

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



Snowed In

WITH THE

SCROOGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KARA KENDRICK

SNOWED IN WITH THE SCROOGE

ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



KARA KENDRICK





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Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Jordan Bailey of [Successful Writer Marketplace](#)

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SNOWED IN WITH THE SCROOGE INFO

Ashton

This single mama needs a break before Santa shows up.

A quick, kid-free getaway to the ski town of Spruce Ridge before the holidays is perfect.

Well, almost perfect. Arguing with a handsome, grumpy stranger over the last frozen pizza at the general store isn't the best way to start a vacay. Neither is an impending blizzard rolling up the mountain, but it'll be fine. I've got wine, the pizza, and a hot tub.

Until I accidentally lock myself out of the rental cabin.

Wearing only my bikini.

In a blizzard.

Not ideal.

My only option is trudging to the cabin next door and asking for help.

And of course, the neighbor happens to be Mr. Hottie Grumpypants from the general store —the same guy I kinda, sorta managed to grab the last frozen pizza from— and he's still salty about it.

When the power goes out, we're trapped together in his cabin with only the fire for warmth. Sparks fly, things quickly heating up between us, and now Christmas is looking a whole lot merrier.

But is this self-proclaimed workaholic scrooge interested in building a life with a sunshiny single mom like me, or will the holiday magic vanish come January?

This story has earned the Stand Out Story Award from Last Chapter Press.

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CHAPTER 1



ASHTON

“FA-LA-LA-LA-LA. LA-LA-LA-LA!” I BELT OUT THE FAMILIAR holiday tune at the top of my lungs as I round the curve into Spruce Ridge, the idyllic ski resort town I’m visiting for one blissful week.

Work-free.

Kid-free.

Drama-free.

#bliss.

Don’t get me wrong, I love my kids. Adore them, in fact. But mama needs a break every once in a while. This single mom gig is tough, especially when I can never—and I do mean never—count on my ex.

The only reason I’m even getting this break is because Gabriel, the unfortunate ex, wants to trot the kids out in front of his new girlfriend. Probably to seem more grounded and give the impression he’s a wonderful, doting dad.

Which, to be clear, he is not.

But who am I to argue with a week off, especially during the busy holiday season? Gives me more time to shop, bake Christmas cookies, and watch romantic holiday movies. I planned on staying home, but then my best friend, Stella, and my brother, Wes, gifted me this trip. A combo Christmas and maid of honor gift for their upcoming wedding and I couldn’t say no.

Sliding into a vacant parking spot, I cut the ignition and grab my purse, then head into the general store for a few groceries. From the map, it looks like my rental is a decent way up the mountain, so I probably need at least a few things to eat, maybe a bottle of wine.

“Howdy!” A white-haired man with a bushy matching beard waves at me from behind a log counter and I wave back.

“Hi!”

“You need any help, gimme a holler.”

I nod and pick up a plastic shopping basket. “Will do.”

Instrumental Christmas music hums in the background as I wind my way through the tiny, rustic store. Grabbing the essentials from the wooden shelves —crackers, chocolate, coffee, chardonnay— I head over to the refrigerated section in the back. I wedge cheese, eggs, and creamer in, my biceps straining under the growing weight of the basket.

I should have snagged a cart instead.

Hustling over to the freezer section, I balance the basket on the crook of my left arm and throw open the icy door in search of a frozen pizza. My hand shoots out to grab the last cheese pizza and pull it from the shelf, but meets resistance.

“Hey!” I pop my head around the frosted door, tugging at the cardboard box.

“Hey, yourself.” A gruff voice shocks me back to reality. A tall, broad man in a suit and tie, of all things, scowls down at me, his fingers curled around the pizza box.

“I had that pizza. Sir,” I add for good measure. This guy looks like he’s used to being called *sir*, with those shiny dress shoes and that starched pinstriped shirt.

“No. I did. And it’s the last one. Normally, I’d let you have it, but my food options are limited here and the grocery delivery my assistant placed earlier got cancelled on account of the weather.” His dark brows squish together, deep furrow lines etching his forehead.

Dude’s really worried about this pizza.

“Well, normally I’d let you have it, but I’m not sure what my accommodations are going to be like. You see, it’s a vacation rental, and I don’t know how many pots and pans and things I’ll have. So…” I bat my eyelashes at him, thinking surely that will do the trick, but he doesn’t budge. Not even a fraction of an inch.

“I understand. Maybe you could get a lasagna instead?” He tips his head at a lone silver tray of frozen pasta, long icicles hanging from the metal edge.

“Uh-uh. No thanks, I’ll pass. But you’re welcome to it. Because, you know, I had this pizza first.” I wrap my fingers tighter around the red box, tugging it toward me. But the stubborn suit isn’t giving in.

“Technically, I had it first. Because my hand’s on top.” He nods at the box, his knuckles white from gripping so tight.

“On the right side. But my fingers are on top on the left.”

He frowns, his lips pressing together in a thin line as the frigid air from the freezer blows around us.

“Should we play rock paper scissors for it?” I ask, squaring up my shoulders. “Because I’m not going to let you just waltz away with the pizza, and it seems you’re dead-set on having it. So we need to work this out in an equitable fashion.”

The man heaves out an exasperated sigh. “Not sure how a game of chance like rock paper scissors is equitable. But I guess it’s better than flipping a coin.”

“Okay, then. Um—” I stare down at the pizza box. “You’re going to have to let go of the box to play.”

“Oh, right. Let’s put it back into the freezer. A neutral place until we sort this out.”

“Fine.”

He shoves the pizza box into the cooler, then shuts the door. My heart pounds hard in my chest, the fate of the frozen pizza hanging in the balance. I set the plastic basket down on the floor and hover my hand in the air, ready for action.

“Rock.” We bounce our fists. “Paper.” *Bounce*. “Scissors.” *Bounce*. “Shoot!”

I ball up my fist, choosing rock, while the suit throws out two fingers in a scissors sign.

“Yes!” I scream, jumping up and down, joyful victory running through my veins.

The man shakes his head, but pulls open the freezer and gamely hands me the pizza. “Here you go. All’s fair in rock paper scissors.”

“Thank you very much.” I accept the cold box, shoving it into my now-overflowing basket. “There’s still a lasagna left.”

He locks his dark caramel eyes on mine and I squirm under his disapproving gaze. This guy is one-thousand percent business— he probably works as a trader or a lawyer or something else very serious.

“I’m going to pass on that, but thanks for the suggestion.”

I shrug and smile, trying to give off my most charming vibe. “You do you. See ya!”

Sashaying away, I’m fairly certain he grumbles something to the effect of “*hope not*,” but I can’t be one-hundred percent sure.

I head up to the register and unpack my basket, the white-haired clerk ringing up all my items and making friendly small talk.

“How long you in town for?”

“A few days. I’m renting a cabin up the mountain. A holiday gift from my brother and future sister-in-law.”

“That sounds nice. Hope you have some firewood stocked up there. We’re in for some bad weather. It’s rolling in later this evening.”

“Really? Good to know.” A tiny tug of anxiety pulls low in my gut, but I ignore it.

I’m sure everything will be fine. Wes wouldn’t send me up here if the place wasn’t fully stocked and absolutely safe.

That's the kind of brother he is, always looking out for me.

“Need anything else, young lady?” The clerk bags the last of my groceries, the red pizza box winking at me from the paper sack, the cherry on top of this shopping trip.

“I think that's it, thanks so much!”

The clerk shoves the bag across the counter and I glide out of the store, eager to make it up the mountain before darkness descends and the bad weather rolls in.

CHAPTER 2



JACK

MY HOLIDAY BREAK'S OFF TO A FANTASTIC START.

Not.

Thus far, my flight was delayed, the grocery order cancelled, and apparently Spruce Ridge is under a winter weather advisory, cutting my skiing days short.

Like I said, not a fantastic start to the trip.

Top all that off with losing out on the last frozen pizza to the attractive but annoyingly persistent tourist. If she hadn't stolen my pizza, I might have checked her out, what with the bright blue-gray eyes framed by the long, dark lashes she had the audacity to flutter at me. Also, some pretty decent curves under that tight black sweater. And I might have noticed her nice round peach of an ass as she sidled away with my pizza.

Not that I'd go there —she's not my type, really— but I can still appreciate a good ass when I see one.

I roll my shoulders, trying to ease the tension that's been a constant since the last big merger deal came across my desk three months ago. Adding to the stress, my semi-serious girlfriend Kennedy dumped me on Halloween while we were at a mutual friend's party. Said she wanted to “explore her options,” whatever the hell that means. All I know for certain is I haven't heard a word from her since, not even a quick *Hey, how you doing?* text, for old time's sake.

Which is fine. I didn't think we were a love story for the ages or anything —both of us are entirely too practical for that

sort of thing— but a check-in *I miss you* or something would've been a nice stroke for my ego.

“This it, Mr. Pearson?” Dusty, the store clerk, surveys my meager selection of supplies— a few canned goods, a bottle of cabernet, extra batteries, a loaf of bread.

“Unless you have more frozen pizzas hiding around here somewhere, yes.”

“Sorry, I don't.” Dusty runs his hand over his white beard. “Had a delivery scheduled for today, but they cancelled on account of the weather. What you see is what we've got.”

“I figured.” I plunk my black AmEx onto the counter and Dusty takes it, runs the card through before handing it back to me.

“Hope you got some more supplies stocked at your cabin. This storm's gonna be pretty bad, according to the weather reports I'm hearing.”

I grab my groceries, brushing off his concern. “I do, but I'm not too worried. The news stations make it sound like Snowmageddon every time, it's how they drive advertising dollars. The last ‘huge storm’ turned out to be less than a dusting of snow. I'm sure I'll be fine.”

Dusty chuckles, his weathered cheeks wrinkling up with a smile. “That you will. You better get going, though— it's starting to get dark.”

I glance outside, the streetlights already glowing yellow against the slate gray sky, even though it's not much past five p.m.

“You stay safe out there!” Dusty waves me off as I haul the groceries out to my SUV and load them into the trunk next to my suitcase and laptop bag.

A cold blast of wind howls and I pull my jacket tighter around me, the arctic air stinging the exposed skin on the back of my neck.

I can't wait to be up in my cabin, in front of a roaring fire, sipping a glass of whiskey. I'll be reading merger documents,

but at least I'll be on my comfortable leather couch as opposed to standing behind my desk at the office.

Firing up the SUV, I blast the heat and drive slowly through the quaint town. Although it's high season for Spruce Ridge, the inclement weather must have scared a lot of people away because the streets are practically empty, the sidewalks clear. All the shops twinkle with white holiday string lights, but most have flipped their signs to "closed" for the evening, allowing their employees time to prepare for the incoming storm.

Five minutes later, I begin the slow, steep ascent up Spruce Ridge. The road's narrow, a stray branch here and there brushing against the side of my vehicle. Snow's plowed to the side and packed into hard, gray slush, but at least the road's clear. I fiddle with the radio, finding the local weather report.

"Expect severe winds and snow tonight, temperatures dropping to near-record lows. Stay indoors and be prepared for prolonged power outages," the meteorologist chirps, her voice a dramatic contrast to the dire warning she's delivering.

Wonderful. I hope the cabin has firewood. I remember seeing some last time I was up here, but that was months ago. Who knows if it's been used and restocked by the house staff. I can only hope the groundskeeper's doing his job, keeping the cabin prepared for my arrival.

Darkness engulfs the mountain as I climb higher and higher toward the sky, and now I can only see a few feet in front of me. The high beams pierce the dark veil, but beyond the two strobes of light, visibility is zero. I focus on the road directly ahead of me, inching my way up the familiar path.

Finally, I see the turn to the side road leading to my cabin, and veer to the right. My SUV climbs up the windy road, then crunches the gravel driveway beneath the heavy tires. I cut the ignition, sagging against the seat, peering at the dark log cabin.

I made it.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, I unlock the door and carefully make my way up the wooden steps, pleased to note the stairs

have been properly swept and salted, the tall fir trees trimmed.

I unlock the door and flip on the lights, bathing the space in a soft amber glow. Everything's tidy, exactly as it should be. Satisfied, I head back out to the car to grab the groceries and luggage.

Thirty minutes later, I'm unpacked, groceries are stocked, and I'm sitting in front of a toasty fire with my glass of whiskey.

"Alexa, play my jazz playlist." Smooth baritone notes float out from the state-of-the-art sound system and I close my eyes, resting my head against the cool leather.

Yes, this is exactly what I need right now. A relaxing week away from the office, time to unplug and reflect on the next stage, my next move.

I'm where I want to be in my career, the top dog. Everyone respects me, fears me, even.

And yes, I'm still single, no kids. But that's absolutely fine by me. Relationships are overrated, anyway. More headache and trouble than they're worth.

I like being alone.

Love it, in fact.

I'm a lone wolf-type and I'm good with that.

Maybe I'd make an exception for an exceptional woman, but everything would have to be spectacular— the connection, the chemistry, the sex.

Otherwise, I'm better off alone, making money and living out my adventures on my own terms.

Because I'm a loner... and the last thing I need is a plus-one.

CHAPTER 3



ASHTON

THAT SUIT AT THE GENERAL STORE WAS AN ARROGANT asshole, the type of man I vowed never to get involved with again.

Cocky, self-righteous, acting like he owns the whole damn world.

Which he very well may, judging by his quality threads and the expensive cologne wafting off his perfectly stubbled jaw.

Stubble I'd love to feel beneath my fingertips as I hold him tight, kissing the smugness right out of him.

Hold up. No. Absolutely not.

I have no idea where that wild idea came from, but just no.

The last thing I need right now is to get mixed up with yet another egotistical, know-it-all man. I've made that mistake more than once —exhibit A, Gabriel— and promised myself I'd never make it again.

Even for a quick romp, it's one-thousand percent *not worth it*.

You hear that, Ashton? Not fucking worth it.

Shoving my unbidden fantasy of the suit out of my mind, I fumble with my cell phone, searching for the text message with the door code buried somewhere deep in the sea of information the rental company sent me.

“1-7-3-2-6-D-Q-7-1-4-! Good grief, I’m never going to remember all of that...” I depress each metal button one by one until I hear the soft click of the lock give way. “And I’m in!”

Shoving through the door, I inhale the pine scent of the wood floors and rafters, the slight antiseptic bite of cleaning agents stinging my nose. At least I know it’s clean.

I drop my suitcase on the knotty wood floor, sweeping in and checking out my new space. A huge picture window lines the entire den wall, overlooking the back deck and a mountain vista. Although it’s dark outside, I know the view will be stunning in the morning.

Plus, I spot a hot tub on the corner of the deck. Perfect, because my muscles are tight and knotted with tension from driving—and fighting over the last pizza.

Throwing my groceries in the fridge, I hurry outside, shoving the cover off the shiny mahogany tub of water and cranking the heat setting up as high as it goes. The pool sputters to life, big, white bubbles breaking the surface tension of the still water.

With the hot tub percolating behind me, I pull up the door code on my cell again and punch in the numbers—all fifty million of them—then hurry upstairs to change into my suit.

The upstairs doesn’t disappoint, a spacious master bedroom down the hall with a picture window mirroring the main living area. An all-white king-sized bed sits in the center of the room, piled high with pillows, and I’m torn between soaking in the warm bubbles outside or curling up in the feathery-softness of the duvet. Given that a huge snow storm is blowing toward us, I go with the hot tub option, even though that bed looks hella comfy.

I toss my jeans and sweater on the cushioned bench at the foot of the bed, stepping into the black two-piece bathing suit I threw into my suitcase at the last second. The bottoms are skimpier than I’d like, but who cares? No one’s going to see me all the way out here.

Snagging a fluffy towel out of the gorgeous gray-and-white marble bathroom, I skip down the stairs and head to the sleek, stainless-steel wine fridge. Not that I need to use it—I hardly have any groceries in the full-sized refrigerator—but I try to use all the amenities when I travel.

Of course there's a fancy wine opener sitting on the marble counter above the fridge, and I make quick use of it, uncorking the chilled chardy. Carrying the bottle over to the kitchen island, I open the cabinets and search for a non-glass wine tumbler. I'd hate to break glass in the hot tub—that's a major rental no-no. I settle on a stainless-steel Spruce Ridge cup, pouring the straw-colored liquid as close to the top as I can manage, slurping at the edge to prevent sloshing.

Delish. Solid wine for a mountain general store.

I tuck my towel under my arm, scoop up my cell and wine, and head outside. The temperature's dropped since I got here, a cold breeze whipping at my face. I toss my cell on the side table next to the hot tub, then set the wine in the convenient cupholder on the spa before sliding into the warm, bubbly water.

Heaven.

The jets massage away my tension as I sink lower into the spa. Yes, this is exactly what I need right now. I tip my head back and gaze up at the inky, cloudy sky, fat flakes of snow falling on my face, a strange contrast to the heat of the water.

Fuck Gabriel and his stupid new girlfriend. She can have him for all I care.

So long as she's sweet to my kiddos. Because if she's not, I will hurt her.

Oh, I should text everyone and let them know I made it here okay.

Climbing out of the hot tub, I scurry over to the table, goosebumps rising on my heated skin. The air's freezing cold and the wind whips at my exposed flesh. I snag my phone off the table and clamber back into the water, holding my cell away from the bubbles.

Ashton: Made it here, safe & sound. Rental's amazing!

Stella: Oh good! We were starting to worry. How's the weather? It's snowing here

Ashton: Just started snowing. Supposed to be really bad tonight. But the cabin has a fireplace, so it's all good

Stella: Great! Have an awesome time! Love you!

Ashton: Love you too! Tell Wes I'm good. Xoxo

Stella: xoxo

Next, I text Gabriel the jerk.

Ashton: Made it to Spruce Ridge. Everything good with the kids?

Gabriel: Katelyn's crying about Snowball. Who the hell's Snowball?

Of course, Dad of the Year doesn't know about our elf on the shelf, Snowball. Why the hell would he? Best case, the dad thing's a weekend-only gig.

Ashton: He's our elf. Did you get him from the house?

Gabriel: No. Why the fuck would I? I didn't even know about him

I roll my eyes so hard my eye sockets hurt. No one can see me and it feels so fan-fucking-tastic to do whatever I want.

I take a deep, meditative breath and type back:

Ashton: You better go get him or she won't stop crying. It's a whole thing

Gabriel: Can't. We have dinner reservations in twenty minutes and I'm still waiting on sitter

OMG. Gabriel has the kids for a week and he hires a fucking babysitter? Unbelievable.

Ashton: Swing by the house and grab him after then

Gabriel: Maybe, we'll see

Biting down hard on my bottom lip, I punch out:

Ashton: Tell her he's doing special duty tonight for Santa and will be back tomorrow. Then go get the freaking elf

I type 'loser,' but then delete it. No need to start World War III on day one of my trip.

Gabriel: I'll see what I can do

Annoyed, I toss my cell to the ground and chug some chardy to take the edge off. Honestly, I have no idea what I ever saw in that guy. I can't believe I actually have two kids with that asshole.

And now my wine's gone and I'm thirsty.

I climb out of the hot tub again, water sluicing down my legs as I stoop down and pick up my phone, jamming at the screen for the entry code.

Shit, it's cold out here.

Punch-punch-punch-punchity-punch-punch and the door clicks open. I race inside, sliding across the floor to the fridge and pour another healthy serving of wine.

A shiver runs down my spine and I'm freezing-ass cold in here, even though the heat's kicked on and the temperature's probably totally fine if you're not half-naked and dripping wet. I snag my tumbler and hurry back outside, jumping into the hot water.

The door clicks behind me and the sound of the lock triggers something deep in the recesses of my brain.

No. No, no, no!

I glance through the glass doors, my cell glinting at me from the kitchen island.

Shit! The code.

My hand flies to my face and I cover my eyes, trying to visualize it. 1-3-7-something, I think. But there are like fifty numbers and letters and special characters in that code and there's no way in hell I'm ever going to remember it.

Especially after two tall glasses of wine and zero food.

No chance.

I swivel my head around, glancing in both directions. A soft light glows in the window of the cabin next door. I'll just head over and see if the neighbor has a spare key—probably a long shot— or, worst case, can let me borrow a phone to call the rental company.

Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.

I drain the rest of my wine for liquid courage, then bundle up in my towel, wrapping it around me as tightly as possible. Both to block the wind and to hide my embarrassingly tiny bikini from view. Then I hoof it down the back porch steps and around to the front of the house, trudging through the dark wilderness.

Hitting the driveway, I follow the road up to the neighbor's house, which is very similar to my rental cabin. Standing at the end of the walkway, I take another deep breath, then forge ahead, buoyed by the freezing cold and the stark realization that I have no desire to spend the night sleeping in the hot tub.

CHAPTER 4



JACK

DAMN, THIS MERGER IS BORING.

I must have read the same sentence five times and still have no idea what we're trying to say or why it matters. Which is why I didn't go to law school. Give me numbers and spreadsheets over words and legalese any damn day.

Knocking back the rest of my drink, I stretch my legs and stand, ready for a refill. I toss the thick legal document onto the rustic coffee table, then cross to the bar and pour another three fingers of whiskey into my glass.

Tap, tap, tap.

I still, cocking my ear toward the door. That can't be a visitor, not all the way up here on a night like this.

Tap, tap, tap.

The same sound again.

"Alexa, pause." The music stops mid-note and I hold my breath, listening.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Louder this time, and coming from the front of the house. I cautiously make my way through the den and dining area, then flick the front porch light on.

"You've gotta be kidding me," I mutter, staring out the frosted glass at the unexpected visitor.

Who looks shockingly similar to the pizza thief. Except now she's only wearing a white towel, shivering on my

doorstep.

Intrigued, I open the door. “Yes?”

She’s shuffling her feet, hopping up and down in an attempt to keep warm. At the sound of my voice, her head pops up, recognition dawning on her face.

“Oh. Um, hi.” She shoots me an awkward half-wave with one hand, the other clutching at her towel for dear life. “So, this is embarrassing—”

Hot pink blotches stain her cheeks and I bite down on my lip, holding back a smile.

“I’m renting next door,” she tips her head to the right, “and I was in the hot tub. I went back in for a sec, then back outside again, and next thing you know, I locked myself out of the house.”

She gnaws at the corner of her mouth and I can’t stop staring at her full lips.

“Bummer.” I shove my hand in my pocket and stare at her. She squirms under my gaze, pulling the towel around her even tighter.

“Any chance you have a spare key to your neighbor’s house?” She bats her lashes at me, just like she did back at the general store. I’ll give her credit— she does have beguiling eyes, wide and steel blue.

“Sorry, no spare key. I don’t know them that well. I’m not a full-time resident here, and neither are they. Obviously.”

She fiddles with the edge of the towel, thinking. “Maybe I could use your cell to call the rental company and get the code?”

“Should we play rock paper scissors for my phone?”

She sighs and shakes her head. “Not sure I can risk losing. Look, I’ll pay you. I just need to get the code, then I’ll leave you to your night.”

I step aside, waving her in. “Come in before you freeze to death. I’m Jack, by the way.”

Visibly relaxing, she hurries in from the cold and I shut the door behind her.

“Ashton. Thanks for your help.”

I shrug. “I can’t exactly say no, can I?”

She flushes, pink climbing up her neck. I head toward the den and she shuffles behind me, her flip-flops thwacking on the knotty pine floor.

“Sit tight, my phone’s charging in the bedroom. I’ll be right back.” I dash up the stairs and grab my cell, disconnecting it from the charger. The sooner I can get her the code, the sooner I’ll be alone again. Although it’s kinda fun watching her blush and squirm...

Two minutes later, I’m back downstairs with my cell. I hand it to her, our fingertips brushing, and we both freeze. Recovering quickly, she takes the phone, her towel opening a fraction of an inch. I catch a quick glance of a black bikini and a whole lot of skin, but she repositions, pulling the towel closed.

“Your phone’s locked.”

“Oh. Right.” I tap at the screen, unlocking it, and hand it back to her.

“Um...” She bites at her lip. “Does Spruce Ridge Rentals sound familiar to you?”

My brow furrows and I cross my arms over my chest, amused. “I have no idea. I’m unfamiliar with the rental companies because I don’t rent out my place.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t know who you rented from?”

“It was a holiday gift. From my brother and best friend.” Tears shimmer in her eyes and now I feel like an asshole.

“Take a deep breath. We’ll get this worked out. Here.” I hold out my hand, taking the phone back from her. Then I do a quick search of local vacation rental companies.

“Do any of these look familiar to you?” I show her the list of companies, and her eyes trail down the long list. Spruce Ridge is a very popular ski destination and the rental market’s huge.

“I think it’s that one.” She points at Ridge Rentals and I hit the link, taking her to the website.

“Here’s the number, give them a call.”

Ashton dials, crossing her ankles and leaning against the island. I can hear the loud rings trilling through the speaker, then the tinny automated message: “Sorry we missed your call. Please leave a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

Ashton glances over at me and I shrug. I guess that’s all the encouragement she needs because she leaves a message.

“Um, yeah, hi. This is Ashton Jones and I’m renting a cabin up on Spruce Ridge, er—” Her eyes fly to my face and she covers the mouthpiece of the cell. “What’s the address?”

“3232 Snowfall Drive.”

“3232 Snowfall Drive. I have a little bit of a situation and I’ve locked myself out of the rental. If you could please give me a call back ASAP, I’d appreciate it. My number’s—” She pauses again, glancing over at me. This time she hits the mute button. “I can’t give them my number. My phone’s locked in the cabin. What’s yours?”

“970-341-6169.”

She holds up a finger, hits unmute, then motions for me to repeat. “970-341-6169. Thanks!” She disconnects and thrusts the phone back at me, hitting me square in the chest.

“Thanks. Hopefully they’ll call back soon.”

“Yeah, hopefully.” I set the cell on the counter, watch as Ashton shifts from foot to foot, goosebumps covering her bare arms.

“You want a sweatshirt or something while you wait? You must be cold.”

She waves her hand through the air breezily. “No, I wouldn’t want to put you out. I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly cold.” I point at her skin. “Hang on.”

I trot back upstairs, only semi-dismayed that my night’s been thrown off by this woman. She’s more attractive than I gave her credit for back at the general store. And even though she’s a bit flighty and not at all my type, she seems—different. In an intriguing way.

Not that I’m interested.

I rifle through my drawers, coming up with a gray Spruce Ridge sweatshirt and a pair of dancing reindeer pj pants. They’re the smallest bottoms I have, a Christmas gift last year from my nieces and nephews.

Bundling them together, I head back downstairs. Ashton perches on a barstool, swinging her bare legs back and forth through the air. A stray lock of her auburn hair has tumbled from her bun, and she’s winding it between her fingers. Despite my best efforts, I can’t keep from noticing the long, graceful column of her neck or the soft swells of her breasts just peeking out from the white cotton.

“Here.” I shove the clothes at her.

“Nice pants.” She snickers at the dancing reindeer and I frown.

“You don’t want them? I’ll take them back.” I reach for the pants and she recoils, clutching them against her chest.

“I never said I didn’t want them. I’m just surprised is all. You don’t seem like the dancing-reindeer-pajama-pants type.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I feel like I should be insulted by that.”

“Only if dancing reindeer are your jam. I don’t know.” The corners of her mouth tip up into a smile, making my dick stir for the first time in a while.

“I hate to concede anything, but you are correct. They were a gift from my niece and nephew. The smallest pants I own.”

“Excellent.” She hops down from the stool. “I happen to love dancing reindeer. Do you have a bathroom down here?” Her head swivels around, checking out the space.

“First door on your right.”

She skips off with the spare clothes and I contemplate what the hell I’m doing right now. Because it kind of feels like flirting and I don’t have time for that. Or a relationship. Or any of the problems that come with the dating territory.

I should help Ashton get the rental code and then send her on her merry way.

So why am I fantasizing about stripping those reindeer pj pants off her toned legs with my teeth?

CHAPTER 5



ASHTON

*HOW IN THE ACTUAL HELL DID I GET HERE? AND WHAT THE
freak am I doing right now?*

I stare at myself in the mirror, swimming in Jack's gray Spruce Ridge sweatshirt, my long hair curling from the humidity of the hot tub. The pajama pants are still three sizes too big, but I roll them up several times and tie the drawstring as tight as possible. Tucking my wet bikini into the towel, I pad back out to the kitchen. Jack's standing at the island, scrolling through his phone, and I pause for a minute, taking him in.

You know— on the off-chance I have to describe him to the police.

He's tall, probably around six foot two, I'd guess. About Wes's height. Short, dark hair, with a few streaks of gray around his temples. Nice stubbled jaw, broad shoulders. Most likely works out with a trainer a few times a week.

Probably looks really freaking good naked.

Stop. *Keep your eye on the prize, Ashton.* This is supposed to be a nice, relaxing getaway, not a sexy rendezvous with a stranger.

Especially a stranger as grumpy as Jack.

He doesn't seem particularly interested, either, and I'm certainly not going to argue with him and try to change his mind. Ain't nobody got that kind of time.

"You hungry?"

Jack's deep voice startles me and I almost drop my wet towel. "Um... I could eat, yeah."

"I'd offer you pizza, but I lost rock paper scissors." He narrows his caramel eyes at me and a hot flush creeps up my neck.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I have two kids. Probably gives me an unfair advantage."

"Oh." Shock registers on his face and my stomach twists into a tight knot.

See. Definitely not interested, especially now that he knows you have kids.

"I wouldn't say that. I'm known as the uncle with the rock paper scissors power moves. You just got lucky back at the general store."

A slow breath leaks out of me, something achingly similar to relief, but I ignore the implications.

"We probably need a rematch then." I cross to the counter and set down my towel.

"What's on the line?" Jack tips his chin at me.

"The frozen pizza, of course. Since I'm obviously not eating it tonight. If you win, I give it back. I win, I keep it."

"Deal." Jack sticks out his hand and we shake. "Best two out of three."

"You're on."

With a deep breath, we square up, facing each other. Together we chant, "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

"Damn it," Jack mutters, staring at my scissors to his paper.

"Out of practice, huh?" I tease, adrenaline simmering in my veins.

"I guess so. But don't get too cocky, I have another shot here."

“Ready when you are, boss.” I wink and his eyes narrow with determination.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

Now it’s my turn to be mad. “Gah! I knew I should have gone with scissors again.”

“Sorry, paper trumps rock. Tie game,” Jack says, as if I need a reminder of the score.

“This one’s for all the cheese pizza.” I press my lips together, nerves thrumming in anticipation.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“Son of a reindeer,” Jack snarls, pounding the island. “I can’t believe I lost.”

“Again,” I point out, grinning at him. “Rock for the win!”

“All I want is a cheese pizza,” he grumbles, scraping a hand roughly over his chin.

“Hey, I’ll share it with you.” My hand darts out and touches his arm —rock-solid, just as I suspected— and his eyes flicker to my fingers, but he doesn’t pull away. I linger on his muscle for a beat, then pull back into my own space. “You know, if I ever get back into the house.”

“You will. In the meantime, I can make us each a grilled cheese?” He raises a dark brow and I nod.

“You have a thing for cheese, huh?” I ask, settling back on the stool.

“Cheese is a basic food group. One of my favorite things. Normally, I’d have more options for you—” He bends into the fridge, pulling out a package of cheese and a loaf of bread. “But you saw what we were working with down there. You’ll have to settle for cheddar tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Cheddar’s solid, it works.”

“Do you want something to drink? I have wine, beer, whiskey...” Jack lists off my options and I go with wine.

Three minutes later, I have a chilled glass of much-better chardonnay and Alexa's streaming soft jazz in the background. The fire's heating the room to the perfect temperature and Jack's grilling us sandwiches.

The whole scene would be kind of romantic if we were a couple.

I shake my head, ridding myself of the ludicrous thought.

He's a total stranger, Ashton. What the fuck?

"So, Jack. What do you do?" *Oh, cringe.* That's what I start with? Might as well ask him to list his height and weight too, while I'm at it.

"I'm in business. M and A." He keeps his back to me, not turning away from the stove.

"M and A?"

"Mergers and acquisitions. I help companies buy other companies."

"That's interesting."

He glances over his shoulder at me, stone-faced. "It's not. What about you?"

"I work at my kids' school, in the front office. Answering phones and stuff."

"Probably more interesting than my job, honestly."

I shrug. "It's not all that exciting, but I'm on the same schedule as the kids, so that helps. Because Gabriel —my ex — isn't very helpful. At all."

I clap my hand over my mouth, wishing I hadn't said that. Too much wine, not enough food. I'm sure Jack doesn't want to hear about all our dirty laundry.

"Sounds like he's missing out then." Jack locks his eyes on mine and I lick my lips, my throat suddenly drier than toast. All I can manage is a quick nod.

"Here you go. Not exactly gourmet, but it's edible." He slides the golden sandwich toward me and my stomach

growls. It's been hours since I've eaten and I'm starving.

“Thank you.” I accept the plate from him, shifting in my seat. I'm a strange mix of nervous and comfortable all at once, and it's a little disconcerting.

A loud wind howls, whipping through the eaves, and the lights above the island flicker on and off.

“Oh no—” I groan, staring out the window as the snow falls faster and harder than before.

“Looks like the weather people may have gotten it right this time.” Jack's brows pull together.

And then everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 6



JACK

“WELL, THIS ISN’T VERY MERRY.” I PEER OUT THE WINDOW AT the white flurries rapidly piling up on the deck. “The electric company’s not going to be able to make it up the mountain and get the power turned back on before tomorrow, at the earliest.”

“At least we already have dinner.” Ashton motions at her sandwich. “And a nice, cozy fire. We won’t freeze to death.”

“That is the bright side, I suppose. Are you always this optimistic?”

Ashton’s perfectly straight teeth glimmer in the firelight. “Yeah, I guess I am. I much prefer to look for the sparkle in a situation— life’s more fun that way.”

“That’s a— unique way to put it. Not sure that strategy’s all that practical, though...”

She waves her hand through the air. “Pish-posh. Practicality’s boring.”

“Says the person who locked their cell in the rental and has no way back inside.”

“Touché. But if that never happened, we wouldn’t be together right now.” She locks her steel blue gaze on mine and my lower body tightens, my cock rising to the occasion.

Don’t be ridiculous, Pearson. You barely know this woman.

But you want to...

I clear my throat, shoving my hand in my pocket to deflect my situation. “More wine?”

Ashton runs her tongue along her bottom lip and nods. “Yes, please.”

I refresh both of our drinks and gesture toward the couch. “Want to move in front of the fire? To stay warm?”

“Good idea.” She slides off the barstool and we make our way to the couch, my eyes fixated on the dancing reindeer as her hips sway side to side in the dim light.

“So, Jack...” Ashton drops down onto the leather, tucking her legs up beneath her and accepting the wineglass. “What’s your story?”

“What do you mean?” I join her on the couch, swirling the amber liquid in my glass, stalling.

“Where do you live? Do you play sports, have hobbies? A girlfriend? Wife? Ex-wife?”

I half-chuckle, half-groan. “No, no, and no. I live in Denver, alone. And I ski, run, and play tennis when the weather’s good. What about you?”

“I live in Snow Valley with my kids. My brother and his fiancée —my best friend— live nearby, and so do my parents. I’m divorced— been divorced now almost as long as I was married. And I play the piano and like to paint. Although I’m not very good at painting. But it’s a fun outlet.”

“An artist, huh? I’m zero percent artistic— bet you find that hard to believe.”

She giggles, the tinkly lilt of her voice making me hard all over again. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something about this woman that has me reassessing my single, grinchy ways.

“I wouldn’t say that, Jack. You have good taste in music. And pizza.” Her eyes shine in the glow of the fire, golden highlights shimmering in her long, tousled hair, and I don’t know what in the actual hell possesses me, but I lean over until our lips almost touch. Her breath soft on my face, she smells like peppermint and Christmas, and I want this woman more than anything I’ve wanted in a long time.

“I have great taste in pizza,” I murmur, my thumb tracing the smooth skin of her cheek. She inhales and I close the remaining distance between us, pressing my lips gently to hers. Our bodies melt together as we taste each other for the first time, timid at first, then bolder.

Something tells me nothing about Ashton stays timid for long...

Her hands wrap behind my neck, her fingers threading through my hair, pulling me closer to her. She opens her mouth to me and I sweep my tongue in, pressure and desire building between us. My heart pounds wildly as I struggle to maintain control, every muscle taut, tense.

I should be freaking out right now —this goes way beyond the boundaries of my typical MO— but this thing between us feels right. Maybe it’s the storm, maybe it’s all the glittery holiday cheer. I have no idea, but every part of me wants this woman.

Right here, right now.

Wrapping my hands around her back, I grip her waist, run my palm over the cotton of the sweatshirt I lent her. Inwardly cursing myself for not giving her a thin T-shirt instead.

My fingers itch to explore every inch of her luscious body, but I hesitate, not wanting to overstep.

“What’s wrong?” Ashton breaks our kiss, murmuring against my mouth.

“Nothing on my end. But I don’t want to take advantage of the situation or make you uncomfortable.”

A chuckle escapes her lips as her fingers fly to the buttons of my dress shirt, popping each one without breaking eye contact.

“Do I seem uncomfortable right now? And I’m more than happy to help you work out whatever qualms you may have.” Her voice is low, husky with desire, as she untucks my shirt and runs her palm over my bare chest. I’m certain she can feel the hammering of my heart beneath her fingers as she traces

over my pecs, my muscles flexing at her touch. Every nerve is humming and alive, more alive than I've felt in forever.

“By the way— I don't usually do things like this. Just so you know.” She gazes up at me through lowered lashes, her pupils wide and dark.

“Neither do I,” I assure her. “But I think this situation calls for an exception. In the holiday spirit and all.”

“Agreed. I mean, we have no electricity, and we should conserve our cell batteries, be responsible, and not waste the power on watching Netflix or playing Wordle. Doesn't leave us with much else to do...” Her voice trails off, the tip of her pink tongue flicking over her full lip.

“You make a solid argument. And I have no objections.” I run my hand over her reindeer-clad thigh, eager to get those jovial caribou off her body as soon as possible.

She smiles at me, inching closer, her hair tickling my skin.

“Tell me, Jack. Have you been a good boy this year?”

“Definitely not.” I trail my fingers down the soft skin of her neck, her pulse racing beneath the pad of my finger.

“Santa might not bring you want you want for Christmas then,” she teases.

“I think he already has.”

CHAPTER 7



ASHTON

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IN THE HO, HO, HO I'M DOING RIGHT now, seducing this handsome stranger in front of a fire in the middle of a blizzard.

So not responsible.

But oh so fun.

And I deserve a little fun every once in a while, right?

That's what this entire getaway's supposed to be about, except everything that can possibly go wrong has. Might as well just enjoy tangling my tinsel with this very gorgeous, very eligible bachelor and not overthink things.

Like Jack said— all in the holiday spirit.

Besides, only one of us can be a scrooge, and it's certainly not going to be me.

He slides one hand inside my sweatshirt and my nipples harden in anticipation. *Geez, how long has it been, Ashton? Try to calm down and not orgasm at the first touch. Play it at least a tiny bit cool.*

Desire unfurls low in my belly and my skin tingles everywhere Jack touches. My lower back, up and down my torso, my stomach, the side of my breast.

Oh my stars.

Skimming my breast with his hand, sparks of heat fly through me and my breath quickens. Applying the exact right of pressure, he cups me, thumbing my nipple.

I moan, my cheeks heating as he watches my face.

“You like that?” His voice is low and deep.

“Mm-hmm.” I nod, trying to maintain what little poise I have left.

Easier said than done as he slides his other hand up my sweatshirt, tweaking my left breast in the same way. My entire body’s hot and flushed, so I take off the sweatshirt and toss it down on the white throw rug.

“Gorgeous.” Jack’s caramel gaze darkens as he takes me in before crushing his lips to mine. Bolder and more intense this time, he’s no longer holding back and neither am I. If I’m going to have a vacay tryst, I might as well make it mind blowing and memorable.

Sliding my hand over the ridges of his abs, then down that sexy V-indent thing athletic guys have, I unbutton his pants and slide the zipper down slowly over his hard cock. A low rumble sounds from deep in his throat as he stands and sheds his pants, eager to help me out. Then he grips my hips, teasing at the waistband of the loaner pj pants. I stand and nod, giving him consent.

He unties the white drawstring, his eyes locked on mine as the green pants drop to the floor.

Under normal circumstances, I’d be self-conscious, naked in front of such a good-looking man for the first time. But since this is a one-off thing, I decide to let my inhibitions go.

“Stunning.” Jack wraps his arms around me, bringing me closer to him, our chests pressed together. His skin’s warm and he smells woody, with a hint of campfire.

Our mouths meet in a greedy kiss, our tongues intertwining as the wind howls outside the cabin.

This is the most romantic, spontaneous thing I’ve ever done in my entire life and I kinda hope the lights don’t come back on until tomorrow. Being here, in this absolutely perfect moment with Jack, is pure magic. Electricity will only spoil it.

His hands travel from my hips to my ass, squeezing and caressing the bare skin, sending a delicious shudder straight to my core. Sensing my arousal, he lightly smacks my rear, then rubs a hand over the heated spot. Wetness pools between my legs and I press against his thigh, needing friction.

“You like it a little dirty then?” he murmurs into my open mouth and I let out a soft groan.

I couldn't make this man up if I tried— he's hitting each of my fantasies one by one. This cabin, a tryst, being a tad bit naughty...

“Sweet and shiny on the outside, sexy and dirty inside,” he teases, nipping at my lower lip.

“Something like that.” I gaze up at him through lowered lashes, desire building in my core.

He slaps my other cheek, soothes the skin, then slides his fingers through my wetness. With his thumb, he swirls around my clit, applying pressure. Stars begin to float at the edges of my vision and my muscles tense.

“You definitely like that.” He nips at my neck, teasing me as I groan into the darkness.

“Jack...”

“Yes, baby?”

I peel his boxer briefs down, his rigid cock popping out. Running my thumb over the tip, a drop of hot liquid leaks out. I bring my hand to my mouth, lick the salty fluid from my thumb. His cock dances against my belly and I encircle his steel shaft, squeezing and pulling, pleasure dancing across his face.

“Does that feel nice?” I purr, cupping his balls with my other hand.

“Nice doesn't even begin to describe it...” He stares at me with a heated gaze as I move up and down, slow and smooth.

Dropping to my knees, I wind my hands around his thighs, then lick the crown of his cock. He pins his eyes on me, his

pupils large, his hand fisting in my hair. I draw him into my mouth, humming, the vibration eliciting a guttural moan.

“Fuck, baby, that feels so good...”

Boosted by his praise, I take his length deeper into my mouth, hollowing my cheeks and sucking him in as far as I can. Moving up and down his shaft, he grows harder, longer.

“I can’t take much more of this. Come here.” He grabs my hand, helping me stand, then captures my lips in a searing kiss. His hands wander all over my body, lighting me up brighter than a Christmas tree.

“I want you,” I murmur, trailing my fingers over his strong shoulders.

“Something we can both agree on. Hang on a sec.” He grins at me, then breaks away, jogging upstairs. A minute later he’s back with protection. Ripping open the foil packet, he rolls it over his cock, then guides me to the couch, laying me down. The cool leather’s a shock, and a ripple of pleasure rolls through my body as Jack positions himself above me. He dips down, kissing me softly on the lips.

“You sure you’re good with this?” His face softens, his brows pinching together.

“Absolutely.”

He drops his mouth to mine again, nibbling at my lower lip, sucking the flesh between his teeth. His hand finds my breast and squeezes, tiptoeing the line between pain and pleasure, and heat rushes through me, straight to my core. My thighs fall open wider, urging him to come inside. He reads me correctly, his hand finding my hot center as he pushes two fingers inside me. My muscles tighten around him, then loosen. Another finger, then he’s moving in and out, my body riding the rhythm of his hand.

“Fuck me. Please.” My voice comes out strangled, needy, as he stares down at me.

“You have such good manners. Even when you’re begging.” He flashes a smug smile as I contract around his

hand. Pushing in deeper, he curls his finger to hit my most sensitive nerves.

I arch to get maximum contact, but he withdraws.

I need this man.

He runs his cock through my wet heat, then pushes in, slowly, so slowly. I bite back a whimper as he fills me and I stretch to accommodate his length.

“Is that good?” He locks serious eyes on mine and I can only nod, my voice caught in my throat.

Moving in and out, he finds a good rhythm, and I match every thrust. Desperate for more contact, more heat, more force.

“You look so good riding my cock, baby.”

His voice is raspy, every muscle flexing, as he drives deeper and deeper into me.

“Fuck me...” I moan, scratching my nails down his back. My body’s on fire for this man, and I’m so close to shattering.

He drives in and out, harder and faster, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Let go, vixen,” he whispers in my ear and I crash, my body unraveling. He follows my lead, spilling his release.

“Fuck, Ashton...” He murmurs into my hair, his hand tiptoeing across my chest, teasing at my sensitive nipples. “That was fucking amazing.”

I snuggle into him, his heart pounding hard against my ear. “Worth losing out on the pizza?”

“Probably...” His hand traces circles on my flushed skin.

I raise up, one brow lifting high. “Really? Probably?”

“Fine. Worth it.”

I arch a brow at him and his mouth tips up in a grin. “Okay, you drive a hard bargain. More than worth it.”

“That’s what I needed to hear.”

He pulls me in closer and I breathe in his scent, my heart rate beginning to come back to normal.

Jack drops another soft kiss on my hair, then whispers, “I may have even let you win rock paper scissors earlier. To guarantee I see more of you.”

A rush of warm happiness blooms in my chest and I’ve never felt more grateful for a blizzard in my life.

CHAPTER 8



JACK

HOOKING UP WITH A BEAUTIFUL STRANGER IS THE LAST THING I expected on this trip to Spruce Ridge. I wasn't lying when I told Ashton it's not something I usually do. I'm too damn busy for the whole hook up song-and-dance— I much prefer a steady relationship, ideally with another certified workaholic.

Ashton doesn't strike me as the type. In fact, she's not my type at all. She's fun and flirty, carefree and sexy as hell.

Maybe this relationship could actually work out. Like an opposites-attract sort of thing.

No. The very idea seems ludicrous. I'm not the right guy for her long-term. Too particular, too demanding. I don't have enough emotional bandwidth. And I'm certainly not father material.

“Jack?”

Her quiet voice rouses me from my thoughts. “Hmm?” Running my hand over her silky hair, I shove down the first pangs of guilt over what's surely coming.

“Not to put you on the spot or anything—”

Shit. Here we go...

I brace myself for impact, arguments against long-distance dating already popping into my brain.

It's impractical. Things never work out. It won't last.

“Where can I sleep tonight? The couch is fine, but can you put out the fire? And do you have some spare blankets?”

The knot in my stomach loosens, then oddly tightens again.

She's not interested in a relationship?

I clear my throat, swallowing hard over my ego. “Don’t be silly. You can have the bed. Or we can share it.” I dangle the idea out there, surprised at the tension in my gut and how much I want her to say yes.

“We can share, if you don’t mind. You don’t strike me as a cuddler— I didn’t want to presume.”

Running my hand over her bare back, I pull her tighter against my body. Beneath that playful exterior, Ashton’s more vulnerable than I thought.

“You’re not being presumptuous. We had sex on the couch — which was amazing, by the way. Sharing a bed isn’t that big of a deal.”

A shy smile spreads across her full, pink lips, the golden glow from the fire sparkling in her eyes.

“Thanks, I’d like that.” She stretches across me, her arm sweeping the floor as she reaches for her discarded clothes.

I chuckle. “Forget the reindeer— unless you want them.”

She tips her head up, pressing her lips softly to mine, and I deepen the kiss, our connection. Something buried down inside me unlocks, a rush of emotion flooding my system, and for once, it’s not just lust.

I can actually see myself falling for this woman— and the thought’s more frightening than the typical credit card bill in January with compounding interest.



WEAK, MILKY LIGHT SPILLS THROUGH THE PICTURE WINDOW, the bedroom still and quiet except for a light snore rumbling my chest.

A snore that’s not mine.

Yesterday tumbles back— the curvy spitfire from the general store getting locked out and showing up at my door, the blizzard, the fireside sex.

My cock twitches, moving against Ashton's bare leg, and she stirs in my arms.

“Morning, sunshine.” I stroke her shoulder, marveling at the smooth creaminess of her skin.

“Morning.” She snuggles deeper into the mountain of covers, shimmying her hips seductively.

Fucking sexy. I could definitely get used to this.

“You have big plans today?”

“Only if you count trying to get into my rental.” She grimaces and I wind my hands around her back, kissing her soft lips. She sighs happily, opening her mouth to me, and I rush in. Tongues tangle and now my cock's rock hard, and it's not just a case of morning wood.

“We'll figure that out, don't worry about it. I have a better idea of how to spend the morning.” I shift until I'm straddling her, my elbows resting on either side of her head.

“You're so fucking gorgeous,” I murmur, dipping down and sucking on the tiny divot at the center of her neck. Goosebumps rise on her skin as I trail my fingers over her breasts, pinching and teasing the pink nipples. She arches up, wrapping her legs around my waist and pulls me closer to her, running her hand over my chin stubble.

“You're pretty handsome yourself. Plus, you're a real hero for letting me spend the night with you. Especially after I scored the last pizza.”

“I'd say you more than made up for that.” I bury my face between her breasts, licking and sucking at her skin. A soft moan vibrates in her throat and I reach between her legs, caressing her hot center. “You're so fucking wet for me already, baby.”

“Mmmm...” she hums, and I press three fingers into her, then withdraw, push in again.

“Yes, Jack, just like that.” Her eyes close, her face relaxed as I pleasure her.

“That’s a good girl, getting ready to take my cock.”

The corners of Ashton’s mouth tip up, the pale pink tip of her tongue running along her bottom lip.

I flick at her clit and her eyes fly open, her pupils wide and dark. She raises her hips up, trying to get more contact, but I press her back down.

“Not yet, baby. I want to take you all the way to the edge — no rushing this time.” I move my hand away from her pussy, tracing lazy circles on her stomach as she writhes beneath me.

“Jack...” Her voice is high and reedy with need.

“Lay back and enjoy.” I slide down her body, sucking her clit into my mouth hard. Swirling my tongue round and round, tasting the sweetness of her. She shivers as I blow on her hot sex, licking up and down, plunging into her with my tongue.

“Oh. My. Jack...” she hisses, arching. Her thighs quiver, her orgasm building. I don’t let up, grazing her sensitive bud with my teeth until she’s gasping and shuddering.

“Don’t stop, oh god, don’t stop.” She clutches my shoulders, her fingers flying to my head and twining in my hair as I slip my fingers into her.

“Be a good girl and come on my hand.” Her pussy tightens, contracting around my fingers as she explodes, shaking.

“Beautiful,” I murmur, stroking her heated skin, skimming my hand over her curves.

Eyes still closed, her chest rises with every shaky inhale. After a few minutes, she comes out of the haze and gazes up at me, and damn if she doesn’t look even more gorgeous than yesterday.

“Now it’s your turn.”

CHAPTER 9



ASHTON

“YOU SURE YOU CAN HANDLE ME SO SOON, ANGEL?” JACK asks, rolling over next to me and stroking his long, hard cock.

“Not only can I handle you—” I run my hand along his obliques, the taut muscles flexing under my touch, “I want you to make it hurt so good.”

He licks his lips, pupils darkening with desire. “I can most definitely do that, baby. Come here.” He pats his upper thigh and I climb on top of his strong body, straddling him.

Without hesitation, he cups my breasts, circling the pads of his thumbs around my nipples. The skin’s sensitive after my orgasm, but he doesn’t let up, bringing them to sharp points before he pinches hard.

“Ow...” I hiss, biting down on my lip.

He releases my nipples and blood rushes back to my skin, my chest flushing and I’m hot all over. My pussy clenches, wetness seeping onto Jack’s legs.

“That’s a good start, baby.” He tiptoes his fingers down my spine, electricity zinging straight to my core.

Smack.

He slaps my right ass cheek hard, the flesh stinging.

Smack.

Then the left, then the right, alternating until I’m panting, my chest heaving.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, soothing my fiery ass with his open palm. “And so fucking wet.”

Running his fingers through my wet heat, he dips in, scissoring and stretching me. Tension builds low in my belly and I squeeze around him.

“Not yet, baby.” He pulls his hand away, sucking my juices off his fingers like ice cream. “So fucking sweet. I want you to come on my cock this time.”

It’s not a question but a command, his voice husky and deep, and I’m not about to argue.

“Climb on and ride my cock like the good girl you are.” His lips curl up in a lazy smile, as if he just told me to wrap a holiday gift, not fuck him senseless.

I settle into the role, more than happy to play along. I wouldn’t have guessed Jack had this side to him, but I freaking love it.

“Anything you want, sir.”

His eyes darken and he reaches out and pulls me roughly onto his cock, impaling me with his steel shaft. The speed startles me and I cry out. He smacks my hip lightly, urging me to move, and I follow his direction. Every part of me lights up as I move on his cock, taking him in as deep as I can.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so tight,” he hisses, pistoning into me, my breasts bouncing up and down. His abs flex as I grind down on him, milking his cock.

“Jack—” My body’s tingly all over and I know I’m close to shattering.

“Ashton...” He growls my name, tweaking my nipples, and I’m done. My orgasm rips through me, and I’m calling his name, over and over again, sliding up and down on his cock.

He follows right behind me, gripping my waist and not allowing me to pull away, maintaining maximum contact with my body. He wrings every drop of pleasure from both of our bodies until I collapse on top of his broad chest.

We lay entwined together for a long time, until he grows soft and slips out of me. Everything's quiet except for our breathing, finally returning to normal.

“Fuck, that was hot.” Jack’s voice vibrates against my cheek as he rubs the round globes of my ass.

“I loved it,” I sigh happily into his chest. “Hottest sex I’ve had in a decade.”

“What?” He peers down at me, eyes narrowed. “You’re saying you’ve had hotter then?”

“Probably not, but I figure you need goals,” I tease, smiling slyly up at him.

“Angel, be careful what you wish for. I’m not sure you can handle me at full power.”

I rise up on my elbows to stare at him. “Want to bet on that?”

“Hell, no. I do believe I’m down two rock paper scissors games at this point.”

“I can’t wait for strip poker,” I laugh, kissing him full on the lips.

He smacks my ass playfully. “Maybe after breakfast.”



LUCKILY, JACK’S STOVE IS GAS, SO HE SCRAMBLES SOME EGGS and boils water for coffee.

“Not exactly gourmet, but it’s the best I’ve got.” He takes the last bite of his eggs, sets his fork down.

The fire’s roaring again, helping take the chill out of the air.

“Do you think we’ll get power back today?” I cross my legs up under me, wrapping the blanket Jack gave me snugly around my shoulders.

“Hopefully. But I’ll get more firewood, to be on the safe side.”

“Thanks again for letting me crash here. I wouldn’t want to be alone in the blizzard anyway.” I tuck my hair behind my ear, suddenly self-conscious.

Which is dumb, considering I let the man smack my ass less than thirty minutes ago.

“Hey—” He reaches for my hand. “I’m glad you’re here. Honest.”

He laces his fingers with mine and my heart squeezes hard.

Don’t do it, Ashton. Don’t go catching feelings for a man. Especially one that lives in Denver and is probably not into commitment.

“Um...” My throat’s dry and tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

OMG. I’m so stupid. I’m crying and I have no idea why.

“You okay?” Jack stares at me, his caramel eyes filled with concern.

“Yeah...” I whisper, my face flaming.

Jack rubs his thumb over mine. “You’re a terrible liar—I’m feeling really confident about that strip poker game later.”

I have to laugh, a giggle bubbling out of me.

“You can talk to me, Ashton. I won’t run away. Besides, there’s nowhere to go.” His expression is serious, his square jaw set.

I swallow hard, my chest tight. “It’s just— I haven’t been with anyone in a long time. And this has been so great.” The eggs churn and scramble even more in my stomach. I blink back tears, then meet Jack’s gaze. “I don’t want it to end.”

He pauses, and I can practically read the thoughts marching through his head.

She’s clingy. Too needy. Drama central. Don’t get involved.

The fire crackles, and I drop my gaze, staring at the checked pattern in the blanket.

“I don’t either.”

I jerk my head up, not sure I heard him correctly. “You don’t?”

“No. I’ll admit, we probably didn’t make the best first impressions on each other. But you’ve certainly changed my mind about you.” He shoots me a grin and heat climbs from my chest up my neck.

I exhale a shaky breath. “In a good way, I hope?”

“In the best way.” He reaches over, pulling me into his lap. I haven’t felt this safe and secure since... I don’t even know when.

Resting my head on his strong shoulder, I inhale his scent, nuzzling against the soft cotton of his T-shirt.

I have no idea where this is heading, but for the first time since Gabriel, I’m going to let my guard down and find out.

CHAPTER 10



JACK

FUCK, ASHTON'S SEXY.

Curvy, funny, adventurous.

And vulnerable.

A single mom with two young kids.

I'm no good for her.

So why am I sitting here promising more than I can give?

It's not fair to her, that's for damn sure.

But my chest aches at the thought of letting her go, seeing her walk away, never talking to her again.

It's like she somehow worked her way into my veins and now she's the blood pumping through me, giving me life.

Fuck me.

I grab another log, stack it onto the pile in my arms.

I've spent my entire career going after what I want, taking it by whatever means necessary. It's literally my fucking job description.

Merge and acquire.

That's my goal, every single time.

I'm good at it. More than that, I love it. I thrive under pressure, the rush of adrenaline as I find a company, run the numbers, demonstrate to the shareholders that what they need is me.

The running joke at the office is it's how I get my rocks off.

Which isn't one hundred percent accurate, but it's closer to truth than fiction.

So why can't I pursue a relationship with Ashton with the same laser-sharp focus and vigor? I've never been one to shy away from a challenge— why start now?

Because you're no good for her, that's why. She needs someone who's going to show up for her every damn time—and that's not you. Never has been, never will be.

I blow out a breath, a puffy white cloud floating in front of my face.

Why can't I show up for her? Or at least give it a try?

A hard pit lodges deep in my gut. I know my shortcomings. Kennedy made me painfully aware of them a few months ago. I still hear her scathing voice echoing in my head: *"It's always about you, Jack. Every little thing. You're the most calculating person on the planet. I wish I never got involved with you."*

Sadly, she was right. Fucking nailed it, to be honest. I *am* selfish. And calculating. And vicious.

I'm not good enough for someone as genuine and pure as Ashton, plain and fucking simple.

I have to end this thing, before either of us gets involved any further, and real feelings start creeping in.

My chest squeezes, a dull throb pulsating behind my right eye.

Problem is, I already have feelings for her and every selfish ounce of me wants to ask her to take this relationship further.

Dammit.

I think I like my ruthless side a lot more. Life's a hell of a lot easier when everything's logic and numbers and you don't give a shit about feelings.



“HEY! IS IT STILL SNOWING OUT THERE?” ASHTON RUSHES over as soon as I kick the door closed behind me, sealing out the cold.

“Yeah, but it’s letting up a little. But this is the last of the firewood.”

“Oh no. Do you think the electric company will be able to make it up the mountain?” Her eyes widen with worry as I shake the snow off my boots.

“Maybe. But this should hold us over until at least tomorrow.”

“Oh, your cell vibrated while you were outside. I didn’t answer it— wasn’t sure of the protocol.” Her cheeks pinken and all I can think about is getting her naked again, maybe having some fun on the kitchen counter.

No, Jack. That’s not the plan, remember?

“Okay, I’ll check the messages in a second. Let me set this wood down.” I stack the logs next to the stone fireplace, mentally gauging how much time we have left before I need to head back out and try to find more. I’m guessing we have at least another twenty-four hours. Hopefully, we’ll get power before then because it’s been a minute since I’ve had to chop my own firewood.

I move to the counter and grab my phone, tap the voicemail icon. Ashton rests her chin in her hand, staring at me with those steel-blue eyes as I listen to the message.

“Jack, it’s Brock. I know you’re off the next few days, but we have a situation with the Claussen deal. A mix-up with the files and the deal’s about to blow up. Call me.”

Fuck. I’ve been working this deal for the last few months and we’re inches away from the finish line— or so I thought.

“Everything okay?” Ashton’s dark lashes flutter at me, making my cock harden and twitch in my pants.

Not the time, bud.

“Yes and no. I need to make a work call. Office emergency.”

“On your vacation?” One of her brows arches high, skeptical.

“Unfortunately. I’ll be back in a few.”

Striding away from her questions, I shutter myself in the office. The air temperature in here’s at least ten degrees colder. Brock better make this conversation fast or I may freeze to death.

I dial his number, hitting speaker phone, and he picks up on the first ring. “Brock, talk to me.”

“We’re fucked, Jack. The deal’s going to fall through.” His panicked voice fills the room, and I let out a low, angry hiss. The sound echoes, bouncing off the mahogany desk.

“Shit. How? What happened?” I flex my fingers, my brain already running through the possibilities.

“Their damn legal team redlined a few things on the last page of the agreement and the bank’s balking. We need you back here immediately. Looks like it could be an all-nighter. I already called our legal team in, plus the company’s finance people, the CEO, and the CFO.”

I suck my teeth, peering out at the winter wonderland. “I’m snowed in. A blizzard rolled through Spruce Ridge last night. I don’t think I can get out today. Best case, first thing tomorrow.”

“Dammit. We need you!” Brock’s voice tips up, and I can visualize him pacing at the office, downtown Denver sprawling before him. “Can you at least Zoom in?”

“Maybe for thirty minutes or so. But I need to conserve my cell battery.”

“Shit, Jack. You don’t have a damn generator up there? What are you, fucking camping?”

“Right now it feels like it. Plus, I have company.”

“Company, huh? You never told me you were dating someone.”

“I’m not. She’s the next-door neighbor and she locked herself out of her cabin. I’m just doing her a favor— I couldn’t let her freeze to death.” My stomach churns as I overexplain myself to my partner. As if it’s any of his damn business.

“Well, aren’t you a good fucking Samaritan these days? Emphasis on *fucking*, I’m guessing. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were losing your edge.”

“It’s no big deal, Brock,” I growl, not liking his implication. Any weakness —perceived or otherwise— could start a downward spiral and I’m definitely not ready to be replaced as king of the mountain.

“Prove it, then. Jump off the neighbor and onto the Zoom call.” His tone’s snarky, testing my commitment to the firm and my position, and I don’t fucking appreciate it.

“Fuck off, Brock. Send me the Zoom link.” I disconnect, slamming my cell onto the desk.

“Really, Jack?” Ashton’s voice startles me and I spin around so fast I create a damn breeze. She’s standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, and even from this distance I see the tears swimming in her eyes.

“Ashton...” My gut twists and tangles, acid rising up my throat.

“You told your business associate about this?” She waves her hand through the air between us and I wish I could have a re-do of the last few minutes, suck my words back like a damn Hoover vac.

“No. I mean, not really.” The explanation’s weak and I know it. “And why are you eavesdropping?”

Turn the conversation around, get out of the tight space you created. The strategy’s a solid one, and it rarely lets me down.

Ashton’s fists ball at her sides, her lip quivering even as she thrusts out her chest and stands tall. “I didn’t mean to

eavesdrop. I came to tell you an electric company truck pulled up outside and they're working on the lines. So don't worry—you can be rid of me as soon as I get in touch with the rental people.”

“Oh.” I scrub a hand over the back of my neck, a mix of emotions rolling through me. Surprisingly, disappointment floats up to the top.

“If I could trouble you for your cell one more time, I'll call the rental company again. Then you can jump on your Zoom call.” Her voice drips with sarcasm at the word *jump* and guilt grips my chest, squeezing hard.

“Sure.” I cross the room, pulling up the number for Ridge Rentals, then hand the phone to her. She jerks it away, turning her back on me as she murmurs into the mouthpiece, so quietly I can barely hear her.

After a few seconds, she tosses the phone back to me and hurries out of the room. I swear her shoulders are shaking — she's probably crying— and I hate that I hurt her.

My cell pulses in my hand, and Brock's name pops up.

I glance at Ashton one last time, then take the call, shutting the door between us.

CHAPTER 11



ASHTON

I'M SO STUPID. HOW COULD I HAVE EVEN THOUGHT THAT someone like Jack— successful, powerful, handsome— would think of me as anything more than a quick lay?

Stupid, stupid Ashton. Always falling for the wrong guy.

I swipe at the hot tears rolling down my face, wishing desperately that I could remember the code to my rental. I just want out of this cabin, away from Jack and all his bravado and stupid boys club innuendo.

I'm such an idiot.

And this is why you don't get involved.

Because now my feelings are all sorts of hurt, burning shame pulsing through me, and I'm fifteen all over again. The boys tormenting me because Ty Hamilton and I made out behind the bleachers after a football game.

He never even called me after that night.

Stop it. This isn't your fault. You're a grown-ass woman. It's fine.

Except I feel like a moron, putting myself out there, taking Jack at his word and believing that he might actually be different. That he might be interested in something more than a fling.

As if.

I snatch up my towel and bathing suit, shove my feet into my flip-flops, and slip out the front door. Maybe, just maybe,

I'll be able to remember the rental code. Or find an unlocked window and crawl in or something. Now that it's daytime, I might have better luck.

The snow's freezing on my bare toes and I shiver, the icy wind whipping at my face as I round the house. Climbing the stairs to the deck, I stare at the keypad, willing my muscle memory to kick in. 1-4-7-something-something-something!

That's definitely not going to do it. I peer into the kitchen, utter despair swirling in my gut.

Dammit.

Setting my things down on the table, I move to the nearest window and attempt to raise it. Locked. I try each of the windows one by one, but none of them budge, and now my fingers are every bit as frozen as my toes. I'm probably gonna die of frostbite. Not that Jack will care.

More tears well in my eyes, blurring my vision.

What was I thinking, putting myself out there like that? And how could he be so callous? I thought he was different, better. Turns out, I was wrong. My picker's broken, that's for damn sure.

And every single back window is locked. Now what?

I wipe away my tears with the sleeve of Jack's sweatshirt and huff out a breath, thinking. Maybe a side or front window will be unlocked. Doubtful, but worth a shot.

I gingerly make my way down the steps, then trudge through the snow toward the front of the house, my bare feet absolutely freezing. Once I'm on the porch, I hop up and down, rubbing my toes to get circulation back. If I can't get in soon, I'll have no choice but to go back to Jack's cabin.

Glancing around, I notice a miniature Christmas tree standing by the front door. Yesterday, I paid no attention to the decorations, filled with excitement about the vacation. I wonder...

I kneel down and tip the tree up, patting underneath the square tree stand. A scrape of metal shrieks out and excitement

pings through me as I grasp the cool object.

A spare key.

With shaky hands, I pull the key out and hold it up to the sky. I half expect a choir of angels to sing out, but the only sound is the rumble of the electric company's truck off in the distance.

Standing, I dust off my hands, then try the lock.

And— it's a Christmas miracle. The latch clicks and I shove through the door into the rental. The air's chilly, but a hell of a lot warmer than outside. A shiver runs through me, but I ignore it and hustle to the kitchen to grab my cell. Hopefully I don't have five hundred missed calls.

I hit the screen and the phone comes to life. I do have several missed calls and even more text messages.

Gabriel: Where's the stupid elf?

Gabriel: Hello? I'm at the house and can't find him

Gabriel: ASHTON. Call me. NOW

Gabriel: I can't find the fucking elf

Gabriel: Forget it. I'm not waiting any longer. You can explain to the kids why Snowflake didn't show up

What an asshole. He's obviously zero percent concerned about me dying in a blizzard.

And he can't even get the elf's name right.

I text him back, punching out the message in a hot surge of anger.

Ashton: It's Snowball, you jerk

Then I check my voicemail messages. The first one's from Stella: "Babe— I hope you're okay. Worried about you up there in a blizzard. Call me or text me to let me know you're safe."

Thirty minutes later, she dropped me another message: "Ashton, call us back. Now Wes is worried too. Please."

Another hour later, I had a call from Wes: “Ash, call me. Stella’s freaking out.”

The last message is from Wes this morning: “Don’t leave. We’re on our way.”

Oh shit. Wes and Stella are trying to come to Spruce Ridge in a blizzard?

I dial Stella’s number, but it goes straight to voicemail: “Hey, this is Stella. Leave me a message!”

“Stella, it’s me.”

And then my cell dies.

Double shit. The power’s not back on yet, either, so I can’t even charge it up.

Knock, knock.

Could Stella and Wes already be up here? Spruce Ridge isn’t that far of a drive, but still...

I head to the front door and fling it open, fully expecting to see my brother and bestie standing on the front porch.

Bitter cold hits my cheeks, even as my skin burns. I suck frosty air into my lungs, trying to catch my breath.

“Jack—”

CHAPTER 12



JACK

“JACK— WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” SURPRISE TIPS Ashton’s voice up an octave, her hands disappearing into the sleeves of my sweatshirt. Her skin’s blotchy, like she’s been crying, and the realization I caused that pain hits me like a sucker punch to the gut.

I’m such an asshole. I should apologize and walk away.

“After I hung up my call, I looked for you, but you were gone. I need to know you’re alright— I don’t want you to freeze to death.” I shove a hand into the pocket of my jeans, trying to seem calm even though my heart’s pounding double-time.

“I’m fine. I found a spare key under the topiary Christmas tree.”

“Handy.” I shift my weight, a damn rock lodged deep in my throat. She stares at me for a long minute, and I swallow hard over the lump.

Walk away, Jack. It’s for the best. Say you’re sorry and go. She doesn’t need you.

“Listen— I’m really sorry for what happened back there. I don’t know what you heard exactly, but I realize none of it sounded great. And for that, I’m sorry. My partner, Brock, is kind of an ass...”

Ashton locks her gaze on mine and I try not to squirm, instead raking a hand through my hair. “And I can be an ass as well. I own that.”

She bites at her bottom lip, listening to my feeble apology but saying nothing. So I forge ahead.

“For what it’s worth, I told him to fuck off. What I do — and how I feel— is none of his damn business.”

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad you don’t let your business partner influence your romantic decisions.” Her tone’s sarcastic and even though I definitely deserve her anger, it still stings.

“I don’t. And if the work situation wasn’t urgent, I wouldn’t have made the call right then. Ashton, I don’t pursue many relationships. For various reasons, but one of the main factors is my career. My job is my life and I’ve always been okay with that. Until now.”

I step closer, close enough to hear her breath hitch, soft spots of pink blooming on her cheeks. Reaching out, I grip her hips and pull her to me, our faces only inches apart now.

“I should walk away from you, I know that. I’m not good enough for you and both of us could wind up getting hurt. Plus you have kids to worry about, so if all this is too much, say the word and I’ll go.”

Fear grips me, clawing at my chest, the air between us crackling with tension. But deep down, I have to take the risk. I can’t live with the maybes, the what ifs.

Ashton’s worth it, I feel it deep in my soul.

“Jack—”

I hold my breath, every muscle in my body tense. I’m more nervous in this moment than during a negotiation with billions of dollars on the line.

“I’m in.”

“What? Really?” Relief floods through me as Ashton’s face breaks into a smile, her hands wrapping around my neck.

“Yes, really. But under one condition...”

“Name it.”

“I’m keeping the pizza.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” I tease, my hand sliding from her waist to her ass. “But it’s a deal.”

Dropping my lips to hers, I kiss Ashton, long and slow and deep. Not caring about the icy cold or my stressful career or the logistics of the future.

In this moment, the only thing that matters is the amazing, kind, genuine woman in my arms and the connection we share.

The sound of an engine, followed by slamming car doors, shocks us out of the moment.

“Ashton Jones?” A baritone voice interrupts and sends us hurtling back to reality.

Ashton breaks away, peering around my shoulder. A pick-up truck is parked in the driveway.

“Yes?”

Two men approach the house, both wearing dark green ski suits.

“We’re with the Spruce Ridge Snow Patrol, performing a routine wellness check. Your family contacted the Ranger station when you didn’t answer your cell last night. Normally, we give calls like this more time, but on account of the blizzard, we wanted to take extra precautions and play it safe.” The first ranger eyes me up and down, assessing the situation.

“Oh. Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t have my cell because I locked myself out of the rental. Jack let me stay the night, thankfully, or I might have frozen to death—” She shoots me a grateful look, squeezing my hand. “Then this morning I got back into the cabin, but my cell died before I could call home. I’m so sorry to have caused any trouble. I hope you didn’t have too much difficulty coming up here.”

“No trouble at all, ma’am.” Ranger One shoves both hands in his pockets. “Happy you’re safe. The power should be up and running again sometime today, but in the meantime we’ll update your family and let them know you’re fine.”

“More than fine, I’d say,” Ranger Two smirks, his lips twitching as he gauges the situation.

Ashton's cheeks flame red as both rangers nod at us and wave good-bye, returning to the truck. A minute later, they're gone and Ashton and I stand alone on the porch, an icy wind swirling around us. Snow flurries begin to fall and she shivers.

"Why don't you grab your cell and come back to my cabin? It's much warmer— and we can finally get around to that poker game." I wink at her and a huge smile stretches across her face.

"I'll bring the pizza, too. We can split it— consider it an early Christmas gift."

EPILOGUE



ASHTON

THREE WEEKS LATER...

“YOU SURE YOU’RE READY TO INTRODUCE ME TO THE KIDS? If not, we can wait.” Jack gazes down at me, squeezing my hand.

“I’m ready if you are.”

“Absolutely.” He drops his lips on mine, giving me a quick reassuring kiss. “After the grilling from your brother last weekend, hanging with Declan and Katelyn should be easy.”

I giggle. “Sorry about that. He’s protective, especially after the way things went down with Gabriel.”

“That’s a good brotherly trait. I don’t blame him one bit.” He runs his thumb over my cheek and my heart soars.

I never thought I’d feel this way again— happy, giddy, loved. Jack’s better than even my favorite book boyfriends and I pinch myself every single day, just to confirm this is real and not a dream.

A car door slams and my gut instantly tightens, my shoulders tensing.

“You okay? You can still change your mind...” Jack gives me a graceful out, but I shake my head.

“It’s going to be great, I know it. The kids will love you.”

A minute later, the front door flies open and Katelyn flings herself at my thighs, holding me tight.

“Mommy, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, pumpkin.” I smooth my hand over her hair. “Hey, Dec. Give me a squeeze, even though I know you think you’re too cool to hug your mom.”

Declan loops his arms around my waist, giving me a small hug. Then Gabriel darkens the doorstep, dropping the kids’ backpacks on the floor and thrusting the elf at me.

“Here’s Snowdrop. Take him before I forget.”

“Daddy, it’s Snowball!”

Gabriel shrugs. “Whatever. Have him— I’m off-duty.” He shoves the elf at me, then catches sight of Jack.

“Who are you? A repairman or something? Is the heat not working? I thought you got that fixed.” He narrows his eyes at Jack, a deep furrow creasing his brow.

As if the thought of me dating someone other than him is so absurd it doesn’t even cross his mind.

I take hold of Gabriel’s elbow, steering him quickly out of the house, while shouting over my shoulder. “Kids, go grab a snack while I say bye to your dad!”

Jack takes the hint, following closely behind me, and we convene awkwardly on the front porch. Gabriel shoots daggers first at me, then at Jack. Jack ignores the dirty look, instead stepping forward and extending his hand.

“Jack Pearson. Nice to meet you.”

Gabriel declines, instead shoving both of his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans.

Typical Gabriel behavior. Such an immature asshole.

“Not a repairman,” I point out. “Jack’s my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Gabriel’s voice tips up in a scoff. “First I’m hearing of this.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Funny enough, I don’t have to report on my dating life.”

“It affects the kids, Ashton.” Gabriel glares at me and bile rises in my throat.

He always makes everything so unpleasant.

“Obviously. Which I’ll handle. See you next week! Have fun with— what’s her name? I can’t keep them all straight.”

“Maribeth.” Gabriel’s lips press into a tight line as he eyes Jack up and down, sizing him up.

“Have a great Christmas,” Jack says, squaring his shoulders and standing by my side. Having him next to me makes me feel ten times better, stronger, and for that I’m grateful.

“Thanks. You too.” Gabriel turns and trudges back to his car, then fires up the engine and guns down the driveway.

“Nice guy.” Jack loops his arm around my waist, pulling me to him. A shiver races through me, from the cold as well as relief that introductions have been made.

It’ll never be easy with Gabriel, but if anyone can handle him, it’s Jack.

“That’s signature Gabriel. C’mon, let’s go chat with the kids.” I take Jack by the hand and lead him into the house.

“Kids! I have someone I want you to meet!” I call toward the kitchen.

A few seconds later, Katelyn runs out to the living room.

“Oh, is Santa here already?” Her head swivels around, presumably looking for Old St. Nick.

“Santa never comes early, Katelyn.” Declan trails behind her into the room.

They both stop short when they see me holding Jack’s hand. Katelyn’s eyes grow wide and Declan chews his lip suspiciously.

“Katie, Dec— this is Jack. We’re dating.”

Brief, honest, and to the point. No need to sidestep anything.

“Cool.” Declan shrugs, then takes another bite of his cheese stick.

Cool? I wasn’t expecting that reaction.

Katelyn glances at her brother, then at Jack and me. “Are you nice to Mommy?” Her little pink lip trembles, her fists clenching.

Jack nods solemnly. “I am. Promise.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you then, Jack.” She gives him her hand to shake and a smile pulls at Jack’s lips.

“Nice to meet you as well, Katelyn. And you, Declan.” Jack extends his hand to Declan, and Dec shakes it.

Good to see both my kids have better manners than their father.

“Are you going to get married?” Katelyn stares at Jack, her blue eyes wide.

“Katie! Kind of early to ask that.” My face flushes crimson and I low-key want to die of embarrassment.

Jack clears his throat, but links his fingers with mine. “If your mom will have me. And only if you’re the flower girl.” He winks at her and she blushes, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

“I’d love to be the flower girl.” Katelyn grins, flashing her gap-toothed smile, and my heart melts. Jack definitely knows how to charm an eight-year-old— and her mom.

“We’ll see about all that.” I try to move the subject away from weddings and marriage— I don’t want to scare Jack off.

“Cool. Can we have pizza for dinner?” Dec asks, swallowing the last bite of his snack.

Jack chuckles, a deep, low rumble, and I know in this moment we’re going to be okay. Better than okay, even.

“Pizza’s my favorite,” Jack says, and Declan relaxes, grinning.

“Mine too. Do you like video games?” Dec screws his mouth up, waiting for an answer.

“Of course. Which one’s your favorite?” Jack crosses his arms, totally at ease.

“I like Madden, but my sister likes Roblox.”

“Me too,” Jack says, and the three of them launch into a detailed convo about all things video games.

I place an order for pizza delivery as I watch the man of my dreams chat breezily with my children on the couch, the Christmas tree twinkling in the background. Snowball sits atop the mantle, his legs dangling in front of Katelyn’s stocking, and I swear he winks at me.

This is truly the merriest Christmas ever, all because I got snowed in with the pizza-loving, not-really-that-grumpy scrooge next door.

Want to know how Jack and Ashton are doing now? Be sure to check out this Bonus Epilogue! [Take me to more Jack and Ashton](#)

And if you loved this book, be sure to check out the story about Stella and Wes in [My Charming Holidate!](#)

Thank you for reading. We’d love to hear what you thought in a review! [Snowed in with the Scrooge.](#)

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Click the picture to find out more about the next in the All the Jingle Ladies series!



Sonnet

Losing my husband sent me into a tailspin.

The only things keeping me upright and moving are our son, Nyck, and the fact that the ER needs me as an emergency room doctor.

But still... I'm not myself. I want to be happy again. I want to feel again. And I want to see a future again.

When I ordered this Secret Santa Sighting on my video doorbell, my son was supposed to be off with my sister shopping for the holidays, but Nyck is home sick.

And then Nyck goes out and talks to Santa and tells him the only thing he wants is for me to be happy!

I'm touched at how Santa handles it and then Santa doesn't let me down. He grants my wish for a date.

Jasper's handsome, sensitive, and he rings my bell in so many ways, showing me that happiness can be mine again.

But when I find out that trust is the one thing he can't give me, I'm crushed.

Can we have our holiday happily ever after?

Jasper

I have everything for a great life. Well, everything but love.

Not that I haven't tried, but most of the women wanted me for one thing- my money.

They wanted what I could give them, not what we could give to each other.

When I go on a Secret Santa Sighting doorbell ring all dressed up as the jolly fellow himself, I think it's going to be like the others.

Do a little ho-ho-ho and then go-go-go!

But nine-year-old Nyck catches me and tells me how much he wants his mom to be happy, I can't help but want that too.

Sonnet turns out to be everything I've ever wanted in a woman. Kind, nurturing, funny, and a holiday angel in a curvy package.

When Sonnet finds out that I've done the unspeakable - at least in her mind - she runs away.

How can I show her that my trust is in her completely?

This Santa is ready to make all her wishes come true.

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

Grab a mug of hot chocolate and settle into your favorite reading place to fall in love with All the Jingle Ladies!