way her breasts jiggle with every movement of my hips, momentarily mesmerized until she begs, “Please, need your mouth on my tits.”

I growl and then dive between her round breasts, kissing right in the middle before I shift and suck one of her nipples into my mouth. Her body fucking electrifies, and it makes me feel like a god among men. I piston my hips, the sound of our bodies slapping together drowning out how loud my heart is hammering inside my chest.

When I give her other nipple the same attention and then bite down, she gasps, “Gonna come.”

“That’s right, my little present. Cover my cock in your juices and use your body to beg for my seed.”

“Fuck,” the word is one long, drawn out moan coming from her mouth.

Her pussy walls tighten around my shaft and before I can stop it, she pulls my fucking cum right out of my damn balls, everything in my body tingling as I come harder than I ever have in my damn life. It feels like our orgasms go on forever and I’m barely able to breathe as we shake in each other’s arms.

I look down at my woman in wonder.

I grunt, “What the fuck was that?”

“I have no idea,” she pants and gives me a sly grin, “but I can’t wait to do it again.”

I tilt my head back and laugh before I roll us. My cock is still inside of her with her draped over my chest and I’m not looking forward to the moment I slip free from her.

It’s okay. I’ll just give her what she wants, and we’ll do it again.

And again.

And again.

I’m barely cogent, my hands running up and down the smooth skin of Lake’s back, when she kisses my chest and practically bounces off the bed and starts to walk back into the bathroom. She looks over her shoulder at me and grins.

“Come on, let’s get ready. We need to head to town for the parade,” her voice is full of joy as I groan.

But damn it, I do get up, clean up, and get dressed to take my woman to the parade.

She wants to go and I’m going to always do my best to give her what she wants. I just hope that the crowd doesn’t bother me too much, but it only takes one look at my woman to remind me I’m more than okay. I’m better than I’ve ever been in my life.

Hell, with her body pressed against mine at night, I haven’t had any more nightmares.

Because she’s fucking magic.

I knew I was in love with Lake already, even if I hadn’t admitted it to myself, but watching her meet new people as the town gathers for the parade has me falling in love with her all over again. She welcomes everyone with open arms, an open heart, and without judgement. Even me, who has years of Scrooge-like tendencies which would be so easy to fall back on.

The way she comes alive is beautiful to watch.

Hours later, after watching her eyes twinkling with excitement and holiday cheer, I take her light home so I can devour it all for myself. I’ve shared her

enough for the day and the miser in me takes over.

But she gets hers too. I'll always make sure of it.



CHAPTER 7

LAKE

Christmas is two days away and once the holiday comes and goes, I'm going to need to decide what is going to happen next. I'm either going to start the New Year with a husband or I'm going to move on.

Do I have any clue where I'm going to go now that I've fallen in love with Jasper Ridge and Gannon? Nope. I don't have the first fucking clue.

Not only is the stress and anxiety of wanting to talk to Gannon about what is going on between us weighing on me, but I've been giving Nico the bare minimum to keep him off my back. I hate not being completely honest with my brother. This is the first time in my life that I haven't been, and it feels like I'm fighting against quicksand with how emotional it makes me.

I know Nico would tell me to go home to Seattle, but the more days I've spent in Jasper Ridge, the less Seattle feels like home. I know I can't go back. I don't want to.

I want to stay here, but I don't know if it's possible.

Don't get me wrong, being with Gannon blows my mind every time. Not just the sex either, but the small ways he takes care of me. The way he listens to me like he's really hearing me. The possessive look in his eye whenever I catch him staring at me.

And I catch him doing it a lot.

It all adds up to a man that I think wants me, but we haven't talked about what happens next.

I'm afraid to bring it up. What if the thought of marriage freaks him out and he tells me to go? It would break my heart.

What if all the things he's said about knocking me up or about me being his have been said in the heat of the moment? If that's the case, I'll need to find my own mountain to isolate myself on because I won't be able to face the world as I know it.

But none of the things he's said to me felt like just words. They felt very real.

I just don't know what to do with it all. How do I find a way forward if we keep dancing around the conversation? That elephant in the corner is fucking huge at this point and I can't ignore him anymore.

My time in Jasper Ridge has changed my life, but if this is only a glimpse at a future and not one that I can hold onto, I want to know it sooner rather than later. I'm already gone for the man; that ship has sailed and almost circumnavigated the globe at this point. It would kill me to find out the rug is going to be pulled from underneath me and I'm only going to fall deeper if I'm not careful.

I might be able to recover at this point. I'll have to go into hiding and lick my wounds, but I could do it. If I stay for another week? A month? And *then* he tells me he doesn't really want this? I'll be broken beyond repair.

Maybe I'm over thinking things. And I know why.

Gannon went down to town today and when he asked me if I wanted to go with him, I gave him a half-assed smile and told him, "I think I'm going to hang out here and read for a little while. Is that okay?"

The relief on his face was clear to see and it had my heart racing way too fast in my chest. He kissed my forehead before straightening and murmuring softly, "Okay, I won't be long."

I don't know why his words sounded like he meant something different. This is the first time we've been apart since I arrived outside of his cabin. I know it's healthy for people to spend time separately and I shouldn't just hole myself up in the cabin, even if it seems to have worked out fine for Gannon while he's distanced himself from everyone else.

I've always been semi-social, even if I can be awkward in social situations. I was good at retail because I like meeting new people and have a damn good customer service voice. Still, I'm not great at making deep, long-term connections.

I groan and tilt my head back, the book I was trying to read long forgotten. I couldn't read more than a sentence before realizing I wasn't really connecting with or paying attention to the words. All I can focus on is the

relief on Gannon's face when I didn't jump at the idea of heading down the mountain with him.

Why was he so damn relieved? Does he have someone he's meeting up with in town? It's not like we've talked about being exclusive. Nope, I just showed up on his porch declaring myself his bride.

"What the fuck is wrong with me? His bride," I hiss at myself.

Storm barks and I look over at him to see him creeping toward me on his belly, his head cocked to the side as he studies me like I'm about to crack. He's not entirely wrong. If I were him and a human that I've become close to was talking to themselves, I'd have the same look on my face.

I reach a hand down to him and he crawls the rest of the way, bumping my hand with his head. I sink my fingers into his fur.

It's not just Gannon I've come to love since my arrival. Storm is an amazing dog, and I can see how much Gannon relies on him not only for companionship, but for comfort as well. If I were to leave, I think they'd be okay together.

But I'd be out there all on my own and the thought has my stomach pitching to the side. I shake my head and gasp when I realize I need to take my pill. Storm scrambles back when I leap off the couch and head directly into the guest room, which is where I'm still keeping my stuff.

Maybe it's a sign. Gannon hasn't asked me to move into his room. That means something. Right?

I sound sad as fuck, "Right?" I tilt my head back and shake it as I look up at the ceiling. "You have got to stop talking to yourself. Starting now."

I give a decisive nod as I tilt my head down and paw through one of my bags to find my pills. When I don't find them, my heart starts to pound in my chest, and I race into the bathroom trying to tell myself I must have left them in there even though I know I didn't.

I always keep them in the same place because losing them would be bad. Very bad.

I think.

Probably.

Gannon's relief filled face fills my mind again. Yeah, definitely bad.

I turn the bag over when I don't find them, and everything spills out onto the bed. I start to spread the contents out, but my birth control is nowhere in sight. I glance at my other bags and wonder if I need to look in there too.

But I know they won't be there.

Did Storm get into them? He's very well trained, but a dog is still a dog, right? They'll do things they know they aren't supposed to do because they're a dog and training only goes so far. At least, I would assume. I've never had a pet before.

I never even thought about getting one, but if I end up leaving Jasper Ridge, you better believe I'm going to get myself a dog. We can go out on the open road and see what adventures await us together. I won't be able to get a dog nearly as big as Storm, but it's okay.

As long as they're not some little dog that yips instead of barks, I'll be okay. I shudder at the thought of some ankle biter. Hey, if that's your speed of dog, more power to you, but I need a dog who will be able to hold their own. Not one I'll have to carry everywhere.

I sift through the things I've dumped onto the bed one more time, sending out a silent little wish my pills will magically appear.

Just as I'm about to stand up and devolve into full 'freaking the fuck out' mode, a throat is cleared behind me. I whirl around to find Gannon leaning against the doorframe with a smirk on his face.

I press a hand to my chest as I manage to swallow down the scream which was working its way out of my lungs. "Gannon," I gasp, "you scared me. What the fuck are you doing just standing there staring at me like a creeper?"

I turn back toward my stuff and start to go through it again, but his voice has me freezing, "You won't find them, little present."

This time when I turn toward him, I do it slowly. So slowly I'm sure I look a little deranged. I narrow my eyes at the man I've fallen in love with to find his dark blue eyes sparkling with mischief. What the hell is he up to?

I prompt him, “What do you mean, I won’t find them?”

He pushes off the door jamb and stands up straight before stalking toward me slowly. The way his body moves can only be described as prowling. If I weren’t kind of freaking out right now, I would find it sexy as hell.

Okay, I’m freaking out and I still find it sexy as hell. Some things are simply out of our control, and this is one of them.

Gannon’s henley bunches and pulls across his muscular chest with every step he takes. I lick my lips, thinking about the tattoos on this chest, the same ones I’ve explored and licked. I love his tattoos. And his beard.

I’m going to miss him when this all comes crashing down around me.

I’m going to miss Storm.

I can’t find my pills.

Tears well up in my eyes, too many emotions rioting inside of me. I feel like I’m grasping at something, but the edges are frayed, and I can’t get a good grip.

Maybe I never had one to begin with.

Gannon stops right in front of me and cups my face in his big palms. I want to lean into his touch and get comfort from it, but I can’t. Not right now.

“Lake,” his eyes are filled with concern, “why does it look like you’re about to cry?”

“I don’t know,” my voice is right over the edge of shrill and I wince at the sound of it. But he doesn’t. He simply holds my gaze, searching for something I’m afraid he’ll never find. “I don’t know what we’re doing here, and I know a decision needs to be made, but the thought of leaving is breaking my heart.” Gannon goes rigid in front of me, but now that I’ve started, I don’t think I can stop. “I don’t know when it happened, but I’ve fallen in love with you. With you. With Storm. With this place. This house. Everything.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. You’re mine and you’re staying right here,” his tone is possessive, but it barely registers over my own panic.

“We haven’t talked about the future or how I came here to be your bride,

but you didn't even place the damn ad," my tone is bordering on hysterical. "I don't know what to do. I don't want to leave. I want to stay, but I don't know what you want. And now I can't find my fucking birth control," I huff out the last bit and my bottom lip wobbles as a tear makes its way down my cheek.

I don't want to cry. I hate crying, but it feels inevitable at this point.

"I told you," his voice is gruff, like he's on the edge, it has me looking at him, really looking at him, "you won't find your birth control."

My words are slow and measured, "Why won't I find my birth control?"

"I flushed them." When I gasp, he smirks and reminds me, "I told you I was going to."

"I thought that was just sex talk. You know, heat of the moment or whatever." I throw my hands up in exasperation and try and step back from him, but he won't let me. He lets go of one of my cheeks and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me even closer to him. "Gannon, we have to talk about this. I can't stay in this limbo state while trying to ignore that big fucking elephant," I wave my hand toward a corner, "over there."

Gannon's eyes fucking crinkle in amusement, but I don't find any of this funny. Before I can lay into him again, he has me up in his arms and cradled against his chest. He strides toward his bedroom, the one I want desperately to be ours, muttering, "I can't talk to you in there when I hate your stuff is still being in there."

I look up at him, my eyes wide. I couldn't have heard him correctly. Right?

When he sits down on his bed, he arranges me so I'm straddling his lap and looking directly into his eyes. I open my mouth even though I have no fucking clue what I'm going to say, but Gannon stops me with a shake of his head.

"You got to stay what's on your mind and now it's my turn. No, my threat to throw away your birth control was not a heat of the moment thing. It wasn't even a threat; it was a promise." He flashes me a predatory grin. "One I've made good on."

“I,” I start to sputter and then clamp my mouth shut at the look on his face.

His hand comes down and splays across my lower abdomen. “I’m going to put my baby in you, Lake. And do you know why that is?”

I let out a whimper and shake my head. Not because I’m afraid to speak, but because I literally can’t form words. His eyes are so intense and full of conviction that he’s stolen all my thoughts and my ability to speak.

“Because you’re going to be my wife,” his voice is filled with pride.

Like he’s proud of the thought of being married to me. Like this is what he wants. Like he’s going to keep me forever.

My eyes well up with tears again, but this time for an entirely new reason.

He presses his forehead against mine and shifts me a little on his lap so he can reach into his pocket. He pulls out a small pouch and now I’m so overwhelmed I don’t even know where to look. Not that it matters because my vision is blurry with tears.

When I blink them away, Gannon is holding a ring up between us. It’s simple and gorgeous.

His voice is rough, but not in a gruff way, in an emotional way, “You said that you’ve fallen in love with me. With Storm. With this place.” I feel my cheeks heating because I did. And it’s the truth. “Little present, we’ve fallen in love with you. I love you. Storm loves you. Everyone who has met you in Jasper Ridge loves you. Do you know why that is?”

“No,” I croak the word and shake my head, a few more tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Because this is your home. You’re not leaving. You’re going to stay and we’re going to build a life together. Right here. In this house that you make into a home simply by existing within these walls.”

If happiness could be described in one perfect moment, this would be it. It feels like all the colors of the rainbow swirl through my soul and radiate out of me, creating a kaleidoscope of pure joy which can’t be contained.

I grin up at Gannon and realize he’s waiting for something. A smile stretches across my face as I sass him, “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

He shakes his head slowly and grips my hand gently before sliding the ring into place. “I don’t need to ask. You’ve already said yes.”

Even though I’m sitting on his lap, I manage to launch myself at him, knocking him back onto the bed, as I pepper kisses all over his face. Pure fucking joy.

Somehow, our clothes fall away, and he slides down my body until he can bury his face between my thighs. The subtle burn of his beard against my thighs, the weight of the ring on my finger, and the promise in his eyes of forever send me spiraling through my first orgasm almost immediately.

He growls as he feasts on me. It’s like he wants to climb inside my body and take up residence. Silly man, he’s already embedded in my heart.



CHAPTER 8

GANNON

I bring the axe down on another piece of wood and I can feel my woman's eyes on me from where she's perched near the back of the house and looking out the wall of windows. My back is to her but only because I know she likes the show. I can practically feel how turned on she is from here.

Fuck, Lake strokes my ego with a single look and right now her eyes make it feel like she's rubbing her curves against my body.

It's not like other women haven't looked at me, they have, but I didn't like the attention. I crave the way my fiancé looks at me, the way she watches me. I love it when she lights up when I walk into the room and the way she shows me how much he cares about me with her eyes.

She's so fucking expressive that it takes my breath away.

Everything about her soothes a piece of me and I'm feeling more and more like a man worthy of her every day. I'll never take her for granted though. Hell no, I won't ever give my little present a reason to walk away from me.

I couldn't bear it.

Seeing her yesterday with tears streaming down her face as she let all her worries and fears out just about gutted me.

I'm sure I didn't help matters because I drove down the mountain without her. I wasn't sure if I hid my relief that she was going to stay behind, but considering her state when I got back home, I'm going with I completely sucked at hiding it from her.

I just needed the chance to go in and pick up my woman's engagement ring. I sure as fuck didn't want to do it in front of her. It needed to be a surprise because she deserves the romance. Especially since she showed up at my door expecting to get married.

I had planned to wait until Christmas, but I knew I couldn't put it off the

moment I saw Lake frantically searching through her stuff. She looked more lost than she did when she showed up at my door. There was no way I wasn't going to put all her fears to rest since it was in my power to do so.

Hearing her tell me that she had fallen in love with me along with Storm and Jasper Ridge changed my entire life. Just like when I opened my front door to find her about to step up onto my porch.

I was not at all prepared to be blindsided, but I was. Hearing those words, so simple but with a huge impact, was almost too much. I wanted her to love me, and she does.

I'm a lucky fucking man.

Knowing she's watching me, I put my axe down before I set another log up to be split. I reach back and pull the henley I'm wearing over my head before turning slightly toward where I know she's sitting and tossing it in that direction. I swear I can hear her wolf whistle, but it's probably all in my head.

I've worked up quite a sweat getting more wood ready for the fireplace. We're expecting a few more inches of snowfall to come through tomorrow or the next day, but it won't stick around for long. I have plans for my fiancé down the mountain and there's no way a little snow is going to slow me down.

When I pick up the axe again, I flex my arms as I put another log in place and split it. I allow myself to get lost into the mindless task, the entire time feeling my woman's eyes on me. I've never split wood with a fucking boner which could probably do the job without the axe, but there's a first time for everything.

The longer I'm outside, the hotter I become and it's not only about the work I'm putting in. Lake's eyes feel like fire against my body and I'm practically buzzing just underneath my skin.

It feels like the last few logs take for fucking ever, but I know it's just because I'm desperate to go inside and fuck my woman until she can't walk straight. The way she's been watching me, her focus intense and unwavering, has me feeling on edge, but in the best way.

If it were anyone else's eyes on me, I would be a grumpy asshole, but she

can look as much as she wants. Hell, I crave her eyes on me and all her attention.

I put the axe down and then stretch out my back, my mind drifting to the fact that she's staying. I'm going to marry her as soon as I can, but I know there is one more thing that we need to deal with. Her brother.

With everything Lake's told me about him, he's not going to be happy to find out that she's run off to marry a virtual stranger. I can only hope my love for her and the need I have to protect and care for her will be enough for Nico. I know it's a job he's taken seriously up to this point, but it's not his job anymore.

It's mine.

Even though I don't want to, I take the time to put away my axe and then stack the wood in the storage I've set up on the back porch. It won't help me if it's soaked through when the snow starts falling.

I can still feel Lake watching my every move. I have a vision of her with her hand shoved down her leggings, her delicate fingers buried inside of her sweet pussy as she fucks herself and watches me.

My cock is straining against the fly of my jeans, desperate to be let free, but the fucker is going to have to wait a few more minutes. It's torture but it's the sweetest kind.

I'll be buried inside my woman soon. Then we can spend the rest of the day wrapped up in each other.

The moment all the wood is stacked, I grab my discarded henley and vault up the stairs, not even bothering to take them one at a time. It would take too much fucking time and I'm already on edge.

My steps are predatory as I step inside the back door. It might not be what I was imagining moments ago, but I do get to watch my fiancé shimmy out of her leggings, her shirt already discarded on the ground beside her feet.

"You like watching?" I stalk closer to her, my eyes roaming over her naked body as I drop my shirt to the ground. "Did you get wet while watching me?"

"You put on quite a show," her voice is low and husky.

I growl, needing the words from her sweet lips, “And are you wet for me, little present?”

Her lips turn up in a wicked smile, one full of promises and temptation. “If you want to know,” she ghosts her hand over the side of her body, the ring on her finger—my ring—catching the light, “why don’t you find out for yourself?”

I close the distance between us, bend, and hoist her over my shoulder. She gasps and clings to me, but she doesn’t fight me. The way she’s put her trust in me is exhilarating and a little scary.

I won’t squander it.

I stomp my way through the house until I’m standing next to our bed. Yes, our bed. Officially.

After I slipped my ring on her finger, I was easily able to talk Lake into moving all her stuff into our bedroom. I glance around and see her things mixed in with mine and can’t help but smile.

She didn’t come here with a lot of things. I get it, traveling that far with too much stuff would have been a nightmare, especially since she wasn’t sure what she was going to find on the other end of the adventure. Still, I hate that she doesn’t have much.

When I asked her about it, she just smiled at me sweetly and kissed me softly. “I don’t want a lot of stuff, Gannon. I have what I need and it’s enough. One day we’ll go to Seattle and go through the things I put into storage, but I’m good until then.”

It’s not enough though. She deserves the entire fucking world at her feet. I’m going to figure out a way to give it to her. She’ll never want for anything with me.

I slide Lake down my body from over my shoulder, letting her feel the hard planes of my chest and how hard I am for her as I do. The moan she lets out is pure carnality and I can feel pre-cum leak from the tip of my dick.

When she’s standing, I slide a hand between her thighs and trace the seam of her pussy lips with the tip of my finger. I grunt, “Dripping for me.”

“Oh my,” she keens, “please Gannon. I’m already so damn close just from

watching you outside.”

I look down at myself and see wood chips on my pants and I know I’m covered in grime and sweat. I should go and take a shower first, but when I look into my woman’s eyes and see the hunger there, I know I can’t deny her.

“Get on the bed, hands and knees,” I gruffly command her.

I watch as her tits and ass jiggle slightly with how quickly she moves to follow my directions. While my eyes are drinking up their fill of her, my hands are making quick work of undoing my belt and jeans.

I kick off my shoes and then shuck my clothing completely. My cock springs free of my boxer briefs and comes up to hit my abdomen. I don’t think I’ve ever been harder in my life and staring at my woman’s heart shaped ass is not helping matters at all.

I step up to her and run the tips of my fingers up and down the backs of her thighs, teasing her when I know her needy little pussy is dying to be filled by my cock. My cock and my cum.

I growl because my woman is off her birth control now. I probably should have talked to her about it, but I did warn her I was going to find the pills and get rid of them. I’m a man of my fucking word and those pills were on borrowed time from the moment I set my eyes on Lake.

“Gannon,” she whines and looks over her shoulder at me. Her voice takes on a demanding edge that has my cock throbbing, “Are you going to fuck me or just look at me?”

I smirk at her before slapping one ass cheek and then the other. She lets out a surprised yelp, but it’s not a sound of pain. Not even a little bit.

I watch as her pussy glistens with even more of her arousal and I clench my jaw to stop myself from blowing my load all over my woman’s ass before I’ve even buried myself inside of her. I slap her ass again, one cheek and then the other, mesmerized by the way she gets even wetter when I do.

“I’m going to fuck you, little present,” I promise, my voice deeper and raspier than it’s ever been before.

All because I’m right on the edge. She does this to me. No one else.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

I grip her hip with one hand, my fingers digging into her so hard I'm probably leaving bruises behind. The thought of being able to see the evidence of how wild she drives me has me gripping my cock and sliding the crown up and down her glistening slit.

Lake arches her back, and her fingers dig into the sheet below her. "Fill me up. Fill me up," she repeats the words, a chant begging for our pleasure, for us to become one.

I slam inside my woman to the hilt, my thrust hard enough that she can barely stay up on her knees. I reach forward and grip her shoulder, pulling her back toward me. When she squeezes around my length, stars dance across my vision and my fingers tighten on her body.

I start to move my hips, filling her and then pulling back until only the head of my cock is inside of her. Every time I fill her, I pull her back toward me by the grip I have on her shoulders, fucking her and making her body move to fuck me as well.

Her moans fill the air and I know I won't be able to last much longer. Not with the way her walls are rippling around me and begging me for every ounce of my cum.

"Need you to coat my cock in your slick," I grit out through my teeth, barely hanging on. "Then I'll fill you with my cum."

"Fuck, Gannon," her breathless moans make me fuck her harder and faster, "fill me. Need it."

I grunt and growl as I slam into her. We climb higher, our pleasure mounting and feeding each other. Her thighs start to shake as I fill her, and her walls squeeze around my length. I push inside of her as deep as I can go, and my vision goes white.

My knees go weak, and I grip her as jets of my cum fill her. When her arms give out, I lean over her and kiss right in the middle of her back and then across her shoulders.

"I love you, Lake," I murmur against her skin.

"Love you," she murmurs and makes a sound of contentment.

I hope I can get her to make that sound every day for the rest of our lives.



CHAPTER 9

LAKE

I look at the tree which is now in Gannon's living room—and fully decorated—and smile. Best. Christmas. Ever.

I got my Scrooge to decorate. Granted, we didn't have a lot to choose from yesterday when we drove down the mountain and scoured Jasper Ridge to find a tree, ornaments, lights, and a wreath for the front door. That doesn't matter to me at all. We could have a tree with barely any branches, and I would be a happy woman.

Christmas really isn't about decorations anyway. It's about who you spend it with. As the man I love snuggles me while we watch the fire dancing in the fireplace with a mug of hot cocoa, marshmallows included, in my hand, I don't have a single thing to complain about.

Yesterday when we went down the mountain, I told him he better not look for any gifts for me. He pouted, but I put my hand on his thigh, his eyes fixed on the road, and squeezed.

"I mean it," I insisted, "I don't want stuff. I have a feeling you're going to spoil me year-round, Gannon. I don't want to open any gifts tomorrow. Being here with you, being your fiancé, and decorating the house is enough of a gift for me."

He grumbled, but I knew he accepted my words. It was all true too. I never needed gifts or stuff. I have always been searching for something much more important—love. I never got it from my parents and until I took a chance and left my life in Seattle to travel all the way to Wyoming, the only person I have always been sure about when it comes to love is Nico.

That's not the case anymore. I know my big, gruff, growly, protective mountain man loves me. I can feel his love wrap around me and give me comfort. It makes me feel stronger than I've ever felt before. It makes me feel like I've found my place.

I've been searching for so long, and I never could have predicted the road

which led me here. I guess taking some risks does pay off. I was never brave before, but I think it was fate that I found the ad when I did.

Fate and maybe a little luck. But then I had to have the courage to take a chance.

I'm proud of myself and damn happy it paid off in a big way.

Gannon's arm squeezes around my shoulder as he nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck, his beard dragging across my skin and making me shiver. This man.

He can turn me on like no one else ever has. I swear I would spend all day in bed with him if I thought I wouldn't end up sore, dehydrated and sticky. Very, very sticky.

Storm lifts his head when my phone rings and I glance at it to find Nico calling me.

I've been putting him off, but I think things were going down with whatever business he's been doing for the club because he hasn't reached out as much the last few days. I can only hope he's safe, along with whoever else the club has out there doing whatever the hell it is they're doing.

I fumble with my phone for a moment, my hand shaking, until Gannon takes the mug of cocoa out of my hand and sets it on the coffee table. With my phone gripped in both hands, I take a deep breath and answer.

"Nico," I chirp, forced levity lining my voice in a way that almost makes me wince, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, little sis," he sounds exhausted and I'm instantly on high alert.

"Are you okay?"

He sighs and I can almost see him running his fingers through his hair. "I'm good. Everyone here with me is safe. It's just been a long day. We're wrapping things up in Tennessee and I'll be heading home very soon," there's a warning in his voice I can't ignore.

"I'm not in Seattle anymore, Nico. I told you that," I keep my voice soft, not wanting to piss off the only family I have left and knowing this is going

to be a hard change for him.

It's not like we see each other every day or anything, but it was often enough. My heart clenches because I'm not going to see my brother as much anymore. We'll still be able to talk, and I hope I can get him to come out and visit me. I'm more than willing to visit him in Seattle as well.

But if Gannon's serious about starting our family right away—with my birth control long gone, it seems he is—traveling might become difficult for us.

I glance at my big mountain man teddy bear to find him watching me with concern in his dark blue eyes. I give him a watery smile, the reality of the situation hitting me hard. I'm not going to change my mind, and I certainly don't regret making this change, but that doesn't mean it's easy either.

“So you said,” he grunts. “Now that I have a few minutes, I need you to tell me more about why you're in Wyoming and what made you leave your life in Seattle. I thought you were happy,” his voice is filled with vulnerability I'm not used to hearing from my brother.

“Nico, I love you.” I think that's the best place to start. “You're the best big brother. I'm so grateful to you for all you've done for me. The way you've always protected me and made decisions with my happiness and needs in mind. You raised me, even though you were just a kid yourself most of that time.”

“I'd do anything for you, Lake, you know that,” his voice is thick. “I never wanted you to feel the sting of our parents not giving a shit. I was the only one there who could step up, so I did.”

He says it like it's simple, like anyone would make the same decisions. Maybe for him it is black and white, but I know there is nothing simple about it. A lot of people wouldn't have done half of what he did for me.

“I know you made a lot of sacrifices to make sure I had what I needed.” I hedge, “I wasn't unhappy in Seattle, Nico.”

“But you weren't happy either,” he sounds defeated.

“I didn't feel like I had a place to belong. It's hard to be yourself and feel comfortable in your own skin when you feel out of place.” I huff out a small

laugh. “I hated my job. I hadn’t dated in years.”

Nico perks up, “Dated? Why the fuck did you need to date, Lake?”

I roll my eyes and try to push down the anger starting to rise inside of me. Now is not the time to fight with the man.

“Dating is part of life. It’s an important part,” I remind him.

Gannon lets out a growl and I look over to find his possessive gaze locked onto me. He’s clearly not happy with the thought of me dating anyone. I give him a pointed look and roll my eyes.

“What the fuck was that? Are you there with someone?” Nico sounds almost hysterical, “A man?”

“Yes, Nico,” my voice is gentle, “I am here with someone. Yes, a man.”

“You never did tell me how you chose where to go,” he sounds suspicious. “I thought you might have just really needed a vacation and you’d be back.”

I ignore the last part of his statement because I never said anything to give him that impression. I’m also not surprised he would think such a thing.

“I answered a personals ad,” I mumble the words, “and that’s how I came across Jasper Ridge. It’s how I met Gannon.”

I could have tried to come up with a lie, but my brother has always been good at knowing exactly when I’m not being completely honest with him. It’s only because he was out of town and doing something for the club that I’ve been able to get away with it for this long already.

“You what?” He roars the words so loud I pull the phone away from my ear. “Who the fuck is Gannon? What do you mean you answered a personals ad? What the fuck, Lake?”

“It’s exactly how it sounds, Nico,” sarcasm drips into my words even though I try and hold it back. “The funny thing is, when I got here, he had no idea anyone had put an ad out there for him.”

“He didn’t even know...,” Nico starts to mutter before his voice trails off. “I can’t fucking believe this. Went all the way to Wyoming because of a personals ad and didn’t turn right back around after finding out the guy had nothing to do with it,” he’s talking quietly, clearly more to himself than me.

“I know you don’t understand, but it’s worked out. Gannon is an amazing man, and he treats me like I’m precious,” I insist, hoping to talk my brother off the ledge.

Gannon leans in and kisses my temple, his words a soft whisper against my hair, “Because you are precious.”

“I never knew you to be so fucking stupid,” Nico snarls and I gasp, my eyes filling with tears.

Sure, we’ve had fights here and there throughout our lives. We’re siblings after all, but there were always lines we never crossed. Calling me stupid for my decisions crosses the line.

I know he’s hurting, upset, and confused about my actions, but he doesn’t get to lash out at me. Even if he thinks he’s doing it in the name of keeping me safe.

“I felt like I was being stifled in Seattle, but here I feel free,” I try to tell him, my voice tumultuous.

“You’re going to come back home,” Nico insists like I didn’t say anything.

Like I am too stupid to make my own decisions.

Like I’m a little girl who needs her big brother to swoop in and save the day.

Like nothing has changed.

A tear rolls down my cheek and Gannon gently takes my phone out of my hand. He presses something on the screen and then his gruff voice is wrapping around me, “Nico.” He barks, “I don’t know what you just said to Lake, but she’s crying right now. I won’t allow that shit to happen. Not when I can stop it.”

Nico growls, “Who the fuck is this?”

“My name is Gannon Parsons. I’m a former Marine. I own land in Jasper Ridge where I built my cabin. I have a younger brother, Slade, who plays for the University of Mariposa football team. He’s expected to be drafted in the spring.” He takes a breath and holds my gaze. “I do independent consulting

work for security firms. I don't need to work much and can do a good portion of it remotely."

I blink up at Gannon, my heart growing bigger with every word he says. He's not just defending me, but himself as well. And our love. Our life.

I couldn't be prouder of the man I've fallen in love with than I am in this moment. We hadn't talked about what he does for work, but if he's worried about my reaction, he shouldn't be. I don't care what he does. I just want him to be happy.

"How do I know you're not just blowing sunshine up my ass?" Nico's voice is firm, but there's a smidge of hesitancy in it as well.

"Lake has told me about you and your club. She said a guy named Friar handles your IT. Have him run me down. He'll find out all about me, my service record, my net worth, my family history—which was shit, much like yours. I don't have anything to hide." He looks at me and his eyes soften. "I love your sister. She is the most amazing woman I've ever met. She has grit and determination, but she's soft and beautiful. I promise I will make her happy."

"Fuck," Nico barks and I blanch.

I don't know what he's going to say next, but I also don't really want to hear it. I was afraid he would blow up at me and he did. I guess I wasn't as prepared as I thought I was.

"Listen, I'm going to be marrying your sister in a few days. I want her to be my wife before the New Year. I was going to surprise her by taking her down to the courthouse on Friday since she already told me she doesn't want some big thing. I hope you can be there to support her. She loves you so damn much."

"You're marrying my sister on Friday?"

"I'm not going to wait. She's mine. I'm hers. That's just the way it is." He pauses, his dark blue eyes fixed on me, and he winks. "We hope to see you here. I look forward to meeting the man Lake loves so much, the one she hasn't stopped telling me stories about. She thinks you're a good man. I hope you prove her right."

With those final words, Gannon hangs up. He. Hangs. Up.

On my brother. Nico. My brother.

He hangs the fuck up.

My jaw is on the damn floor as I stare at him, but he smirks at me and shrugs like it's no big deal. But it is. It's a huge deal.

I wrap my arm around the back of Gannon's neck and pull him down until our lips are almost touching. "I love you," I whisper softly before I kiss him with all the passion, love, and need my body contains for this man.

I do hope Nico shows up, but even if he doesn't, I know I'm right where I belong.



CHAPTER 10

GANNON

The dress Lake has on is simple, but it's gorgeous on her. It's not white, but I don't need it to be. Not to marry the woman I had no idea I needed in my life. She looks up at me and smiles softly, but I can see a little bit of hurt in her eyes. I hate that it's there.

I hate that I can't do anything about it.

I look down the street one more time, hoping Nico shows up right this second. I sent him a message so he would know what time we were getting married, just in case. It seems luck isn't on my side this time, even though it certainly was when Lake pulled up to my house. It wasn't long ago, but I've learned life can change in an instant. I'm glad this time it was a change for the better.

I'm going to take care of my woman. I'm going to show her she always comes first. We'll fill our house with laughter and the sound of small feet hitting the hard wood while Storm gives chase. We'll have memories of food fights, skinned knees, grand adventures, and small miracles.

We'll fill our lives with love.

"Wait," Eliane calls out when I start to turn Lake toward the entrance to the courthouse. Elaine is powerwalking in our direction with Albert trailing behind her, a big smile on his face. "We're here. We're here," she huffs when she gets to us and immediately wraps her arms around us.

I chuckle and hug Elaine back. She startles a little as she looks up at me and I can understand why. Touch was something I avoided for a long time, but as more of the broken pieces of me heal, the more I crave affection.

I think I was afraid to completely accept the love the Langs have always offered to me. Slade soaked it up, but he was so much younger than I was when he became friends with Hollis and found a safe haven at the Lang house. I had many more years of abandonment and neglect working against me.

“Thank you for inviting us to your wedding,” Elaine snuffles and looks at us with tear filled eyes and a watery smile. She turns her attention to Lake and gushes, “You look beautiful, dear.”

My woman blushes, a huge smile on her face. “Thank you. I know it’s not white or very traditional, but I’ve always loved this dress.”

Even though her coat covers most of it, I still take in the baby blue dress covered in embroidered flowers. I know how it hugs her curves and makes her look like a queen. I’m already looking forward to sliding it off her body later tonight.

Albert wraps his arm around his wife’s shoulders, a look of pride on his face when he looks at me. “Well, I think it’s about time to get the two of you hitched. What do you think, kids?”

Lake laughs and looks up at me, her brown eyes sparkling with happiness. They’re not Nico, and I know how much she wishes he was here with us right now, but it does show her that we have people who support us. I’m sure it means the world to her because it does to me.

I lead my fiancé up the steps to the courthouse, Elaine tittering behind us. The woman’s happiness is infectious. I find myself smiling so big my cheeks start to hurt. I’m going to marry Lake; she’s going to be my wife.

I guess Christmas is the time for miracles.

Just as I reach for the handle of the door, manic honking rings out from down the street. Lake whips her head around just as a truck comes barreling down the road and skids to a stop in front of the courthouse. It’s a good thing that Jasper Ridge really isn’t known for its traffic.

Lake gasps when a man practically vaults out of the truck and starts to take huge strides in our direction. When she starts to bound toward him, I try and grab her, but she’s too fast for me. I’m right on her heels as she launches herself into the man’s arms. I clench my fists together to not grab her away from him.

“Nico,” my woman gasps and squeezes her arms around the man’s neck even tighter and I force myself to relax a fraction. “I didn’t think you were going to come.”

I eye the man as his eyes come up and meet mine. We take each other's measure, neither of us giving anything away as we do. When he sets Lake down on her feet, I gently tug her back against my chest with one hand while I reach the other around her for Nico to shake.

"Nico," my voice is a low rumble, "I'm Gannon. It's nice to meet you."

The look of reluctance on Nico's face is almost comical as he shakes my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Gannon." He looks back at his sister and gives her a genuine smile. "I couldn't let my sister get married without me." He leans down and kisses her forehead. "I'm sorry I was almost late. After leaving Tennessee I had to go back to Seattle and fill in Spark and Rites before I could head this way."

"I'm just glad you're here," my woman's voice is thick with emotion. "You aren't going to tell me how stupid I'm being again, are you?"

Nico's entire being fucking deflates. When he looks at me and then his sister, I can see the sadness and regret in his eyes. "I shouldn't have said that, Lake. I'm sorry," his voice cracks a little before he clears his throat and swallows hard. "You're the only family I have left. I know I have the club and those men are my brothers, but you're the only blood worth anything. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you either," Lake gasps out.

"If this is what you want, if this is the right path for your life to take then I'm not going to stand in your way." He shakes his head, sadness radiating off him. "I didn't realize how unhappy you were in Seattle. I should have seen it. I shouldn't have tried to keep you in some arbitrary box because I wanted to keep you safe."

Lake steps out of my hold to wrap her arms around her brother. "You were trying to protect me. I understand why you did it, Nico. I love you for it, but now it's time for me to do this. For me." She looks back at me, her brown eyes so damn loving that my heart starts to pound in my chest. "Gannon is a good man. He's the right man for me. I know our life will be filled with joy. It'll be limitless." She looks back at her brother as I try to get my emotions under control because of the way her sweet words touch me. She tilts her head to the side and studies her brother, "Isn't that what you want for me?"

“It is,” he croaks. He hugs her tight and then lets her go, giving her a gentle push backwards toward me. For a man like him, I’m sure it’s not easy to do. It’s about as close to acceptance as we’re going to get until my actions prove to him his sister will always be safe with me. “Now, let’s get you married.”

I hear sniffles behind us and turn to see Elaine wiping tears from her cheeks. When she notices me, she waves her hand dismissively and I chuckle under my breath as I tuck my woman into my side and lead her back up to the doors of the courthouse.

The ceremony doesn’t take long, everyone in the courthouse is ready and waiting for us. There aren’t exactly a lot of courthouse weddings going on in Jasper Ridge a few days before New Year’s Eve. Or anytime really.

We go with our own vows. I speak from my heart when I lay my promises at her feet. “Little present, you showed up in my life even though I wasn’t looking for you. I would have had no idea to even look for you because I wouldn’t have been able to imagine my perfect woman could even exist. You’re so damn beautiful that you take my breath away, but you’re strong, brave, sweet, and have no problem speaking your mind. I promise to always stand at your side, never fighting your battles until you give me the nod. Then I’ll step in and slay anyone who thinks less of you, who makes you feel even a moment of sadness or pain. I’ll walk this life with you because you make me see the world through fresh eyes and without the demons of my past weighing me down. You drove up to my house and you saved me. I don’t know how you managed it, but I promise to do the same for you every single day until I take my last breath. Even then, I’ll find you in the next life because our fates are entwined by something stronger than life and death, it’s mixed in stardust and forever.”

I reach up and wipe away the tears which have escaped my woman’s glassy eyes. But they aren’t tears of sadness. They’re made of pure fucking happiness and joy. I hate to see her cry, but these tears feel like redemption.

“Gannon,” Lake’s voice is a husky rasp, “I knew something had shifted when I decided to take a chance and follow a pull that I didn’t understand but couldn’t ignore. It led me straight to you, to a life I never could have dreamed up but am so glad is mine. You make me feel like I can conquer anything. You see me for who I am, and you want me to soar. I promise to honor you

and the gift of your love. I will walk beside you, holding your hand and encouraging your hopes, your dreams while fighting your fears and your demons. I'll hold you when it seems like the darkness is too big. I'll mend you when you feel broken. I'll celebrate you when you fight and win. You're an amazing man who I am lucky to know, but having your love? It's miraculous. I can't wait to see what life has in store for us next." She gives me a pointed look and my cock starts to thicken in my slacks at the thought of getting her pregnant. "I can't wait to walk this path with you. There will be lows and there will be highs, but together we'll face whatever comes next with the strength of our love at our backs."

I can't tear my eyes away from my woman's gaze as we are announced husband and wife. Then I kiss the woman I never saw coming but am so grateful for that I barely have words to express it. She clings to me, kissing me back with passion and adoration.

Someone clearing their throat is the only thing which has us pulling apart slowly. When Lake glances over at Nico, her face turns bright red, and I bark out a laugh.

"I'm glad you're making an honest woman out of her and all, but I don't need to see all that," there's a joking quality to his voice as he shivers.

Lake reaches over and gives him a shove, the sound of her laughter settling deep in my soul. I want to hear her laugh like that every day for the rest of our lives.

This woman. She's so damn special; she changed my entire life.

Elaine claps and we turn our attention to her. She gives me a sheepish smile. "I hope you don't mind, but I have two things to tell you." I arch an eyebrow, having a feeling about at least one thing she's going to say. "I'm the one who put the ad up," there's not even a hint of apology in her voice and she sounds almost smug.

Albert rolls his eyes and shakes his head at his wife. "No offense honey, but I have a feeling they figured it out already."

Elaine giggles and shrugs. "I'm not even sorry," she admits honestly.

Lake's voice is full of curiosity, "What's the other thing?"

“Oh,” Elaine gasps, “there’s a reception at our house for you. Now, I’m not the one who spread it around, but when word got out about the two of you getting married, I was approached about the town wanting to throw you a wedding reception.”

Lake looks up at me, surprise written all over her face. I kiss her forehead and murmur, “I’m not at all surprised. Everyone who has met you has fallen in love with you, little present.”

“Well, I guess we can’t let down the town,” my wife’s words are filled with laughter and excitement.

Part of me wants to grumble and lash out. I just want to take my woman home and bury my cock deep inside of her, but we should celebrate our marriage. I don’t want her to ever look back on today and wish she had more.

A good portion of the town is waiting for us when we get to the Lang’s house and Nico is instantly caught up in meeting everyone. I’m so damn glad I didn’t have to track the man down and kill him for breaking his sister’s heart.

Everyone congratulates us, giving us hugs and smiles. I can feel the love this town has for me and how glad they are that I’m not isolated up on the mountain. I don’t think I’ll ever move back down into town because I’m happy up in the cabin. Still, knowing they don’t see me as the monster I’ve seen in myself for so long makes me feel lighter.

Hours later, with Nico staying at the Lang’s house, I’m finally able to take my wife back home. When I help her out of my truck, I scoop her up in my arms, her giggles ringing out across the mountain and making the world light up in a way only she can.

She clings to my neck. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying my wife over the threshold before I take her to bed so I can fill her with my cum,” I growl, my cock pulsing with every word.

Lake makes a humming sound and looks up at me lovingly. “I like the way you think, husband.” I groan, the sound pained and full of longing. I’ve been waiting all day for this. She kisses along my jawline and whispers, “I love being your wife. I love you.”

“I love you, my little present. You came out of nowhere, but you have shown me that miracles are very real.”

When I lay her down on our bed, I know I’m going to spend the rest of the night and my life worshiping this woman. She’s everything to me and I’m going to show her just how much she means to me.

A primal part of me roars with the need to claim this woman. Over and fucking over. Maybe the beast in me will calm when her swollen pussy is dripping my cum and she’s too tired to take me one more time. But even then, it’ll only be until I can be inside of her again.

“Gonna breed you tonight, wife,” I growl.

She moans and arches her back, her voice raspy with need, “Can’t fucking wait.”

Me either.

Our lives together are just starting. What comes next is up to us. But I do know we’ll be standing together through it all.



EPILOGUE

FIVE MONTHS LATER *LAKE*

Gannon and I have been in Seattle for a week. I guess you could call it our honeymoon since I told him I didn't want to go anywhere after we got married. Not only was winter really going to settle in, but I just wanted to enjoy being with my husband in our home. I wanted that closeness and traveling to some exotic destination never really held any appeal for me.

Instead of exploring a place, we explored each other's bodies, and it was more than enough for me. The way my husband can play my body is beyond compare. I'm a lucky woman and I don't hesitate to show him just how much I appreciate the way he worships me by doing the same to him.

I smile over to where Gannon and Nico are playing a game of pool while we hang out in the DSMC clubhouse. It feels different being here now. Not only because Seattle and this place is no longer my home, but because Nico has relaxed into the idea of letting me have my own life.

I'm proud of my big brother, but I have a feeling that him relaxing has more to do with him trusting Gannon to protect me than it does anything else. It's okay, I'll take it.

"I'm pretty sure you're cheating," Nico grumbles at my husband who just grins back at my brother.

"That's a pretty grave accusation," Gannon ribs him back.

I chuckle to myself at the relationship they've forged together through phone calls and Nico coming to see us when the weather would allow it and he could step away from his duties at the club.

I tease them about their bromance all the time, but they don't seem to mind. I'm happy they're getting along. It makes me feel all warm and cozy.

As much as I've loved visiting Seattle again, I'm looking forward to going home. I have a surprise for my husband that I'll give to him later tonight

during the club's official going away party for us.

Nico isn't the only one who has accepted Gannon. It seems like all the brothers in the club have welcomed him with open arms. I have a feeling if we didn't live so far away from Seattle, or any chapter of the DSMC, he would be made a brother without much fuss.

Our vacation has been spent exploring a city Gannon has never been to, while giving me an opportunity to say goodbye to the place where I grew up. Part of me is going to miss it here, but I'm not looking back.

Why bother? I have so much to look forward to in Jasper Ridge.

All the stuff I put in storage has been gone through and either donated or packed up for the drive back home. We even had to rent a trailer. I thought Gannon might complain it's too much stuff, but I should have known better.

My husband never complains when it comes to me.

Still, I can tell he's looking forward to heading back home as well.

When we dropped Storm off with the Langs, I thought Gannon was going to cry. The man got down on the floor and wrapped his arms around the dog's neck, murmuring, "It won't be forever. We'll be back. Be a good dog and don't get too spoiled."

Elaine gasped and pressed her hand to her heart in mock outrage. "We would never spoil him."

Gannon gave her a pointed look, but the woman just laughed. She waved her hand dismissively as he reminded her, "He doesn't get table scraps. I brought plenty of dog food for him."

Elaine looked at me and winked as I sat down next to my husband and Storm crawled right into my lap, looking up at me with his big soulful eyes. I hugged him as well, knowing he probably would hate being cooped up in the truck for the drive, but not liking leaving him behind either.

"We'll miss you," I whispered, and Storm snuggled into me as if he knew exactly what I was saying to him.

I swear Gannon had tears in his eyes when we were driving away, Storm barking his own goodbyes to us.

When I reached over and gave his thigh a squeeze, I tried to reassure him. “He’ll be fine. You know they love their grandpup.”

He nodded, but I knew he was hating leaving Storm as much as I was but was trying to push the feeling away. He grumbled, “They’d probably love grandchildren even more.”

I smiled at him, knowing he was eager to knock me up. Little did he know that he already had. I was just waiting for the right time to tell him.

Tonight will be perfect because not only will I get to tell Gannon, but Nico and the rest of the club as well. We have a lot to celebrate tonight.

I never knew what love really was, but then I took a chance that changed my entire life. I don’t regret it for a moment.

Nico tosses his cue onto the pool table and scowls, his exasperated words pulling my attention back to him. “I thought you said you weren’t very good.”

Gannon throws his head back and laughs, giving a casual shrug that reeks of male pride and smugness. When he looks at me, he winks before heading toward me. I’ve been sitting at a table with a few of the old ladies of the club. There aren’t many, but I have a feeling their numbers are going to keep increasing.

When I first met the men of the DSMC, none of the younger guys had old ladies, but once one of the men fell, it started a domino effect. I’m glad the men of the club are finding their happiness; they deserve it and the women they’ve fallen for are strong and exactly what each man needs.

I stand as Gannon gets closer, letting out a small gasp when he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into his chest. His lips slam down on mine, and I melt into him. I hear Nico let out a groan of annoyance, but I don’t pay him any mind.

When Gannon pulls away, I smile up at him, joy filling every piece of me. His dark blue eyes are intense and focused on me, even as some of the brothers catcall and whoop around us. “I love you, my little present,” he murmurs, not at all bothered by the chaos surrounding us.

I play with the hair at the nape of his neck, his love making me giddy. I

can't wait to tell him my news. I know he's going to be the best father. My eyes well up with tears because it's overwhelming how much my life has changed.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love you, Gannon. I'm so glad you accepted me as your mail order bride."

The laugh he lets out has my heart beating hard against the inside of my chest. He was a grump, a self-proclaimed Scrooge who was happy being isolated from the rest of the world.

But look at him now.

Just look at him now.

**Want more Lake and Gannon?
Get [Mail Order Bride for the Scrooge's Bonus Epilogue](#)**

**Interested in Slade, Hollis, and Salem's story?
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While not mentioned in this book, Jasper and Jade have one more brother--Stone.

Curious about his book?

Check out [Scarred Beginnings \(Heart of a Wounded Hero Series\)](#)

If you want to read more about the DSMC, check out my [website](#).

Don't worry, Nico will be getting his book soon!

Want to start at the beginning of the Denver Family books?

Read Amelia and Beckett's story in [Protecting His Home \(Banks Ink. Book 1\)](#)

You can find a complete chronological reading order for my Denver Family books and a book map that covers the entire universe on my [website](#).

There will be more stories from Jasper Ridge. Make sure you're following my socials and are signed up to get my newsletter to make sure you don't miss any announcements about upcoming books!

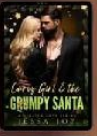


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

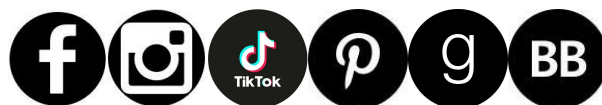


Ember Davis loves alpha heroes with a range of emotions, but a strong sense of how to take care of their women. She loves her heroines from all walks of life, just like her heroes, and she wants them to be real and relatable. Her heroines tend to be sassy, opinionated and smart.

Ember is a stay-at-home mom of two who recently refound her love of books and all things romance and is so glad that she did. She's always been creative but writing and creating stories that she would love to read satisfies dreams she had as a little girl. She loves butterflies, the color purple and enjoying time with her family.

Pssst...it's totally a pen name, but everything above is 100% true.

If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review and/or a star rating on Amazon! This is a whole new world for me so any feedback you're open to giving, I'd love to have.



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