

NICHOLE ROSE

The
Galentine's
CHRONICLES

She's his favorite

Pretty
LITTLE MESS

Pretty Little Mess

A Grumpy/Sunshine Romantic Comedy

Nichole Rose

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ABOUT THE BOOK



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Falling for her grumpy mountain man boss was not part of this sunshiney hot mess's plans for Galentine's Day.

Cordelia

Welcome to Winthrop, WA. Population: Screwed.

When I answered Deacon Cromwell's ad for an assistant, roughing it with a mountain man was not what I had in mind.

But I'll give anything a shot. Just so long as it doesn't shoot back.

When my grumpy new boss finds out he hired...well, me... all bets are off.

He's way too hot to handle.

And I'm dying to be handled.

If we don't kill each other first.

I mean, accidents happen in the wild all the time, right?!

Deacon

When I placed an ad for an assistant, I expected someone who knew about life in the mountains.

Instead, I got saddled with the prettiest little mess I've ever met.

Cordelia's mouth never stops moving, and the only thing hotter than that pink hair is her temper.

I have no business putting my filthy hands all over her, but she's itching for someone to settle her down.

And it damn sure won't be anyone but me.

This hot mess is mine to tame.

Paul Bunyan, save me! This grumpy mountain and his hot mess heroine are hot enough to start a forest fire. If you enjoy laugh-out-loud romantic comedy, hot mess heroines, and steamy romance, you'll love Cordy and Deacon!

CHAPTER ONE

Cordelia



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“This was your idea,” I tell the stricken curvy girl staring back at me in the mirror. “I warned you to stop coming up with master plans when alcohol is involved, but do you listen? No. No, you don’t.”

Apparently, Drunk Me still isn’t listening because the only girl staring back is Stone-Cold Sober Me. And Stone-Cold Sober Me would like to speak to the manager.

I mean, honestly. Who convinces her best friends to celebrate Valentine’s Day by forging a drunken pact to conquer our greatest fears? Drunk Me, that’s who.

They’re called *fears* for a reason. But text messages don’t lie.

I’m definitely the ringleader of this circus.

Cordy: *We’re all spending Valentine’s Day doing something we’d never do.*

Devyn: *Like what?*

Cordy: *Whatever you want. I saw an ad in the paper this morning for a mountain man looking for an assistant for two weeks. Maybe I'll call.*

Cleary: *You aren't serious.*

Cordy: *I'm completely serious.*

Gem: *I like the idea. Maybe I'll take the plunge with that jewelry exhibition in town next week. Show off a few of my creations.*

Peyton: *It's insane, but I like it.*

Mandy: *Something we would never do? It's a terrible idea! We don't do things for a reason.*

It seemed like a good idea during our wine-fueled chat last week. It seems less so now that I'm sober and out of time. Valentine's Day is just a few days away, and I'm the only one of the girls who hasn't followed through on our agreement.

"No more Moscato for you," I mutter to my reflection, even though both me and said reflection know I don't actually mean it. I made the same resolution after I convinced the girls that we should take Gemma's inflatable dolphin to the fountain on the Vegas strip for an impromptu, late-night pool party. Thank

God we were the least interesting crime happening in Vegas that night!

I'm pretty sure I also said the same thing when I decided to dye my hair pink to match my business cards. It's an adorable color, but the upkeep is exhausting!

Wine nights with my book club besties might be ruining my life. Because Drunk Me really sold this mountain man idea. The girls keep asking if I've talked to him yet. No! No, I haven't. But his ad is still in the paper.

I know exactly three things about mountain men. One, they exist. Two, they live in the mountains. Three, they make sexy romantic heroes. Beyond that, color me clueless.

Why this particular mountain man needs an assistant for two weeks, I don't know. I'm not even sure what an assistant to a mountain man does. My personal assistant skills have only ever been put to use for the self-employed and small businesses who need an extra set of hands periodically but don't want to hire through a temp agency. But I'm committed now.

And freaking terrified. Nature and I are sworn enemies. Ironic considering I've spent my whole life in the Pacific Northwest, where people come specifically for nature. But the one, and only, time I went camping, I got lost.

I spent four days wandering through the Gifford Pinchot National Forest near Mt. Rainier by myself, cold, wet, and starving. I was thirteen. I haven't stepped foot in a forest or on a mountain since. The first thing I did when they found me

was opt out of all future field trips for the rest of forever. But it's been ten years.

It's time for me to grab Babe the Blue Ox by the horns and face my fear.

What better place than with a client who is basically Paul Freaking Bunyan?

"You can do it," I coach myself. Stone-Cold Sober Me isn't convinced, but she picks up the phone anyway.

I dial the number from the ad and *The Wonder Pets* theme plays through my head—the part about the phone ringing. My childhood comes rushing back in a sea of anxiety.

"Dammit, Nell," a man growls on the third ring. The gravelly timbre of his voice reminds me of thunder rumbling in the distance. It's strangely...erotic. "Would you stop fucking bugging me and let it ride, already? I told you I'm not fucking going."

"Um, who's Nell?" I ask, and then internally cringe. I should really work on minding my business and not everyone else's. He doesn't sound like he's in a sharing mood.

The line goes silent for a heartbeat and then I hear him take a breath. "From the sounds of it, not you," he says.

"Nope."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Cordelia Shanks."

He sighs, sounding exasperated. “Well, Cordelia Shanks, I don’t need whatever you’re selling, unless it’s cookies. I’m Buddhist. And my Jeep is older than Lucifer so I don’t have a goddamn extended warranty, either. And if you’re calling to scam me, don’t.”

“I’m not selling anything or scamming anyone,” I say. “Wait. Are you really a Buddhist?”

“Depends on if you’re calling to spread the good word about our Lord and Savior,” he growls. “Because I don’t have the time for it.”

“I’m not.”

“Then no.”

“Oh. Then why Buddhism? Why not go with *I’m a Satanist?*”

“I’m trying to get off the phone, not have every church from here to Oregon calling me,” he says. “Or showing up at my damn door.”

“Good point. I didn’t think about that.”

“I’m hanging up now. Do me a favor and don’t call back.”

“Wait! Hire me first.”

Oh, good grief. That is not what I meant to say.

“Hire you? I don’t even know you. Why in the hell would I hire you?” he growls.

“Your ad,” I blurt, talking fast to keep him from hanging up on me. He’s awful cranky. Are all mountain men grumpy, or

did I just win the lottery? I probably just won the lottery. A real-life, grumpy mountain man. The girls are going to love this. I'm not so sure I'm going to love this, though. I'm the opposite of grumpy. "You need a personal assistant for two weeks, and I'm the answer to your prayers, Mr. Mountain Man, sir. The Shanks Agency—that's me, by the way—is capable of handling all of your needs. I'm hardworking, a self-starter, and I require very little supervision. You tell me what you need, and you'll get it."

"Say that again," he growls, his voice rougher.

"Um, which part?"

"What you called me."

"Oh. Mr. Mountain Man, sir?" I repeat, my brows furrowed. "Your ad didn't have a name attached. I'm not sure exactly what your job title is. I tried to look it up, but the internet wasn't very helpful, sir. There aren't very many mountain men left, apparently."

"Fuck," he rumbles, only it sounds more like a groan. "Deacon."

"What?"

"My name is Deacon, Cordelia."

"Deacon," I repeat, testing it out. It's an interesting name. Kind of...sexy.

"Jesus Christ," he growls. Does he ever speak normally or does everything he say come out in that same grumpy, growly

tone? “Do you even know what an assistant for a mountain man does, Sunshine?”

“No,” I say slowly. “But I didn’t know what a paranormal adventure tour guide did either until I was crawling through tunnels under Seattle. I learn quickly, Mr. Deacon, and I’d really like to help you.”

Please say yes so I don’t have to tell the girls my master plan fell through. I can’t be the ringleader and the failure!

“Deacon,” he growls. “It’s just Deacon.”

“Okay, then. I’d really like to help you, Deacon.” I pause. “I can send my resume and references.”

“Don’t need them,” he mutters, and my stomach sinks. He’s not going to hire me. I’m going to be the first of the girls to strike out. Crap on a cracker. Drunk Me is banned from coming up with ideas for at least the next year. “If you’re going to work for me, I have rules, Sunshine.”

Wait, what? He wants to hire me?

Thank you, *Spooks Below Decks!* I knew taking that crazy that job would pay off some day.

“Name them,” I say, willing to agree to just about anything he throws at me.

“Rule one, you do what I say, when I say,” he says. “No questions asked. I’m not going to have you getting eaten by a goddamn bear because you got out here and wouldn’t listen.”

“Okay,” I agree quickly. He’s the expert, not me.

“Rule two, you stay the full two weeks. No quitting halfway through because you’re bored or cold. I won’t have time to take you back down the mountain.”

“I never quit once I make a commitment, Deacon.”

“Rule three,” he says, carrying on like I’m not even talking. “You’ll be living with me. If that’s going to be a problem for your man, it’s his problem, not mine. I don’t want some jealous idiot showing up on my doorstep, causing a problem. If Tyr doesn’t drag him back down the mountain, I will. Got it?”

“I don’t have a man,” I mutter, and then bite my lip. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him that. It’s probably best if he thinks I have a professional football player or something waiting for me at home. Less chance of me disappearing without a trace that way, right?

“Good,” he grunts. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Cordelia.”

“T-tomorrow?”

“Is that a problem?”

Yes. I can’t pack for two weeks in one day. It’s going to take me that long to figure out what to pack!

“Nope,” I lie cheerfully. “Not a problem at all.”

“Good. I’ll text you the address, Sunshine. We’ll meet at the saloon in town.”

“Thank you,” I squeak. “You won’t regret it, Deacon!”

“Oh, I’m sure I will, Sunshine,” he says, and then chuckles.

I don't get a chance to ask what he means by that before he hangs up on me. I flop onto my bed, kicking my feet in the air like an excited little girl.

"I got the job!" I cry to the ceiling. And the reality sets in.

Oh, crap. I got the job.

Now, I just have to convince him that a crazy, pink-haired curvy girl who is terrified of the woods is perfectly capable of being his assistant.

CHAPTER TWO

Deacon



image-placeholder

Deacon

“What the hell did you do?” I growl, glaring daggers at my baby sister as soon as I cross the threshold of the old-fashioned saloon our parents left us when they died. A sharp gust of cold wind blows in through the double saloon doors before they swing closed behind me, stirring up the familiar smells of wood polish, grease, sugar, and alcohol that’s seeped into this place over the last four decades.

“Deacon! I knew you’d come,” Nell says, her baby blues lighting up at the sight of me. She scurries from behind the long, wooden bar, wiping her hands on her apron. A smudge of flour runs across her right cheek and dots her nose. There’s a streak of it in her brown curls, too.

I briefly consider letting her know it’s there, and then quickly change my mind. Serves her infuriating ass right if half of Winthrop sees her with flour in her hair tonight.

“You placed an ad for an assistant,” I growl, dropping a kiss on top of her head. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

“Oh! Did someone call?” She beams up at me, completely ignoring my question like usual. Nelia Cromwell does what Nelia Cromwell wants to do. She’s been that way her whole life. I don’t think the word *no* exists in her vocabulary. “Who was it? Did you hire him? When does he start?”

Two can play this game. If she’s not answering my questions, I’m not answering hers. Besides, mine are more pressing considering I have a curvy little pixie landing on my doorstep in less than twenty-four hours. What the hell am I supposed to do with her?

Oh, I’ve got plenty of ideas. Starting with bending her over my kitchen table. The girl is the rare kind of beauty that makes a man stupid. Which is precisely why I hired her. I was thinking with my dick. I looked her up on my computer while we were on the phone. One look at her dark green eyes, dimples, and impish smile, and my cock was fully on board with telling her what I need and getting it—her words, not mine. Especially if she calls me *sir* while she’s doing it.

No, goddammit. No. There’s a reason I live in the middle of the Cascade Mountains with nothing but my dog. I don’t do relationships. I don’t do people. I like my solitude, my privacy, and my peace and quiet.

Cordelia Shanks wouldn’t know solitude if it landed in her lap. And judging by the way the girl rambled a mile a minute, she ain’t ever heard of peace and quiet. I don’t think privacy is high on her list either.

“Let me see the ad, Nell. Now,” I order, trying not to think about how damn much I actually enjoyed talking to Cordelia. I don’t enjoy talking to anyone.

“Fine,” Nell says, reluctantly reaching into her apron pocket to pull out her phone. She loads up the classified section of the *Seattle Times* and then taps on her screen for a moment before passing it over to me.

Before I can take it from her, she snatches it back.

“Maybe you shouldn’t read it,” she says. “That vein in your temple is already throbbing. It might explode if you read it.”

I hold my hand out silently, hitting her with a hard stare.

She grumbles under her breath and smacks me in the chest with her phone. I take it from her, my eyebrows climbing as I read the ad she placed.

Mountain man desperately (seriously. Help. Me.) seeking assistant for a short-term assignment. Must be outgoing, reliable, understand the needs of a small-business, and know how to file. Pay negotiable.

“See? I covered all the basics,” she says, circling around behind the bar again. “You’re welcome. Now, your turn. How many calls have you had? Did you hire someone? When does he start?”

“I’m not a grouch.”

“Ha!” Nell snorts. “Even your dog thinks you’re cranky.”

“Oscar likes me just fine.”

“Oscar likes the bed he sleeps in and the steak you feed him, Deacon. You, he tolerates,” she says, smirking at me. “The dog is a diva.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

She shrugs, sinking her hands back into the scone dough she was kneading when I interrupted her. “Spill.”

I reach across the bar for one of the scones she’s already finished.

She smacks my hand before I can grab it. “Hands off. Those are for the dance. You can’t have one until then.”

“I’m not going to the damn dance, Nell.”

“If you aren’t going, you aren’t getting a scone.”

“Fine, then I’m not telling you who I hired.”

She narrows her eyes on me suspiciously. “Are you just trying to get a scone out of me, or did you actually hire someone to help you?”

“I hired someone.”

She nudges the platter of scones my way.

I smirk, snatching one off the plate before she changes her mind and smacks me again. Swear to God, she got that shit from our mom. Got the scone recipe too. They’re delicious.

“Spill it, Deacon.”

“Her name is Cordelia Shanks,” I sigh around a bite of scone. “She’ll be here tomorrow. And if she dies in the goddamn forest, it’s your fault.”

Nell's mouth pops open, her eyes growing comically wide.
“You hired a woman? Shut the front door!”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I growl.

“Nothing.” She drops her gaze back to the dough as if I haven't known her for all twenty-four years of her life. She's a terrible liar.

“You think I'm against hiring women?”

“What? No.” She wrinkles her nose. “You just get weird around women. They make you extra cranky, that's all.”

“That's because every woman in this town is trying to set me up,” I growl. It's ridiculous. There are exactly four single women left in this town—not including my sister, and every time I come down the mountain, some crazy woman tries to set me up with one of them. It drives me up the fucking wall. I've been saying no for six years. It's not changing anytime soon.

“They worry about you,” Nell says quietly.

“Well, they need to quit. I don't need their damn pity,” I mutter, shoving the scone into my mouth. The butter melts on my tongue and I immediately reach for another one. Nell doesn't stop me this time. She's too busy watching me with that look on her face. The one that says she worries too.

I've given her plenty of reasons over the years. Until six years ago, I was the captain of an interagency hotshot crew, an elite team of highly trained firefighters from different departments deployed to fight wildland fires. We were

working a fire in a canyon in the Cascades and were given bad information. Our escape route was cut-off. Three of us survived.

I came back home to heal, except the healing didn't work out quite like I planned. The only things that helped ease the nightmares were fresh air and being able to see the night sky. By the time I got through the worst of the PTSD, the mountains and solitude had grown on me. I had no desire to go back to the fire service or rejoin civilization, so I simply didn't.

Everyone assumes it means I'm still a broken husk of a man. I'm not. I just don't like people. They always want things or want me to do things. Frankly, it gets on my fucking nerves.

"They don't pity you, Deacon," Nell says. "They just want to see you happy, that's all."

"I'm happy."

My baby sister snorts.

"I'm happy," I growl.

"Good, then there's no reason you can't come to the dance tonight."

"Uh, fuck no." I rise from my barstool, shaking my head as I stride toward the door. "I said I was happy, Nelia. I didn't say I was crazy."

"Fine!" she shouts after me. "But you're going to fall in love someday, Deacon! And you better be nice to your new assistant or I'm asking Mom and Dad to haunt you!"

“Love you too, brat.”

“Bye!”

CHAPTER THREE

Cordelia



image-placeholder

Cordelia

Welcome to Winthrop. Population: I'm going to die in the mountains.

“This is doable,” I whisper to myself, creeping down the main street leading through downtown Winthrop. “You’re a fierce, independent woman and you can handle this.” It’s a lie I tell myself when something is most definitely not doable and I’m crazy for even thinking it.

Deacon did not mention that my two weeks were going to be spent 140 years in the past. But either I drove through a portal into the 1880s or Winthrop fell through a portal from the 1880s, because half the town looks like it came straight from one of the old western movies my grandpa used to watch. You know, the ones where they settled disputes by a gunfight in the middle of the street at high noon. The wooden buildings have elaborate false fronts with painted signs and tin awnings held up by wooden posts. There are even hitching posts for horses out front.

What there isn't is cell reception. I'm from Seattle. We have more tech firms and IT headquarters than the south has churches. The fact that this town exists in a cellular dead zone is giving me anxiety.

Or maybe that's the sheer number of trees pressing in on me from every side. Panic already tries to claw its way up my throat, threatening to escape in hysterical laughter.

I should have stuck to conquering my fear of singing in public. A shot of liquid courage, a trip to the karaoke bar, a little off-key Mariah Carey, and boom! Mission accomplished.

I'm far less likely to die on stage than I am out here.

I sigh, shaking my head at myself. When did I turn into such a negative Nancy? Winthrop might not be what I expected, but it's beautiful. Even my anxiety can't deny that. If the ghosts of Wyatt Earp and Jesse James still roam the earth, they probably hang out in places like this.

The saloon where Deacon told me to meet him comes into view ahead and I slow to a crawl, gaping. The false front rounds out at the top before meeting in a fancy point at the very top of the building. I'm sure the design probably has a name, but I don't know anything about old west architecture. Actual swinging doors adorn the front, with a big porch.

Oh, I bet the barkeep gets to throw people off of it a lot! I hope I get to see it while I'm here. Tabitha and Gem will think that's hysterical. Though, judging by the lack of cars out front, I'm guessing my odds aren't high today.

I pull into the nearly vacant lot, parking in an empty spot in the middle of the lot. And then I sit for a minute, trying to calm my freaking nerves before I go in and meet Deacon Cromwell, the grumpy mountain man I badgered into hiring me. I don't know who he's expecting, but I kind of doubt it's a plus-size hot mess with curly pink hair and a flair for the dramatic.

The pink hair isn't an issue in Seattle. My clients love me regardless of what I do with my hair. But this is about as far from Seattle as you can get without leaving the state. People here may not see it the same way. Deacon may not.

Well, too bad for him.

I grab my phone and send a quick text message to the girls, letting them know I made it safely. Hopefully it'll go through at some point this century. Once that's done, I take a breath and climb from the car. The cold wind hits me right in the face, stealing my breath. And then it hits the skirt of my dress, lifting it like a hot air balloon heading for takeoff.

"No!" I squeak, trying to battle it back down. Except nature fights back. My boot slide on the icy cement. I yelp, grabbing for the car door. The wind grabs my dress. I let go of the door to grab the dress, only to slide again. "I didn't even do anything bad, karma!"

"You wore that damn dress with a pair of lace panties, Sunshine," a man growls behind me, his voice all too familiar. "I'd say karma's spanking your pretty little ass for it."

I squeak again, releasing the car door to yank my dress down over my butt. My cheeks—the ones on my face—flame bright red as I spin around. Or attempt to spin around, anyway. With my boots slipping and sliding and my arms glued to my sides to keep my dress down, I waddle like a freaking penguin more than spin gracefully.

If anyone is watching this scene unfold, they're either recording me for the internet, or crying on the floor. I was not built for ice. *Clearly.*

Maybe I wasn't built for public. Because when I finally get turned around, instead of meeting the gaze of the man I assume is Deacon, my gaze meets his groin. It's right there at eye level. And wow. Either he stuffed a sock in those jeans or nature likes him way better than it likes me because there's a gray-sweatpants worthy bulge.

"Hi," I whisper to his dick. I mean, I whisper it to him, but I'm staring at his dick so I might as well be talking to it. Jesus, take the wheel. *Please?*

No such luck.

"My eyes are up here, Sunshine," he says.

I drag my gaze up his body. And then up higher.

"Holy, Babe the Blue Ox," I blurt, gaping. I don't know what in the Paul Bunyan they fed him, but I guess that isn't a sock in his jeans. He's got to be the biggest man I've ever seen in my life. He towers over me like Goliath thanks to the fact that he's standing on the porch, but even if he weren't, he's

still flipping huge. Dark brows slant over steely gray eyes and nose that's been broken at least once. His unruly hair and beard give him the appearance of a Viking more than a mountain man, but the blue flannel stretched over his massive chest softens the look. "You are not old."

His dark brows climb.

"I mean, um, all the mountain men on the Discovery Channel are older. You're not, and you're beautiful." My cheeks are so red I actually feel the heat coming off of them. "I'm going to stop talking now."

"You watched the Discovery Channel?"

"I studied."

He doesn't say much. He's very still too, very peaceful. There's a lot going on behind those eyes, but it doesn't reflect on his face. That's still set in a dark frown, as if he isn't sure if he wants to put me back in my car and send me back down the mountain or ask me to shut up.

"Learn anything?"

"Yes." I grin up at him, trying to fight a shiver. Why is it so cold up here? It is not this cold in Seattle. "I learned that I have a lot of questions. I wrote them down so I can satisfy my curiosity while I'm here. I'm going to feed two birds with one scone."

His expression changes now. He blinks at me. "Did you just say feed two birds with one scone or am I hearing shit?"

"That's what I said."

He stares at me for a minute, opens his mouth, starts to say something, and then breaks off. He looks at me again, and then starts to speak again before he gives his head a sharp shake and stops again. “Fuck it,” he mutters. “I guess we’re feeding the damn birds instead of killing ‘em now.”

“Oh! I’m your new assistant, Cordelia, by the way. You can call me Cordy. All my friends do,” I say, thrusting my hand out for him to shake. Except as soon as he reaches for it, I remember my dress and the wind, so I quickly jerk my hand away, slapping it back down onto my thigh to hold my dress in place. “I can’t shake your hand. I don’t want my butt plastered all over the internet.”

His eyebrows climb, a growl rumbling in his throat. “Who the fuck put your ass on the internet?”

“No one yet. Well, I hope not.” I dart a furtive, suspicious look over my shoulder. “On the off chance this place has the internet, I’d like to keep it that way.”

“We have the internet, Sunshine.”

“You do?” I perk up at the news. “Oh, thank God.”

“It’s dial-up.”

“It’s what?”

“Are you ready to head up?”

“Yes.” My lips pull down into a frown. “Um, up where?”

“The mountain, Cordelia.” He nods at a snow-capped peak in the distance.

“We’re going up there?” I squeak, my stomach sinking faster than a stone. “I thought you lived in town. You know, near other people and houses and buildings and roads and things.”

Breathe, Cordy. Breathe.

“Nope,” he says. “We’re going up the mountain and we won’t be back down until next week. So if you need something, you better say something now, Sunshine. Once we get up there, you’re stuck.”

Oh, this is bad. No, this is worse than bad.

This is my worst nightmare brought to life.

“You good?” he asks, his steely gray eyes lingering on my face. “You look like you’re going to puke. If you want to quit now...”

Oh, I see how it is. Deacon Cromwell can’t wait to be rid of me. Well, too bad for him because I’m no quitter. I’m going up that stupid mountain with him, even if it kills me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deacon



image-placeholder

Cordelia Shanks is even more beautiful in person than she was on her website. That shock of pink hair and her pretty little dress give her a pin-up vibe that makes me want to pull over and see what's under that dress up close and in person again. Her stunning green eyes shine as bright as the sun, especially when she's smiling. But she doesn't smile the whole way up the mountain. She doesn't say much either.

Most people ooh and ahh and take a million pictures, overwhelmed by the majestic beauty of the mountains. Sweeping views of Mt. Baker give way to breathtaking glimpses of the valley below, with rivers snaking their way through the countryside. Cordy doesn't drink it all in. She cowers in her seat, shrinking into herself the deeper into the middle of nowhere we get.

It's not a peaceful silence, either. It's loud as hell. I don't like it much.

"You don't spend much time outdoors, do you?" I growl fifteen minutes from the cabin. The question pops out sounding accusatory.

“No,” she says, her voice small. “Never.”

Well, hell. I should turn around and take her right back down the mountain. I knew before I ever loaded her three suitcases in my Jeep that she didn't belong out here...but I loaded them anyway. I want her in my space, filling it with her sweet laughter and cheerful rambling. It's a foreign desire, one far outside of my wheelhouse, but I want it, nonetheless.

“Why'd you want the job then, Sunshine?”

“I can do this job, Deacon,” she says firmly. “I started my business my senior year of college. I may not look the part up here, but I'm one of the best at what I do because I understand firsthand what it takes to run a small business.”

What the fuck?

“Never said you couldn't, Cordelia. I just asked why you took the job.” There's something she isn't saying, a reason she's so anxious. I want to know what it is.

She shivers, snuggling deeper into her coat. “Drunk Me read your ad and decided that you sounded like you could use my skills,” she says.

“Nell,” I growl.

“Who is Nell?”

“Sister.”

“Ah.” Her lips twitch. “Now, I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Why that groove between your eyes seems permanent.” She giggles, the sweetest fucking sound that goes straight to my cock. “This wasn’t your idea at all, was it?”

“Nope.”

“Why do you even need an assistant?”

“You’ll see in about five minutes,” I mutter.

Her lips part into a little O, her expression turning curious. She still doesn’t look comfortable, but she doesn’t look completely terrified now. It’s progress. But I still want to know what she’s hiding behind those pretty eyes. I have a feeling it’s what really lead her to take this job. I don’t think there’s a chance in hell she’d be up here otherwise.

I take the next cutoff, plunging deep into the woods. Low-hanging, icy branches brush against the roof of the Jeep. Cordelia jumps, reaching for the Oh, shit handle.

“Almost there,” I say.

“No more Moscato ever again,” she mutters under her breath.

We ride in silence as the road to the house narrows, winding deeper into the heart of the Cascades. Shadows creep in, daylight fading early this far north, especially under centuries worth of tree cover.

Cordelia grows restless, shifting this way and that in her seat as if she can’t get comfortable. She opens her mouth four different times to say something and then snaps it closed again.

As soon as we round the bend and the cabin comes into view, she sits forward in her seat, studying it intently. It's not glamorous. The single-story log cabin is 700 square feet, with a gabled roof and a small front porch. The two bedrooms in the back share a bathroom between them, with the rest of the cabin reserved for the living room and kitchen. I eat at the island in the kitchen. Like I said, not glamorous.

But it's mine. I built it myself during the worst of the PTSD. I worked until I was too tired to function every day, trying to exhaust my mind into silence so I could sleep at night. Didn't work most days but having something other than the memories to focus on helped get me through the hardest days.

"This is where you live?" Cordelia asks after a moment, glancing over at me.

"Yep." I pull up in front of the cabin and cut the engine.

"Did you build it?"

"I did. Six years ago."

"It's beautiful, Deacon," she says softly.

"Thanks," I grunt, pocketing the keys. "Come on. Let's get you inside before it gets dark. You aren't dressed for the weather up here in that little bitty dress." I shake my head. "Hope to hell you brought warmer clothes, Sunshine. This ain't Seattle."

"Really? I never would have guessed," she says, her voice saccharine.

I narrow my eyes at her, but she only bats her lashes at me, her expression full of mischievous innocence. I want to kiss the little smirk off her lips. No, that's not true. What I want to do is mess those curls up while I'm kissing that smirk off her lips. Preferably while she's got those thighs wrapped around my hips and I'm drilling into her.

A memory of her lacy pink panties stretched across her round ass pops into my mind. I tuck and roll from the Jeep like my life depends on it. How the hell am I supposed to keep my hands off this girl for the next two weeks? Fuck if I know. It's been an hour and I'm already in hell.

This is all Nell's fault.

I mutter a curse and then circle around the Jeep to help Cordelia out. She steps out like a chick emerging from an egg, one little piece of her at a time. It's somehow the cutest and most ridiculous shit I've ever seen at the same time.

"The wind isn't showing me anything I didn't already see, Sunshine," I growl. "So you might as well get your ass out of the Jeep and into the house."

"Don't rush me," she huffs. "I'm manifesting success."

"At what?"

"Not dying in the freaking woods. Obviously." She rolls her eyes. "Yeesh. Are you always this cranky, Mountain Man?"

"You aren't going to die in the woods."

"I might. It looks very nature-y out here."

“It’s a goddamn forest, Sunshine. It’s nothing but nature.”

“Would you stop reminding me!” she cries, shooting me a death glare.

“All right, that’s it,” I growl, scooping her up into my arms.

“Paul Bunyan, save me!”

“What?” I say, laughing abruptly.

“I said put me down.”

“You did not. You screamed for Paul Bunyan to save you.” I nudge her door closed with my shoulder and start for the cabin.

“Just checking to see if his spirit really haunts the mountains,” she mutters, a pretty blush climbing up her cheeks. “You never know.”

Jesus Christ. She’s been here five minutes and she’s already fucking up my world. Only, I don’t resent it nearly as much as I do when the women in town do it. In fact, I don’t resent it at all. I like it far too much.

Fuck. I think I need this girl to marry me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cordelia



image-placeholder

“No cell reception?” I repeat, staring at Deacon in horror. “What do you mean you don’t have cell reception?” Is that my voice? Surely that’s not my voice. Why is it so loud and squeaky?

“I mean, Sunshine,” he growls, “that little contraption in your hand is about as useless as tits on a bullfrog out here. The only thing you’re calling with it is the spirit of Paul Bunyan.”

Oh, he’s never letting that go.

Tyr, his adorable Siberian Husky, thumps his tail against the side of the couch, watching us intently. He’s a sweet dog.

“I feel like this would have been relevant info yesterday, Deacon.”

“You didn’t ask.”

I splutter, trying to convince myself that I’m a grown professional and I can handle this. Except...I don’t feel very grown or professional right now. I feel like a crazy person, stuck in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with the world’s hottest—and most infuriating—mountain man. Part of me

wants to strangle him. The other part wants to throw myself at him.

I need to talk to the girls. This is an emergency of the highest order.

Hello, Paul Bunyan? I think I want to sleep with my infuriatingly hot boss. Also, I've never done that before so could you be a pal and help a girl out with some guidance? Kthnx.

Argh!

“How did I call you yesterday?”

“Landline.”

Thank you, Baby Jesus!

“May I use the landline to make calls while I'm here?” I ask. See? I can be a grown professional. Go, team me.

“You'll only be here tonight, Sunshine.”

“What?” I set my phone on the coffee table to plant my hands on my hips. “Now, listen here, Deacon Cromwell. You can't fire me before I even start! Sure, maybe I haven't made the greatest first impression today. And sure, maybe you do know what my underwear looks like. And yes, maybe I don't have the first clue how to be a mountain person, but I've seen your office. And your office needs Jesus.”

“That's not—”

“Actually, I'm not even sure Jesus could find anything in there. You haven't filed a single thing since 2017. 2017! And

don't even get me started on your desk because I'm still not convinced there's actually one in there at all." I've seen trainwrecks in better condition than his office. If a trainwreck and a tornado had a baby, it still wouldn't compare to the state of the small, detached building he uses as an office.

"We're going out to prep some of the cabins, Sunshine," he says. "We've got hikers coming in for Valentine's Day. We'll stay there overnight, then head back down in the daylight."

"Oh," I say ruefully. And then what he said sinks in. "Um, how are we going?"

"We'll drive part of the way, then hike in once the trail ends."

I gulp, my stomach churning.

"It's an easy hike, Cordelia."

"That's...not the problem," I wheeze, sinking down onto the sofa as anxiety claws through me. I lower my head, taking deep breaths as spots swim before my eyes.

"Fuck," Deacon growls, stomping toward me. He places his hand on my back, pressing firmly. "Put your head between your knees and take deep breaths, baby."

I don't know what in our short history makes him think I'm capable of contorting my body into that position. Maybe he missed the size of my boobs and belly, but they don't exactly make contortionism easy!

"Do it, Cordelia," he orders, his voice cracking like a whip.

I slump forward, doing my best to obey.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Now breathe for me, baby. Deep breaths.”

I suck in a breath and exhale it. The black spots in my eyes slowly disappear.

“Better?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good,” he growls, plucking me up from the couch like a ragdoll. His hands sink into my hips, his furious gray eyes meeting mine as he lifts me to my feet. “I don’t know what the hell you’re so afraid of, but you’re going to tell me. *Now.*”

“Paul Bunyan, save me,” I whisper, caught in the maelstrom swirling through his eyes. They’re the color of gunmetal now, shooting off sparks. They’re so pretty. And so is he, like a fiery, furious Viking warlord.

CHAPTER SIX

Deacon



image-placeholder

“You can’t hike in those boots, Sunshine.”

“Why not?” Cordelia demands, sticking one foot out to admire her black boot.

“They have fucking fur on them, for one,” I growl. “And I’m pretty sure it’s fake fur.”

“It is. I’m against animal cruelty.” She beams at me from the small island in the kitchen, those dimples making my cock stir.

“Secondly,” I say, trying like hell to avoid the way it twitches in my pants, “you couldn’t even walk across the parking lot in the damn things yesterday. There’s no way you can climb a mountain in them today.”

“This isn’t the same pair, Deacon. Those were charcoal. These are black.”

“Charcoal is black, Cordelia.”

“No. Charcoal is charcoal. Black is black.”

I eye them skeptically. They look like the same fucking color to me.

“They’re hiking boots, Deacon. They’re just *fashionable* hiking boots,” she says, patting me on the chest as she hops down from her stool and sails past me out the front door. “Not everything has to be Paul Bunyan chic like that shirt of yours.”

“What’s wrong with my shirt?” I growl, glancing at Tyr.

He looks at me, huffs, and then follows her after her. The traitor.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, convinced this is going to be the longest goddamn hike I’ve ever been on in my life. Cordelia’s been in an odd mood all morning. She’s stressed out and trying like hell to hide it behind false bravado and boundless cheer. I see right through her, though. She didn’t sleep a wink last night.

I know because I didn’t either. My cock ached like a motherfucker all night, keeping me wide awake. I kept thinking about the fact that the only thing separating us was her closed bedroom door. I thought about charging in there at least fifty-four different times to finish what she started in the living room.

But she doesn’t belong out here. And I’m not so sure I’d be able to let her go if I got her in my bed. I’d fight like hell to keep her. I’m already pissed I have to let her go in two weeks. But this isn’t any kind of life for a girl like her, especially not when just being out here has her ready to crawl out of her skin.

She might want to grab the bull by the horns to conquer her fear, but out here, the bull fights back. She's lucky she survived when she was a kid. People get lost and die in the Pacific Northwest all the time. Between miles of woodlands hiding dangers like steep cliffs and sheer drop-offs and the frigid temperatures at night, there's also the incessant rain that cause mudslides and sinks. And then there are the bears, mountain lions, and any number of other wild animals. And the fires that sweep through, consuming everything in their path.

I can't ask her to live in a cabin in the middle of it with me, facing those risks every day. She belongs in the city. It's a helluva lot safer for her there. Or so I keep telling myself. But she marched her gorgeous ass out here, determined to face her past, just because she got drunk and decided it was time. Is she really safer in the city? Alone? Where any motherfucker with bad intentions could get to her? Hurt her?

A growl rumbles in my chest at the thought.

Hell no, she isn't.

She's a statistic waiting to happen. Or a trainwreck. Either one is just as likely because she's a hot damn mess to boot. But I want her to be my hot mess, dammit all to hell. Which means I need to figure out what the fuck I'm going to do about that because the clock is ticking.

I've got two weeks to sort out my shit. Two weeks to figure out how to make this girl mine and rejoin society. When she leaves here, I intend to go with her. It's the only logical option.

At least it's the only one I can live with, because she deserves more than a cabin in the woods and a lifetime of anxiety.

She deserves more than my crabby ass...but she's getting me anyway.

Ready or not, Sunshine. Ready or not.



“Oh!” she squeaks an hour later, smacking her phone up against the window. “Signal!” The damn phone proceeds to rattle and ding like she's the fucking president and we're under attack.

“Good God, Sunshine,” I mutter. “How many fucking calls do you get a day?”

“Those are texts,” she says. “My besties are all on missions. It requires a lot of communication.”

“They’re in the military?”

“No. They’re facing their fears too. We made a pact. It’s a whole thing.” She scrolls through her messages, muttering under breath at some. One makes her cackle.

“Please tell me they aren’t in the mountains too.”

“What? Oh, no. For some reason, half of them are stripping down in front of other people.” She turns wide eyes on me and then giggles. “I guess the wind got that part out of the way for me yesterday. Peyton is saving the forest. You’d like her. And I don’t know what Cleary is doing.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, shaking my head. I’m guessing they were all drunk when they made this pact. I’m almost afraid to ask who the ringleader was. I have a sneaking suspicion the responsibility party is sitting beside me, scrolling through messages on her phone like her life depends on it.

“Holy Babe the Blue Ox!” she shouts. “Cleary is Anita Dix!”

“What?” I try not to choke on my own tongue. Did she just say clearly, she needs a dick? Because I’ve got nine inches ready and willing...

She taps out a message on her phone, ignoring me.

“What did you just say, Sunshine?”

“No,” she groans, pressing her phone against the window again. When that doesn’t work, she holds it up near the roof of the Jeep, and then contorts herself, shoving her arm into the backseat. Finally, she huffs and drops the phone onto her lap. “Stupid mountain with no stupid reception.”

“Sunshine, focus,” I growl, two seconds from pulling this car over to spank her little ass again. “What did you just say?”

“I said Cleary is Anita Dix,” she says slowly, looking at me like I’m crazy. “The romance author.”

Shit, maybe I am losing my mind.

Or maybe it’s just wishful thinking, asshole. You played with fire last night, now you’re burning for it.

“She just confessed that she’s been writing this year as Anita Dix. She never told us.” A bright smile stretches across her face, those fucking dimples popping out again. “I’m so proud of her, Deacon.”

“Good for her,” I mutter, not sure what else to say.

“Do you read?”

“I’m guessing not the same things you read.”

“Oh, really? So you don’t read monster smut?” she sasses, smirking at me.

“I don’t even know what the fuck that is, Cordelia.”

“Romance between a human and a monster. Sometimes they have interesting things going on with their...um...nether regions. Like knots and things.”

“Knots?” My brows fly upward.

“You know, on their penises, so when they, um...” She squirms in her seat, blushing bright red. “It gets stuck inside after they...” She huffs adorably. “It’s so they can breed their mate without it leaking out.”

“Sunshine?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop talking.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

I exhale a slow breath, my dick so hard he’s about to break in half. Jesus. She’s a kinky little thing, isn’t she? I’d like to breed her. I won’t need a damn knot, either. I’ll just leave my cock in her between rounds until she’s nice and pregnant.

“You think I talk too much, don’t you?”

“I think if you keep talking about breeding, I’m going to be fucking you on the side of this mountain until you’re screaming the goddamn thing down around us,” I growl, glancing over at her. “Every word you say makes my dick harder, baby.”

“Oh.” Her gaze falls to my lap, her tongue skating across her bottom lip.

I fire a round of curses up at the roof of the Jeep.

This is going to be the longest goddamn hike in the history of hikes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cordelia



image-placeholder

Cordelia

“Are we there yet?” I pant, grasping onto a tree. My legs feel like rubber. Actually, that’s not true. I can’t feel my legs. All I feel is the burn in my chest and the knot in the pit of my stomach.

“Almost, Sunshine,” Deacon promises, reaching out to run his hand down my back. “Ten more minutes.”

“You said that ten minutes ago,” I remind him. He said it ten minutes before that, too. I think he’s trying to keep me from freaking out by giving me small increments of time to focus on, but the longer we’re out here, the more my anxiety grows. It’s cold and isolated and feels far too much like it did when I was a teenager. I don’t like it at all.

Deacon has been surprisingly patient with me. I expected him to be cranky and annoyed, but he hasn’t been. He’s been...really sweet. He’s talked more in the last two hours than he has since I got here. I’m sure if he were on his own, he and Tyr would already be at the cabins by now, but he doesn’t

seem to mind that I'm slowing him down. He's let me set the pace and just walks along at my side, helping me over fallen logs and grabbing me when I slip on icy patches or trip... which happens more than I care to admit.

"I mean it this time. Look." He points up the ridge. "We're going right up there."

I follow his finger to a gap between the trees, sighing in relief. It doesn't seem that far, but distance can be deceptive out here. Mountains that are miles and miles away look as if they're close enough to touch. It's precisely why so many people get lost. Nature is a tricky biatch.

"Let's go then," I groan.

"Rest a minute, Cordelia. We've got time."

"You don't need rest."

A glimmer of a smile touches his lips. "Jealous, Sunshine?"

"I hate exercise." My nose scrunches up. "Actually, exercise hates me. Last time I tried to use the treadmill at the gym, it sent me flying across the room like I was a human cannonball. My butt hurt for weeks."

He laughs abruptly, startling a fluffy rabbit in the underbrush. It darts across the trail just ahead, leaping into the frozen brush on the opposite side of the trail. Tyr barks and jogs after it, sniffing the bushes where the little guy disappeared.

"Tyr, leave it. He's too small to eat."

“You eat rabbit?” I gasp.

“We eat a lot of shit out here, Sunshine. In case you haven’t noticed, there is no grocery store up here. If we want to eat, we catch it.” He taps my nose. “That’s what mountain men do. We live off the land. We hunt and fish and gather and trap.”

I draw myself up to my full height...which isn’t very high compared to him. “I know I’m your assistant and all, but I’m not hunting anything, Deacon Cromwell. That is not what I signed up to do.”

“You signed up to follow my rules, Sunshine,” he says, something dark flaring in his eyes. “Whatever I say, no matter what.”

“I’m not shooting Peter Rabbit or Bambi.”

“But you’re fine with squirrels?”

“Are they the mean ones that jump out of the bushes at your face?” I ask.

“You have experience with this?”

“Seattle,” I say, shrugging. The squirrels are on another level. We’re basically sworn enemies at this point. “But I’m not shooting them either.”

He growls, wrapping his hand up in my jacket to tug me toward him. “You don’t make the rules, little girl. You follow them.”

“Yeah?” I whisper, getting caught in the maelstrom in his eyes again. “I forgot to tell you something, Deacon.”

“What’s that, Sunshine?”

“Your stupid rules can go fly a kite, *sir*.”

His eyes darken to gunmetal as he yanks me forward, toppling me into his chest. A predatory growl rumbles in his throat like thunder rolling over the mountainside. His lips crash down on mine, one hand wrapped around my throat as he backs me up against the tree.

I moan into his mouth, my entire soul crying out with relief. Ever since last night, my body has ached for this, begging to feel his touch again, pleading for the relief he denied me. I barely slept last night, not because I was nervous about today, but because I couldn’t stop thinking about him. About how badly I wanted to sneak across the hall into his room and finish what I started.

I burn for him in ways I didn’t know it was possible to burn.

He shoves his knee between my legs, using it to pin me up against the tree as he attacks my mouth, drinking from my lips exactly like he did last night. He’s everywhere again, drowning me in sensation. This man is a giant in every sense of the word, powerful and fierce.

“You’re lucky it’s thirty degrees out here, Sunshine,” he grunts against my lips before biting the bottom one. “If it weren’t, you’d be bent over my knee right now, telling me how much you fucking love my rules.”

“Promises, promis—Deacon!” I scream, shocked when he bends forward suddenly, scooping me up over his shoulder.

My hair falls forward into my eyes as the world tilts upside down. His hand comes down on my ass in a sharp smack.

“Stay still, Sunshine,” he growls, and then starts marching down the trail with me over his shoulder like a freaking sack of potatoes.

“Put me down right now, Mountain Man!”

“Can’t. Busy.”

Tyr barks, jumping up to lick my face.

“Deacon!” I cry, punching him in the butt.

He chuckles, the sound bouncing back to me in a haunting echo. “Did you just punch my butt, Cordelia?”

“Yes, and I’m going to do it again if you don’t put me down.”

The crazy man starts humming.

“Is that *Pocketful of Sunshine*?” Why am I screeching like a crazy person?

“Yep,” he says, the most cheerful thing he’s said since I met him.

I was wrong about dying in the woods. Deacon is going to die in the woods because I’m going to strangle him. And I won’t even have to hide the body. We’re so far in the middle of freaking nowhere, I doubt anyone will ever find his body.

I don’t punch him in the butt this time. I bite him, right on his left cheek.

It does not get the reaction I expected.

The crazy man just laughs and hums louder.



“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks twenty minutes later, hooking his hand into the hood of my coat to stop me when I try to slide past him out of the cozy cabin. And by cozy, I mean tiny. It’s one room with a bathroom. The bed takes up most of the room, with a small sitting area and a tiny kitchen on the opposite side. The fireplace across from the bed warms the space. The view of the mountains from the windows is breathtaking, even I can’t deny that.

“You said we had to prep the cabins.” This one looks good to me. It’s obvious that they’ve been well cared for. I don’t know how often he comes up here to check on them, but the

place is spotless. It probably seems like heaven to couples who have been hiking or skiing all day.

“Later,” he grunts, dragging me into his arms. “We’ve got something to take care of right now, Sunshine.”

“We do?”

“Yeah, we do.” He nuzzles his face against the side of my throat, causing my stomach to clench as a wave of heat rushes through me. “What am I going to do with you, hmm?”

“Well, if you want my opinion, I definitely don’t think you should put a gun in my hands and ask me to shoot a poor, defenseless animal,” I say, even though I’m pretty sure that’s not what he’s talking about. I’m pretty sure we were never really talking about that in the first place. I mean, we were, but that discussion ended as soon as he brought up his rules. “I’m more likely to shoot you or Tyr or me.”

“Well, we can’t have that, now, can we?” he murmurs, stripping me out of my coat. It falls to the floor at our feet. I shiver even though the fire roaring in the fireplace is already warming the cabin.

“No,” I whisper. “Definitely not.”

His rough hands skim up my side, eliciting another shiver. Every time he touches me, I feel him everywhere as if he’s leaving little trails of energy in his wake. They wash over me in an electrical storm of desire. It’s incredible.

“I drove myself crazy last night, thinking about you alone in your bed, Sunshine.” His palms skim over my breasts, pulling

a groan from my lips. I arch toward his touch, my body under his spell. Heck, who am I kidding? I think my heart is under his spell too. I'm falling for him. It shouldn't be possible. He's cranky and bossy and I barely know a thing about him. But he's worming his way into my heart anyway, wiggling right in like he's supposed to be in there.

"Me too," I confess. "I thought about sneaking into your bed so many times, Deacon."

"I know," he grunts, dragging his thumbs over my nipples. "I heard you pacing the floor. Goddamn, these little things are like diamonds, baby."

"Uh, yeah. It's cold outside and you're touching them, Deacon."

He pinches the left one.

My shocked yelp bleeds into a loud moan.

"You don't know how to behave, do you?"

"No." I turn my head against his chest, looking up at him. "I've never behaved a day in my life." His steely eyes settle on me. "But I think you like me that way, don't you?" I ask, marveling at the realization. Most of my life, I've been a mess. It's just who I am. I don't apologize for it. If I'm too much for someone, then I'm not meant for them. But I've been too much for a lot of people.

The whole world wants me to shrink to fit into some box they've predesigned for me. One where I'm quiet and proper and don't have bright pink hair or charge full speed ahead at

everything I do. But I didn't just almost die in the wilderness when I was thirteen. I made a promise to myself that if I survived, I'd live. *Truly* live.

I'd rather be too much for people and leave this world knowing I experienced everything it had to offer and did everything I was meant to do, than to shrink myself to fit some mold and die deformed and repressed just because society said that's who I had to be. I'm curvy and loud and a little bit mental. I talk back and stand up for myself and rarely behave. But I'm *happy*. I love who I am.

"Good," Deacon growls, wrapping one hand around my throat. "Don't behave. Drive me up the fucking wall, Sunshine. Break my rules." His eyes gleam, sin and sex glittering like stars in the darkness. "Because I don't plan to behave with you, either." He squeezes my throat gently, lowering his mouth to mine. "I plan to be very, very bad when it comes to you, Cordelia Shanks."

"Yes, sir," I breathe against his lips.

He growls, kissing me hard before he pulls back to look at me. "You know exactly what you do to me when you call me that, don't you?"

"No, but I can guess," I say. "I'm a reader, remember?"

He falls still, not moving like he did yesterday. A whole story plays out behind those eyes, but not a single line of it passes across his face. "I think I'm hearing shit again, Sunshine."

“You hear shit?” I squeak, my eyes growing wide. “Stuff! I mean stuff.”

“You can curse. You’re grown.” He grins at me.

“I never curse. Except when my alarm goes off in the mornings, but that doesn’t count because mornings are evil, and they only exist to keep the nights from bumping into each other.”

He shakes his head, still smiling. He should really do that more. “It’s been a few years since I heard shit, but you say one thing, and I hear something filthy.”

“Oh. What do you think you heard?”

“Are you a virgin, Sunshine?”

“I...”

“Don’t lie to me, now,” he growls. “That’s just piss me off.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Goddamn. You mean all this is mine?” He runs his hand down my body as if to indicate what he means, his expression that of a little boy at Christmas. “Now, you’re speaking my language, little girl.”

“Yeah? Are you going to let me finish what I started this time, Mountain Man? Or are you sending me to bed without my dinner again?” I sass, feeling brave and bold. With him, I don’t feel like a timid virgin. I feel like a powerful woman, in control of my sexuality. It’s the hot, adoring way he looks at me. The possessive, reverent way he touches me. The filthy,

sweet things he says to me. It's impossible to feel small and unsure when you've got a giant ready to fall to his knees and worship at your feet.

“Oh, I'll feed you, Sunshine,” he growls, brushing his lips over mine. “All nine inches if that's what you want. But I'm not coming down this pretty little throat, and I'm not coming on your pretty little face, either.” He spins me around in his arms, wrestling my hands around behind my back and pinning them with one of his. His lips touch my ear. “When I come, it'll be in that tight little cunt where it belongs, Cordelia. And I won't need a knot to breed you, either.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Deacon



image-placeholder

Deacon

Resisting the base urge to toss Cordelia on the bed and fuck her raw takes every ounce of strength I possess, but I don't want to rush her first time or hurt her. I want to wreck her.

"Deacon," she moans, her tongue skating across her bottom lip.

My composure slips. I wrap myself around her, taking her mouth in a hard kiss as I back her toward the bed. She sighs against my lips as we fall toward the mattress, still locked in a scorching kiss.

Her sweet sounds drive me crazy. I can't help but go back for more every time she whimpers or whines, letting me know how much she likes it. Eventually though, I manage to pry myself away long enough to strip her clothes from her body. I don't take my time doing it. I want her naked as soon as possible, nothing standing between me and perfection.

“Deacon!” she cries, her hands flying to my hair when I bend, wrapping my lips around her cherry nipple. I bite her before moving to her left breast to do the same. She sobs this time, her sounds a symphony I could listen to all day.

“You’re ravishing, Sunshine,” I murmur, sitting back to get a look at her. She truly is perfect from head to toe. I’m in awe of her body. Cherry nipples top full breasts. Her soft belly flares to wide hips and thick, juicy thighs and gorgeous legs. She was made to fuck and cuddle, made to pamper and adore.

I wrap my hand around her throat and tip her head back, kissing her again. She likes that. Every time I touch her throat, her eyes turn glassy. Every time I take control, she melts. She’s eager to be fucked hard. But not yet. Not for her first time.

I sip at her lips slowly, tangling my tongue with hers, showing her how it’s going to be. I’m the one who sets the pace here. I’m the one who makes the rules. She mewls into my mouth, turning soft and pliant beneath me.

I run my hands all over her, touching her everywhere like I’ve wanted to do since she stepped out of her car and the wind lifted that little dress of hers. My dick instantly turned to steel. It’s been hard every minute since.

I drag my lips down her throat. She squirms as my beard tickles her sensitive skin. And then moans when I wrap my lips around her nipple again, playing with it. I take my time, learning what makes her moan and what makes her cry out, what makes her tremble and what makes her shake.

And then I move on, kissing my way down her belly. Her softness fascinates me. How can someone so fierce be so sweet? So soft? She has the heart of lion, yet she's covered in silk.

"Deacon. You're killing me," she groans.

"Good," I grunt. "That's the plan, Sunshine." I move lower, kissing across her mound. I nip at her hipbones and then her inner thighs. She smells like heaven, sweet and sticky like cream. Fuck. I'm going to gorge myself on her.

I nuzzle my face against the juncture of her thigh, inhaling her scent into my lungs, tormenting both of us. "I should keep you like this all day," I murmur. "Just to see how much you can take before you shatter for me."

"I need you now," she moans, trembling beneath me. "I'm breaking now."

Christ. She's perfect.

I drag my palms up her inner thighs, spreading them wide. Her hard clit peeps from between her pink folds, glistening and swollen. I spread her apart with two fingers, admiring my first glimpse of heaven.

No man has ever seen a sweeter sight, I guarantee that.

"This is mine now, Cordelia," I murmur. "No one touches it but me."

"Ye—" Her agreement ends in a strangled cry when I bury my face between her thighs, licking her from top to bottom. Her sticky, sweet creamy coats my tongue, and I realize how

utterly fucked I am. There's no way I'll ever be satisfied without this again. There's no way I'll ever be content on this mountain without her and this perfection ever again. She's an instant addiction, an immediate necessity.

I groan, falling into her like a baptismal font. I lick and suck and bite, making love to her with my mouth as she cries out beneath me, adding vocals to the symphony she's conducting for me.

I grind her against my face, covering myself in her. God, I never want to lose her taste. Her smell. *Her*. I add my fingers to the mix, thrusting them into her as I bat her clit with my tongue.

She cracks for me, crying my name.

My dick throbs, precum leaking into my boxers as she comes all over my face. I eat her through it, not stopping until she falls limp beneath me. I slowly back off, crawling to my feet to pull my clothes off. I keep my eyes on her, watching her come down as I undress.

Her eyes flutter open, landing on me. They're so dark green, they're almost black as they dance down my torso, growing wider and then wider still.

"Paul Bunyan, save me," she breathes as I drag my pants down my legs.

"He can't save you, little girl. You're mine."

She smiles, showing me those damn dimples. And then she rolls to her knees, crawling toward me. I watch through

hooded eyes as she slinks across the bed to me, making my cock leak.

“I want...” she breathes, stretching her neck out. Her breath washes across the head of my cock, and then her lips close around the very tip.

“Motherfucker,” I groan, spearing my hands into her hair.

She sucks on just the head, licking all over it. My eyes threaten to roll back in my head. My balls draw up, threatening to give up the fight. Jesus Christ, that mouth is a deadly weapon.

I groan, pulling away from her.

“I wasn’t finished,” she says.

I flip her onto her back, crawling over her. “Yeah, you’re finished, Sunshine. Otherwise, I’ll be finished,” I growl, dragging her leg up over my hip. “And I’m not coming in your mouth or on your pretty face. I’m coming in your cunt, exactly like I told you.”

“You say such dirty things.”

“And you fucking love it.” I lean down and take her mouth in a deep kiss. “You love when I do dirty things too.”

“Yes,” she whispers against my lips.

“Then you’ll love when I’m riding your cunt bare, Sunshine.”

“Deacon!”

“I’m not wearing a condom, Cordelia,” I growl, nipping her lip as I line up at her entrance. “I’m breeding you, exactly like you’ve been begging me to do.”

“Oh my god.”

I drag her leg up higher and push forward, slowly sinking into her. Her tight little hole resists me for a moment, but she’s so wet and ready for it, the resistance doesn’t last long. The head of my cock slips in, and my eyes do roll back in my head this time.

Fucking hell, she’s tight. And hot.

“Oh,” she moans, wriggling beneath me. Every little move pushes me in deeper and then deeper still. It’s like she can’t stop herself now that she’s started. She’s a little glutton, greedy for every drop of pleasure she can find.

“Goddamn, Sunshine,” I groan, writhing with her.

Her barrier gives way, pulling a shocked cry from her lips. She stops moving, stops breathing. I press my lips to hers, trying to kiss away the pain. Offering comfort the only way I can. She kisses me back eagerly, her body already relaxing beneath mine.

“Deacon,” she sighs sweetly.

I pump my hips, gliding in and out of her.

“Deacon!” she cries this time, a note of shock in her voice.

“You like that, Sunshine?”

“Yes. Do it again.”

I chuckle against her lips and give her what she wants. We kiss and fuck, grinding against each other as I make love to her. She mewls like a little kitten, practically purring for me. I lean back on my heels, dragging her ass into my lap and pump into her.

She bounces on each thrust, landed against my thighs with a little clap of sound that makes my balls ache. I run my hands over her body and then play with her clit, fucking her harder and then loving her slower. Until she's sobbing in ecstasy.

I angle my hips so my dick hits her g-spot and grind against her clit at the same time. Her orgasm hits all at once. Her eyes widen in shock, her mouth parting on a silent cry. I growl her name, pounding into her as she comes in a heated rush all over my cock.

My muscles lock up, a ferocious orgasm ripping through me in a rush of sound and a roar of light. She's at the center of the maelstrom, blazing like the sun. *My sunshine.*

I fall forward, catching myself on my elbow, still inside her. My lips land against her cheek, seeking her mouth. I kiss her hard, pouring my devotion into her as we come down together. She trembles beneath me, so sweet and cuddly. So perfect.

I roll us to the side, making sure to keep my dick in her.

She burrows into my arms, nuzzling her face against my throat.

"Don't fall asleep on me, Sunshine," I murmur, "I'm not done with you yet."

“I noticed,” she giggles. “You’re still hard.”

“Mmhmm.” I tip her chin up until our eyes meet. “Didn’t need a fucking knot either, baby.”

CHAPTER NINE

Cordelia



image-placeholder

Cordelia

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask Deacon, watching him from the corner of my eye as he works at his desk late the next afternoon. After spending half the day in bed yesterday at the cabin, we had to work quickly to get the other two in order for the hikers headed up to stay through Valentine’s Day. I didn’t think it sounded very romantic until we spent the night making love under the skylight, with no one around for miles. Now, I’m rethinking my stance.

Hiking still isn’t high on my list of things to do. Even with Deacon at my side, being in the woods scares the crap out of me. Too many bad memories. But it’s strange. I came here to conquer that fear. I never expected that I’d make new, happy memories to soften the sharp edges of the old ones. Slowly but surely though, the last two days have chipped away the four I spent lost and afraid.

I know that’s because of Deacon. It’s not the woods that’s different this time. It’s the fact that I’m with him. He’s the new memory chipping away at and replacing the old. I used to

remember how cold I was out there at night. Now, I remember burning up with his lips gliding down my body. There used to be nothing by ominous sounds from the dark. Now, there's his cranky growl and rusty laughter.

“Depends on if you're going to talk shit about my office again,” he says, eyeing me sideways.

“I think you mispronounced trainwreck,” I say sweetly, grabbing another stack of receipts to scan and file. We've been working for the last two hours, and I've barely made a dent in the chaos, but he seems partial to it. Mostly because I don't think he's stubborn and doesn't want to admit that Nell was right about him desperately needing help getting this place in order.

He narrows his eyes on me, making me smile. “Ask your question before I come over there and fuck up all of your hard work.”

“I will murder you in your sleep if you even think about touching these receipts, Deacon.” I give him a mean glare—or my best impression of one, anyway. No one with pink hair and a headband looks intimidating.

He smirks. “Ask your question.”

“What did you mean yesterday about it being a few years since you heard things?” I didn't think anything about the comment yesterday, but I found a stack of photos at the bottom of the filing cabinet of him in firefighter gear earlier, shoved to the back as if he wanted to forget them. He wasn't always a

mountain man. I don't know what happened, but I'm guessing whatever it was drove him here.

His heavy sigh confirms my suspicion. "Come here."

I carefully set the receipts aside and climb to my feet, crossing the office to him. He grabs my hand, pulling me down onto his lap.

"It's easier if I show you," he says, clicking an icon on his desktop.

A God-awful screeching sound echoes through the office.

Tyr grunts in the corner, rolling onto his other side.

"What is that?"

"What? The dial-up sound?"

"Dial-up? Bunyan, save me," I mutter. "I have traveled back in time." Right back to the 1990s, when rap music was good and the only thing you could do on the internet was learn or chat.

"Smartass," Deacon says, his lips twitching.

I grin at him.

We wait four hundred years for the dial-up to connect, and then he opens a web browser. He quickly types something in and then pulls up a news article.

Sixteen firefighters killed in Pasayten Wilderness.

"Deacon," I whisper, my stomach sinking as I skim the article. When I come across his name as one of only three

survivors on the team, my heart cracks in half, tears welling in my eyes.

“We were given the wrong information about where we needed to be,” he rasps. “When the wind shifted direction, the fire jumped the line and cut off our exit. We had no way out. It was moving too goddamn fast.”

I turn in the chair, wrapping myself around him as best as I can.

“One of the jumpers had fallen and fucked up his ankle, so me and another jumper were lagging behind with him, dragging his ass back down the mountain,” he says. “When the fire swept through, we could hear them screaming. I tried like hell to get to them, but there was no saving them.”

“Oh, Deacon. I’m so sorry.”

A shudder wracks his body. “By the time the fire caught up to us, we’d found a small pond and dove in. Damn near drowned waiting for it to roar through. The water got so hot, we thought it was going to boil before the fire finally roared through and we were able to climb out.”

I wrap myself even tighter around him, pressing myself close in an attempt to comfort him. He’s a survivor, just like I am. Only, he survived something so much worse. I can’t even imagine how terrifying that had to be.

“The worst part was finding their bodies,” he whispers. “They didn’t even have time to deploy their shelters. It hit them so fast.” He shudders again, locked in his memories. And

then he exhales a shaky breath. “Their screams haunted me for a long time, Sunshine. That day haunted me for a long time. I came out here to heal. I needed to find peace, so I built this place. When I finished it, I built the cabins up on the ridge.”

“I’m so sorry, Deacon. I thought my four days in the forest was bad, but what you went through was so much worse. You lost so much that day,” I whisper, running my fingers down the side of his face in a comforting gesture. “Of course you needed peace.”

“You were just a kid, Sunshine. I knew what I signed up for and what the risks were. You didn’t sign up to get lost and nearly die in the woods when you went on that field trip.” He gives me a half-smile. “Trauma isn’t a competition. We’ve both been through some shit.”

“Yeah, I guess we have.”

He runs his thumbs under my eyes, wiping away my tears. “Don’t cry for me, baby. It took a few years to get there, but I’m good. I’m done with the fire service and will never have to face that shit again. I’ve made peace with what happened.”

“But you’re still afraid to leave here,” I say softly.

“Nah, I just don’t like people.”

“Liar,” I whisper.

He gives me another half-smile, running his finger over my lips. “Never had a reason to want to leave, Sunshine. I had my dog and my cabin, and I was good. Everything I needed was

right here. Why risk undoing the work I've done finding my peace when there was nothing out there I wanted?"

My stomach twists at his question and a little sliver of my heart breaks. If that's how he feels, what are the two of us doing? My life is in Seattle. There's no way I'll ever be able to build my business out here in the wilderness. There's no way I'd survive out here. I may be more comfortable out here because Deacon's here, but I still hate it. I think I'll *always* hate it a little bit.

It'll always remind me of being small and vulnerable and alone, hovering close to death. That's no way to live. But...if I leave, I'm going to be leaving the biggest part of my heart behind. That's no way to live either.

I was supposed to face my fears for Valentine's Day, not go and fall in love with a mountain man. But I fell anyway. Now, I have a whole new fear to contend with. Getting my heart broken into tiny little pieces. Only...I don't see a way to avoid it if his life is here and mine is in Seattle.

"What are you thinking?" Deacon asks.

"That I should finish filing those receipts," I lie. "You have to go hunt Bambi or something so you can feed me dinner."

He narrows his eyes on me. "Or I can feed you my cock. It should keep that smart mouth full."

"Probably," I agree. "But the rumors about all the protein in semen are just a myth, Deacon. It's not nearly enough to fill this hole in my belly."

“Jesus Christ,” he says, snorting laughter. “Do I even want to know how you know this?”

“Uh, because unlike you, I don’t have to wait four hundred years for the internet to load? I can Google things I want to know.” I pause, peeking up at him with a devilish smile. “And as it turns out, there are a lot of things I like to know.”

He growls at me, dipping his head to press his lips to mine. “Baby? Go file those receipts before I decide to see how much protein I can give you.”

“Yes, sir.” I hop off his lap, squealing when he smacks my ass. “Hands off, Deacon Cromwell! I have work to do, and you have to feed me.”

He rises to his feet, grabbing me before I can get too far. He drags me back into his arms, kissing me breathless. By the time he lets me up for air, I’ve forgotten all about the receipts and dinner.

Unfortunately, he hasn’t.

“Go file, Sunshine. I’ll go hunt us up something good to eat.” He winks at me and then strolls out of the office, leaving me swooning after him.

“Paul Bunyan, save me,” I whisper, sinking down into his chair with my head in my hands. What am I going to do? I’m in love with a mountain man and our relationship was doomed before it ever began.

CHAPTER TEN

Deacon



image-placeholder

Deacon

“Goddamn, Sunshine,” I growl, gripping her hips as I drill into her behind. “Watching that ass bounce while I’m fucking you might be my new favorite sight.” I smack it to watch it jiggle, groaning at how sexy it is. Jesus, she’s got the perfect body. Everything about it turns me the hell on. Especially the way she works it when she’s on my cock.

“Deacon,” she groans, rocking back against me. “Harder.”

“I told you already, Sunshine. You don’t get to decide how I fuck you. I do.” I run my hand down the crevice of her ass, pressing my thumb to her little hole. She whines, pressing back against me.

She’s hot for it, the dirty little thing.

I tease her instead of giving her what she wants, pressing against the tight ring of muscle without ever slipping my thumb inside.

She whines impatiently. “Please. Oh, please.”

“Please, what, Sunshine? Let me hear you say it.” It’s fucked up how much I like hearing her say what she wants me to do to her. It’s more fucked up how much I like hearing her call me sir when she does it. But she gets off on it just as much as I do. Every night since we came back from the cabins on Sunday, we’ve fucked and explored and drove each other crazy. There isn’t a spot on her body I don’t know.

“Please, sir.”

“What do you want me to do, Cordelia?”

“Put it in me!” she cries.

“Nu-uh. Not until you tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

“Deacon.”

I thrust hard, making her moan.

“Please, put your finger in my ass!” she shouts. “Please!”

I growl, pushing it past the tight ring of muscle.

She sobs in ecstasy, rocking back against me. God, she’s beautiful like this, spread open to me, completely uninhibited. There isn’t a shy bone in her body. She’s eager to explore and willing to try anything once, perfect in every way.

“Oh, God, Deacon,” she sobs. “Why does that feel so good?”

“Because you belong to me,” I growl, torturing her with pleasure. “This perfect cunt and gorgeous ass are mine,

Sunshine. Your body is my playground now.” I stroke deep, replacing my thumb with two fingers. “I own it.”

Her muscles clench around my cock.

“You like knowing that.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Then you’ll love knowing this.” I lean forward, running my lips up her shoulder blade toward her ear. “You own me too, Sunshine.”

“Deacon,” she cries, shattering around me.

Her inner walls contract all up and down my shaft. I sink my teeth into her shoulder, groaning as she drags me over the edge with her. My balls ache as they empty into her in hard spurts, filling her womb with my seed.

“Deacon,” she chants through it. “Deacon.”

I ride her through it, unable to help myself when she feels this good.

Eventually, she collapses beneath me, groaning. I follow her down, rolling us to the side so I can keep my dick in her where it belongs. Like I told her, I don’t need a knot. I can breed her just fine like this.

I brush my lips across her shoulder, holding her close.

“Mm,” she hums. “If I own you, I guess that makes me the boss now.”

I chuckle quietly. “Baby, you’ve been the boss.”

“And don’t you forget it, Mountain Man.”



“What the hell do you think she’s doing?” I ask Tyr, watching from the porch as Cordelia marches back and forth outside with her phone held high over her head. She’s been out there for the last half hour, muttering to herself and marching around like she’s practicing for the damn band.

The dog looks at me, his tail thumping the wood.

“Damned if I know,” I mutter to him.

He huffs and lopes down the porch, heading in her direction.

“Ha!” she shouts, scaring a bird into flight from a tree overhead. “It worked! I found signal!”

I shake my head, laughing to myself as she dances in a gleeful circle. God, I love her crazy ass. I'm so in love with her it's ridiculous. I never thought I'd fall. Never wanted to fall. But with her, it was inevitable. From the moment I saw her photo, I knew I was fucked. When she stepped out of her car, there was no fighting it. In the four days she's been here, she's changed everything. She's changed me.

I watch her for another moment, and then slip inside the house to make a phone call of my own. She asked me yesterday why I hadn't left, and I didn't lie to her. For six years, all I wanted was peace and quiet. Now, the thought of not having her voice ringing out fills me with dread. The thought of not hearing her laughter every day makes my stomach twist into knots. She belongs with me, bringing sunshine into my life. That's the future I want. Not solitude in the mountains, but a lifetime of arguing about ridiculous shit with her. A lifetime of laughing with her. Nothing else will suffice.

When she leaves here, I'm going with her. After the fire, the department's insurance paid the three of us who survived a hefty settlement. I haven't touched mine. Haven't touched most of what I make from renting out the cabins either. It all sits in the bank, accruing interest. It's enough to hire someone to take care of things out here. Hell, it's enough to never have to work again if that's what I decide to do.

There's time to figure that out later. But I saw the look in her eyes yesterday...the glimmer of fear, the first inkling of heartbreak. She's preparing to lose me. I'll be damned if I

stand by and let that happen. If I let her feel that fear or watch her heart break little by little until her time here is up. I'm solving the problem now, and then I'm telling her how I feel about her.

We're not spending another fucking day without her knowing that she owns my heart just as much as she does my body. I wanted to tell her last night, but I stopped myself. Today is Valentine's Day. It's probably cheesy as hell to tell her today, but I'll be cheesy for her. Hell, I'll be whatever she wants me to be so long as it ends with her in my arms for the rest of my damn life.

That's all that matters to me.

I grab the phone off the kitchen island and dial Nell's number.

"Deacon! How's your new assistant working out? Is she awesome?" she asks as soon as she answers. "Are you calling to tell me that I'm a genius and you're sorry for being a grouch about it?"

"You're a genius and I'm sorry for being a grouch about it."

Her silence speaks entire tomes. "Holy crap," she finally whispers. "She is awesome. What happened? Why do you sound so happy? Oh my gosh. You *like* her!"

"She is awesome," I say softly, striding down the short hall toward my bedroom. "And she'll be your sister-in-law if I have my way."

Nell squeals in my ear.

“I need you to find someone to look after shit up here for me, Nell.”

“Seriously?” she gasps. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I go where she goes.”

“Oh, Deacon,” my baby sister whispers. “I’m so happy for you. I’m going to miss you so much!”

“I’m not gone yet,” I say dryly.

“When are you leaving? Do I get to meet her first? You wouldn’t let me meet her the other day,” she complains. “You said I’d scare her off. Rude, by the way.”

“Yeah, I was wrong about that. She’s crazier than you are.”

“I am not crazy.”

“Whatever you say. Can you deal with the problem or not? I can’t live like this. It’s driving me insane. I want it done now. I can’t wait a week.”

“The cabins are a problem?”

“They are when she’s leaving in a week and they’re standing between me and my future,” I growl. “I need to get someone hired to look after them so I can start making plans.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Nell says. “Maybe Ford can handle things for you. He needs something to do to keep him out of here and out of my hair anyway. You’d think owning a fancy ski resort would keep him busy, but no. He’s always in here, scaring off the tourists.”

“If you’d marry him, maybe he’d stop growling at all the tourists.”

“What? Ford doesn’t want to marry me,” she says like I’ve lost my mind.

“Nell, the man’s been waiting for you to marry him since he met you.”

“Whatever. We’re just friends,” she mumbles. “Get off my phone so I can work magic for you.”

“You’re my favorite sister.”

“I’m your only sister, you big idiot,” she says. “But I love you too.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cordelia



image-placeholder

“Where did your crazy mountain man go?” I ask Tyr, squatting to scratch his ears when he butts his head against my leg in a silent demand for attention. Deacon was on the porch just a minute ago, but I guess he’s gone back inside now. He must have gotten tired of watching me act like a lunatic.

I don’t even care if he was judging me though. I found signal in the dead zone he calls home. It’s been a good day. I got to catch up on what the girls are doing. Apparently, I’m not the only one busy falling in love. We’re falling like bricks all over the place. Tabitha met a mob boss in Vegas. Cleary woke up married to a tattoo artist, also in Vegas. Gem is getting it on with an ex. Peyton is hooking up with a billionaire. Mandy is banging the guy who pretended to be her photographer. And Devyn is head over heels for her brother’s best friend.

Maybe Drunk Me was onto something with this *we’re not moping on Valentine’s Day, we’re facing our fears* pact. For the first time ever, my besties are all in love. We’re a Hallmark

movie in the making. Only with a lot more sex. High five for us!

“Let’s go annoy Deacon,” I murmur to Tyr, rising from my crouch. The muscles in my legs protest, making me giggle. Yeah, there’s definitely a lot more sex in this movie.

Tyr follows me as far as the front porch and then flops down, refusing to come inside like usual. The dog is nuts. He likes freezing his cajónes off. Yesterday, I found him sleeping in a pile of melting snow like it was completely normal. Huskies are built different, I guess.

I slip inside, kicking my boots off so I don’t track mud all over the floor, and then wander down the hall in search of Deacon. I hear his voice coming from his bedroom, so head that way.

“Yeah, I was wrong about that,” he says. “She’s crazier than you are.”

I stop outside his door. Is he talking about me?

“Whatever you say. Can you deal with the problem or not? I can’t live like this.”

Problem? He can’t live like this?

“It’s driving me insane. I want it done now. I can’t wait a week.”

My stomach churns, anxiety shooting through me. He is talking about me. Oh, my god. He’s sick of me. He wants me out of here. I thought... I stumble away from his bedroom door, shocked and numb.

I'm so stupid! I thought things were going great between us. But apparently, I was dead wrong about that. I'm a problem he wants to be rid of. I'm too much for him, just like I am for the rest of the world.

He made me fall in love with him and his stupid, handsome face and his grumpy attitude and his bossy ways and the sweet things he says. And the whole time, it was just sex to him. I was just a warm body.

You own me too, Sunshine.

I stumble into the living room, shoving my feet into the first pair of boots I come across, and then quickly scurry out the front door. I need fresh air. I need...out. I race down the porch steps, heading anywhere but here. Tears blur my vision, my heart feeling like it's going to rip itself in two.

I make it ten feet from the cabin before I stop. Nope. No way. I'm not going to be that girl, the one who hears something she doesn't like and then does something foolish and irrational. I'm not dying in the woods because he broke my stupid heart. If he wants me out of here, then fine. He can tell me that to my face. And then he can take me down the mountain to my car and I'll leave. But I'm not rushing out into the woods like a crazy person.

Been there, done that, still have the anxiety to prove it.

I spin on my heel, marching right back to the cabin.

Tyr lifts his head, looking at me as if to ask me what the heck I'm doing.

“Don’t ask,” I growl.

He slowly lays his head back down.

I yank the front door open, stomping inside.

“There you are,” Deacon says, stopping halfway across the room.

“You’re a jerk.” I slam the door closed behind me.

“What the fuck, Sunshine?”

“If you wanted me to leave, all you had to do was ask. But I am not a problem, Deacon Cromwell,” I growl, stomping toward him to poke him in the chest. “And I am not crazy. If I’m too much for you, it’s because you’re too small for me.”

He grabs for me, but I duck under his arms, too fired up to be easily contained.

“And another thing, you don’t get to sleep with me and tell me that I own you and then just decide that you can’t live like this and want me out of here,” I say, my bottom lip quivering. “If it was just sex to you, you should have just said that to begin with instead of letting me fall in love with you!”

“You’re in love with me?”

“I was before I heard you say I’m a problem and you want me dealt with.” My voice cracks, a tear slipping down my cheek. “Now, I just want you to take me to town so I can leave. I won’t be *a problem* for you ever again.”

“The hell you won’t,” he growls, grabbing for me again. This time, he manages to get his arms around me. Despite my

best efforts, he manages to haul me up against his chest.

“Let me go!” I cry miserably. I don’t want to remember what it feels like to be in his arms when I don’t get to be in them anymore. I don’t want to remember how good he smells when I don’t get to smell him anymore.

“Never,” he rasps, picking me up off my feet and carting me down the hall like I’m a freaking statue he’s trying to move into place. “I will never let you go, Cordelia Shanks.”

I choke on a sob, wishing he meant it the way I want him to mean it.

He drags me into his bedroom before tossing me onto the bed. Before I can even think about rolling off the opposite side of the bed, he’s on top of me, pinning me beneath him. He yanks my jacket off me and then rips my shirt right down the middle before grabbing my hands and pinning them beside my head.

“You said your piece, now it’s my turn, little girl,” he growls, a maelstrom raging in his steely eyes again. I try to avoid his gaze, but it sucks me in like always. “You are crazy. You’re the best goddamn kind of crazy I’ve ever met. But you have never and will never be a problem.”

“That’s not what you said on the phone,” I mumble.

“I wasn’t talking about you, baby. I was talking about this place. I was talking about the cabins. I can’t fucking live another goddamn day knowing you’re leaving in a week and

I'm supposed to stay here without you," he growls. "It's driving me insane. *That's* my problem, Sunshine."

"Oh," I whisper, my heart leaping with hope.

"I'm so in love with you I can't think straight. When you leave, I'm going with you so I called Nell to have her find someone to manage the damn cabins. I didn't want to wait a week to tell you. Since today is Valentine's Day, I wanted to tell you today. That's what you heard me talking about, Cordelia."

"You love me?"

"Like crazy."

I sob his name, tears dripping into my hair. "I'm an idiot."

"No, you're a fierce little pixie," he says, releasing my hands to wipe away my tears. "You've been worried about me breaking your heart since you gave yourself to me. I realized that yesterday, Sunshine. I saw the look on your face when I said I never had a reason to leave this place."

"It made me sad," I whisper.

"I know it did. This place brought me comfort when I needed it, but it doesn't provide the same for you. It's not a shelter, but a prison for you. I can't ask you to live like that, Cordelia. You'd be miserable," he says.

"I'd do it for you if it's what you wanted."

"There isn't any version of this world where I want you to sacrifice your well-being for my sake," he says, stroking his

fingers along my cheeks. “Being out here doesn’t just make you unhappy, it makes you uncomfortable. It frightens you and gives you anxiety. You think I’d let you live like that?” He shakes his head. “Hell no, Sunshine. Taking care of you is my motherfucking mission in life now. I won’t ever allow you to be miserable just because you think it’ll please me. What kind of husband would I be if I allowed that?”

“Deacon,” I wheeze.

“Yeah, I said it, little girl,” he growls, his eyes flashing to my favorite gunmetal gray color. He shifts down my body, planting his lips against my collarbone. “Husband.”

I whimper, my head spinning as he drags his lips down my chest.

“Rule four,” he breathes against my skin. “You will marry me, Cordelia.”

“I thought we decided I’m the boss.”

“Boss me, Sunshine.”

“Rule one,” I say, my back bowing from the bed as his lips close around my nipple. “We have to come out here at least one weekend a month.”

“Agreed.” He drags my nipple through his teeth.

“Rule two,” I gasp. “We’re getting a satellite phone.”

He kisses a trail down my body, which I take as agreement. When he dips his tongue into my belly button and then drags my pants down my hips, I decide it’s definitely agreement.

“Rule three...” I try to think of one as he moves between my legs, draping them over his shoulders.

He blows across my sex, making rational thought impossible. And then his tongue slides through my folds.

“Rule three!” I cry. “You have to keep doing that.”

“This?” he growls and licks me again. “You want me to keep doing this?”

“Yes!” I sob. “Yes!”

EPILOGUE

Deacon



image-placeholder

Five Years Later

“How is it that you have phone reception, but I don’t?” Cordelia demands, eyeing me suspiciously from the passenger seat. “We have the same carrier!”

“Guess I’m God’s favorite, Sunshine.”

My wife gasps in outrage and then giggles. “That’s only because he feels sorry for you, Mountain Man. He always shows mercy to the less fortunate.”

“The less fortunate?” I cock a brow at her.

“Your sons, your dog, and your sister love me best. Someone had to take pity on you,” she sasses, shoving her phone back into her pocket.

“Keep talking your shit and I’m not going to take it on you when we get to the cabin, little girl,” I warn her, smiling despite myself. Fuck, I love when she’s feeling feisty. Nothing makes my dick harder than my wife when she’s giving me nine kinds of hell...which is basically all day every day. She

sasses me because she knows I get off on it, just like I boss her little ass around because I know she gets off on it.

After five years, there are no secrets between us. I know this girl like I know the back of my hand, and she knows me the same way. I never imagined hiring an assistant could lead to this kind of happiness, but goddamn. I've never been happier. Neither has she. She tells me every day how happy she is and how much she loves the life we've built together.

We spend most of that life just outside of Seattle with our boys. I lead expeditions up Rainier a few times a month. Her business is thriving. We don't get up here to the cabin now that we've got three kids with another on the way, but we still try to slip away as often as we can for a weekend alone. Nell and Ford watch the boys while I fuck my wife all over the cabin, just like I did five years ago.

Cordelia still isn't entirely comfortable with nature. I don't think she ever will be. But she no longer has anxiety attacks when we're out in the woods. She's conquered her fear...or at least put it to bed. She says that's because I make it impossible for her to be afraid, but she doesn't give herself nearly enough credit. She's the one who faces it every time she steps onto a trail and refuses to let it beat her. That's all her. I'm just the lucky bastard who gets to protect her while she does it.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" she asks. "Because either way, it's not really making me want to behave, Mountain Man. Oh! Stop at that rest stop. I need to pee."

“That isn’t a rest stop, Sunshine. It’s a fucking port-a-potty on the side of the road.”

“Well, your giant son is sitting on my bladder, so I don’t care what they call it. I need to pee,” she says, rubbing her belly. “I don’t know why I can’t have normal-sized babies. They all have to come out fully grown, carrying briefcases.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. Our boys are big. Hudson and Myles were both over ten pounds and 23 and a half inches long. Ryder was eleven pounds and twenty inches. Her belly is even bigger this time around. She hasn’t been able to see her feet in three months. She never complains though. She loves being pregnant. The part she hates is when they’re outside of her body and growing. She wants to keep them little and cuddly forever.

I pull over beside the port-a-potty and hop out, jogging over to check it out and make sure it’s safe for her. It’s not in the greatest shape, but there isn’t shit smeared on the walls or heroin needles all over the place. And there isn’t anyone hiding inside. I jog back to the SUV to help her out.

“I’ll wait out here.”

“Uh, yeah,” she says. “There’s no way we’re both fitting in that thing.”

She waddles inside, scrunching her nose up at the smell.

I wait in front of the door, chuckling as she mutters to herself. Even after five years, she’s still always talking. I don’t

think she ever stops. Her voice is still my favorite sound. I fucking love it.

“Deacon!” she shouts.

The sheer panic in her voice sends my heart slamming against my ribcage. I rip the door of the port-a-potty open, ready to fight. She’s still sitting on the little toilet, her eyes wide and stricken.

“My water just broke,” she whispers.

“What?”

“My water just broke.” Tears well in her eyes.

Fuck. Oh, fuck. We’re an hour from the nearest hospital.

“Come on, baby,” I say, trying to stay calm to keep her calm. “Let’s get you back to the car. Everything is going to be okay.”

“I can’t have this baby on the side of the road, Deacon.”

“We’re not having the baby on the side of the road. We’re going to the hospital,” I say firmly. Paul Bunyan, save me. We better not have this baby on the side of the road or she’s going to kick my ass.

I help her up from the toilet and then scoop her up into my arms to carry her back to the car.

“I’m going to leak on you!” she cries.

“I don’t give a flying fuck,” I growl, pressing my lips to her temple. I’ve had my tongue in her ass. I think I can handle a little amniotic fluid.

The first contraction hits halfway back to the car. She yelps, digging her nails into my shoulder. “Babe the Blue Ox, that hurts!”

I race her to the SUV and plant her ass in the seat, buckling her in as she writhes through the contract. I’m the world’s biggest asshole for getting her pregnant again. It’s my dick’s fault. He can’t stay out of her.

“Breathe, baby,” I croon. “You know how to do it.”

“Deacon, please drive,” she whimpers, breaking my heart.

I press my lips to her forehead and shut her door, jogging to the driver’s side. As soon as my ass is in the seat, we’re on the road, racing back down the mountain toward the nearest hospital.

“You doing okay, Sunshine?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “The contraction stopped.”

I exhale a relieved breath.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She sits back in her seat.

Approximately sixty seconds later, the next contraction hits.

There’s no fucking way we’re making it to the hospital.

“Deacon!” she cries. “Drive faster!”

“I’m driving, baby. But I can only go so fast. I’m not going to risk killing you or the baby to get us there,” I say.

“I can’t have a baby in the car.”

“I don’t think you have a choice, Sunshine. He’s coming.”

“Why does nature hate me?” she cries.

If she wasn’t so scared, I’d laugh.



“Deacon?” she whispers, clinging to my hand an hour later as the ambulance loads her into the back. “Are you sure the baby is okay?”

“Yeah, Sunshine,” I promise, pressing my lips to her forehead. “He’s good. You did good.”

We didn’t make it to the hospital. We didn’t even make it down the damn mountain. Our boy decided he was ready to

make his entrance, and that was that. I delivered him on the side of the road...though truthfully, I didn't do a whole hell of a lot. She had that shit handled. I just did what I was told. What can I say? I may have been a firefighter in a past life, but my wife is a superhero in this one.

The paramedics grabbed the baby up as soon as they got here—five minutes too late—and started checking him over, but he's doing great. He's a big boy, just like his brothers. We named him Atlas.

“We're never having sex again,” she mumbles, making one of the EMTs chuckle.

I shoot him a hard glare. He quickly zips it and busies himself with supplies.

“Whatever you want, Sunshine,” I say, knowing she doesn't mean it. As soon as she bounces back, she'll be rearing to go again. “Maybe four should be our limit.”

“What?” She blinks at me, suddenly more alert than she was two seconds ago. “You don't want more babies? But I want a girl.”

“You just said...” I trail off, shaking my head. “Never mind. We'll get you your girl, Cordelia. Just as soon as you recover from this one.” I pause. “But next time, maybe we don't go to the cabin in the third trimester.”

“Smart plan,” she says. “We should definitely have more sex at the cabin before the third trimester.”

I laugh, leaning down to press my lips to hers. “Now you’re speaking my language, little girl,” I breathe against her lips.

“I love you.”

“I love you, Sunshine.”

A paramedic carries Atlas to us, bundled in blankets.

“He’s doing great, mama,” she says, laying him on Cordelia’s chest. She immediately cuddles him close, some of the tension draining from her body. “He’s a healthy little guy. You did good.”

“Hi, baby boy,” my wife whispers, her eyes locked on our son. “You’re going to be our little troublemaker just like me, aren’t you?”

“Fuck,” I whisper, a lump rising in my throat as I watch her cuddle him close, complete adoration lighting her up. It’s the most beautiful sight, outstripping the mountains by miles.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



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Thank you so much for reading *Pretty Little Mess*! If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review! They're a huge help for Indie authors like me!

Get ready! We're going back to Nashville. Riley and Cami's new recording artist needs saving, and this wounded warrior is just the man for the job. *A Hero for Her* releases on February 22nd! Pre-order is available now!

THE GALETINE'S CHRONICLES



Valentine's Day? This group of single besties hasn't celebrated since, well...they don't want to talk about that. But this year looks a whole lot different. Thanks to a bottle of wine and a ridiculous Galentine's Day pact, they're conquering their fears, one outlandish adventure at a time. Love wasn't supposed to be in the cards, but they'll tumble headlong into it anyway when they meet the men of their dreams in the last places they expected.

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A HERO FOR HER



The curvy songbird brings him peace. The broken Army Ranger gives her hope. But can love heal his haunted mind and save her life?

Ronan Gallagher

When I left the Army, I left behind pieces of myself.

The things I did haunt me. So do the friends I lost.

I thought I'd always be broken until I took a job protecting Winter Pyke.

This curvy songbird touches parts of me that haven't seen the light in years.

But a crazy fan has made her life a living hell.

That's a feeling I'm all too familiar with.

And I won't allow her to live the way I have for so long.

I will save her...and then I'm making her mine.

Winter Pyke

All I've ever wanted to do is sing.

I never expected it to come at such a high price.

The world knows my name, but I've never felt more alone.

Especially with a madman threatening to kill me.

Enter Ronan Gallagher, the former Army Ranger my manager hires to protect me.

I feel safe in his arms, and I'm falling fast.

But Ronan is fighting a battle of his own.

I've never been much of a soldier, but I want to be for him.

If he can fight for me, I'll fight for him too.

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Grizz's Passion (coming soon)

ABOUT NICHOLE ROSE

Nichole Rose writes filthy, feel-good romance for curvy readers. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to instalove and over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling in love into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and everything supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a proud mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in the Pacific Northwest.

You can learn more about Nichole and her books at authornicholrose.com.

