



*Rescued*

BY THE

**VETERAN**



MOUNTAIN MEN OF WILDVALE

**CHELSEY CLARK**

Rescued  
By the Veteran  
*Mountain Men of Wildvale: Book 3*

Chelsey Clark

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# CHAPTER 1

# LANA

**A**s I drive along the highway, a blur of sparse pine trees thickened, lining the edges of the winding road. The sunrise casts a soft, misty glow over the mountains, setting a truly magical backdrop for my arrival. I pass a sign that reads: Wildvale, 2 Miles.

I fiddle with the radio dial, settling on the local station. “Good morning, Wildvale. This is Jay Evans with your weather forecast for Sunday, December 18th. Expect snow showers this afternoon and a high of 15 degrees. Stay safe out there!”

Just perfect. Like Wildvale needed another snowstorm. The windshield of my old jeep is fogging up, even with the defrost cranked up. My check engine light has been on for hours, but I haven’t had time to stop.

After twelve hours of driving through the night, I’m exhausted. But I’m almost there – I’ve almost arrived at my childhood home.

My Jeep is stuffed with my belongings. After six years away at college in Michigan, I’m finally moving back home to Vermont.

Soft rock music hums from the speakers, and I let my mind wander, dreaming about how my chiropractic clinic will look once it opens. The past six years have been full of all-night study sessions and clinical exams. I’ve worked so hard, and I’m finally ready to prove myself.

My eyelids flutter. I'm trying my best to stay awake. I take a swig out of my extra-large coffee cup, but it's empty.

Maybe some fresh air will help. I roll down the window and I'm met with a frosty blast of wind whipping at my cheek. I flinch and quickly roll the window up.

I'm excited to see my friends again, too. Candice and Joseph, and their adorable son, Brawley...

Thud!

My body jolts forward. I must have drifted off to sleep for a second. The jeep has stopped moving, and I quickly realize that I am stuck in a snowbank.

I turn the key in the ignition, but it's no use. The Jeep won't start.

I removed my gloves and pulled out my cell phone. Hopefully, the tow truck is available this early on a Sunday morning. I open an internet tab to look up the number and realize that I have no signal.

Wildvale is known for three things: breathtaking wilderness, snowstorms, and crappy cell service.

My options are limited. Even though I'm a little over a mile from the outskirts of town, I risk catching frostbite if I walk. I made sure to wear my warmest winter gear, but it does nothing to protect against the windchill of Wildvale.

If I stay put in my car, I could be waiting for days. Especially with a big snowstorm on the way.

Plus, I've got a busy schedule to keep. I need to stop over at the cabin, my childhood home, where I plan to stay. Then, I

have to check out the clinic I'm renting and make sure it's all set to open in a week. I also promised Candice that I would make an appearance at Brawley's birthday party this evening.

Since I've got no time to waste, I decided to walk.

I zip my coat all the way up to my chin, tightening my hat and scarf. I'm wearing the best snow boots my meager student income could buy.

I grab my purse and fling the door open, bracing myself against the gust of arctic air. I can do this. If I can make it through medical school, I can do anything.

I take a few steps forward and stumble in the snow, clumsily falling to my knees.

Just then, I heard the roar of an engine getting louder and louder. It's a truck – and it's coming my way. Hallelujah!

I struggle to push myself up and off the ground. I wave my arms frantically, flagging down the driver. "Help!" I shout.

The blue pickup truck pulls off to the side of the road. A man climbs down from the driver's seat.

"What are you doing out here? It's a little chilly to make snow angels!" He yells.

As he approaches me, I get a clear look at his handsome features. He is tall, broad-shouldered, and lean. A few tufts of honey-blond hair peek out from under his cap. There is a perfectly placed dimple on his chin, which is hiding under a few days' worth of stubble.

He is the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

“S-sorry,” I stammer. I’m shivering and in desperate need of a warm-up. “My jeep – it’s stuck. I can’t even get the engine to start.”

The man looks over at my jeep, assessing the situation. “Tell you what,” he says. “I’m headed into town, and I happen to have my tow straps with me. I’ve got a few minutes to spare. I could pull you out if you wanted.”

I nod my head eagerly. “Yes! I’d really appreciate that.” This man is a godsend.

“Okay. No sense in you hanging around out here. You must be freezing. Hop into my truck and warm up. This shouldn’t take long.” He gives me a mega-watt smile, and I try hard not to drool.

Back at college, there were plenty of cute boys, but nothing like this man. He is rugged and sexy. I want to know what his bare chest might feel like against mine.

As he trudges off in the snow, I climb into the cab of his truck. It smells pleasantly woodsy – a combination of cedar and citrus.

There are a pair of dog tags hanging from the rearview mirror. I resist the urge to read them.

There’s a tug at the back of the truck and the man returns, taking his place behind the wheel. “Alright let’s get her out of there,” he says.

“Him,” I correct.

“Excuse me?” He asks, a bit confused.



“Well, my jeep – I think of it more as a him. I call him Old Faithful,” I explain.

He bursts out laughing, relieving some of the stress of the situation. “You might want to change his name, then.”

His laugh is deep and genuine, and I can’t take my eyes off him. I blush and look away before he notices.

Sure, he’s incredibly handsome, but I need to focus on my clinic. There’s no time in my schedule for romantic encounters.

“I’m David, by the way.” He extends his hand and I accept, returning the gesture with a firm shake. I want him to know that I mean business, and nothing more.

“Lana O’Mark. Nice to meet you,” I say, placing my hand on my lap. “And thanks again for saving the day.”

“Anytime, Lana.” He gives me a wink and steps on the gas.



## CHAPTER 2

### DAVID

**M**y truck lurches forward, and I glance over my shoulder to see that Lana's jeep is unstuck from the snowbank.

She's lucky that I was up early, making the trek outside of town to gather some Christmas decorations for the inn. Otherwise, with the forecast for snow, she could have been stuck on this mountain all day.

"Oh, thank god," she mutters under her breath.

I can tell she's self-conscious. Her eyes light up as soon as the jeep is unstuck, but her expression remains stoic.

"Step one, done. Now let's see if you can get it to start," I say. I don't mean to rush her, but I have a busy day ahead of me.

Lana dutifully nods and climbs down from the truck. I watch in my rearview mirror as she walks around to her jeep.

It's not a bad view at all – she has strong, thick thighs, and her coat is tight, accentuating her curves. Two long, chocolate-brown braids bounce against her shoulders.

I picture what it might be like to have her curled up by the fireplace, her soft, voluptuous body intertwined with mine. I feel myself stiffen and snap out of it.

She's sexy, but we just met. I have no idea why she's here, or how long she'll stay. Plus, I'm in over my head at the inn trying to keep things running smoothly.

Lana jogs over to my side of the truck, and I roll down the window.

“It won’t start. I feel so stupid – I’m not sure what’s wrong. I should have had it serviced sooner,” she says, a worried expression on her face.

“No worries. I can tow it over this hill and drop it off at the repair shop. It’s just down the road. They’ll get it fixed up, and in the meantime, I can take you where you need to go,” I offer.

She eyes me suspiciously. It makes me slightly uncomfortable, but I don’t blame her. It’s not very practical to ride with strangers.

“I’m not a criminal nor a creep, I promise you,” I say, placing my hand over my heart. “And there’s a hunting knife in the glove box. I pray that you aren’t the bad guy, but it’s there to protect yourself - if that makes you feel any better.”

This softens her a bit and she chuckles, relieved. Her sapphire eyes crinkle at the corners, exposing two cheeky dimples. “I’m a doctor. If I need to use the knife, I’ll make sure to stitch you up afterward.”

I shake my head and laugh with her. She’s feisty, and I like that.

As we drive through town, I notice Lana staring out the window, admiring the Christmas décor adorning the storefronts of Wildvale’s main street.

I point out one of my favorite places. “There’s the bar. Good burgers, too.”

Lana nods in agreement. “Oh, I know. That’s one thing I missed about Wildvale,” she says. “I grew up here. I’ve been

away for the past six years studying medicine. I'm opening my clinic after Christmas," she adds.

Beauty and brains. If I had more free time, I would consider asking her out for a drink.

"What kind of clinic?" I ask.

She points to a sign ahead. "Turn right at that stop sign. I'm a chiropractor. I've noticed Wildvale only has a general practitioner, so it's a good opportunity. I'm excited to help the community, you know?"

I turn the wheel, and we bump along a narrow, unpaved road. Lana's coat is slightly unzipped, and I notice her bouncing breasts out of the corner of my eye.

"Oh, I do," I agree. "That's amazing by the way. You could really make a difference."

Too bad the timing is all wrong. I picture Lana's hands on my back, working their way up and down my body...

"Here we are," she announces, snapping me back to reality.

We are nestled in the snow-laden pine trees, completely secluded. A cedar, A-frame cabin is perched up a small hill, overlooking a crystalline, frozen lake.

Lana gets out and grabs her luggage from the back of the truck. I check my watch. I'm running late, but I can't leave without making sure she is situated.

I jump out and stretch, taking a long pull of the fresh, forest air. I grab Lana's bags and she leads the way to the cabin.

"So, this is where you grew up?" I ask.

“Yeah. It’s a little outdated, but I plan to spruce the place up a bit. After the clinic is up and running. I have my work cut out for me.” She swings the door open and flicks the light switch.

Nothing happens.

I follow her into the cabin.

“It’s freezing in here!” I shriek.

She furrows her brow. It’s meant to be a concerned look, but I find it adorable.

“My parents were supposed to have the property manager swing by and get everything started for me,” she says.

I glance over at the stove and notice the power is off. “Maybe a fuse blew?”

She sighs. “Great. What am I supposed to do now?” she asks, rhetorically.

Just then, I receive a text from Diedre at the inn. There’s a last-minute catering order, and one of the staff called in sick.

“Hey, Lana, I hate to do this, but I have an emergency at work. I could drop you somewhere on the way...”

“No, it’s fine,” she insists, giving me a dismissive wave. “I’ll be fine. It looks like I finally have a cell signal, so I’ll ring the property manager. I need to stop by and check on the clinic, anyway.”

As if on cue, her phone rings. “Oh good. It’s my dad calling. He’ll help me figure this out. Go on. Really. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

I point to the door, and she gives me the thumbs up. She mouths “thank you” to me as she answers her phone, and I

walk back out to my truck.

On the drive back to the inn, I find myself missing Lana.

I wonder if our paths will cross again.





# CHAPTER 3

## LANA

My phone is ringing, the obnoxious chirping noise echoing through the cabin.

“Hey, Dad!” I answer, with a false enthusiasm. I can barely hear him, so I walk back outside to get a clearer phone signal.

“Hi, Lana! How is everything at the cabin?” he asks.

I sigh. “Well, honestly, not great. The electricity seems to be out.”

He groans. “That’s terrible! Did you reset the circuit breakers?”

It’s freezing out. I jump up and down to get my blood pumping. Snow flurries are falling from the sky. “Not yet. I’ll give it a try. Hold on.”

With the phone against my ear, I head back inside, locating the dusty utility room that houses the electrical box.

A cobweb brushes against my cheek as I pop the circuits. Nothing happens. “Still not working. What should I do?”

My phone beeps, and I see that I have an incoming call.

“Hey, dad? The property manager is on the other line. I’ll get this all sorted with him. Don’t worry about me. Just enjoy your time in Florida.”

“Okay, Lana. We love you,” he says. “Call us back if you need anything.”

He hangs up, and I switch over to the call waiting. “Hello?”

“Lana? Hey, Thomas here. I have some bad news...” he starts.

I interrupt him. “Oh really, Thomas? So do I. The cabin’s electricity is toast.”

Thomas sighs. “Right. Well, I’ll get it fixed. Anyway, I was calling to tell you about the clinic space. I’m here right now. It’s been vandalized.”

“What?!” This day could not get any worse.

“I called the sheriff. I’m afraid the damage is extensive. The front window is busted out, and there’s graffiti all over the place.”

I take a deep breath. “Ok. So, what, do you think I’ll need an extra week until it’s ready?”

Thomas goes quiet again. His tone is gentle as he breaks the news. “Oh, Lana. I’m so sorry, but the repairs are going to take quite a while. Insurance will cover the cost, but it’s not easy finding workers on such short notice.”

“Great! Just great.” I grumble, rubbing my throbbing temple.

The snow is coming down harder now. My phone pings again, and I realize that I’m due at the inn for Brawley’s birthday party.

“I’m kind of stranded out here at the cabin. My jeep’s in the shop. Do you think you could give me a ride to the Wildvale Inn?” I request.

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Thomas drops me off at the front door of the inn and sets my luggage out for me. I feel like a circus act, traveling from place to place with all my bags in tow.

“Thanks again, Thomas.” I wave him off and head inside.

I don't mean to be so grumpy, but this day has been rough. I just want to settle in and go to bed. But my friends are waiting, and there's no time for that.

Pushing through the heavy wooden doors that separate the lobby from the restaurant, I immediately spot Candice, Joseph, and Brawley sitting at a table with bear-shaped balloons.

I do a double-take as an apron-clad David approaches their table with a cake. “Happy birthday little man!” he exclaims.

We lock eyes. Is this where he works?

“Yes, happy birthday,” I say, still catching my breath. “Sorry I'm late, it's really coming down out there!”

Candice mentions the woes of Brawley's holiday season birthdate, but everything around me is background noise. I can't take my eyes off David.

Now that he's not bundled up in a thick coat, I see his true physique. His biceps are lean but well-defined. His long-sleeved thermal clings to his torso, revealing a strong, muscular back.

He reaches across the table, and I sneak a peek at his abs, which are framed by a deep v-cut leading to his groin.

I'm left momentarily speechless, turned on by the tingle between my legs.

Candice approaches me, giving me a welcoming kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for joining us. I can't believe it's been two years since we've seen each other!"

I shake off my lustful thoughts and shimmy out of my coat. Candice takes it for me, placing it on my seatback.

We settle in and exchange stories, grateful for the chance to catch up. David is busy working, and he is unable to join us.

I don't mind stealing glances at him as he moves around the room, watching the way he saunters when he walks, or the boyish charm on his face when he interacts with customers.

After the party, Candice packs up as Joseph takes a sleeping Brawley to the car. "Thanks again for coming, Lana. It means the world to us. Where are you staying tonight?"

"Here. I'm heading to the front desk now," I tell her.

"Alright. Let me know if you need anything. I'm so happy to have you back! We will have to plan a girls' night soon. Love you." She gives me a hug, and we wave goodbye.

I head over to the front desk, but nobody is there. I ring the bell.

David appears from the restaurant, taking his place behind the desk. "Good to see you again! I didn't know that Joseph and Candice were friends of yours."

I smile. "And I didn't realize that you worked at the Wildvale Inn. You seem to wear many hats around here. Is that what the emergency was all about?"

“Yeah, well, when you own the place it’s kind of expected,” he retorts. “Our kitchen has been understaffed, so I had to fill in. The place was practically on fire by the time I got here.”

I nod. “Well, it looks like it’s still standing. Unlike my clinic. I guess the space I rented was vandalized. Who knows when I’ll be able to start working, now.”

David frowns. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Probably not,” I sigh. “Anyway, I remember the old owner of the Wildvale Inn. He was so sweet. Kind of like Wildvale’s surrogate grandpa.”

“Yeah, he was, wasn’t he?” David says fondly. He runs his fingers over the keyboard, changing the subject. “So, what happened with the cabin? Do you need a room for the night?”

I grimace. “Yeah. The electricity is still out. Anything available?”

David types something into the computer and frowns. “Unfortunately, no. We’re booked. The week leading up to Christmas is always slammed.”

“Oh…” My lip wobbles as I hold back the urge to cry.

David must sense my desperation because he quickly adds, “No worries! Listen, you could stay with me – I’ve got a room here. You could take the bedroom, and I could sleep on the pullout couch. Just for tonight. And no funny business, scout’s honor.” He holds up three fingers, the Boy Scout salute.

I hesitate. Do I really need the temptation of being in the same room as this delicious man? I promised myself no distractions. But there’s no rule against making new friends.

David seems unavailable, anyway. As the owner of the inn, he must be incredibly busy. I can't imagine the amount of time it takes to run this place. Plus, if he lives here, he probably works around the clock.

There's no harm in staying in his room just for tonight. I'll consider it a friendly gesture, and nothing more.

"Okay," I nod. "Sure. But the door stays closed. And I'm not fending off the boogeyman for you." I tease.

He throws up his arms in mock defeat. "You got it. I'll be brave," he promises.

\*\*\*\*\*

David finishes up the closing tasks, and we head up to his room. It's cozier and more inviting than I had imagined. He shows me to his bedroom, the room I'll be sleeping in.

"Everything's all set. Do you need anything else before I turn in?" David asks.

"No, this is absolutely perfect, thank you." I wonder what it would be like to spend every night here, sharing a bed with David.

I imagine myself wrapped up securely in his strong arms, my head against his broad chest.

What am I thinking? I don't have time for romance. My clinic is in shambles, and I need to get my career up and running. David is just being friendly; he's clearly only interested in making sure the inn's guests are comfortable.

I sit down on the bed and kick off my boots, noticing a few picture frames on the nightstand. My curiosity takes hold, and I pick one up.

The first one appears to be a younger version of David, with a buzzcut and army fatigues.

“What’s this?” I ask.

Realizing that I might be prying, I quickly set the photo down.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” David says, gesturing toward the photo.

“That photo is about ten years old. It’s the day I enlisted in the army.”

# CHAPTER 4

## DAVID

**L**ana sets down my army photo but continues to stare at it, searching for some hidden meaning.

Finally, she asks, “So, what made you decide to join the military?”

I sit down on the bed next to her, making sure to keep a few feet of space between us. She’s so naturally beautiful, sitting cross-legged on my bed. I can’t believe I have the perfect woman in my room, gazing up at me and asking to hear my life story.

“I grew up an army brat, so to speak. My parents – they were both in the military, and we moved around a lot. It was cool, being able to see so many places.”

Lana shifts a bit, propping herself against a pillow.

“So, did you enlist because you liked the lifestyle?”

I sigh, shaking my head. “To be honest, no. My parents were adamant that I follow in their footsteps. To them, there was no other option-most kids’ parents wanted them to attend college, but my parents insisted on the army. Of course, I wanted to make them happy. So, I enlisted.”

“But was it hard to make friends?” Lana continues. “That’s the stigma, isn’t it?”

I swallow. I haven’t talked about this with anyone before. “It was incredibly hard to make any real friends, before and after



my service,” I admit.

If only I had more free time, I would ask her out. I’ve never felt this comfortable talking with another person.

Lana frowns. “I’m sorry David. But you’re here now, so it seems to have worked out. Right?”

“Well, yeah. I eventually retired after a few years,” I reply. “Despite all of the drawbacks, the most difficult part was being away from my grandfather. I loved coming here to spend a few weeks every summer with him.”

Lana’s gaze falls to the other photo on my nightstand. It’s a picture of me as a young boy with my grandfather. We had just returned from a fishing trip, standing proudly in front of the Wildvale Inn.

“Is that you and him?” She asks, gesturing toward the photo.

I nod wistfully. “Yep. He used to own this place. I joined the army because I wanted to please my parents. I should have spent more time with him instead. We used to love fishing together,” I recall.

“Oh yeah?” Lana encourages me to go on.

I smile at the memory. “Those fishing trips were always the highlight of my summer. Just my grandpa and I, versus the elements. But, before I could settle down, he passed away and left this all to me.”

She shoots me a sullen look. “Wow, David. I had no idea.”

I glance down, not wanting her to catch the sadness in my eyes. “Yeah. So, I guess that’s why it means so much to me to do right by him. I want to preserve his legacy.”

Lana gently touches my arm. “I think you’re doing a great job,”.

At any point in my life, I would have moved mountains to be with a woman like Lana. And yet, just when the timing is all wrong for both of us, our paths cross.

“Thank you,” I say softly. Our eyes meet and for the first time in my life, I feel like I’ve found someone who might understand me.

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I awoke early, surprisingly refreshed after sleeping on the pull-out couch. I stretch and my feet plop onto the floor with a soft thud. I realize I’ve forgotten a fresh change of clothes.

I’ll have to pop into my bedroom to retrieve some.

I tip-toed quietly to the sliding barn door and pray that Lana left it unlocked. I would hate to awaken her at this hour—especially since she was so exhausted yesterday.

I gently tug on the door—and as luck would have it—it opens. The floor creaks, and I hold my breath, hoping she doesn’t wake up and freak out.

I quickly pull a folded-up thermal from my closet shelf and spin around on my heel to leave. Before I do, I pause for a moment, relishing the sight of Lana.

She’s curled up like a kitten, still wearing her black leggings and sweater from yesterday. She looks like an angel, her silky brown hair spread about her head like a halo.

I linger for a moment, letting my gaze fall first to her large breasts, her full hips, and landing on the pleasantly rounded shape of her backside.

A shiver goes down my spine as I imagine what it would feel like to grip her ass.

Damn it. I have to stop thinking about Lana. I want her, but she has a good career unfolding here in Wildvale. She doesn't need me getting in her way.

Lana stirs, stretching her legs and changing position. I panic a little, realizing that I'm rock-hard and still in her room.

I leave without startling her.

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After I prepped the food this morning, it occurred to me that Lana could use the old nurse's office as a makeshift clinic. The space hasn't been used in years. Since my grandfather passed away, I've had to cut some costs to keep the inn running.

I feel good about doing this favor for Lana. I hope it doesn't come off as clingy. I don't want to push her away, but I saw how bummed she was when she mentioned the damaged clinic. I'll take my chances. She deserves something nice.

I cleaned it up quickly, fixing a few things as I did so. The space wasn't totally trashed, but there were layers of dust and a few rusty nails that need to be replaced. A fresh coat of paint wouldn't hurt, but Lana's eager to start working.

I consider inviting Lana to collaborate with me on my soon-to-be-launched wellness program. It would be great to offer chiropractic services in addition to yoga and acupuncture.

Now that breakfast is over, I push through the heavy, wooden doors to find Lana in the lobby, milling about with other guests.

I clear my throat. “Morning, Lana. How did you sleep?”

“Hey, David!” she beams. Her smile is radiant, and her dimples are enough to cause a stir below my belt. She casually touches my arm, and my skin prickles beneath her French-manicured hand.

“It was exactly what I needed. But no worries—I don’t want to impose on you. I’ve made a reservation at the inn in the next town over. I’ll be staying there tonight,” she says.

“Oh, no need. A guest checked out this morning, actually. I can get you set up in your own room later,” I say, trying to suppress my excitement.

“Great, David. Thank you. That will give me more time to check on my clinic.” She gives me an appreciative smile.

“Actually, Lana, I’d like to show you something. Follow me.” I instruct.

I’m nervous to show her the makeshift clinic space. What if she totally rejects it? Have I made a mistake? I don’t want to risk losing her.

My pace slows a bit. I’m doubting myself as we approach the clinic room.

I hesitantly lead her into the nurse's office. The smile on her face falls, turning serious. "David, what is all this?"

For a moment, I'm afraid she hates it. "Well, I, um..." I stutter, unsure if this is too much. "I thought you could use it as a makeshift clinic. You know, until yours is fixed."

She is silent for a moment, pondering. Her silence is intimidating, and I am certain that she is uncomfortable with all of this.

Crossing her arms, her body language has changed from casual to closed-off. "Well, I don't know. I mean, this space is lovely, but I'm not sure I can accept this."

I blew it. I came on way too strong, and now she wants to run far, far away from here.

There's no way I can inform her about the wellness program now. She will think I'm too clingy.

I act quickly, trying to rectify my mistake. "It's too much. I'm sorry, Lana. Really. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just wanted to help after you told me about your clinic, and how important your work is to you. You don't have to use the space." I hold my breath, waiting for her response.

She furrows her brow. "David, I don't want you to think I'm unappreciative. I just don't think I should be accepting so many handouts from you. I need to stand on my own two feet, and be independent. But I guess...I don't know."

I shrug. "It's okay. I get it."

She sighs, and her arms fall to her sides. "Since you went through all this trouble, I guess it wouldn't hurt to use the

space for a few days. That way, I can see a few patients to keep myself busy.”

I try to stifle my disappointment. “That’s great, Lana. Let me know if you need anything: medical supplies, referrals...”

“Thank you, David. Now, I better get to work,” she says.

I take that as my cue and leave.

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It’s afternoon, and the snow is still coming down hard. There’s over a foot on the ground. Pine tree branches sag under the icy weight, threatening to come down with the slightest movement.

I lead a small group of guests along the hiking trail, a complementary activity that gives them the opportunity to explore Wildvale’s signature wintry landscape.

The guests remark on the picturesque vistas before us, but my mind is elsewhere. I knew Lana would think the clinic was too pushy. I mean, I know she appreciated it. But it may have been too forward, like I’m trying to involve myself in her life.

She obviously doesn’t want a relationship. Nor do I have time for one. Even if she’s the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.

I wish I had another chance to explain my feelings to Lana. If I had the opportunity to make things right, she might understand where I’m coming from.

This is all driving me crazy. I've never been so unfocused at work. My discipline, my determination—it's all gone out the window since Lana O'Mark crashed into that snowbank.

I'm awakened from my trance by a cracking sound. I whip my head around and see one of the branches plummeting down, about to clobber one of the guests.

“Watch out!” I shout, leaping to push them out of the way.

“David!” I hear one of the guys call out.

Then everything goes black.

# CHAPTER 5

## LANA

**A**fter seeing a few patients at my temporary clinic, I decided to take a coffee break. Before I could get up from my desk, David and two guys come bursting through the door.

I jump up instantly, my heart racing as I watched David struggling. “What happened?” I blurt out.

“I’m fine,” David grumbles, clearly injured.

I motion toward the exam table and the guys set David down.

“He fell saving another guest from a rogue tree branch,” one of the guys says, attempting to catch his breath. “He can barely walk.”

“Well, that’s very noble, but you should be more careful,” I admonish him.

David reddens. “A branch almost took out one of the guests. I had to get her out of the way.”

The other men quietly leave the clinic. My heart is practically leaping out of my chest, but I’m glad that David’s alright.

I give him a stern look. “Can you please remove your shirt so I can have a look at your back?”

A sly grin spreads across his face. He is staring at me. I’m trying to remain as professional as possible.



He does as he's told, and I touch his shoulders first, followed by his lower back.

I poke and prod before finally settling on a diagnosis. "It's a standard lumbar sprain. Nothing a little chiropractic massage can't fix."

David's eyebrows shoot up so high, I think they might leap off his face. "Massage?"

"Yep. Chiropractors are well-versed in all healing practices. Now lie down, face first." I slide out the face pillow, and he lies down on his stomach.

I rub some therapeutic oil between my palms and gently knead his lower back.

It seems so erotic, but this is strictly my job. He's just like any normal patient.

But my heart is still racing, and I can feel the coil of excitement in my stomach winding tighter.

Wait a minute. Am I attracted to David?

"Thank you, by the way," David mumbles, his face stuffed into the pillow.

I startle, stumbling backward. My hand slips a bit lower, practically grazing his butt. I'm embarrassed, but David gracefully ignores the mistake.

"So, how did you..." he begins.

"When did you..." I say at the same time.

We both talk over one another, trying to break the awkward silence. "You go first," I say.

He repositions his arms. “How did you decide to become a doctor?”

I smile. “I remember watching hospital shows on TV when I was a kid. Doctors seemed like real-life superheroes. I wanted to be one of them.”

David lets out a low moan. “Superhero, indeed. This feels amazing, by the way.”

He shifts on the table, and I can’t tell if he’s trying to get more comfortable, or if he’s a bit too excited.

I quickly change the subject. “So, if you came to Wildvale every summer, how come we’ve never met each other before?”

“I’m not sure.” His tone turns serious. “I guess I was going to ask you the same thing. I wouldn’t have missed the chance to get to know you...”

I stop rubbing his back and consider him for a moment. Does David like me?

I clear my head. “My family would pack up and head to Michigan in July every summer. I’m guessing that was the same time you came to visit each year.”

“That explains it, then. How’s Michigan? I haven’t been,” he says casually.

I place a heating pad on his back. “It’s almost as picturesque as Wildvale. By the way, I didn’t get a chance to tell you—I saw three patients earlier.”

“Wow, Lana. That’s cool. Who did you see?” he asks, genuinely interested.

I lean against the exam table, resisting the urge to trace my finger along the curve of his back.

“I ran into Mrs. Landon in the lobby earlier and she asked me to give her a back adjustment. Then, Mr. Landon, her husband, saw how great I did and asked for one, too. I also had a chance to work out some kinks in Diedre’s back while she was on her break.”

“Sounds like you’re the best doctor in town,” he suggests.

I pat his back. “All set. And no need to butter me up, this is free of charge,” I add.

He sits up. “I’m serious.”

David leans forward, and I hold my breath. I’m trembling. We lock eyes, and I notice for the first time that they are the color of caramel.

He cocks his head and leans in a bit closer. “Lana...”

I freeze. Is David leaning in to kiss me?

His bare chest and taut abs are teasing me, and I contemplate the feel his soft, supple lips against mine.

It’s not clear if David thinks of me romantically. All of this could simply be a nice, friendly gesture. He’s obviously dedicated to his work at the inn.

My emotions are all over the place. Yes, he’s incredibly attractive, but I can’t get involved with anyone. Not now, when my practice is starting up.

Besides, if he wanted to kiss me, wouldn’t he have done it by now?

There's a knock on the door. "Doctor O'Mark?" It's Mrs. Landon.

David jerks back, and I straighten up, smoothing my sweater. He quickly puts his shirt on.

I clear my throat. "Yes, Mrs. Landon. Hi! How can I help you?"

I have no doubt that my cheeks are five shades redder than normal.

David interrupts. "Hey, Mrs. Landon. I hope the inn's treating you well. I need to go prep for dinner. Lana, er, Doctor O'Mark, thank you for your help. Bye, Mrs. Landon!" He awkwardly waves and hops off the table.

Mrs. Landon breaks the tension with a jovial laugh. "Oh, young love!"

Maybe she's misunderstood the situation. "David is just a friend of mine."

Mrs. Landon purses her lips. "Oh, sure. My husband and I started off as friends too. Anyway, I came by to tell you that I've fired my usual massager. Moving forward, I'd like to see you, if you have the time."

"Absolutely!" I gush. "This is the best news. Let's set up a weekly appointment."

"Alright. I understand that this is just a temporary office. But you're so talented that Mr. Landon and I would follow you anywhere!" she compliments.

"Thank you. How about a Thursday afternoon?" I offer.

“Thursday? No, we’ll have to change it. I think the inn’s annual Christmas party is this Thursday. I assume you’ll be there?” She inquires.

I frown. “I hadn’t heard about it.”

“Oh, you have to come!” Mrs. Landon exclaims. “I’m sure David just forgot to mention it. He’s been so invested in the inn’s success, trying to keep it profitable and whatnot.”

I consider this before responding. “I didn’t know the inn was struggling.”

Mrs. Landon shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know for sure. But David inherited this place, and he’s not a businessman by trade. But he’s had some good ideas here and there-like the new wellness program.”

I furrow my brows. “He never mentioned a wellness program.”

“Oh, it’s going to be great for the town,” Mrs. Landon continues. “And for the inn, too. David’s collaborating with various vendors to offer wellness services. I personally cannot wait for the yoga classes.”

I purse my lips and nod. “Yoga is great for the back.”

Why wouldn’t David have mentioned this to me? I’m a healthcare professional, after all.

She nods. “I believe David will offer personal training. He’s a military man, in case you haven’t noticed his strong physique.”

My body tenses. I had definitely noticed. “I saw some pictures,” I say nonchalantly.

Mrs. Landon chuckles. “Don’t worry about being so modest. It’s perfectly fine to have a crush on someone.”

I blush. Is it really that obvious that I have feelings for David? I’m not even sure if I would call them feelings. He’s incredibly handsome, but just a friend.

“Mrs. Landon, what makes you think that I have a crush on David?” I ask her.

She smiles. “Well, when you get to be my age, you know everything. Like when two people are more than just friends.”

“But David and I are just friends. Really,” I insist.

Perhaps I do like David. I was worried when he came into my clinic, and I certainly couldn’t stop staring at his six-pack. Maybe Mrs. Landon has a point.

“Okay, Dr. O’Mark. See you at the party.” She winks at me and closes the door behind her.

# CHAPTER 6

## DAVID

**I**t's the morning of Wildvale Inn's annual Christmas party, and I am nowhere near prepared. It has been a long week, and we have been short-staffed. Not only that, but I've been moving a bit slower due to my back injury. Lana fixed me up, but I'm still slightly sore.

Yesterday, I could have sworn Lana was worried about me. When the guys dragged me into her clinic, she looked concerned. She was even shaking. Is it possible that she has feelings for me?

I head down to the lobby to grab a cup of coffee. I make a mental checklist of all the things that need to be done by this evening. The decorations, for one. The food is prepped, but it all needs to be cooked. Don't get me started on the Christmas tree...

"Do you always talk to yourself?" Lana approaches me with a smirk on her face.

She grabs a mug and fills it with dark roast, stirring in a creamer after.

My face reddens. "I must look a bit crazy out here muttering to myself. Sorry, I've got a lot on my mind, with the Christmas party tonight."

Then it hits me. I forgot to invite Lana to the Christmas party. She must think I'm a jerk.

“Oh! Gosh, Lana. I am so sorry, I forgot to tell you about the party...”

She puts her hand up, stopping me. “It’s okay, David. Mrs. Landon filled me in. I know we’ve both been so busy with work that it’s hard to think straight. I’ll be there tonight.”

I let out a puff of air. I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath. “Ok, good. I hate to be a drag, but I really need to get started on these decorations. Busy day planned at the clinic?” I ask.

She sips her coffee, pondering. A drop lands on her ruby-lacquered lips and she retrieves it with her tongue. What I wouldn’t give for a chance to taste her.

“You know, I don’t have anything in the books today. I could help decorate if you’d like,” she suggests.

Out of habit, I want to decline her help. I’m used to doing everything on my own. But then I assess the overwhelming amount of Christmas knick-knacks that I have yet to hang up.

Plus, if I accept her offer, we’ll have more time to spend together.

She bites her lower lip, waiting for my reply. She is so incredibly sexy, and seemingly unaware of how gorgeous she is. I quickly look away before my thoughts go any further.

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We finished decorating with about an hour to spare. Decorating with Lana made the activity bearable, although my



attraction to her has become a bit unbearable.

I had to sneak away a few times to calm myself after our fingers brushed casually, or whenever she lightly touched my arm. I've never had a woman affect me the way that she does.

Before heading down to greet the party guests, I do a final once over in the mirror to check my appearance: navy blue slacks, tartan plaid sport coat layered over a white button-down, and freshly polished shoes.

I'm feeling dapper. and I wonder if Lana would approve. Damn it, I have to get her out of my head. I'm pitching my new wellness program tonight, and I must remain focused. We need this program to be a success. The future of the inn relies on it.

I enter the lobby where we've set up a larger-than-life Christmas tree, flanked by an open bar on one side, and an information booth for the wellness program on the other.

Mrs. Landon approaches me. "David! This party is the best it's been in quite some time! How did you do it?"

Before I can answer, there's a hand on my shoulder and my entire body tenses up.

"Well, he may have had a woman's touch this year."

I tilt my head to see Lana standing next to me. She dazzles in a sapphire, sequin dress that matches the azure hue of her eyes. It takes everything in me to stop myself from sweeping her off her feet.

"Do you always sneak up on people?" I say jokingly, happy to see her in such good spirits.

“Look at you two,” Mrs. Landon coos. “It’s so nice to see some fresh romance in this place. Did you plan on matching, too?”

Lana and I eye one another suspiciously, and she quickly removes her hand from my shoulder.

“No...we’re not...we didn’t—” I say, a bit too defensively.

“We’re just friends, Mrs. Landon. I told you this,” Lana insists.

So, there it is, straight from her mouth. Just friends. It feels like I’ve been punched in the gut, but I keep a straight face.

Even if I wanted to pursue anything with her, I simply wouldn’t have the time. Each moment spent with her is less time invested in the inn. And with declining revenue, staffing issues, and inflation, there’s no room in my life for romance.

“That’s right,” I add. “Just pals. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to mingle with the guests. I hope you ladies enjoy your evening.” I give a polite nod and wink before slinking off into the throng of partygoers.

As I check out the information booth, I steal a glance at Lana to see how she’s doing. There’s not an ounce of concern on her face as she effortlessly converses with everyone, gracefully making her way through the party.

I spend the evening pitching the wellness program. No matter what I do, I can barely get a few sentences out before my mind wanders back to Lana. My eyes betray me, perpetually scanning the room to steal glimpses of her.

Thankfully, I have some fliers that do most of the heavy lifting in explaining the program.

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As the party winds down, I assist guests with the coat check and clean up remnants of empty glasses and snack plates.

When the last few guests filter out, I catch a deep blue glimmer out of the corner of my eye. There, underneath the mistletoe, is Lana.

I'm not sure if this is intentional or not, so I casually greet her. "Hey! So, what did you think about the party?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I think it went pretty well. I had a great time. How'd your pitch go?"

I nod. "Good. A lot of people were interested. I got about one hundred sign-ups."

"That's great news, David. And also," she begins, pointing up at the mistletoe.

"It took me like thirty minutes to hang this up, and I'm pretty sure nobody used it. I think it might be an outdated tradition."

I gulp. She is incredibly difficult to read. Or, maybe I've had one too many glasses of champagne. Either way, I'm aching to kiss her. But I can't. I'm frozen in place, my heart beating faster and faster.

I lick my lips and shrug. "Yeah. It was just in the box so..."

Damn it. I sound like an idiot. Maybe I should make a move. Lana is everything I've dreamt of in a woman—gorgeous, intelligent, ambitious, and helpful.

And yet, I know that the timing is all wrong. I can't risk losing the inn. The thought of someone else taking over my grandfather's business is soul-crushing. I'm torn between my family's legacy and my own desires.

She sighs, breaking my train of thought. "Well, I'm beat. I better head to bed. Night," she says and takes a step forward.

"Lana, wait," I spit out.

I probably shouldn't kiss her, but it's all I want at this moment. Against my better judgment, I shut my brain off and move hastily, closing the space between us.

What's the harm in a Christmas kiss? I can't stand this tension between us any longer.

Suddenly, our lips meet, delicately gliding over the other. She doesn't push away but rather leans into it. I feel a slip of her tongue gloss over my lips and let her in, the slow, deliberate dance drawing us closer together.

She takes a step back, breaking the spell. "I need some air!" she exclaims.

"Lana, I'm sorry..." I begin to apologize, unsure if my actions were too forward.

She walks away and I'm left standing alone.

"Idiot," I grumble to myself. I rip down the mistletoe and throw it in the trash before heading to bed.

# CHAPTER 7

## LANA

I awaken to the sound of my phone ringing.

David. He automatically pops into my head as I rub the sleep from my eyes. My phone is still ringing.

Annoyed, I grab it from the nightstand. It's my mom.

"Good morning, mom," I croak.

She informs me that she, my father, and my brother are arriving tomorrow to spend Christmas in Wildvale. I agree to have dinner with them, struggling to stay present in the conversation. I can't get last night's kiss out of my mind.

I say goodbye and hang up before she realizes that I'm in a bad mood.

My first appointment is in one hour, so there's no time to waste. I quickly roll out of bed and hop in the shower.

As I rinse off, my mind wanders back to last night. David kissed me, and I kissed him back. Was it a mistake? Maybe he had a bit too much to drink. I still can't believe that it happened.

I shouldn't have walked away like that. I had the perfect opportunity to show him how I feel, and I blew it.

I close my eyes and drift off into a daydream, conjuring an image of David's thick muscles, wondering if his thickness applies to all his parts.

I crank the shower dial to the coldest setting and let the icy water obliterate every ounce of desire in my body.

After leaving him standing there last night, I'm positive David has lost any ounce of interest in me. How could he ever want me after I humiliated him?

I quickly get ready and head down to the clinic. As I round the corner, I see a line of about ten people. What is going on? I had one patient scheduled this morning, so I'm shocked to see a line outside my door.

I greet the people waiting in line. "Good morning, everyone! This is the chiropractic clinic. I think you have mistaken it for the restaurant, maybe?"

A guest I recognize from the Christmas party pipes up. "No, not a mistake Dr. O'Mark. We're here for the free check-ups."

I stare at them, puzzled. "I'm not aware of any free check-ups."

"It's part of the new wellness program," the guest continues. "David said he'd cover the costs."

For a moment, I'm speechless. David didn't mention this promotion to me.

Was he doing it to be considerate of me or to boost interest in the wellness program?

Maybe he does have feelings for me. But it's possible that he just sees me as a business partner, someone to increase profits.

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After a long day at the clinic, I head straight to my room, eager for a full night of sleep.

I climb into bed and close my eyes, but it's hopeless. I can't sleep. My mind is racing, still thinking about David and the kiss.

I toss and turn before finally giving up. I might as well get some work done, so I'll head back to the clinic and organize my patient files.

Walking down the hall, I notice how eerily quiet and calm the inn becomes at night. Everyone's probably asleep at this hour, snuggled tightly in their king-sized, flannel sheets, fireplaces blazing amid the persistent snowstorm.

I turn the corner and my body collides with another.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I squeak out.

My eyes adjust, and I realize the person is David.

Of all the people in Wildvale, it's the one person I'm the most embarrassed to see. I want to shrink away and disappear, but there's nowhere to go.

"Lana," he says pointedly. "What are you doing out here this late?"

I shrug. "Couldn't sleep. Thanks for the patient sign-ups, by the way. I meant to tell you sooner but..."

"Busy day. Yep, I get it. Me too." He seems forlorn and exhausted.

"Yeah," I sigh.

"Well, I'll let you go. Good night." My body tenses up. There's more that I want to say to him, but I can't muster the

courage.

“Lana, wait.” David stops me, lightly squeezing my forearm.

“Last night was...”

“David, stop. You don’t have to explain,”

“I don’t, but I want to,” he persists. “I’ve been so busy running around the inn, making sure everything is perfect for Christmas, planning the wellness program...”

“Which I do appreciate, by the way,” I interject. “And I get it. The clinic, the patients, it’s a win-win for both our businesses.”

David furrows his brow. “Lana, do you think that all of this is just business?”

I hesitate. I don’t want it to be just business.

David sighs and reaches out, placing his hand on my shoulder. The static in the air creates an electric shock, and my shoulder instinctively flinches.

“Lana, I don’t understand this, us. I know it appears like I only care about my inn, but this past week with you has been great. I want you to know that.”

I bite my lip. “I agree, David. But you know I have many responsibilities, with the clinic, my patients...”

David takes a step closer, and my body trembles. He moves his face inches from mine, his expression pleading.

“I’ve thought about you all day, Lana,” he admits. “And it’s been damn near impossible to get any work done.”

“How do you think I feel, David?” I hiss. “I can’t stop thinking about you, either. And I hate it.”



David is dejected. “Wow,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry, I didn’t realize I was causing so much trouble.”

I sigh. “No, David. It’s complicated. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it, Lana? Because it seems like you care, at least a little bit,” he implores.

“I guess. I mean, I do. But I have goals, and I can’t afford any distractions. Last night, that kiss—it was great, but it’s obviously created a distraction for both of us.”

David shrugs. “So what? We’ve both made work easier for one another this week. I think that says something.”

I contemplate this for a moment. He makes a good point.

“Even if I want to be with you, the timing is wrong,” I continue. “I need to focus on building my clinic.”

“I used to think the same thing. That the inn and work mattered more than anything else. Until I met you,” he insists.

I blink, unsure of what to say. “Is that true?”

David cranes his neck, his breath hot and heavy as he whispers in my ear, “Yes, Lana. I can’t stop thinking about you because I’m attracted to you. I want you. And nothing can get in the way of that,” he admits.

His cedarwood scent intoxicates my senses. Goosebumps prickle my skin, and a knot forms in the pit of my stomach, slowly dissolving and trickling down.

“Oh,” I exhale, taken aback. “I want you too, only if the timing were different...”

He pulls me closer to him, eliminating the space between us.

“Damn it, Lana! Forget about the timing and live in the

moment.”

The fire in his amber eyes coaxes me out of my shell. My knees weaken, and my tough exterior crumbles under the weight of his declaration.

I’ve made a vow to devote myself to the clinic. After all, wasn’t that the point of studying for six years? But I made that vow before I met David.

I’ve never met anyone like him—someone so ruggedly handsome, kind-hearted, and determined. He’s perfect, and he’s standing in front of me, begging me to give us a chance.

I took a chance coming back to Wildvale, so why not take a chance on David? Maybe this time, everything will work out perfectly.

“Okay, David. I’ll give it a try,” I murmur, overcoming my lingering doubt.

Our lips meet, and my hips lean into his. His firm biceps envelop me, and my body stirs against his.

He pulls away from me momentarily.

“Let’s get out of the hallway and go someplace quieter to talk,” he suggests.

I give a half nod of agreement, anxious to be alone with him. My nerves send waves of electricity through my body, and it feels like an eternity passes as he fumbles for his room key.

Finally, he opens the door. Once we are half a step into the privacy of his room, I tilt my head up, placing a firm kiss on his lips. I’m eager to taste him, to drink him in.

He slams the door without breaking the seal of our kiss but then stops to rub his strong hands over my tingling arms.

“You seem like you need to warm up a bit,” he observes.

I nod toward the bearskin rug laid out by the fireplace. “You could light a fire,” I suggest.

His eyes light up. “Of course. Great idea.”

He plants another soft, sweet kiss on my lips before kindling the fire. A flame lights up the room and David’s sultry gaze penetrates me, setting my heart ablaze.

He motions for me to join him on the rug. “Let me warm you up.”

I follow his lead. Despite all of my misgivings, there is nothing more perfect than being in David’s arms.

I kneel on the rug in front of him, and he kisses my forehead.

The sweetness of his gesture excites me, enticing me to explore further.

I lift the hem of his shirt, running my hands across his stomach. “Maybe I should see how your back is doing.”

An enthusiastic grin spreads across his face as he eagerly lifts his shirt over his head, exposing his deliciously taut six-pack abs.

Gently, I reach toward his lower back and massage around his hips. The tension in my belly coils tighter, and I yearn to connect with him.

Our lips meet again, hungrily stealing kisses from one another. A little distraction is what I’ve needed all along.

My desire overtakes me, and I give in to the moment, willing to do anything to be closer to him.

# CHAPTER 8

## DAVID

**L**ana's lips are on mine once again, breathing life into me. I shudder as her hands press into my bare chest, searing the skin beneath.

Her lips graze my neck and slowly trail down, first to my chest, then down my stomach. With every touch, my body tingles, sending shockwaves through me.

She stops at my belt buckle and flicks her eyes up at me, and she's no longer Lana the doctor—she's Lana the sex goddess. She's impossible to resist; I'm completely enamored with her.

"I have just the remedy for you," she teases, her mouth lingering near my groin.

I could never disappoint her, so instead of giving in to my base desire, I cup her chin.

"Come back to me, love," I beckon.

Lana shifts her body forward, those full, curvaceous hips rolling over my groin, threatening to undo me.

We are face to face again, the urge to connect growing stronger and hotter with every movement. I run my hands under her shirt and squeeze her large, supple breasts.

"Take this shirt off. I want to feel you against me," I instruct.

Without hesitation, she flings the shirt over her head. "Who's in charge here?" she teases.

“It’s a collaboration, remember?” I remind her.

She presses herself into me and we lay back down on the rug, her legs straddling mine.

The fire illuminates us, casting shadows onto the wall, making us appear as one.

Tenderly, I take one of her nipples in my mouth, suckling it, and her back arches forward. Lana’s hips bear down harder on my groin, grinding against my stiffness.

She lets out a soft cry of pleasure, and the urge to please her overtakes me. Cupping her full, round bottom, I carefully flip her over so that she is on her back. Her dazzling sapphire eyes innocently blink up at me.

“Now it’s my turn to take care of you,” I growl.

She squirms with delight. “I’d love that,” she breathes out.

I start to slide her flannel pajama pants off her hips and see that she is completely nude underneath. I hesitate for a moment, licking my lips. Lana lets out a soft whimper, writhing her hips.

“Do it, David,” she pleads. “Take care of me.”

My only mission is to fill her with pleasure, doing to her what she does to me. Showing her exactly how good she makes me feel.

I pull her pants off, revealing the glistening, tight slit between her thighs. I thrust two fingers deep into her, caressing her with light, gentle strokes. She cries out, and a flood of wetness and warmth slides over my fingers, teasing my aching cock.

She squirms, the heat and friction building up inside of her. I bring my lips down upon her, flicking my tongue in slow, strong circles while my fingers continue to stroke, loosening her tightness.

Lana rakes her hands through my hair, gripping it, holding me in place. “David,” she exhales. “I need you.”

I could come right then, but I can’t disappoint her. I’ve waited long enough to be with her, and I’m determined to give her everything she wants.

Lana lets out a low, sultry moan. “David, I want to feel you. Please,” she begs.

I can’t take it anymore. She tastes good, but I need to be inside her - to have all of her.

Rising up on my knees, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and continue massaging her with the other.

“The first time we met, I knew you were special,” I declare. “But do you want to see how good you make me feel?”

She nods feverishly. Her hair is splayed out around her head, and she is glowing under a sheen of sweat.

At her approval, I practically rip my jeans off, exposing my massively hard, throbbing shaft. It hurts so badly; I’ve never been more turned on. I’ve never met another person who drives me this wild.

“Is this what you want, Lana?” I slowly run my hand along the length of my shaft, teasing her.

Lana greedily grabs me, stroking me fast and hard, willing me to enter her. Her face is flushed, and her eyes burn through me.

I carefully nudge her thighs open, lingering at her entrance. “Tell me how I make you feel,” I insist.

She shimmies down, trying to grind herself onto my hard cock. I slide myself over her slit, teasing her further.

“David, I...” she stammers, catching her breath. “I want to be with you.”

For a moment, I’m stunned. I also want her to be mine, and I think I’ve known it all along.

“I want you, too.” We lock eyes as I slip inside her. “Oh, fuck, you feel so good,” I mumble.

The tip of my cock slides in slowly, the natural tightness of her just barely allowing me in. A shudder runs through me.

Out of instinct, I pump my hips, slow and deliberate thrusts caressing her while she sucks me in deeper.

Lana’s entire body quivers. “I want to feel all of you, David.”

I lift her legs over my shoulders, and the angle allows me to take in the full sight of her angelic beauty.

Lana lets out another moan, a cross between a whimper and a sigh. I push further, deeper until I can feel her tightness strangling me, her desire pulsating against my shaft.

“Oh fuck, yes. Lana, you feel so good. You’re perfect,” I mutter, breathless.

I’m lost in her, but I keep going. Her pleasure quickens with each thrust. I quickly switch positions, a desperate need to close the space between our bodies.

I use my forearms to prop myself up so that I’m hovering over her, gripping the bearskin rug. Her perky breasts graze my



chest, and we are eye to eye.

We gaze at each other, a mixture of lust, desire, and wonderment. I close my lips over hers, inhaling every soft moan that escapes.

Suddenly, she cries out and turns her head away. “David, I...” she whimpers.

A gush of warmth caresses me, and I glance down to witness the slickness, easing myself in and out of her. She’s coming, an experience so overwhelmingly intense that I am powerless. I let go, releasing myself into her at the same time.

Beads of sweat roll down my temples. I collapse onto the bed next to Lana and she rolls onto her side, facing me.

“So, your back seems to be fixed,” she says, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Does this count as my follow-up appointment?” I tease.

Lana is smiling from ear to ear. I’ve never seen her so happy and relaxed. She shimmies into the crook of my arm, placing her head on my chest. “I’m much less stressed out now, that’s for sure.”

“Me too, actually,” I say, somewhat surprised.

“Do you think we should add ‘passionate lovemaking’ to the wellness program? Or is that too forward?” she jokes.

I let out a hearty laugh. “I think we can add that to our wellness program. But I think the guests can stick to yoga and digital cleanses.”

She trails her fingers over my abs. “Just trying to balance work with play.”

I twirl a lock of Lana's hair around my finger. "This is great, isn't it?"

Lana suddenly becomes serious. "Yeah...and David? Would it be too much if I invited you to dinner tomorrow night?"

I give a pensive nod. "Like a date?"

"Yes, but my parents and brother will also be there," she says.

After such a great evening with Lana, I worry about meeting her parents. What if they don't like me? I assume Lana might be the type to take her family's opinions seriously. But if I don't meet them, I'll miss the opportunity to show how much I care.

"Okay. Let's do it," I agree, accepting her invitation.

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It's Christmas Eve, and Lana's invited me to dinner with her parents. I'm so nervous that I've already had to change out of one undershirt and replace it with a fresh one.

Lana is waiting for me in the lobby when I head down to the restaurant.

"Hey handsome," she says, planting a kiss on my cheek.

I smile at her. "You look lovely. Can you tell how nervous I am?"

Lana places her hands on my chest, smoothing my sweater. "Just relax. Be yourself. They'll love you."

We take our seats at the table where Lana's parents and brother are situated. They greet me warmly, and the waitress brings over some drinks.

Her parents express gratitude for all of my help, profusely apologizing to both of us for the ill-prepared cabin and damaged clinic space. We get along well, and after a couple of glasses of wine, her parents are full and relaxed.

"David," Lana's mother pipes up. "I was thinking. If you aren't busy for Christmas, you should spend it with us."

I look over at Lana. She smiles coyly.

I nod. "I'd love to join you. Thank you," I reply.

Lana claps her hands together. "Perfect!"

"Maybe we could create a new tradition. I could reserve a room for you next year too. We book up fast around the holiday," I offer, half-joking.

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After Lana's parents and brother head out for the night, I pull her aside. We're sitting on the loveseat in the lobby, warming up next to the fireplace. I offer her a nightcap before turning in, and she gratefully sips her tea.

"Thanks for inviting me tonight. I'm excited to spend more time with you tomorrow," I say.

"Me too, David. This has been the best Christmas, yet." Lana's breath hitches and I notice a glittering teardrop slide down her cheek. She quickly flicks it away.

Lana laces her fingers through mine. “I’ve never had a man—or anyone, for that matter—treat me so kindly. I think we really do work well together.”

“Hey, do you think we can market ourselves as the first success story out of the wellness program?”

I can’t help but ease the seriousness of the moment with a little laughter. However, there is no doubt in my mind that Lana is the one for me.

She playfully smacks my arm, giving me the side-eye. “I think you might need to find a new doctor.”

We lock eyes momentarily and sit in silence, goofy, happy smiles plastered across our faces.

“Merry Christmas, David,” Lana says.

“Merry Christmas, Lana,” I whisper.

# EPILOGUE

## LANA

Two years later

**I**t's Christmas Day at the Wildvale Inn, and the snow is falling heavily, creating the perfect winter wonderland. It's as if we're in a snow globe.

Not only is it Christmas, but it is also our two-year anniversary. Considering this, along with the increase in reservations during the Christmas holiday, we decided to throw a Christmas Day celebration at the inn.

David, who is now my handsome husband, heads over to the table where I'm sitting with my family, indulging in his famous French toast.

David smiles warmly, holding out a tray. "Anybody need a refill?"

"Oh, I'm stuffed David," my father says.

"I could keep eating. It's Christmas, after all," my brother says, beckoning the tray of breakfast food.

"David," my mother starts. "I can't believe it's been two years since you became a part of the O'Mark family. What's been your favorite part so far?"

"Was it when you guys made him super nervous that first Christmas Eve dinner?" My brother remarks.

I elbow him. “Stop it!”

“I know what mine is—this French toast!” my dad exclaims.

“Ok, stop drooling please.” I roll my eyes.

David rubs his chin, apparently deep in thought. “It’s the feeling of being a part of a family again,” he admits. “You all are so warm and welcoming. Since my grandfather passed away, I haven’t had that feeling—until I met Lana and you all.”

Dad nods, pleased. “How about a celebratory toast? To Lana and David and whatever the future may hold!”

We clink our glasses, turning our heads toward the stage when a voice booms through the speakers.

“Merry Christmas and happy anniversary to two of my favorite people, Lana and David!”

It’s Candice, Wildvale’s most famous resident.

She’s getting ready to sing, per our request. Even though David and I technically met on a whim, Candice and her husband Joseph had a lot to do with us getting together.

Since they were our mutual friends, it was easy for us to spend time together and socialize—something we were bad about in the past.

It’s hard to believe that we almost let work get in the way of our love for one another.

Candice belts out the first note of ‘Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree’ as her husband Joseph cheers. Their kids cheer alongside him in the audience, and I think about the possibility of one day having my own children with David.

For now, I'm just enjoying our marriage, the growth of the wellness program that we put together two years ago, and the booming success of my clinic.

I tap my foot to the music, stealing glances at David, when Tara, the new waitress comes over. She's been such a savior, solving our staffing issues.

"Hey, Lana. Need anything?" She asks.

"Merry Christmas, Tara! I think I'm all set here..." I trail off, thinking for a moment.

My eyes wander to the corner of the small restaurant, honing in on Eugene, one of our frequent customers. He's all alone, as usual.

"But," I continue. "Do you think you could say hello to Eugene?" I point to where he's sitting.

Tara's eyes scan the crowd. "Is he the man in the snowflake sweater? Do you think he's alone?"

I nod solemnly. "Yep. He's always alone, typing away on his laptop. He doesn't say much, other than asking for a refill on his coffee. I feel bad for him. Maybe you could see if he wants to join us?"

Tara hesitates. "I could try. Maybe the nice gesture will turn his frown upside down."

I laugh. "It's his signature facial expression. Still, there's no reason anybody should be alone, especially on Christmas.

"Yeah, and he's not bad-looking," David interjects.

Tara blushes. "That's true...I'll say hello to him and see how he's doing."

David gives her a playful nudge. “Go for it!”

Tara’s face is bright red, but she’s a good sport. “Sure, I’ll talk to him.”



**Thank you for reading!**

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