



SAVED BY

THE

MOUNTAIN

MAN

THE MONTANA MOUNTAIN MEN BOOK FIVE

GEMMA WEIR

SAVED BY THE MOUNTAIN MAN

MONTANA MOUNTAIN MEN #5

GEMMA WEIR

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Offending people since 2017.

You're welcome ;)

WARNING

This book contains an over-the-top, jealous, unreasonable, possessive asshole.

If you consider unapologetic alphaholes unacceptable, or feel their behavior is in some way abusive, then this isn't the book or series for you.

If you're a naysayer who thinks what I write is romanticizing domestic violence and abuse then please, please stop reading now.

This book isn't a guide to dysfunctional relationships, it's fiction. My books are fantasy, this isn't real life, it's a romance novel and should be read as such.

We all know in the real world throwing a woman over your shoulder, messing with her birth control or stalking her and letting yourself into her home is a one-way ticket to either a restraining order or the mental hospital. But I'd like to think that in fiction it's okay to agree that these things are incredibly sexy. Please do not kink shame me or my enthusiastic readers for finding these extreme alphahole behaviors hot, maybe if you read this book with the pinch of romantic salt it was intended to come with, you might like it too.

So if, like me, you love a guy who is so obsessively in love with his girl that he will snarl, demand, punish and fuck her until she gives herself to him completely, then read on and welcome to the world of my Montana Mountain Men.

TEDDY



I'm surrounded by love in every direction and honestly, it's kind of sickening. I love my brothers, my sisters and my new niece and nephew, but honestly, it's getting to be like Groundhog Day on Valentines with all the warm fuzzies that are bouncing around our house.

I barely remember my dad, I'm the youngest of seven brothers, so it's not like I didn't have a father figure around after he died, but the actual man my father was, is more of a foggy memory, rather than someone who had a dramatic impact on my life.

When Beau fell for Bonnie who is closer to my age than his I'll admit I was shocked. We all saw it coming, I mean he basically followed her around for a year before he figured out what he was feeling and claimed her as his. But it was still a shock to see my confirmed bachelor oldest brother so loved up.

He admitted to me that once she was his, he realized he'd felt that way from the moment he saw her alone in the coffee shop that first time. Huck confessed that when he saw Cora in the bar his feelings for her were instantaneous. Granger knew the moment he spotted Alice on the side of the road and Penn, well he almost got arrested he was so possessive of Lulu when she bumped into him on the sidewalk.

One by one, my brothers have all been sucked in by the promise of love at first sight, and by a legacy my daddy started by falling head over heels for my mama the instant he saw her. Mama used to tell us all about how they fell in love as a

bedtime story, she'd lament on about how it was like being struck by lightning.

But let's be honest, no guy dreams of falling in love. We dream about perky tits, what the inside of a girl's mouth will taste like, how wet and hot and tight her pussy will feel, and if she'll let you do all the filthy things you wish you could do to her. We don't fantasize about meeting the one and living happily ever after.

The day I saw *her* in high school, it was like a jolt of something fundamental hit me. But I was a kid and I never thought it could be something so all-consuming as love. It wasn't until my brothers started to talk about how it felt when they found their women, that I realized it sounded familiar, that it had happened to me, but I'd been too young and too dumb to realize it.

I missed my chance at forever. That girl was my happily ever after and I never even said hello to her.

I've never told anyone else, but once I realized who she was to me, I spoke to some of the guys I went to school with and found out her name, then thanks to the power of social media I tracked her down on Facebook. She's happily married with two beautiful kids.

What do you do when you realize that your whole life was already planned out, but you missed the boat and now you'll be alone forever? Well, if you're me, you spend six months fucking anything that moves, then you spend the next three months pouting like a little bitch because you'll never find love.

Maybe if things were different, I'd have gotten over losing the love of my life, but I still have to live in a house where the air is so full of other peoples' happiness I'm practically choking on it, and every time I see one of my brothers or their wives I'm reminded that I'll never have what they do.

I love living in our little Barnett commune. I love that we all still eat together every night and if I moved out I'd be alone, eating TV dinners for one and watching porn or some

shit. I love my family; I just hate knowing that I'll never have what they have.

JUNIPER



“What the fuck kind of hellhole is this? I thought the town near the depot in Washington was small, but this is ridiculous, is there even a bar?” Nero, my brother laughs as we pass the welcome sign to Rockhead Point.

“I think it looks kind of pretty,” I say quietly, watching the beautiful surroundings pass us by as we drive farther into town.

“Where are we supposed to meet this guy?” Buck asks, his hands fixed at ten and two on the steering wheel.

“Outside some coffee shop called Wake Up and Go Go. He says that the depot is a bitch to find and he’ll need to guide us in.”

“Did you remember to tell them about Juni?” Buck growls.

“I told them there was a change of plans and that our baby sister was moving with us too, yeah.”

“I’m twenty, I’m hardly a baby and I really could have just stayed in California on my own. I don’t know why you guys insisted I move out here with you,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“No, you couldn’t. There was no way we were moving across the country and leaving you on your own after your mom took off. I still can’t believe that bitch just up and left and you never even told us,” Nero snarls.

Nero and Buck are my half brothers, we share a dad, but have different moms. I didn’t even know they existed until five years ago, when my dad got caught out and had to admit

to their mother, his wife, that he'd been having an affair for the last twenty-two years and that he had another kid—me.

She immediately kicked him out and divorced him, so he moved in with me and my mom. It wasn't long before my mom found out that she wasn't his only bit on the side, he also has a few other women dotted around the country, but thankfully no more kids, or at least no more that we're aware of.

It didn't take long for Dad to get bored of playing house with us and move on to the next girlfriend on his rotation and a few months later, Buck and Nero came knocking on the door, demanding to get to know me.

Five years on and the three of us have an amazingly close relationship, considering we spent most of our lives not knowing the other existed. Buck is twelve years older than me at thirty-two and Nero a year younger than him at thirty-one, so when we met I was a painfully shy fifteen-year-old and they were adults at twenty-six and twenty-seven. It was a weird time in my life to gain two fully grown half-siblings who were absolutely determined to act as my big brothers, but now I can't imagine my life without them.

After his divorce from their mom and getting bored with my mom, Dad decided parenting wasn't for him and, to my knowledge, none of us have seen him since. After he left, Buck and Nero decided it was their job to step up to become the male role models in my life. I adore them, but they take the words overprotective to the extreme. Which is how I find myself in the back seat of Buck's enormous truck, moving to Montana.

Both my brothers are smoke jumpers, which is basically like a firefighter on steroids. They literally jump out of planes to help control wild fires in remote areas. Their job is terrifying, but they love it, so when Buck was offered the opportunity to captain a new smoke jumper depot out here in Montana, he jumped at the chance and then recommended Nero as his second-in-command. When they flew out to California to tell me about their new jobs, they found out my mom had taken off with her new boyfriend and despite me

being twenty—and more than capable of looking after myself—they strong-armed me into moving across the country with them.

“This is it,” Buck says, pulling alongside the curb outside a cute little coffee shop.

“I’m going to use the bathroom and grab us drinks,” I tell them, opening the door and carefully climbing down from the ridiculously high truck.

“Here,” Nero says, holding out a twenty for me.

“I have my own money.” I scowl.

“Take it. You’re our baby sister, you don’t have a job yet, so we look after you.”

Rolling my eyes and not bothering to argue with him again over this, I take the money and head for the shop. The smell of coffee hits me the moment I push open the door, and I inhale deeply, I don’t actually like the taste of coffee, but it always smells incredible. There’s a line of people waiting to be served, so I head to the bathrooms at the back and by the time I’m done there’s only one person ahead of me.

“Welcome to Wake Up and Go Go, what can I get you?” a gorgeous brunette asks when it’s my turn to order.

“Hi, can I get two black coffees and a hot chocolate, please?”

“Of course, and because today is my last day, and my boss is an asshole, it’s on the house,” she says with a wide grin.

I laugh. “Well thanks, and congratulations on your new job?”

“Actually, my husband has finally gotten his way and convinced me to give up work. In theory I work for him at his company now, but that basically just means riding round in his truck with him all day so he can fuss over me and this one,” she says cradling a tiny baby belly.

“Oh, you’re pregnant, congratulations. I’m Juniper by the way, but most people call me Juni.”

“Thank you, I’m Bonnie. Are you passing through on your way to somewhere?”

“Actually we’re moving here or pretty close to town I think. My brothers are smoke jumpers and there’s a new depot being set up not far from here.”

“Oh, I heard about that, my husband and his brothers own Barnett Lumber, Beau said he’d spoken to the new chief of something.”

Smiling widely, I nod. “That would be my brother Buck, we’re supposed to be meeting someone here who’s going to guide us to the depot, because apparently it’s a pain in the butt to find if you don’t know the area, but I’ll go grab him so he can say hi.” Bonnie nods and I head outside and find my brothers leaning against the side of the truck. “Hey guys, come meet someone.”

Both of their brows arch in surprise, but they follow me into the coffee shop and to the counter where Bonnie is putting lids onto our drinks. “Bonnie, these are my brothers, Buck and Nero. Guys, this is Bonnie, her husband owns Barnett Lumber.”

Understanding fills Buck’s expression and he smiles, holding his hand out to Bonnie who leans across the counter and takes his. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Barnett, and congratulations, Beau mentioned you were expecting.”

“He told you that, huh? I swear he’s so excited he hasn’t given me the chance to tell anyone,” she laughs. “And please call me Bonnie, we’re not much for formalities round here. Plus there’s four Mrs. Barnetts, so it can get a little confusing.”

The bell above the door jingles and a rush of cold air follows the noise. “Making friends, baby girl?” a male voice growls, his tone on the verge of hostile as he walks behind the counter and pulls Bonnie into him, forcing her to release Buck’s hand.

Bonnie rolls her eyes, not seeming even slightly perturbed by his possessive behavior.

“Nice to meet you in person, Beau, I’m Buck Henderson,” Buck says, offering his hand to Beau.

The big guy’s expression calms a little as he reaches out and takes Buck’s hand. “Nice to meet you too, Buck. I take it you met my wife.”

“I did, I was just offering my congratulations on the baby.”

Beau nods and relaxes, turning his attention to Nero.

“Hi, I’m Nero, I’m first officer for the depot and this one’s brother,” Nero says shaking Beau’s hand, smiling at Bonnie before dipping his chin in my direction. “And this is Juniper, our baby sister.”

“Hi,” I say shyly, offering Beau a half smile. I’ve felt surprisingly comfortable around Bonnie considering we just met, but her husband is huge and kind of intimidating.

“Nice to meet you, Juniper,” Beau says, softening his voice.

“Juni decided to join us on the move here, she’s looking for a job if you know of anything local?” Nero says.

“Well, there’s a vacancy here, but like I mentioned, my boss is an asshole.” Bonnie giggles.

“Do you have any experience?” Beau asks.

“I was a receptionist back in California,” I tell him, refusing to act like a mouse and forcing my voice to rise until it’s a normal volume.

“I’m looking for someone to help out in the offices up at the yard, the last woman who worked for me left to follow her boyfriend across the country, she left the place in a bit of a mess and I’ve been using temps since then. If you’re interested, why don’t you come on out to the yard on Monday and we can discuss the job and salary,” Beau offers, widening his huge hand over Bonnie’s stomach affectionately while he speaks.

“I’m not—” Buck starts, but I interrupt.

“That sounds perfect.”

“Oh yes, this is awesome. The yard is testosterone heavy and Beau growls anytime I talk to a guy I’m not related to”—Bonnie claps excitedly—“let me get your cell number, then I can text you the address and directions because your GPS won’t work that far up the mountain. Then you need to meet my sisters. They’re going to love you. We can all go out for food and cocktails, although I can’t drink and, shoot, neither can Alice or Lulu so it’d just be you and Cora, but that’s okay, we can drink vicariously through you.”

Bonnie is a little bit like the energizer bunny, but her cheerfulness is infectious and I’m smiling back at her as she pulls her cell from her pocket, her fingers poised above the screen.

“Oh,” I startle, then tell her my cell number while Beau smiles indulgently down at his wife. I’ve never seen anyone actually look at another person like they’re the most important thing in the world, but the way Beau’s expression alters when he looks at Bonnie makes my heart beat a little quicker.

“Juni,” Nero starts.

“Don’t bother,” Beau laughs. “The women in my family are a force to be reckoned with, Bonnie just adopted Juniper, there’s no point fighting it. Why don’t the three of you come on over for dinner tomorrow night, I can introduce you to the rest of our family.”

“Sure,” Buck laughs, shaking his head with amusement. “That would be great.”

A red fire truck pulls to a stop outside. “I think this is our guide,” Nero says, gesturing through the window. “Nice to meet you, Beau, Bonnie.”

“I’ll text you, Juni,” Bonnie says, waving her cell at me enthusiastically.

“Okay, nice to meet you both.”

“Don’t forget your drinks,” she reminds me, pushing a cardboard tray with our drinks across the counter. “Oh, and take some muffins too.”

“How much do we owe you?” Nero asks.

Bonnie waves Nero off. “Nothing, like I told Juni, this is my last day and my boss is an asshole, so these are on him,” she grins.

The guys say goodbye and Nero grabs our drinks as I take the bag with the muffins and follow him out to the truck. I say a quick hello to the guy who approaches us, then climb into the back of the truck and dig into my muffin. It’s banana and it’s delicious. A few minutes later, the guys climb back in and Buck starts the engine, pulling away from the curb and following our guide out of town and onto a rural road that gets bumpier the farther along we go.

After about fifteen minutes, the road widens and a small squat-looking building comes into view. It’s red brick and kind of cute in an industrial way. A huge, much more modern-looking metal shed is next to it, and with the shutter door open, I can spot the light aircraft, helicopters, various trucks and ATVs that are all parked inside the massive space.

“Home sweet home,” Buck says excitedly.

“The barracks and mess look like a shithole, but the birds sure are pretty,” Nero smiles, staring at the aircraft with an excited gleam in his eyes. Not only is Nero a smoke jumper, he’s also a pilot, and anything that flies in any capacity is like catnip to him.

We slow to a stop behind the other truck and climb out. I stay slightly behind my brothers, not wanting to seem rude by staying in the truck, but not being interested enough to really want the tour of the depot’s buildings when we’ve been traveling all day and are so close to our new home.

Our guide is a guy named Finn, he tells us he’s been stationed here for the last few weeks overseeing the arrival of all the equipment until Buck and the rest of the crew arrive. “It’s not the Ritz, but I’ve seen worse, especially in this kind of rural area,” he says, unlocking the barrack door and leading us all inside. The mess is full of furniture left over from the eighties, with a hint of twenty-first-century modernity in the huge flat-screen TV and various video game consoles. The kitchen is clean, but aged, and the appliances all appear new.

The tour takes about an hour and by the time we're done, I'm more than ready to leave. I love my brothers and I'm proud of the job they do, but given how dangerous their chosen profession is, I've found it's easier for me not to look too deeply into what they actually do for a living. Being here is giving me a bit more insight than I need if I ever want to sleep again.

"The crew houses are about ten minutes down the mountain, they used to be workers' homes on the Williams' ranch, but when the owner heard we were looking for homes close to the depot he offered them up for rent for the jumpers," Finn says with a smile. "If you're about done here for now, I'll guide you down to the houses and then see you back here in the morning."

"Sounds good, the rest of my crew will be coming in the next few days, so I'd like to get comfortable with the lay of the land before they get here," Buck says, holding his hand out to the other man to shake.

"Great, then let's go," Finn says, climbing back into his truck.

We follow suit, climbing into Buck's truck and once again follow Finn back down the mountain. It doesn't take long for us to reach a turning, marked with a sign saying Williams Ranch, and we turn off the road and onto a gravel track that splits in two directions, we take the left-hand fork and follow it around to a mini suburb of matching low-slung log houses. The ten houses create a circle, leaving a patch of grass in the center that has a swing set and small jungle gym. The houses themselves are quaint and beautiful, and I unclip my seat belt and jump out the moment Buck puts the truck into park.

"Well, this is it," Finn says gesturing to the houses. "They each have three bedrooms, two baths and a small yard. They're empty, so I hope you've got some mattresses in that U-Haul," he laughs.

"Yeah, we knew the accommodation was unfurnished. To be honest, I wasn't expecting them to be so nice. The crew housing we had back in Washington was... Well, to say it was

a shithole is probably exaggerating how nice it was. None of our crew lived in them for more than a month before they moved out to somewhere nicer. But this is awesome.” Nero smiles, nodding happily.

“If you like living halfway up a mountain, then sure, this is as good as anywhere.” Finn laughs, eyeing the houses with a derisive grimace.

“You’re not from around here?” I ask. “I assumed you were since you’re acting as guide.”

“Originally I’m from Rockhead Point, but when I joined the fire service I opted to move to Boseman. I’m not a jumper, just a regular old firefighter, I volunteered to oversee the equipment being delivered because my family is still here and I’m familiar with the area. Tell you the truth though, I’m looking forward to getting back to civilization,” he chuckles. “Here are the keys to the depot and to all the houses. If you have any problems, then head on up to the main house. Owner’s name is Hal Williams, or his son Caleb Williams is the general manager, they’re good people and they’ll help with whatever you need.”

Both Buck and Nero shake Finn’s hand, then watch him leave before turning to me. “Juni, pick a house.”

Smiling, I squeal and then rush from house to house, opening each one and looking around, before finally deciding on the first house in the circle. “This one. Buck’s the boss and you’re second-in-command, seems only right that you have the first house.”

The guys both nod indulgently, leaving me to explore as they head back to the trailer and start to unload all of our things.

TEDDY



“The first of the new firefighters got here today,” Hal says, slicing into the huge steak Cody grilled tonight.

“They’re smoke jumpers, like in that film. We met two of them and their sister today,” Bonnie announces. “They seem nice and Beau offered Juni—their sister who moved here with them—a job. We invited them to dinner tomorrow night if you want to meet them.”

“They’re living in the ranch houses?” I ask.

“Yep, most of those houses have been empty the last couple of years,” Hal nods.

“Daddy and Caleb helped the last couple of families build their own houses farther back on the ranch, the rest of the hands are single and live in the bunkhouse,” Bonnie confirms.

“Seemed only right when they’ve been living and working on the ranch for longer than Bonnie’s been alive, they’re as good as family,” Hal says shyly. “Plus I’m charging rent on those empty houses now and if the barn sets on fire, I’ve got firefighters living on the property,” he chuckles.

“Juni is adorable,” Bonnie gushes. “I told her she needs to meet all you guys, she looked our age, early twenties give or take a year.”

“Oh fun, someone else to drink cocktails with since you three decided to all have babies the moment I finally stopped being pregnant,” Cora chides good-naturedly.

“I’m more than happy to change that, Peaches, you know I’m ready to have you growing with my baby again,” Huck smiles, leaning down to press a kiss to Cora’s neck.

“Nope, no, hell no,” Cora shouts, pushing back from her seat and stepping away from my brother. “You can fuck off, I want a least two years between Maverick and any siblings he might get, so you can just forget it.”

Huck smiles and Cora bristles, wagging her finger at her husband. “No, Huck, I know that look, I’ve seen it before. Maverick is six months old, I’m not having another baby.”

“Come sit back down, Peaches,” Huck coos.

“No. I’m calling the doctor and making her promise on her doctory oath that the shot she gave me was actually birth control. She’s a she and you’re charming, and we both know you can’t be trusted,” Cora shouts, tapping at the screen of her cell before lifting it to her ear and walking into the living room.

“She’s going to kill you if she ends up pregnant again,” I warn Huck.

“Barnett men have strong swimmers, that’s hardly my fault. Plus, birth control isn’t fullproof, I can’t help it if I’m that one percent.” He smirks smugly.

Shaking my head, I turn to Beau. “What job did you offer this girl?”

“I didn’t offer her anything yet, she used to work as a receptionist and it’s past time for us to find someone to work in the office permanently. She’s coming in on Monday so I can tell her a little more about the job. I’m sick of having a new temp every couple of weeks and I don’t have time to do all my own work, plus answer the phones and do all the basic admin. I want to be back out on the jobsite, not stuck behind a desk,” Beau says.

“We could use you out there, the guys miss having you around, plus with you back on the crew, Huck will have to do some actual work rather than spend the whole time showing the guys pictures of Mav.”

“Fuck you,” Huck crows. “I’m a proud fucking papa, when you’ve got a kid you’ll be the same.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I wave him off, forcing my expression to stay neutral. I’m not sure if Penn or Lulu told the rest of our family about my tragic tale. I hope not. I don’t want to see sympathy in the faces of the brothers who have found their women, knowing that I’ll never have what they have. I could go out there and meet a woman, settle down and have a kid, but I don’t know if I’d always be comparing her to the fabled “one.” I’d hate to always feel like second choice and I’d never knowingly do that to someone else.

The rest of the night passes quickly and I wave goodbye to Hal as he leaves to go back to his place on the property next to ours. After Bonnie moved in, we built a road straight across our land and his that connects the two homes, so now, instead of having to drive down to the road and then back onto the Williams ranch, it’s just a couple of minutes in one of the golf carts we keep just for this purpose. Bonnie loves it and honestly, I think Hal does too.

Bonnie’s brother lives on the ranch as well, but he and Bonnie rarely speak. Given how close I am to my brothers I don’t understand how they can live with such a broken relationship, but Caleb doesn’t seem inclined to try to fix it and Bonnie’s resigned to that fact.

Saying good night to everyone, I head to my door and push into my apartment. Another change we made after the girls moved in was to build seven additions, so we could each have our own apartments that were connected to the main house and living space. With Bonnie, Alice and Lulu all being pregnant, I imagine we’ll be building on again in a year or so to accommodate all the new Barnetts being brought into the world.

Closing my door behind me, I pad into my kitchen and grab a beer, before turning on the TV and flopping down onto the couch. As much as I enjoy having some space to call my own, I miss the comradery of the house before I gained four sisters. That’s not to say that I don’t love the girls, I do, but sometimes I’m a little wistful for when the seven of us were

just a group of bachelors falling from one pussy to the next. I can't exactly boast to my brothers about how hot the girl I banged last night was when I have my sister and niece sitting next to me.

A film starts to play on the screen, but I'm barely watching it, my mind full of what-ifs. What if I'd spoken to my girl that day in high school? What if I'd believed in all this love at first sight bullshit? What if I'd tracked her down before she met someone else? I've lost count of how many times I've played this game with myself the last year, but the outcome is always the same, no matter how I spin the questions in my head. I never even spoke to the girl who was destined to be mine and because of that, I missed my chance at happy ever after.

Blinking my eyes open, I groan when my neck protests from being propped against the arm of the couch all night. Another shitty thing about having my own place is that there's no one to kick my ass off the couch if I fall asleep, which I seem to be doing more and more these days.

Feeling all the aches and pains in my muscles, I silence my cell phone alarm, which is what must have woken me, and push to sit up, cradling my head in my hands and rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I'm only thirty-one, but some days my body makes me feel really fucking old, it's depressing as hell. Standing, I head for my shower to wash away the shitty night on the couch, then I head into the main house once I'm dressed and ready for work. Beau, Huck and I all work for our business Barnett Lumber. I suppose technically it's Beau's company, he started it, but Huck and I both joined and became partners once we moved back to our hometown after college.

I have a degree in business with a minor in forestry, but for me there's nothing better than being out in the woods, the smell of freshly cut wood surrounding me. If I could get rid of all the machinery and spend all day just me and an axe, I would, but the modern lumber industry is all about volume, so instead of old-fashioned brute force we use precision felling and hauling.

Part of my job is to mark out which trees to fell and which to leave. It means I get to scope out the new cut each week and

mark out the path we'll take and which trees we'll remove. Wandering in the woods is one of my favorite things to do, nature and the peacefulness of being off the beaten track is the only thing that keeps me sane most weeks. I know it's kind of ironic that I'm extolling the virtues of an untouched woodland only to then barrel in with logging machinery but I like to think that we put back as much as we take.

Barnett Lumber plants a new tree for each one we cut down for lumber, we replenish the forest that affords us a living and that circle of life is what helps me to sleep every night.

The day goes quickly and before I realize it, I'm climbing into Beau's truck and on my way home.

"You in for dinner tonight? We have the new chief, his brother and sister eating with us, as well as Hal and Chloe," Beau says.

"It's my turn to cook, so yeah," I laugh. "Good job I was expecting a full house, dinner for sixteen it is."

"What you making?" Huck asks. "I'm starving, Lulu did lunches and she never puts treats in."

"She's trying to convince Poppy to eat something other than cookies and she's making the rest of us set a good example," I say, rolling my eyes. "I think I'll do lasagna. That's easy enough for a lot of people."

"Sweet," Huck hums happily.

Once we get back to the house, I set the oven to heat and then take a shower and change into sweats and a T-shirt. Mama used to make a mean ragù sauce and I quickly fall into the pattern of chopping onions and garlic just the way she taught me to. Before I know it, the trays of food are done and I slide them into the oven to bake, setting the garlic bread I've made to one side, and covering the huge bowls of salad I've put together back into the refrigerator.

It's only just after seven, so I head over to the couch and scoop Poppy up from where she's playing on the floor, zooming her into the air over my head until her baby giggles

fill the room. “Hey Princess Poppy, did you miss me today? Were you a good girl for your auntie Chloe?”

“Unky,” she cries, or at least that’s what I think it sounds like as she slaps me on the head, her hand wet from where it’s been in her mouth.

“I wouldn’t zoom her too much, Huck gave her ice cream, that’s not going to be fun if she throws it up all over you,” Lulu chuckles from where she’s lying on the couch.

“How you feeling today?” I ask. Since she found out she was pregnant, she’s barely stopped throwing up.

“I’ve only been sick four times today so I think it’s starting to ease. Taylor of course has been great, Janet has as always been a bitch,” Lulu says rolling her eyes.

“Hopefully it’ll stop once you’re out of the first trimester, right? Penn’s been driving us crazy with that *What To Expect When You’re Expecting* book.”

“I hope so, I never had any morning sickness with Poppy, so I wasn’t expecting it. I feel fine once I’ve barfed though and I swear I’ve never been more hungry in my life.”

“Don’t worry, Mama, I’ve made enough lasagna for you to have as many helpings as you like.”

Lulu’s expression sobers for a second and she rolls to her side, propping her head up on her hand. “Teddy, I know it’s none of my business, but have you thought about trying to track down your girl, the one from high school?”

Sighing, I ruffle my hair and then glance around to check who else is listening. “I already found her; she’s married with kids.”

“Oh Teddy,” Lulu gasps. “Fate isn’t that cruel, that girl wasn’t your only chance, you’ll see. Someone else will appear and it’ll make the way you felt when you saw that girl all those years ago feel like a single star when your real future is the entire universe.”

“Maybe,” I shrug, not believing it for a minute. I had my chance and I didn’t take it because I was a dumb kid who

didn't believe in some stupid love at first sight legacy. Because of that I'll never have what the rest of my family will, and no matter how much I wish it were different, there's nothing I can do to change it.

I play with Poppy for a little while, avoiding Lulu's penetrating gaze until there's a knock at the front door and Beau goes to open it.

"Hey, welcome, come on in," he says pushing the door wide and stepping back as two guys walk in, followed by a tiny girl.

Poppy coos excitedly, drawing my attention away from our guests until Beau leads them over to the couch. "This is my baby brother, Teddy and our niece Poppy."

Standing, I balance Poppy on my hip and look to the biggest guy first. "Hey."

"Buck, nice to meet you," he says, holding out his hand.

I shake it, then turn to the other guy. He's almost the mirror image of his older brother, only an inch or so shorter and not quite as built. "Nero."

"Teddy, nice to meet you." When my eyes fall to the girl beside him, my heart stops. It actually stops beating as I take in the most mesmerizing creature I've ever laid eyes on. Thank fuck my sweats are loose because my dick jumps to attention as the girl smiles coyly up at me.

"Hi, I'm Juniper, but most people call me Juni."

She doesn't offer me her hand and I can't help but wish she had, wanting to be able to touch her, to see if sparks fly when our skin connects. I know they will, because my stomach is a sea of electricity bouncing around my nerve endings as I try not to stare at her.

She's tiny, barely meeting her older brothers' shoulders, her hair is white blonde and poker straight, her features are elfin, cute and petite except for her lips which are full and pouty. Holy fuck, the image of her on her knees, those lips wrapped around my cock, makes precum twitch from the head

of my dick and I swallow back a groan as I'm almost unmanned without her even laying a hand on me.

Considering her height, she's curvy; thick thighs and tits that I know will be full and ripe, begging to be sucked and bitten. She's stunning, and if I didn't already know I'd missed my "one" I'd swear she was it.

If I was a caveman, she'd be over my shoulder by now and ten seconds away from being impaled on my cock until she was screaming my name and filled with my cum. But I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be okay for me to kidnap this woman I just met while her brothers and mine stand by and watch, no matter how much I want to.

She's young, barely out of her teens, but I don't care, I have to have her, I have to know what it feels like to slam my dick into her. I need to know what she looks like when she comes.

"Nice to meet you, Juni," I manage to force past parched lips. "I hope you're hungry."

Her eyes widen a little at my words. I'm not thinking about lasagna right now and I think she knows it, or at least I hope she knows it. If she doesn't, she will soon. I'll have to be careful though, I have particular tastes in bed so I rarely fuck where I sleep. I tend to meet women who have mutual desires through friends who are more involved in the lifestyle than I am.

I'm not a dom; I don't want a woman to kneel, unless she's sucking my dick, but I have a need to be in control. I enjoy the company of women who enjoy having control taken from them.

Juni doesn't seem like she'd even know the word submissive, but I'll fuck her however she wants, as long as I get to put my dick in her. Hell, right now I'd get on my knees and do whatever the fuck she wants as long as I get to be naked with her.

The oven timer buzzes and I blink, realizing that the conversation has continued without me while I've been

focused on Juni. “Excuse me, I need to go check on the food,” I say, placing Poppy back on the floor with her toys and heading into the kitchen to pull the pans of lasagna from the oven and slide the garlic bread in to take their place.

My hands are shaking a little and I inhale slowly, making sure to look busy while I force myself back under control. If Juni takes the job at Barnett Lumber I’ll see her all the time, no one can resist the charms of a Barnett man and neither will she. Of course, I’ll have to make her understand that it’ll only be a one-time thing, but I’m sure she’ll be happy with whatever I offer her once she understands how good it’ll be between us.

Dinner is endless, but I struggle to force my eyes away from the beauty opposite me at the table. I know she notices, because her doe eyes keep coming back to me, checking to see if I’m still watching. I am. She’s quiet, not quite as shy as Granger’s wife Alice—who barely uttered a word for the first few months they were together—but quiet enough that the conversation flows without her ever actually saying anything unless she’s spoken to directly.

When dinner and dessert have been eaten, everyone works together to clean up and then we head for the couch. I deliberately sit next to Juni, testing my control as I stop myself from touching her, even though I want to drag her onto my lap.

“So, you all live here together?” she questions, her voice sweet and small, but not too girlish.

“It’s weird isn’t it,” Cora laughs. “Sometimes we call it the commune because from an outsider’s perspective it sounds like we’re hippies. When I first moved in it was just the main house, the guys built the add-ons afterward so we could all get some privacy and stop listening to each other fuck,” she giggles, not an ounce of awkwardness in her voice as she confesses that the rest of us were forced to listen to Beau and Huck fuck their wives to screaming orgasms every night.

Buck and Nero chuckle, but Juniper’s cheeks heat to a charming shade of pink. I’d love to turn her ass the same color. Fuck, now all I can think about is Juniper folding herself over

my lap and begging me to spank her until her cunt is dripping and desperate for me.

Maybe I enjoy more than a little control, maybe I like doling out a punishment here and there too, and I bet Juni could be beautifully bad.

No. She's not a sub, she's a normal girl from the town I live in, anything we did together would have to be strictly vanilla. There's no point letting word get out that I'm a kinky bastard, not in a town this small where gossip runs rampant.

Fuck. Getting up, I cross to the refrigerator, needing to put some distance between me and the tantalizing temptation sitting on my couch. "Anyone need a drink?"

"We should actually be on our way home," Buck says, standing up. "Nero and I need to get to work early in the morning and make sure the depot is ready for when the rest of the crew get here. We're hoping to be running at full capacity in a couple of weeks, so it's going to be long days until everything is prepped and organized. Thank you for dinner, we'll have to return the favor once we're settled, although I think we might have to grill and eat outside, we only have four chairs," he laughs.

"Sounds good, let me know if I can do anything to help you guys get settled in. Juni, I'll see you on Monday, Bonnie sent you directions to the yard, right?" Beau asks.

"She did, I'll see you on Monday. Thank you for dinner, Teddy, it was delicious," she says, smiling at me and making me feel weak at the fucking knees like a teen with his first crush.

"You're more than welcome, nice to meet y'all."

They say their goodbyes and leave. The moment the door closes behind them I feel bereft and anxious, the urge to race after her and drag her back to me so strong that I retreat to my room without staying to hang with my family like I normally would. My dick is too hard to just do nothing, so instead I lock my door and walk to my bedroom with my hand already down my pants, my fist clenched tightly around my cock.

“Fuck,” I hiss as I climb onto my bed, push my sweats to my knees and start to work my cock, using the precum that’s dripping from the tip as lube.

I barely have to close my eyes before a perfect image of Juni naked, bent at the waist, her fingers around her ankles, the fold of her sex wet and glistening appears in my mind.

“Good girl, look at your cunt all messy with my cum, use your fingers and push it all the way back inside of you, don’t waste it,” the me in my fantasy drawls as she shudders, releasing one ankle and curling her fingers between her legs, stroking the liquid from her folds before slowly penetrating herself with two of her own fingers.

Before my filthy daydream has a chance to play out, I come with a groan, coating my hand, stomach, and sweats in cum as my dick twitches in my fist.

Panting, I wipe my hand on my sweats and then flop back against the pillows, wrung out and still fucking turned on despite having just blown my load only minutes ago. Once my breathing has returned to normal, I strip out of my clothes and clean myself up, then climb back into bed and turn the TV onto a porn channel.

Normally when I’m this wound up, I arrange to meet up with someone to play, but right now I know anyone but Juni wouldn’t scratch the itch I’m feeling. I want her more than I think I’ve ever wanted anyone, but I know the need I’m feeling will fade, so if she takes the job working in the office I’ll ply her with the Barnett charm, fuck her brains out and then move on.

Grabbing my dick, I try to distract myself with naked and thoroughly fucked on my TV, but the porn does nothing. Nor does any of the kinky stuff that’s a little more extreme I find online, apparently my dick is only excited for blonde, sweet as honey, vanilla-flavored girls.

Fuck my life.

JUNIPER



The Barnett brothers are all beautiful men. You know how when you watch the Miss USA pageant on the TV, it's like a never-ending line of beautiful women and you have that conversation in your head that questions how they got that many gorgeous people in one place? Well, the Barnett house is like the male equivalent of that.

There're seven of them. Seven. And all of them look like male models, only they're not pretty boys, they're men. My panties actually got wet just being in the same house with them, and four of them are married and three of their wives are pregnant. The moment I stepped through the front door, I was hit with a wave of big dick energy and I'm not at all surprised to see they're making babies left, right and center. I swear I started ovulating and my biological clock started beating in time with their heartbeats just from breathing the same air as them.

My brothers are both attractive men. I can certainly see why they have a bevy of women chasing after them, but they're my brothers, so gross. But honestly, I'm surprised the single women of this town aren't camped out on the Barnetts' doorstep with signs saying "Pick me."

Teddy, the youngest brother, the one who cooked the most delicious meal for all sixteen of us tonight, is the epitome of beautiful. Dirty-blond hair that has a slight curl to the ends, full lips and a face that would be at home on a Greek god. All of the brothers are tall, but he made me feel tiny in

comparison, and I'm pretty sure his bicep is wider than my thigh.

He has this air about him too, he's not stern, in fact quite the opposite, but there's this tension I felt around him that made me want to sit up straight and behave. It was the weirdest thing that I've never experienced before. Of course, I can't tell my brothers, but Teddy Barnett is going to be the inspiration for some very dirty dreams, I can already tell.

It only takes us a few minutes to get home. My brothers are discussing the Barnetts and I'm half-heartedly listening.

"What did you think of them?" Nero asks, offering me his hand to help me down from Buck's huge truck.

"They seem like a nice family."

"Yeah, but it's a bit weird them all living together like the Waltons. I wonder if they all shout good night to each other before they go to bed too," he laughs.

"We're all living together," I arch a brow.

"Yeah, but that's different."

"How?"

"Because Buck and I are going to be working together and because you're our baby sister," Nero says with a rise of his eyebrows.

"Please; you guys begged me to come."

"Because there was no way we were going to leave you in California alone after your mom left," Buck says in his growly—I know better than you—big brother way.

"I hate to break it to you, but I was living alone for months and look, I'm still alive. Want to know why that is?" I arch a brow. "Because I'm an adult."

"Juni, we know you're capable of taking care of yourself, but moving here together is the perfect way for us all to have a fresh start. You don't have to put up with your mom dipping in and out of your life whenever she feels like it and we get to

see you all the time and be the real family we've always wanted to be."

Softening instantly at his words, I push up onto my tiptoes and press a kiss against Buck's cheek. "Love you, big bro," I whisper, then follow Nero into our new home.



Monday morning comes quickly, the guys left me to unpack while they got the depot set up and greeted their new team who have arrived in dribs and drabs over the weekend. Our little estate of homes are now all full, except one which would have been for Nero, if he hadn't chosen to live here with us and there's a fun atmosphere with everyone getting to know one another. Five of the new guys are bachelors and the other three have partners and families. Scooter and his wife Maureen have the most adorable set of seven-year-old twin boys who have filled the yard space in the center of the circle of homes with bikes, footballs and a basketball net.

It's strange to think that I only met most of these people in the last couple of days, because we already feel like a little community. This morning while the guys are at work, I'm heading over to Barnett Lumber to meet with Beau about the job in his company's office. Bonnie texted me yesterday and offered to give me a ride, which is great because I don't have a car yet and Uber doesn't exist out here in small-town Montana.

I hadn't realized when I met Bonnie at the coffee shop that her dad owned the ranch and the house I'm now living in, but I'm starting to learn in a town this small, everyone knows everyone and they all know each other's business.

Once Rockhead Point figured out that I was Buck and Nero's sister and not one of their girlfriends, we've had no less than six welcome wagon visits from single women, whose abilities to wear incredibly low-cut shirts without their breasts falling out by far outweigh their cooking skills. In fact, the

single members of my brother's new team of smoke jumpers have been fully embraced by the females of Rockhead Point.

I can't really fault the women for coming in hordes, the guys are all hot, fit, firefighters and Oz, Anders, Warrick, Danny and Knight all look like they could feature in one of those firefighter calendars where they're rubbed with oil and dirt so they look like they just emerged from fighting a blaze.

Unfortunately for me, not only did Buck and Nero warn all of their new teammates that I was completely off-limits, but none of them have made me sit up and take notice the way the youngest Barnett brother Teddy did. Since we had dinner with the Barnetts, Teddy has been a recurring star in my dirty dreams. I've only had sex once, on prom night with Jet my high school boyfriend. It was both of our first times, and we were both excited. Unfortunately, Jet was a little too excited and the whole thing, including cleanup, was over in less than five minutes.

That was nearly two years ago. It isn't that I've avoided sex since then, but more that since my first time was such a disappointment, I've been waiting to meet someone who made me want to rip their clothes off before I become intimate again. Jet and I were friends that became more, and although I loved him, we never had that insane chemistry that I've heard other people talk about. We had sex because it was prom and he didn't want to go away to college a virgin. Both of us knew that we wouldn't stay together once school was over, and it was completely amicable when we agreed to have our first time together and then part as the good friends we should have stayed.

College wasn't really an option for me, my grades were average, but getting into tens of thousands of dollars' worth of debt just didn't appeal when I was lucky enough to be offered a job the moment I graduated. As much as my brothers like to think I was miserable and alone in California, I really wasn't. I had a job, an apartment I sometimes shared with my mom and a happy, albeit sometimes narrow life. Buck and Nero like to think they swooped in and saved me and I don't mind letting them, because they're my brothers and I love them, but if I

hadn't decided to move here with them, I would have been perfectly fine on my own.

In the last two years, I've been on the occasional date, but I'm still waiting for that feeling, that instant desire, the one I felt when Teddy Barnett looked my way.

Smoothing down my teal-blue dress, I take a last look in the mirror and check my appearance. I'm short and carrying a little too much weight, I've got some serious junk in my trunk if you know what I mean, but I have great hair and skin and honestly, I don't hate my reflection when I look in the mirror. My mom might be a bit of a flake, but she taught me how to dress for my shape and to love the body I have, so my interview dress hugs my curves in a way that says sexy, confident, employ me.

I want this job. Not only is it hopefully better than being an assistant in a doggy day care or taking the job replacing Bonnie as a barista—which are the only other Help Wanted signs I've seen in town—but it's also working around Teddy, which is a definite plus.

More than that though, I've been a receptionist and worked in an office before and unless there's some odd software package or something, I'm pretty sure I'm more than capable of doing the job.

The sound of a car horn outside fills the air, and I pull on my cream wool coat and push my feet into nude pumps. Grabbing my résumé and purse, I make my way outside and slide into the passenger seat of Bonnie's SUV.

“Hi Bonnie,” I greet.

“Hi, you look great.”

“Oh thanks, and thank you so much for giving me a ride, Buck offered to let me drive his truck, but honestly I feel like I'm driving a bus and I haven't had time to look for a car yet. Where I lived in California, the public transport was great and I never needed one.”

“It's not a problem, I've been unemployed for less than a week and I'm going crazy. Beau won't let me use any of the

machinery at the lumberyard and my dad says it's dangerous for me to ride my horse or help out on the ranch while I'm pregnant. If I watch any more daytime TV my brain is going to melt, so taking you to the yard is the perfect excuse to get out of the house."

"How long do you have to go?" I ask, smiling as I glance down at her tiny baby belly.

"Months, I'm only twenty weeks and Beau and my dad are acting like I'm going to break if I have to lift my own glass. Honestly, they forget how badass women are," she laughs, rolling her eyes.

"It's sweet that they want to take such good care of you."

She sighs. "I know, and really I should have been expecting it, Beau's wanted to knock me up from the first time he kidnapped me and took me to his house."

"Kidnapped you?" I ask with a laugh, raising my eyebrows.

"It's a long story, but has anyone told you about how the Barnett men find their women?"

"Err, no."

Bonnie giggles and it's the most infectious sound that has me smiling at her story before she's even started telling me.

"Okay, so legend has it that Beau's dad saw their mom one day and fell in love with her, just like that, in an instant. He swears that the moment he laid eyes on her he knew she was the one and they got married like a week later."

"Oh, that's so sweet."

"Isn't it?" Bonnie nods. "But anyhow. So, they were married forever and had seven sons, and their dad used to tell them all the story about knowing their mama was his the very second he saw her all the time. It became like a legend to the guys, because they saw how much in love their parents were and even though they dated and were all manwhores, they all stayed single because none of them were prepared to settle for

anything less than the all-consuming love their parents shared.”

“So, what changed?”

“Nothing. Obviously, you know I used to work at the coffee shop, well my boss was an asshole and he hated to get up early or work late so he regularly used to give me all the opening and closing shifts. Beau saw me locking up alone one night and started coming in and waiting with me while I locked up. Then he started turning up in the morning too and then it was every shift. He’d be there the moment I got out of my car in the morning and again half an hour before we closed every night.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, what did you talk about?”

“We didn’t talk,” Bonnie laughs. “He’d order a coffee, then sit and play on his phone. I didn’t even think he knew my name even though we’ve been neighbors my entire life.”

“So how long?”

“A year,” she interrupts. “Every shift for a year. It wasn’t until a customer asked me out and I flirted a little did I mention I’d been crushing on Beau since I was a kid? Well, anyway, when he saw this guy asking me out he realized I was his and he went full-blown caveman. That’s when he threw me over his shoulder and kidnapped me. I kicked him in the balls and stole his car, but he just turned up the next morning and told me I was his and we were together like it was the most normal thing in the world.”

“He told you?”

“Oh yeah, he *told* me. When I took no notice he refused to give up, and he’s a very hard man to ignore. Once we were together, he confessed that he’d felt something that very first time he’d seen me locking up the coffee shop alone, but that I was so young and he thought he was just feeling protective. He’s cute, but he thinks that just like his daddy, he knew I was his that very first time, it just took him a while to pull his head out of his ass and realize it.”

I can't help it; I cover my mouth with my hand and laugh. "So Beau Barnett, that grizzly bear of a man believes in love at first sight?"

"Not just him, the whole family does. Huck fell for Cora when the boys stalked me on a girls' night out. He had her moved in within a month and pregnant a couple of weeks after that. Granger saw Alice on the side of the road and knew that very second, and had her living in the house the same day. And Penn, well Lulu walked right into him on the sidewalk and he almost got arrested for trying to drag her off the street to his car."

"Wow, I'm actually not sure I want to work for you guys anymore, you all sound crazy," I tell her, meaning it. My brothers are pretty old-fashioned, but men who try to kidnap their women sound more psychotic than old school.

Bonnie waves her hand dismissively. "They only lose their shit over "their" woman and if Bay, Cody or Teddy thought you were theirs you'd know by now. There's no way they could have stayed away. To the rest of the female population, they are completely harmless and just delicious man candy."

I can feel how wide my eyes are from everything she's just told me but I don't have a chance to ask her anything else because she turns off the narrow road and past a sign for Barnett Lumber.

The offices Beau mentioned are actually four of those portable office units you see on building sites stacked two on the ground and two on top, connected by metal staircases. The rest of the huge space is filled with trailers full of logs, two massive warehouses and rows and rows of machinery.

"Those are the offices, that first warehouse is whole logs, the second is cut lumber. Beau owns like half of the forest on the mountain, I still have no clue what the acreage is, but it's massive. Come on," she says, slowing to a stop.

"Is there anything I need to know to help me get this job?" I ask her.

“Juni, the job is basically yours; this interview is more to see if you want it than anything else.”

Still nervous, regardless of her words, I follow her around and up the stairs to one of the first-floor offices. She doesn't bother to knock and just walks straight in, barreling over to her husband and kissing him.

“Hey, baby girl,” he coos, wrapping his arms carefully around her.

“I brought Juni, she's nervous so be nice to her.”

“Nice to see you again.” Beau smiles, glancing over to where I'm standing awkwardly in the doorway. “Take a seat, do you prefer Juniper or Juni?”

“I'll answer to either, but most people call me Juni.”

“Where's Huck? He promised to let me cut down a tree with his machine axe thingy,” Bonnie says.

“Baby girl,” Beau growls.

“Don't worry, I'll find him myself. See you in a bit.” Winking at me, she dances from the room, smiling widely.

“I swear that woman was put on this earth to drive me crazy,” Beau says beneath his breath, then he looks up at me. “I just need to make a quick call.”

I nod, lowering myself into one of the chairs in front of his messy desk, watching as he pulls his cell from his pocket and taps the screen, lifting it to his ear.

“Did you tell Bonnie she could play with the felling head and cut down some trees?” he scowls, barking into the phone the moment it's answered. He falls silent, listening for a minute. “Well don't let her, she's pregnant,” Beau growls. There's more silence and then, “Take care of her, and tell her her ass is mine later.” Stabbing his finger against the screen, he inhales sharply, then pushes his cell back into his pocket and looks to me as I try to pretend like I didn't just hear that entire call, but I'm five feet away from him, I heard it all and I can only imagine what he'll be doing to Bonnie's ass later.

A tiny part of me tingles at the thought. I don't want Beau, he couldn't give off any more happily married vibes if he tried, but maybe I'd like a man who wants me the way Beau wants Bonnie. To distraction, obsessively, ridiculously. What was it Bonnie called him? A caveman? Yeah, maybe I'd like one of those if he cared enough to threaten my ass for not behaving.

“Sorry about that, my wife drives me fucking crazy. She's bored and trying to send me gray before this baby comes.”

I smile, but manage to stay quiet, I am not making any comment about my hopefully, soon-to-be boss's personal life.

“Okay,” he says, smiling. “So what I need is someone who can answer the phones, take orders, deal with suppliers and customers, produce invoices and generally just look after the office side of things. The temps have been muddling through and I've had to pick up all the slack, but Bonnie's finally let me get her pregnant and I don't want to miss anything, so I need someone I can trust that can jump on board and run with it and who isn't planning to skip town anytime soon.”

His unfiltered honesty is refreshing and I nod. “I can do all of that once I have a basic understanding of the packages you use and the layout of the company and customers. I pretty much did the same for a bakery back in California, they started out small, making little cookie box treats, and then someone posted a picture of their box on Instagram and they took off almost overnight. I'm going to need some guidance to start off, but once I'm up to speed I prefer not to be micromanaged,” I tell him, hoping I sound competent and not all shy and timid like I sometimes get around people I don't know well.

“Job's yours if you want it. We'll do a month's trial and then assuming we're both happy, I'll add you to the benefits package and the office can be your domain.” Beau tells me the salary, and my eyes almost bug out of my head. It's double what I was earning in my last job.

“I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but that salary is”

“Good staff deserve to be paid well, and if you can get this monkey off my back and let me smother my wife while she grows our baby, then you’ll be worth every penny.”

“Okay, shall I start tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me. Offices are open eight a.m. till five p.m. Monday through Friday. I know you don’t have a car right now, so Teddy can drive you until you get one. If you let me know what you’re looking for I can let Bay and Penn know, they own the mechanic’s shop down in town.”

“Wow,” I giggle. “Er, honestly I have no idea, I never needed a car back home. How bad does the weather get up here?”

“It can be rough, but you won’t be driving yourself if there’s rain, ice or snow, one of us will come fetch you, we’re used to these roads.”

“Oh I—” I start.

“No,” Beau says, his tone so authoritarian I instantly go silent. “Barnett Lumber is a family business, I wouldn’t let my wife or any of my sisters drive up here in the bad weather, I won’t let you either and I’m sure your brothers would agree with me.”

“Wow,” I say again, both loving and hating his chauvinistic attitude.

“Great, welcome aboard, let me show you your office and then I’ll pry Bonnie away from the machines and she can run you back home.”

“Great,” I nod, a little shell-shocked. When he stands up I do the same, following him out of the door, down the stairs and into the office immediately below his. To say it’s a mess would be the understatement of the year, paperwork is stacked in errant piles all over the desk, floor and filing cabinets. A computer sits on the least cluttered desk, but all the cables have been pulled out and it looks like someone who had no idea what they were doing has attempted to either fix it or maybe move it.

“Fuck, this is worse than the last time I was in here. I’m so sorry, we’ve had maybe fifteen temps since Marlene left us with no notice, and most of them only lasted a couple of days once they realized how much of a mess the paperwork is in, and that the guys are out working all day and not wandering around half fucking naked like they’re in a Coke commercial.”

“Don’t worry, it might take me a few days, or maybe weeks, but I’ll get all of this sorted,” I say, fighting to hide my cringe. This is going to be a nightmare, it’s bad enough having all your paperwork be a mess, but when you’re trying to fix dozens of people’s attempts to fix things, I’m going to be in for weeks of paperwork hell.

“It gets cold up here, so dress code is casual, comfortable and weather appropriate. It’s rare we have any customers up to the yard, but if I need you to come to meetings with me I’ll let you know, although most of the time they’re pretty casual too.”

Beau gives me a quick tour of the rest of the yard, but we don’t see any of the guys that work here nor either of his brothers. Once we’re done, Bonnie gives me a ride home and invites me, Buck and Nero to axe throwing this weekend, then tries to convince me to help her convince Beau that throwing an axe won’t hurt the baby.

By the time I’m waving her goodbye as she turns her car around and heads back home, my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. I’m pretty sure I made my first Montana friend.

TEDDY



Lifting my hands to my mouth, I blow warm air into my frozen fingers, trying to thaw them out a little. I'm not sure where this cold snap has come from, when the weather has been surprisingly mild until today.

I've spent the morning marking out the next cut we're starting tomorrow, the ground was particularly hard going, and I'm freezing and hurting from hiking up and down the mountain. You'd think after this many years I'd be used to it and most days it's fine, but sometimes it's backbreaking work. Right now all I want is a hot coffee, my lunch and to sit in a warm office for an hour before I head back out and join the rest of my crew on the cut we've been working all week.

Pushing the door to the office open, I'm greeted with the sight of an incredible ass encased in tight denim, bent over right in front of me. Fuck. It's been a week since Juniper started working here and until this moment I've managed to avoid her, at least in real life. But despite not actually seeing her in person, Juniper fucking Henderson has haunted my dreams every night since I first set eyes on her.

The things I've done to this girl in the depths of my mind has kept me perpetually hard and wet dreams have become a constant occurrence, something that hasn't happened to me since I was a teen. I need to fuck her. I need to exorcise her from my mind, but I need to figure a way to do it that means she won't quit, become a stage-five clinger or set her brothers on me.

“Oh, Teddy,” she gasps, snapping upright and spinning around to face me. “I’m sorry, I’m still trying to get this paperwork into some kind of order. Let me clear a path so you can get through.”

All I can manage is an animalistic grunt. Seems like all the dirty dreams I keep having about her have dissolved my usual charm. Instead, I just stand and watch as she hurriedly moves piles from the floor to the desk, without offering to help. I’m an asshole, a perverted, hard-as-a-fucking-rock asshole.

When the floor is clear enough for me to walk through to the small kitchen that’s attached to her office, she smiles at me, those pouty blow-job lips of hers spread wide into a grin that makes me clench my teeth to stop myself from slamming her against the wall, ripping her jeans down and fucking her raw.

“I swear the moment I clear one pile, I find another I hadn’t even noticed, I’m amazed anything got done at all the last few months, because there’s no way Beau could have found anything even if he’d wanted to,” she tells me, lifting a pile of papers from the floor and carrying them over to her desk.

Nodding, I try to muster some cordiality, but none comes and instead I walk past her and into the kitchen, pulling a mug from the cabinet and filling it with coffee. “Coffee?” I growl, impressed that I’ve managed to say anything that isn’t me ordering her to scream for me.

“Oh, no thank you, I actually don’t drink coffee.”

She doesn’t drink coffee? Who the hell doesn’t drink coffee? “What do you drink instead?”

“Mainly water, I occasionally have tea or hot chocolate, but caffeine gives me migraines so I try to avoid it.”

She gets migraines? The sudden urge to question her about it almost overwhelms me. I want to know what triggers them, if she’s on meds, what I need to do to take care of her. But her health is nothing to do with me. She might be young, but she’s

old enough to be able to look after herself and she has two older brothers to care for her if she needs it.

I don't understand this urge to know her. She's not mine, I had my chance and I missed out on my "one." I won't force any woman to be a consolation prize and I wouldn't lie and tell them they were my one, when I know they're not. No, if anything did happen between me and Juniper, all it would be is great sex and nothing deeper.

Adding sugar and a splash of creamer to my mug, I take my lunch and a bottle of water from the refrigerator and make my way back into her office. I'm grateful to find her sitting behind her desk organizing a pile of papers into files, cross checking them against something on her computer, her eyes moving between the paper and screen.

"Here," I say, placing the bottle of water on the edge of her desk.

"Oh, thanks," she says, lifting her huge doe eyes up to look at me.

Because we work so far away from the yard, I eat lunch with my crew out on the mountain, I actually don't remember the last time I even stepped foot in this office. I should leave, but I don't and instead I move to the small couch in the corner and sit, opening my lunch bag and pulling out my sandwich. It was Bay's turn to do lunches today and he always makes his favorite, ham and Swiss on whole wheat with this amazing mustard mayo and pickles. I'd never admit it to him, but it's the greatest fucking sandwich and it never tastes as good if I try to make one for myself.

"You eaten?" I grunt to Juniper.

"What?" she startles, glancing up from her screen.

"I asked you if you'd eaten?" I say slowly, unable to stop myself from letting a little of my dominant tone slip through into the words.

She reacts like a fucking dream, sitting up straighter, pulling her shoulders back and pushing out her lush breasts.

Her gaze locks with mine and she shakes her head. “No, not yet, I just wanted to finish this stack first.”

“The paperwork can wait. It’s lunchtime, go get your food.”

I expect her to push back, to argue, but instead she jumps up from her seat, dashes into the kitchen and then comes back out carrying a pink flowery lunchbox. She sets it down on the desk in front of her, then looks up to me and blushes the sexiest shade of pink. “I know it’s childish, but my brothers got it for me and I think it’s cute.”

I shrug. “It’s prettier than a brown bag.”

Trying not to watch her, I take a bite of my sandwich and then moan in appreciation.

“Good?” she giggles.

“So fucking good. I swear I don’t know what Bay does to make them taste so amazing.”

“What is it?” she asks, pulling her own sandwich from her box.

“Ham and Swiss on whole wheat with mustard mayo and pickles.”

Her nose wrinkles and she visibly shudders. “Pickles are the devil’s food.”

“Wash your mouth out. Pickles are nectar of the gods. What you got?”

“PB and J, the ultimate sandwich.”

“Maybe if you want cavities.”

Rolling her eyes, she lifts her sandwich to her mouth and takes a big bite, the jelly leaving a glossy smear on her lips. “Yum,” she says as she chews.

Neither of us speaks as we eat and it’s surprisingly comfortable, apart from the fact that my dick is so hard it’s trying to break through the fabric of my pants and escape.

She pulls out a baggy full of carrot sticks and I can't help but smile. I'd almost lay money on the fact that she has a pudding cup in that pink lunchbox too. It's the lunch of a second grader and although I don't know why, I find it absolutely adorable.

We eat in comfortable silence, not speaking while she hums, happily munching on her carrot sticks and then a yogurt. "No pudding cup?"

She shakes her head and sighs, glancing down at her half-finished yogurt. "I like them too much, so I don't buy them anymore."

"A little something you like won't hurt you," I tell her, contemplating how long it would take me to go to the grocery store and get her a fucking pudding cup.

"Yes, but six some things I like mean my ass will get even bigger. I'd rather leave the pudding in the store and not have to go to the gym."

On the outside I'm frowning, on the inside I'm waxing lyrical about how fucking perfect her ass is and how much I want to bite it and spank it and see it covered in my cum.

"I've seen that look, don't try to convert me to exercise, it's against my religion. I'm built for comfort, not speed," she giggles, wagging her finger at me.

Fuck me, does she not hear the things coming out of her mouth? Built for comfort. Holy crap, my mind creates an image of her on her back beneath me, her legs spread wide, me between them, my hard, fat cock sliding in and out of her while she grips the headboard and begs me to let her come.

When I blink away my illicit thoughts, she's peeling a banana and sliding it between her lips. Fuck me, is everything in that fucking pink box intended to drive me to absolute distraction? I have never wanted a woman with the intensity I want Juniper and I can't touch her. Firstly, because she works for the company I part own and with all the things I want to do it her I'm a walking sexual harassment claim, and secondly, because it'll never be more than a one-time mind-blowing

fuck, and that won't work with a girl who lives next door and who is fast becoming my sister's friend.

Bonnie is already inviting her and her brothers out with us, she wants them to become part of our circle and if that happens, she'll be completely off-limits to me. As much as I crave her, it's best I keep my wants and depraved needs to myself and once my body gets the message that it's not going to happen, she'll just be another beautiful woman that I'm not going to fuck.

JUNIPER



T eddy Barnett is pretty. Maybe pretty is the wrong word, but when I look at him, I can't help but think how pretty he is. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing feminine about him, he's not even androgenous, he's actually incredibly masculine, but he's just so attractive he's... well, he's pretty.

I've been working at Barnett Lumber for two weeks now and this is only the second time I've seen him. My brothers and I went out with the Barnetts to axe throwing this weekend, but Teddy apparently had other plans, and it's rare I see any of the guys who work here since they leave the yard before I get to work each morning.

The day we ate our lunch together I thought I'd felt a bit of a spark, but maybe not. I'm not great at reading guy's signals, and it seems that what I thought was him being flirty, was actually just polite lunch chitchat.

I've almost finished sorting the last of the paperwork in my office and for the most part, the floor is now clear and the filing cabinets are full. As great as Beau has been, I'm actually amazed he let it get this bad before he employed someone permanently. I've found unpaid invoices and unfulfilled orders dating back months that have just never been dealt with.

Being this far up the side of a mountain is odd. My last job was in an office in the business district, so the sounds of traffic noise and bustling life constantly surrounded me. Here it's unnervingly quiet and the only sounds are the birds, the wind and the occasional whirring of saws when the doors to the sawmill warehouse are opened.

To be honest, I'm a little lonely. There's no other office staff and I'm literally the only woman on site. The majority of the guys who work here are out on the mountain, they eat at the cut they're working at and Beau is either holed up in his office with Bonnie, or out on the mountain with the crews.

There're two guys who work in the sawmill, but apart from polite greetings they have their own kitchen in the warehouse and neither of them have ever set foot inside my office. I can understand why the temps never lasted too long up here, not that I'm contemplating quitting, but even I'm starting to get a bit sick of my own company.

The door to my office opens and a harried-looking Beau steps inside. "Hey Juni, I'm really sorry to ask, but Teddy's crew has a machine down and needs a replacement part run to them. I'd take it, but I have a meeting I have to be at in ten minutes that I'm already running late for, and neither Jed nor Lance have the time to do it for me. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency."

"Of course, where am I going and what am I driving?" I ask, eagerly jumping up from behind my desk.

"Here," he says, passing me a handheld GPS navigation device. "I've programmed in the location, someone will meet you once you get to the cut, so just follow the GPS, stay on the path and it'll take you about twenty minutes to get there in the jeep."

Nodding, I take the GPS and the keys he's offering me and slide my arms into my coat.

"I've already strapped the part down in the back of the jeep, it weighs a fucking ton so don't try and get it out, let the guys do it," Beau says, his brow furrowed as he follows me out to the jeep. "Here," he says, holding out a chunky-looking cell phone. "Take one of the sat phones, the cell signal is nonexistent that far up the mountain. Take your own cell too though for numbers, most of the ones you'll need are programmed into the sat phone, but just in case."

Sliding into the driver's seat, I fumble with the harness belt that's in the place of a standard seat belt, then check my cell is

in my pocket.

“Be careful, stay on the track, don’t drive too fast, the road is rutted and if your tires jump out of the ruts you could get stuck. If you have any issues, just stop and call me and I’ll come find you. Don’t walk away from the jeep, and do not try to find the cut once you get to the GPS point, stay where you are and someone will come to you.” Beau’s expression is conflicted, it’s obvious that he doesn’t like the idea of me driving out onto the mountain alone.

“Seriously, Beau, I might be a city girl, but I’m not stupid, I’ll drive carefully and I promise not to take up hiking the moment I’m in the wilderness. I’ll be fine, go to your meeting.”

He nods, then steps back, closing my door. I start the engine and roll the window down a little. “Seriously, I’ve got this,” I smile.

“Text me when you get back to the office. Do not forget.”

“Yes, boss,” I salute him, putting the jeep into drive and carefully pulling away from the yard and onto the track that leads through the woods.

The drive is kind of awesome. The forest is gorgeous, the views unbelievable and the peace surprisingly cathartic. The radio in the jeep doesn’t work, so I start a playlist on my cell and sing along to the music as I carefully traverse the narrow cutout track that meanders through the trees.

After about fifteen minutes, I start to see where the guys have obviously been felling trees in the last few months, but the forest isn’t ravaged, instead selective trees have been taken, thinning the woods but not desecrating them.

As I get closer and closer to the flashing dot on the GPS, the road becomes rougher and I slow down as the jeep jumps and rocks over bumps and ditches along the path. When I eventually get to the spot I’m supposed to be meeting one of the guys to hand over the part, it’s deserted. Slowing the jeep to a stop, I put it in park, kill the engine and then glance around, trying to spot someone moving through the woods

toward me, but there's no one. I'm alone on the side of a mountain.

Unfastening the harness, I open the jeep's door and slide out, watching where I'm putting my feet on the muddy, uneven makeshift road. Grabbing my own cell and the sat phone, I circle the jeep, peering into the trees, but I'm still alone.

I could wander into the woods, but like I told Beau, I'm really not stupid, so instead I move to the front of the jeep and then hop up onto the hood and prepare to wait. Opening up the screen on my cell, I take a selfie, posing with the epic view in the background and then snap a few more pictures of the beautiful mountain vista.

After ten minutes there's still no sign of anyone coming to meet me and I sigh, debating if I should wait or go back to the yard. Beau's in a meeting and I don't want to disturb him, but I'm not even sure which crew this part is for. I suppose I could call Bonnie on the sat phone and ask her for Huck and Teddy's cell numbers, but it's unlikely they've got a cell phone signal out here and Beau didn't mention if they have a sat phone or what the number is.

Sighing, I lie back against the hood, my feet dangling off the front, and prepare to give it another fifteen minutes before I call Beau and ask what he wants me to do. The air is brisk, but the sun is high in the sky and I close my eyes and enjoy the warmth.

“What the hell are you doing?” someone demands.

Snapping my eyes open, I bolt upright and turn toward the angry voice.

Teddy is storming toward me, his lips clenched into a scowl, his hands fisted tightly at his sides.

“Hey Teddy.”

“Answer the fucking question,” he snarls. “What the hell are you doing?”

Confused, I stare at him, then down at myself, then back at him. “I'm waiting for someone to come collect this part Beau

said you needed.”

“Where’s Beau?” he demands angrily.

“He had to go to a meeting and the sawmill guys were too busy, so he asked me to bring it.”

Teddy growls, actually growls, turning away from me, tipping his head back and ranting beneath his breath, his words just slightly too quiet for me to hear. “Were you just going to sit here forever?”

Clearing my throat, I slide off the hood and circle the jeep until I’m standing in front of him. “Actually, I was going to give it another five minutes before I called Beau and told him no one had come to meet me.”

“And how were you planning on doing that, we’re in the middle of the woods on the side of a fucking mountain. There’s not a lot of cell phone towers around here.”

“On the sat phone,” I snip, arching my brow in challenge.

“I can’t believe he sent you out here. Have you ever even driven in these kinds of conditions before?” Teddy rants, throwing open the back of the jeep and unstrapping the machine part with angry movements.

Teddy is hot in normal circumstances, but angry, he’s practically thermonuclear. His perfect face is twisted into a scowl that I kind of want to flick and kiss in equal measure. The brat inside of me wants to wind him up a little more, really annoy him to see what he does. But the good girl part of me wants to soothe him, to make him happy again.

I don’t allow either side to win and instead, I lean my butt against the side of the jeep and watch as he manhandles the metal thing out of the trunk and onto the ground at the side of the path.

Pulling a walkie-talkie I hadn’t noticed from his back pocket, he grips it in his hand and lifts it to his lips. “Track rod is here, send Scott to come and pick it up, I need to head back to the yard, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Without saying a word or even looking at me, Teddy slams the back of the jeep closed and climbs into the driver's seat, glaring at me menacingly when I don't move. "Get in," he growls throatily.

"What do you need from the yard? I can go and fetch it and bring it back if you want? I know you guys are behind with the machine breaking."

"Get in the fucking jeep, Juniper."

My feet obey his order before my mind even realizes I'm moving, and I glare at him as I climb into the passenger seat.

"Belt," he snaps.

With his eyes boring holes into the side of my chest, I pull the harness around me and attempt to fasten the clasp, my fingers fumbling as I try to push the metal links together.

"Here," he says, his voice softening as he pushes my hands away and pulls the belt over me, easily fastening the clip into place. Then he shocks the hell out of me when he pulls it tight across my chest, pushing me back against the seat.

The air in the jeep seems to thicken as I stare at Teddy confusedly. Why is he in the jeep? Why is he driving? And why is he fixing my harness in place like I'm a child who needs to be looked after?

Without another word, he effortlessly turns the jeep around on the narrow track and starts back toward the yard. All the joy and peace I felt on the journey out is sucked away in the depth of uncomfortable silence that falls between us.

"Why are you coming back to the yard?" I ask, finally plucking up the courage to ask.

"These roads aren't safe, I'm going to kick Beau's ass for sending you out here in the first place, there was no way I was going to let you risk yourself driving back. Anything could happen."

"So, you're going to drive a forty-minute round trip because you don't think I'm capable of driving a jeep along a path?" I ask slowly.

“Yes.”

That’s it, just one word, not an ounce of question or uncertainty, just “yes.”

“Wow,” I gasp. “That’s genuinely the most assholeish, chauvinistic thing I’ve ever heard anyone say outside of a chick flick.”

He shrugs. Shrugs.

“Wow,” I say again, suddenly wondering why he isn’t starting to look less attractive to me. Blatant sexism is usually the ultimate turnoff, so pretty soon Teddy will start to resemble a less beautiful Quasimodo, but right now he still looks hot and angry, and did I mention hot?

“Wanting to make sure you get back safe is not me being an asshole,” he finally says after a long, charged minute.

“You suggesting I’m not capable of driving a car along a fucking track is definitely assholeish.”

“I don’t know if you’re capable or not. All I see is a tiny girl, barely tall enough to see over the fucking steering wheel, driving a jeep that she’s not used to, along a road she’s not familiar with, on her own. What would you do if you hit a rut and got stuck? What about if the engine stalled and you couldn’t get it started again? How about if the grizzly that’s been moving in the area recently decided to use the jeep as a scratching post?” His ire rises again with each word of his angry tirade, until the tips of his ears are pink and his jaw is clenched so tightly you could cut glass with it.

“Look, I’m not an idiot, I have a GPS, a sat phone and my own cell phone, I was also driving at a snail’s pace because of the road conditions. I wasn’t being reckless or not considering my own safety. You’re blowing all of this out of proportion because I’m a girl.”

“Not just a girl,” Teddy mutters.

“What?”

Clearing his throat, he takes a glance at me and I swear there’s more than just fury in his gaze, there’s heat too. “I said,

you're not just a girl."

"I know, I'm your employee too, but you wouldn't react to any of the guys this way if they'd driven down here in my place."

For an interminable amount of time neither of us speaks, but I can still feel the palpable energy coming off Teddy in waves. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Shocked, I actually jolt backward in my seat. "What?"

"A boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, significant other. Do you have one?"

I glance at his hands on the steering wheel, his knuckles are white, his grip hard enough that I'm actually expecting the plastic to start to creak and bend beneath his hold.

"Juniper, I asked you a question."

"No. No, I'm single, but I don't really know what that has to do with my ability to drive a car down a path."

The jeep slams to a stop and Teddy turns to face me, his expression murderous. "I want to fuck you."

"Excuse me?" I exclaim, baffled by this bizarre turn in the conversation.

"I want to fuck you. You are one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen and you're driving me fucking crazy. I don't do relationships, I'm sure someone will have filled you in on the legacy that surrounds my family. I'm not looking for love, or a girlfriend. I don't want to date you; I just want to take you to bed and fuck you until you can't stay awake for a moment longer and you're begging me to stop making you come."

My mouth falls open, I probably look like a gaping fish, but what the actual hell? Teddy is gorgeous and he's the only guy I've met in years that has ignited my blood and made my panties wet, but the misogynistic bullshit he just spouted as a way of trying to make asking me for a one-night stand sound slightly less cheap is... well, it's just the biggest pile of shit I've ever heard. "No."

His surprise is so expressive, I honestly wish I had a camera. Has no one ever turned this man down before? Maybe they haven't, he is one of the beautiful people. Perhaps his whole life women have fallen onto his dick at the slightest provocation. "What?"

"I said no. No, thank you," I say tightly.

"I don't understand."

A smile spreads across my lips. "Well, you offered to have sex with me and I declined."

"Why?"

"I wasn't aware I had to explain my reasoning. No means no." I scowl.

"That's not. I..." He stops and just looks at me, like I'm an enigma he's trying to decode. "I've seen the way you look at me, Juniper."

"You're an attractive man," I shrug.

"I come from a family of attractive men, but you don't look at my brothers the same way."

"You're right, I don't, but I'm twenty, so the rest of your family are mostly old enough to be my dad."

"So it's the age gap? Eleven years is nothing."

"The age gap wouldn't be a problem if I was looking for a one-night stand, but I'm not."

Teddy rolls his eyes and sighs. "You're one of those women."

I laugh and the sound is so bitter I almost cringe. "If by *those women*, you mean someone who's not interested in sleeping with a stranger they share absolutely no connection or intimacy with, then yes, I'm one of those women."

Pursing his lips, he looks away from me, sighs again, then puts the jeep into gear and drives forward. Neither of us speaks for the rest of the journey. When we reach the yard, Teddy slows to a stop, waits for me to climb out, then turns

around and drives away in the direction we just came without even a backward glance.

Shell-shocked, I head for my office, open the door and step into the warm, comfortable space. Incredulity wars with annoyance as I replay the conversation Teddy and I just had over in my head. I might be inexperienced, but I have never, ever been propositioned in such a cold and dismissive way.

“I want to fuck you.”

I mean seriously, did he think I was just going to shimmy out of my jeans in the front of the jeep and spread my legs for him? We know nothing beyond surface details about each other. I know that in-depth personal knowledge is not a prerequisite for sex, but announcing he only wants to fuck me is taking casual and meaningless to a whole new level.

Perhaps if we'd met at a bar on a night out after a few drinks I might have been tempted. I still wouldn't have taken him up on his offer, but I'd probably be a lot less offended that he has zero interest in anything beyond a single night of sex with me.

He's a grown-ass man. Surely he has more game than just saying I want to fuck you, or maybe he's just used to women fawning over his cock and dropping their panties at the hint of interest from him.

“I've seen the way you look at me.”

Urgh, what an asshole. So I find him attractive, I find Jason Momoa attractive too, but you don't see me strolling up to Aquaman and announcing I want to ride his dick like a theme park ride.

God, the gall of the man. I mean, he's my boss—technically. I have no idea if they have rules about intracompany propositioning, but I'm pretty sure the HR department at my last job would have had a coronary if a staff member had announced they wanted to fuck another staff member in the middle of a workday.

Flopping down into my desk chair I sit and seethe, growing more and more annoyed with each minute that passes.

By the time Beau returns I'm practically spitting feathers.

"Hey, everything go okay with dropping the shaft off? Where's the jeep?" he asks.

"Your brother decided I wasn't capable of driving it back and insisted he drive, so he took it back down to the cut with him."

Beau chuckles. "I should have guessed as much. I spoke to Bay on my way back and he says he's got a couple of cars he thinks might be a good fit for you. Bonnie says she can drive you down to have a look at them if you want."

"My brothers have taken a page out of your brother's book and decided I need them to check over any car I buy, so if you could let Bay know I'll come look at them tomorrow if he's around."

"I'll have him and Penn bring them round to your place, that way Buck and Nero can check them over," Beau says with a smile.

"Thanks," I say, forcing myself to smile back, and tamping down all of my anger to focus on the right brother, not just the first Barnett to come in target range. Beau leaves and I spend the rest of the day trying to pretend that Teddy Barnett isn't a massive asshole. By the time I slide into the passenger seat of Beau's truck, I almost believe it.

TEDDY



She said no.

Just no, she didn't even look tempted.

Not to sound like a conceited asshole, but this has literally never happened before. Ever.

I could maybe understand it if she's thought it through, pained over the decision and then decided she couldn't have a casual fuck with me without catching feelings. But she just said no.

Every muscle in my body is tense. They have been since I stepped out of the trees and spotted her basking on the hood of the jeep, her curvy, luscious body spread out ready to be ravished.

My first thought when I saw her was how quickly I could strip her naked and lick her pussy until she was gushing with pleasure with the mountain as our backdrop. My second thought was fear and pure fury that she was there alone. We barely cut out a path through the trees wide enough to get the machinery through, there's no way anyone, especially Juniper should be driving along the road that's little more than a dirt path alone, in an unfamiliar vehicle. But there she was, all alone, vulnerable.

I was storming toward her before I could even process what I was doing. But it wasn't her, I'd feel the same if it was anyone, or at least any of my sisters, maybe anyone I didn't want to see hurt or endangered. My anger was just fear that

someone unaware of the dangers was put in a compromising position.

Refusing to look back, I turn the jeep around and make my way down the road to the cut. “Fucking woman,” I hiss between clenched teeth.

I’m confused why she said no. She wants me, I’m not blind and I know what a woman looks like when she’s hot for me, and Juniper is hot for me. It could be that she’s the romantic type, but if someone’s explained my family’s legacy to her, she’d know she’s not my one and that I can’t and won’t offer her anything more than a really life-altering night. Life altering for her at least.

She might be one of the most sexually provocative women I’ve ever encountered, she might make me want to rip off her clothes and fuck her until all she knows is my name and the way it feels to come from my fingers, my tongue and my cock, but she’s not mine.

A shudder ricochets through my body and I exhale, glancing back at her office and feeling myself relax a little, knowing she’s safe and secure in there, that she isn’t roaming around the mountain willy-nilly with no clue of the dangers.

My dick is hard. My body, like my brain, assumed she’d easily accept my offer and even though she said no, all the things I want to do to her are still playing on a loop through my mind. There’s no way I can concentrate on work when all my thoughts are on her. Slowing the jeep to a stop, I put it in park, unzip my pants and pull out my rock-hard cock.

I’m alone on an empty road, but I still glance over my shoulder and check my surroundings before I close my eyes and start to stroke. Visions of Juniper bent over, her hands tied together at the base of her spine, her legs spread wide, a hint of wet pussy lips just visible fill my mind and I fist my dick tighter and work myself fast and hard.

My balls feel heavy and full. I cup them with my free hand as she turns her head and looks at me, her bee-stung lips curved into an alluring smirk as her eyes beg me to slide into

her sopping cunt and claim her, own her pleasure and deny her an orgasm until she's begging, writhing and desperate.

Fireworks sizzle at my toes, slowly creeping upward as her lips part in my vision and she speaks. A single word slipping from her as my orgasm crowns.

“No.”

The release that was dangling on the edge disintegrates and then floats away on the wind leaving my balls throbbing and as blue as the endless sky above me.

“Fuck,” I hiss, as I open my eyes and look down to my angry, weeping cock still clenched tightly in my fist. “Fuck.”

Gripping my length, I try to claw back the sensations her denial lost me, but it's no good, my dick has lost interest. What the fuck? Since when does my dick lose interest? Never that's when, I didn't even know it was possible for me to just stop on the cusp of an orgasm. Sure, I've played with orgasm denial with some of the women I've spent the night with, if this is the way it felt I'm amazed they didn't punch me in the junk instead of begging to see me again.

Frustration pulses through my veins, taunting me with her rejection, my aching balls and a low hissing need for her keeping the feelings looping through me.

She said no.

I'm not sure I can accept that.

The drive back down to the cut is a blur, as is carrying the shaft back to the machine and helping Roy, our mechanic, fit it. I barely remember the rest of the day and by the time we're parking the machines and kit back in the yard, my head is banging and I'm consumed with guilt for the risks I could have taken this afternoon while I was this distracted.

Beau is gone, he's been driving Juniper to work and back and I know he wants to be home more to spend as much time with Bonnie as he can. I don't begrudge him the chance to enjoy his wife before they have their baby, but apparently, I really hate the fact that he gets to spend time with my infuriating little treasure.

Only she's not mine, I remind myself. She's just a woman I want to fuck who doesn't want to fuck me.

"What the hell is up with you?" Huck asks, slinging his arm around my neck and pulling me into his side.

"I'm fine," I growl.

"Bullshit, you look ready to kill someone. Who pissed you off?"

"No one, just one of those days."

Huck laughs. "I think you need to get laid, bro."

"Maybe," I concede, not mentioning that's what has me so angry.

"I'm sure you could find someone in town more than willing to let you tie them to your bed, you'd be surprised how freaky women get, even when they look all sweet and innocent."

My mind immediately goes to Juniper, would she be into the things I am? Would she enjoy letting me take control and fucking her just the way I want to? Would she enjoy me pinning her arms to the mattress, or spanking her ass while she begs me to make her come?

"Teddy." Huck's voice snaps me out of my daydream and back to the present.

"What?" I ask.

"Dude, who the fuck were you just thinking about? That's the look, bro, that's the *she's mine* look."

I shake my head. "No, it's not."

"Who is she? Do I know her?"

"It's not like that, okay? I know who my one is, I missed my chance, she's married with kids."

Huck's mouth falls open and he stares at me.

"It's fine, it's been years, I'm okay with it."

"Who? When?"

“Just a girl I went to high school with. I didn’t think all the stuff Dad said was true, she was just here staying with her family for a few months, then she left. It wasn’t until you all started dropping like flies that I realized who she was.”

“You tracked her down?”

I nod. “On social media. She’s happy, they look like a nice family.”

Huck’s expression goes forlorn. “Bro.”

“Look, don’t feel bad for me, I wasn’t looking to tie myself to one pussy for the rest of my life anyway. I’ll enjoy myself and then play with all my nieces and nephews without all the diapers and sleepless nights.” Forcing a smile to my lips, I slap a hand to Huck’s shoulder and then walk away, letting my brittle facade fall the moment my brother can’t see.

The next few days are hell. I see Juniper everywhere. She’s at our house buying a car from Bay, she’s hanging out with Bonnie on the ranch, she’s driving her small SUV too fast down the road to the yard.

By the time her and her brothers have been in town a month, she’s all I can think about and it’s driving me crazy. I tried to arrange to meet up with a friend for a session to blow off some steam, but the moment the woman, Holly, started to message me, all desire to touch, lick, or fuck anyone but Juniper evaporated.

My dick is broken. I’ve tried watching porn, nothing. I’ve tried imagining all the hot fucking sex I’ve had, nothing. The only thing that gets me hot is her and then right before I blow my load, she says that one word to me that annihilates my lust and replaces it with nothing but frustration.

No.

I hear it on repeat in my sleep when dreams of her sitting beside me in the jeep and denying me over and over again torment my nights. I don’t know what to do.

“Okay, out with it,” Beau says as he closes his office door behind him and shoves me toward one of the chairs in front of his desk. In theory, he, Huck, and I are equal partners in

Barnett Lumber, Beau insisted it be that way once we both finished school and came to work for the company. But Beau is the face of the business, he's the one that attends meetings and schmoozes with customers. Huck and I run our own crews out in the woods.

“What are you talking about?”

“I might be stuck in this fucking cage of an office right now, but I still know everything that happens on our mountain. I know how distracted and angry you've been for the last few weeks, and I want to know what bug crawled up your ass and what I need to do to get you to snap out of it.”

“I'm fine,” I insist.

“Teddy, I'm your brother, I know you, so don't bullshit me. Just tell me what the fuck is going on and let me help.”

Twisting my neck from side to side, I try to release some of the tension in my joints. “I...” I start.

“Spit it out,” Beau snaps, sounding so much like my dad I feel five years old again.

“I want to fuck Juniper Henderson and she's not fucking interested,” I blurt, like a kid confessing to stealing all the cookies from the jar.

Beau's mouth falls open and he pauses, then lowers himself into his chair and stares at me. “Is she yours?” he asks me slowly.

I shake my head. “No.”

Blinking, he shakes his head. “Explain.”

So I do, I tell him about the girl in high school, about not realizing she was mine until the others started finding their women and how it's too late, that I missed my chance.

“She wasn't your one.”

“Excuse me?” I question.

“She wasn't your one. Trust me, if she was you wouldn't have let her walk away.”

“I was a kid.”

“Doesn’t matter. Think about her now, tell me how you feel.”

Shaking my head, I sigh. “What’s the point?”

“Just do it.”

Pulling up an image of her in my head, I try to think about how I feel, but all I have is sadness. I’m not that sad about not having her, more at not having my happy ever after like my brothers have, not feeling that all-consuming love they’ve described to me.

“So?” Beau prompts.

“I guess I feel sad.”

“That’s it? Sad?”

“Maybe disappointed,” I shrug.

“Do you know what the thought of Bonnie being touched by someone else makes me feel?”

I shake my head.

“Murderous. I want to hunt down the man who had the audacity to touch what belongs to me, I want to rip his dick from his body and choke him with it, then eviscerate him from the earth so he doesn’t exist anymore.”

“But you have Bonnie, it’s different, I never even spoke to that girl.”

“That’s exactly my point. Look at all the shit we’ve done to claim the girls. Granger moved Alice in the day he met her then tricked her into marrying him. Huck got Cora pregnant to tie her to him. Penn stalked Lulu and claimed Poppy as his and I panted after Bonnie until she was old enough to be mine. The way we feel about our women doesn’t make sense, it isn’t logical, in fact it’s completely irrational. So, if when you look at a picture of this girl with her husband and kids and all you feel is sad and disappointed, then she wasn’t yours.”

His words settle over me and I stare at him, not seeing him, just taking in everything he says. Is it true? Have I

assumed that Prudence was my one just because I reacted to her, but in reality, I was just a kid lusting over a girl he had the hots for?

Hope surges fast and hot inside of me. For months I've been trying to convince myself that having missed my chance was a blessing in disguise, but if I haven't, if there's still hope, then everything is different. I could still find my woman, still be happy and in love and as insanely consumed as my brothers are.

"And there it is," Beau smirks. "Now tell me about all this shit with Juni."

"I told her I wanted to fuck her."

Beau cringes and rubs at his temples with his fingertips. "Like you asked her out on a date? Or..."

"Er no, I just told her I wanted to fuck her and she said no."

"Baby brother, I thought you had game?"

"I don't normally need game," I shrug sheepishly. "You know how it is. Plus, normally I..." I trail off, suddenly unwilling to discuss the arrangements I make to have sex.

"Do you go to a sex club?" Beau asks, shocking me.

I shake my head. "No, I'm not some *Fifty Shades* wannabe. I'm not a dom per se. I just like to be in control, and it's easier to meet like-minded women through friends who enjoy the same things I do," I tell him vaguely.

"So, you like to be in control," Beau says, waving it away like it's nothing unusual. "Bonnie and I enjoy—"

"I don't want to know," I cry.

His laugh is so loud it shatters the intensity of the weirdly intimate moment. "Okay, but what I mean is that wanting to be in charge is pretty standard, it's not like you want to wrap your bed partner in latex, or have them take a dump on you or whatever. Do you?"

A scoffing laugh bursts from me. “No, definitely not, my kink is just your average need to be in complete control and call the shots, with maybe a little spanking and perhaps a rope or two,” I confess.

“So Juni?” Beau prompts, steering us away from my kinks and onto the issue at hand.

“She’s not interested.”

“Why is that bothering you so much? Surely she isn’t the first woman to not want to fuck you. You might be a Barnett, but we’re not irresistible.”

“I mean, it’s been a while, but yeah I’ve been rejected before.”

“So what’s different about Juni?”

It feels like he’s leading me somewhere, but I’m not sure where. “I don’t know. She was just so dismissive. She comes across all sweet and shy, but it’s a front, beneath the adorably beautiful exterior is a vixen.”

“She is a beautiful girl, Cody mentioned how pretty he thought she was, I think he was thinking about asking her out for dinner.”

“What?” I roar, jumping out of my seat.

“She turned you down, bro, let Cody have his chance, he’s practically a monk, it’s about time he showed some interest in dating,” Beau says with a shrug.

“No. Hell fucking no.” Pulling my cell from my pocket, I dial Cody’s number, immediately redialing when it goes to his voice mail.

“Hello,” he answers.

“Juniper Henderson is off-limits,” I snarl.

“What?” he asks, his tone laced with confusion.

“You can’t ask her out, in fact I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

“Ted, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“She’s mine, Cody, mine, you can’t have her so just fucking forget it.”

“Juniper? As in the smoke jumpers’ little sister?”

“Yes. She’s mine. Fucking mine.”

“Okay. I’m not sure why you’re warning me off her, but congrats, bro, I’m happy for you,” Cody says, sounding genuine.

“You weren’t planning on asking her out?” I question slowly.

“What? No. She’s a sweet little thing, but not my type.”

Slowly, I turn to look at Beau, whose feet are propped up on his desk, a smug grin etched across his face.

“Speak to you later, bro, got to castrate our eldest brother.”

“Ah,” Cody says knowingly. “Beau told you I was interested in Juni. Gotcha. Try not to kill him.” He ends the call and I slide my cell back into my pocket before I open my mouth to speak to my meddling brother.

“Sometimes we need a push to see what’s right in front of us. I needed one to realize Bonnie was mine. If Juni wasn’t yours, you wouldn’t have cared if Cody asked her out, none of us have ever been territorial.”

I’m angry, but not at the same time. This conversation with my big brother has been illuminating in a life-shattering way. Sliding back into my chair, I bury my head in my hands and yank at my hair. “Fuck.”

“What’s the matter?” Beau asks. “You found your woman, this is awesome.”

“Maybe, except I told Juniper that I had no interest in her for anything other than a quick, dirty fuck,” I say, cringing as I remember how I propositioned her. “Shit, I literally turned and said, ‘I want to fuck you.’”

Beau chuckles, he actually chuckles. “Bro.”

“Don’t, just don’t,” I snap, lifting my head and glaring at his amusement.

“I’d suggest you go for the Penn method of just stalking her until she relents, but she’s living with Buck and Nero and I can’t see them being happy about you sniffing around their sister, especially not if she’s told them you offered to let her ride your dick.”

“Fuck.”

“Let’s go home, there’s nothing you can do about it tonight, best to start fresh tomorrow, maybe try being nice to the girl. If all else fails you could do a Huck and kidnap her,” he suggests, laughing.

He’s still laughing as we lock up the offices and climb into his truck.

JUNIPER



Men are weird. It's like there's this macho bullshit inside of them that insists that all those designated blue jobs have to be performed while grunting and growling, or in packs like wolves. When Penn and Bay arrived outside our house with two small SUV's they thought would be good for me, Buck and Nero spent nearly an hour debating the merits of each car in the snow, rain, gas mileage and servicing costs. Then they discussed the safety options, the trim, age and then after all that, the four of them went on to discuss why it wouldn't be safe for me to even use the car in bad weather.

In the end I let them hem and haw, then I picked the bright-red Jeep Compass with soft leather seats and the heaters that warm your butt in the winter. It was a little more than I wanted to spend, but Buck and Nero insisted on gifting me the extra money under the guise that they'd be more focused at work if they knew my car was safe and reliable.

Until I slid behind the wheel and drove myself to work for the first time, I hadn't realized how restricted I'd been feeling having to rely on rides from my brothers and the Barnetts. Back in Cali, I'd been incredibly independent. My mom is a great person, but the moment I was old enough to take care of myself, she let me. It's not that she doesn't care about me, she does, it's just that she lived for me for sixteen years and from then on, according to her, she started living for herself. I get it, and her being a bit selfish means that I'm capable and I appreciate that, even if my brothers prefer to think of her as neglectful.

I've been working at Barnett Lumber for over a month now and I've finally got the offices and paperwork organized and running as it should be. Unfortunately, what I've discovered now, is that this job really isn't enough work for me to be here full time and now the chaos is sorted, I'm sitting trying to find something to do for at least half the day.

It's been weeks since Teddy offered to have sex with me. We haven't spoken to each other since but I feel his eyes on me whenever we're in the same place. My first few weeks here I only saw him twice, now he's constantly in the yard, or in Beau's office, or just near enough for me to feel like a bug under the microscope.

I haven't told anyone about his offer. The only friends I have in Rockhead Point are his sisters-in-law, and telling them their brother offered to fuck me until I was begging him to stop probably isn't the most obvious over cocktail conversation.

Since that day my dreams have been hampered with visions of exactly what he offered to do to me. I imagine him reenacting the Kama Sutra with me for hours on end and wake up sweaty and panting, my underwear soaking. I've lost count of how many times I've made myself come just to take the edge off, but no matter how explicit my dreams are they still come back night after night.

A part of me wants to take him up on his offer just to get him out of my system, but another part is disgusted with the way he so blatantly told me I'd never be more than a warm wet hole to him.

I get that in this day and age most people my age are having sex for purely hedonistic purposes, they aren't looking for love or forever. They're searching for Mr. or Mrs. Right Now, but that's not me.

Tonight, I'm meeting the Barnett ladies for appetizers and appletinis. I'm looking forward to spending some time with them, but a part of me feels like I should be trying to branch out and meet new people who are not so involved with the Barnetts. Right now they're my bosses, my landlords and my

only friends and although they're all lovely ladies, it's feeling pretty insular and like I'm putting all my eggs in one basket.

Opening Beau's office door, I peer around the edge and smile. "I'm done for the day."

"Okay. You're out with the girls tonight, right?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"I'll swing by and pick you up."

"No, that's okay, I'm going to drive, I'm not much of a drinker."

"You sure? I can pick you up and drive you home later."

"Thanks for the offer, but it's fine, I'll pick up the girls too."

Beau's lips flatten and I wonder why he doesn't want me to drive, maybe it's because Bonnie, Alice and Lulu are all pregnant and he's worried about them. "Juni, I'm feeling a little overprotective about Bonnie right now."

I smile. "Okay."

"I'm sure you're a great driver..." he trails off, and I manage not to be offended. Bonnie did say he was a caveman.

"Sure, I get it. Bonnie mentioned..." I stop myself from talking and possibly insulting my boss. "I'll meet them in town, I just got my car and the only place I've driven is work and back, plus I need to pick up some groceries, so let the girls know I'll meet them at the restaurant."

Beau nods, but I can tell he's not hugely happy about it.

Once I'm home, I fill the tub and soak while I eat a pint of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream. After my skin is prune-like, I wrap myself in my soft fluffy robe and dry and style my hair into bouncy waves that hit my shoulders. I'm not sure how fancy the restaurant we're going to is, but judging by the rest of the town I'm guessing it's pretty casual. I wear jeans all week at work, so instead, I slide into my black-and-red wrap dress and push my feet into my black thigh-high boots. It's casual enough for a restaurant and dressy enough for cocktails.

I keep my makeup light, just a slick of eyeliner and a coat of mascara, then I pull my jacket on, grab my purse and head out to my car.

My new jeep automatically connects my cell to the radio, so by the time I'm pulling away from the house, one of my happy playlists is blasting through the speakers and I'm smiling and singing as I turn down the mountain toward town for the very first time.

I know that most people hate it, but I've always loved grocery shopping. There's something soothing about wandering up and down the aisles. I'm not paying a massive amount of notice to what's going on around me, until my cart bounces back and I look up and realize I just drove into the back of someone's ankles. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry," I exclaim, pulling my cart back and rushing around to the person I just hit.

"It's okay, I have a spare ankle, who needs two anyway," A smoky voice replies as the guy turns around to face me. Tall with mocha-colored skin, he's attractive in a rugged way. If he was wearing a cowboy hat, he'd totally pull it off because he looks like he could wrangle a stallion, throw a lasso and carry you over his lap all at the same time.

"I'm so sorry, I was daydreaming. Is your ankle okay?"

When he smiles it's like the clouds part and a single ray of sunshine spotlights him from above. I have never met anyone with such an engaging smile and I can't help it, I smile back.

"It's fine, I'm made of sterner stuff, I'm Marshall."

"Juniper," I tell him, blushing a little when he lifts my hand up and presses a kiss to the back of it.

"Are you in Rockhead Point on vacation?"

"No, my brothers and I just moved here."

"Well welcome, how are you finding the place so far? It has a charm, doesn't it?" his voice is like liquid chocolate and I feel my muscles melt.

“I like it so far, it’s different from California, but I think I’m going to be happy here.”

“Can I take you to dinner sometime?” he asks, surprising me.

I falter, then realize I’m attracted to him so why not. “Sure, I’d like that.”

Marshall smiles again and I swear I internally sigh at how much it affects me.

“Would it be completely against the rules to ask if you had plans tonight?”

“I’m actually meeting friends for food and cocktails, although most of them are pregnant so I’m not sure why we’re bothering with the cocktails,” I smile.

“You know the Barnetts?”

I grin. “I do, how did you guess?”

“Everyone knows the Barnetts and that most of their women are pregnant right now. It’s a small town, you’ll find everyone knows everyone else’s business around here.”

“Ah, that makes sense. I started working up at Barnett Lumber about a month ago and apparently Bonnie has adopted me,” I laugh.

“I went to school with Cody, I’m sure the guys will all be stalking those women of theirs tonight, I’ll drop him a text and maybe I’ll see you later.”

“Stalking them?”

“Oh yeah, they hate it when their wives go out drinking, so the whole clan follows them and watches over them. It’s a little weird, but whatever works for them. I’d want to make sure you were safe if you were mine.”

“Stalking though?” I laugh.

“You never know,” he winks. “Can I get your number? That way I can text you about that dinner.”

He hands me his cell and I type my number into the screen and hand it back. He immediately calls me, smirking when I arch my eyebrow at him in question.

“Had to make sure you gave me your real number. It was nice to meet you, Juniper.”

“Most people call me Juni, and it was nice to meet you too, Marshall.”

He smiles at me again and when I feel myself go a little weak at the knees, I turn my cart and push it away.



“I want a Jolly Rancher–tini so bad,” Bonnie whines. “Have one for me, Juni, then let me smell it.”

“I’m driving, Bonnie, I told you this the last four times you tried to get me to order a drink,” I giggle.

“I need to drink vicariously through you, that’s why you should leave your car here and get a ride home with us.”

“I have groceries in the car and I don’t really drink.”

Alice looks at me sympathetically, she’s eight months pregnant and she looks exhausted. Her belly is so large it almost looks painful on her slim frame.

“Do any of you know a guy called Marshall?”

“Only Marshall I know is Marshall Ross, he owns the feed store and looks like that beautiful man, oh shoot what’s his name...? Idris Elba.”

“Yes, that’s him. I saw him in the grocery store and he asked me out. Should I go out with him? He doesn’t have a wife and kids he didn’t mention does he?”

“No wife or kids, he’s a nice guy as far as I know. He was married I think, but they got a divorce a few years ago,” Cora says, sipping from her fifth cocktail and smiling a little drunkenly.

“He said he knew Cody.”

All four women shrug. “The guys all have guy friends but honestly I don’t think I’ve ever met any of them,” Lulu says, rubbing absentmindedly at her belly.

“I’ll ask Beau,” Bonnie laughs.

“Is he joining us?” I ask. “He didn’t mention it when I spoke to him at work.”

“Oh, he’ll be here, they all would if it wasn’t for Huck and Penn having to stay home and watch Maverick and Poppy,” Bonnie says.

“Marshall mentioned something about the guys stalking you on girls’ nights out?”

“The Barnetts are all jealous, possessive...” Alice starts.

“Don’t forget unreasonable,” Cora adds.

“Assholes,” all four women say in unison, dissolving into giggles.

Wrinkling my brow I stare at them, wondering why that’s funny.

“I’m sorry, Juni,” Lulu says. “The guys are all amazing, but they’re all typical alpha males. They each have a unique style when it comes to relationships, but the things they all have in common is this over-the-top, jealous, possessive caveman attitude. In their heads we’re theirs and with that thought process comes an overwhelming need to protect us. If we go out together, at least one, if not all of the brothers follow us, to make sure we’re all okay and to keep away any guys who might try to buy us drinks or hit on us. It’s weird, but in a way it’s kind of sweet too.”

“Sometimes they try to hide, but we always know they’re there,” Cora laughs, her words a little slurred as she finishes her glass and puts it down a little too heavily onto the table.

“They’re not here now,” I say, glancing around me and trying to spot the family of overly large men.

“Beau, Granger, Cody and Teddy are sitting on the table behind that pillar,” Alice says, tipping her chin and gesturing over my shoulder.

Turning, I spot the small table in the alcove and the four large men all staring in our direction. “Should we go over there?”

“No,” Bonnie says. “They get to watch, but they don’t get to be a part of girls’ night.”

“Don’t look now, but your admirer just walked in,” Cora singsongs drunkenly.

All three women turn to watch as Marshall scans the crowd until he spots us. When his eyes find mine, he smiles and makes a drink gesture. I shake my head, lifting my full glass up to show him.

“Oh, he is hot,” Lulu coos. “Invite him over.”

“I just met him. Besides, this is girls’ night.”

“Too late, he’s coming this way,” Cora laughs.

“Ladies,” Marshall says, greeting us.

“Hi Marshall,” Bonnie smiles. “How are you?”

Before he has a chance to open his mouth and reply to her, our table is surrounded by Barnetts. Beau curls his arm possessively around his wife’s shoulder and she laughs, as she tips her head back and rests it against his taught stomach.

Granger lifts Alice off her seat and sits in it, pulling her into his lap while Cody stands behind Lulu and Cora, glaring menacingly at Marshall as Teddy slows to a stop behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I stare incredulously at Teddy. Why is he guarding me? Marshall’s eyes lift to Teddy, then back to me. There’s a question in his depths that I have no idea how to answer, so instead I jump up from my seat and excuse myself, rushing off to the bathroom to take a moment.

By the time I walk back to our table the standoff seems to have ended and now everyone is chatting amiably. My chair is still empty and Teddy is still behind it, so instead of taking it again, I stop beside Marshall, who watches me approach approvingly.

“Hi,” I say, struggling to meet his gaze with this many people watching me.

“Hey, we appear to have invaded girls’ night,” he says.

“That’s okay, although the others seem to understand the rules of when the guys get to join the party better than I do.”

“Juniper, come sit,” Teddy calls, his hands resting on the back of my seat.

“I’m okay,” I tell him.

“Marshall, have you met Buck and Nero Henderson yet? Buck is the new smoke jumper’s chief and Nero is his second-in-command, they’re Juniper’s brothers,” Teddy says, his tone curt, like he’s trying to warn Marshall off or something.

“I haven’t,” Marshall replies smoothly. “But I’m sure I’ll get a chance to meet them when I pick Juni up for our date.”

Four sets of Barnett eyes look to me and I wither under their appraisal. Do they know something I don’t? Is this a guy thing? Do they know that Marshall is a dog, but some bro code is stopping them from saying anything?

“I should actually be getting going. It’s been a long week and I’m looking forward to a lazy morning tomorrow,” I say, not looking at anyone above chest height.

“I’ll drive you,” Teddy growls.

“I have my car right outside,” I say without even glancing in his direction. The girls hug me one at a time and I make promises to text them all during the weekend to discuss our next girls’ night.

“I’ll walk you out,” Marshall says, placing his hand on the base of my spine.

His touch is a little too familiar considering we just met, but he’s not trying to cop a feel or really doing anything other than being a gentleman so I don’t push him away. I wave goodbye to Beau, Granger and Cody, then force myself to acknowledge Teddy, only instead of looking at me, he’s glaring daggers at Marshall.

What is his problem? We haven't said a single word to each other in weeks and now he's acting like my bodyguard. It's official, the Barnett brothers are weird.

I allow Marshall to steer me out of the bar and over to where my car is parked a few feet away. "Thanks," I smile.

"I'll text you about dinner," he says, leaning down and pressing a soft kiss against my cheek, before pulling away and letting his hand fall from my back.

He waits by the side of the jeep as I open my door and climb in, smiling and offering me a small, cute salute once I'm safely inside. My cell beeps and I open my purse and pull it out, just as the passenger door opens and Teddy Barnett slides into the empty seat.

"What are you doing?" I shriek.

"Getting a ride home with you."

"Why?"

"I'm ready to go and you're leaving. We're basically going to the same place, so it makes sense for us to go together."

"Er," I choke out, trying to think of a reason, any reason why he can't ride with me, but before my brain can find anything, he's settled into his seat with his seat belt fastened. Resigned, I sigh, put my car into drive and pull away from the curb.

We pass the first couple of miles in silence so thick I contemplate opening a window to help dilute the atmosphere. It's pretty clear that neither of us has anything to say to the other, which makes me question again why he would choose to ride home with me rather than wait for his family.

"So, you and Marshall?" he asks, finally breaking the silence.

"I just met him tonight."

"But you're dating?"

"He asked me out, yeah."

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Teddy says, the tenor of his voice low and almost gruff.

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t be sorry, just don’t go out with him,” he snaps.

His attitude annoys me. What does who I date have to do with him? “Who I date is none of your business.”

“You’re my business.”

Stunned, I slowly turn and gawk at him. “Are you drunk?”

He laughs and the sound vibrates through me, making my nipples pebble and my sex clench. I wish he was ugly. Teddy is almost too attractive and I never considered myself someone shallow enough to be affected by a pretty face, but with him I am. From the first moment I saw him, he’s become my “that guy” you know what I mean, the guy you compare all other guys to. Like, oh he’s attractive, but not as good-looking as “that guy.” On the couple of times he’s actually spoken to me he’s been a dick, but apparently that doesn’t make him any less beautiful.

“No, Juniper, I’m not drunk, I’ve only drunk soda tonight,” he says, the angry tone fading into a warm purr that wraps around me in a phantom embrace.

“If you’re not drunk, why are you acting weird?”

“It’s weird that I consider you my business?”

“Yes,” I shriek, wishing that I wasn’t so rattled by the proximity of being in a car with him. “It’s really weird. We’re not friends, I mean you’re technically my boss, but really you’re just the douche who propositioned me for sex. I’ve got to be honest, your opinion on my personal life isn’t really something I’m hugely interested in.”

His sigh is audible and I glance at him. He’s biting on his bottom lip, his hands clenched into fists resting on his knees. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” I elongate the word, confused.

“I was an asshole for asking you...” he trails off for a second, “what I asked you.”

“You mean when you told me you have zero interest in me except wanting to put your dick inside of me?” I retort. I have no idea where all my attitude and confidence are coming from. Normally I’m shy around guys, sometimes painfully shy, but Teddy brings out this brattiness that I kind of love. Guys like him must be used to simpering women and I refuse to be that. He’s an asshole and I’m going to call him on it.

He cringes and I catch the movement in my peripheral vision. “Yeah that. I doubt you’ll believe me, but I’m not normally such a dick.”

“So, I’m special. Nice.”

“No. That’s...” He sighs again. “My family, we have this tradition. Legacy, I suppose you could call it.”

“The whole love at first sight thing. Yeah, I’ve heard.”

“Well, I thought I’d had my chance. I thought I met my woman in high school, but at the time I didn’t know that the legacy, myth whatever you want to call it was true, I thought it was just a sweet meet-cute my parents had. It wasn’t until recently that I remembered and I figured I missed my chance.”

A wave of sympathy washes over me. I shouldn’t feel sorry for him, but if the whole Barnett men thing is true, then knowing you found your perfect match and losing them must be hard. “I’m sorry, that sucks. Could you maybe try to track her down?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. I recently figured out that she wasn’t mine, if she was I wouldn’t have been able to let her go.”

“Oh,” I say, a little confused why he’s telling me this.

“You’re my one.”

My foot slams down onto the brake pedal and we screech to a stop. “Excuse me?” I yell, turning to look at him.

“You’re mine, Juniper, I felt something for you the first time I saw you, but I thought it was just lust. My dick was

rock hard the moment my eyes landed on you. I didn't know you could be mine, so I acted like an asshole”

“I'm yours?” I scoff, interrupting him. “I'm not yours.”

“You are, I've been a blind idiot, but you're mine and I”

“No. No, no, no, no. Just no. I'm not interested. I'm not yours, I never will be. You want to fuck me and I turned you down, that must have been a blow to your ego. I get it, guys like you don't get turned down that often.”

“Guys like me?”

“Yeah,” I wave my hand in his direction. “Guys like you. Handsome, arrogant, conceited. I'm sorry I bruised your fragile superiority complex, but even good-looking guys like you have to learn that they don't always get what they want.”

“Juniper.” His voice is rough and low, almost threatening, but I ignore him.

“Please stop talking, it's late, it's dark and these are winding narrow roads, so just shut up so I can concentrate on driving.”

I'm actually amazed when he doesn't speak, flopping back against his seat. The heat of his anger fills the car but I just drive, ignoring it and pretending I can't see him seething beside me. The next fifteen minutes feels like it lasts at least twenty years and I've never been so grateful to see the turnoff to the Barnetts' place before now.

“Go to your place, I'll walk back from there,” Teddy mutters.

I consider arguing, but decide not to, driving past the entrance and instead turning onto the next road that leads to the Williams ranch and the group of houses that we've affectionately started calling Smoke Jumper Alley.

Neither of my brothers are home, they're both on night shifts this week, but I don't mention that to Teddy as I park my car at the curb and climb out.

“Night,” I call, not bothering to look back at him as I march forward toward my front door.

“Juniper,” Teddy stops me with his hand on my arm and gently turns me to face him.

“What do you want?” A pleading edge bleeds into my voice.

“You,” he whispers reverently, cupping my cheeks and pressing a kiss to my lips before I can even process his movement.

His lips are soft and full for a second, then they turn aggressive, pressing against mine like they’re demanding obedience. Pushing my hands between us, I shove at his chest, managing to gain enough space for me to yell. “Stop.”

He freezes and I shove him again. This time he takes a step away, but his eyes watch me hungrily.

My lips part but I can’t find any words, so I turn and walk away, my hands shaking as I unlock the door, then I dart inside and lock the door behind me.

TEDDY



My entire body is urging me to chase after her, to capture her and take what's mine, but somehow I stop myself and instead just watch her walk away.

I hate it. Letting her leave feels wrong on every level but what else can I do? I've fucked everything up so royally. I need to figure out how to make her forgive me for the less than auspicious start to our relationship and convince her to let us start again.

She's mine. Now I understand that, it's like a fog has lifted and she's perfect sunshine. I want her and it's more than just physical. Don't get me wrong I want to fuck her too, I can't wait to feel her cunt pulse around my cock, to watch her helpless desperation when she's begging me to make her come, while begging me to stop at the same time. But I want more than just sex from her.

I'm not sure how I missed what's been so glaringly obvious since I met her. She's consumed my thoughts, bewitched my mind, but I was so lost to my own self-pity, thinking I'd lost my chance at getting married and loving a woman the way I watch my brothers do every day, that I couldn't see what was right there in front of me.

Foolishly I thought apologizing would hit reset on things between us, but the way Juniper looked at me has made it glaringly obvious that just saying sorry isn't going to get me where I want to be. She called me handsome, arrogant and conceited and she might be right.

I'm used to getting what I want, from women at least. I suppose the fact that I arrange hookups rather than meet women and let chemistry guide me might have something to do with it. When I kiss or touch or taste, both me and whoever I have my hands on know exactly what's going to happen.

I don't mean we have a script and a checklist, my sexual encounters aren't scenes. But when I meet up with a woman it's purely for sex, so there're none of the awkward first date jitters or nerves. Both the woman and I are there for one reason only, and it's been years since I've had any kind of interaction with a woman that wasn't arranged in that way.

Juniper is different, and by trying to treat her like every other woman, I've royally fucked things up. A part of me thought that if I kissed her she'd understand, that she'd want this—me—as much as I want her. But instead she walked away, like it was nothing, like this thing between us is nothing.

For a long moment I just stare at her closed door, like if I stay here she might understand that she belongs to me and come back out here to let me claim her in the way I'm so fucking desperate to. But that doesn't happen. The house fills with light, and the door stays closed.

Eventually I sigh, turn and force myself to walk away. Every step farther away from her makes my heart ache and my limbs itch with the need to be with her, to touch her, to make her mine. But the truth is I have no idea how to make that happen. As conceited as it might sound, it's been a long time since I've had a woman tell me no. Juniper wasn't wrong when she said that women tended to fall at my feet, they do.

I'm a good-looking guy, I've never struggled to find a willing partner to share my bed. Since the whole Barnett ownership-at-first-sight legacy became public knowledge, I've been propositioned more times than I care to remember and have women I've known my entire life literally throw themselves into my path, like they imagine I'm going to fall in love with them, just because they stumbled into me when I've never shown any interest in them before.

Truthfully, right now I wish I'd had to woo more women, because then I might have a clue what to do to make Juniper see that she's mine and I'm hers. Right now, the only useful thing I can think to do is head back down into town and beat the shit out of Marshall for daring to ask *my* woman out on a date. I saw the way he looked at her and the way she looked at him, and the whole fucking thing makes me murderous. He can ask her a hundred fucking times, but she won't be dating him or anyone else in town, because tomorrow morning I'm going to make sure that every fucking person in Rockhead Point knows that the Barnett legacy has struck again.

I want every woman to know I'm Juniper's and every man to know I'll slaughter them if they even consider glancing too long at what belongs to me.

The pounding in my chest settles a little as I finalize my plan to make sure she becomes untouchable in this town. If we lived in the city, this wouldn't work, but in a town this small your social status can alter on one single whispered confidence in the right ear.

By the time I push open my front door, my lips are twisted into a cruel grin. Juniper might think she can deny this thing between us, but I'll make it so she has no choice but to accept how inevitable we are, then when she does, I'll worship at her pussy for the rest of our lives.

"Bro, what the fuck is that look?" Huck asks on a laugh.

Kicking off my shoes, I grab a beer from the refrigerator and make my way to the couch where Huck is sitting with a sleeping Maverick cradled in his arms. My nephew is the cutest kid, with a shock of red hair just like his mama, he's already huge and he's only six months old. The kid is going to follow the Barnett gene pool and be as big as his dad.

"Cora's gonna kick your ass if she comes home and finds him sleeping on you instead of in his crib," I warn, sliding down beside him on the couch.

He shrugs, "She'll be fine, and I like her angry, it makes her horny as fuck," he chuckles.

“Dude, TMI,” I cringe, not wanting to think about my brother and sister-in-law fucking.

“How was Juniper? Where is she?”

I confessed to my brothers that Juniper was mine a few days ago and I’ve been getting increasingly crazy advice on how to lock her down ever since.

A scowl forms on my lips “She was flirting with Marshall Ross.”

“I take it you shut that shit down?” Huck snarls angrily.

“She’s pissed at me. I didn’t exactly make the best first impression, but she won’t be dating that fucker.”

“Did you tell her that she’s yours?” Huck asks, as if it’s just that simple.

“I explained about the way we find our women, but she wasn’t exactly responsive. It doesn’t help that I was such an asshole with the whole I-want-to-fuck-you situation.” My skin crawls as I remember the way I spoke to her, like she was nothing more than a wet hole I wanted to use.

“Why didn’t you bring her home, get her naked, make her understand you’re not normally such a twat?”

“Because unlike you, I’m not one-hundred-percent down with kidnapping as a seduction technique,” I snap.

Huck shrugs. “Worked for me.”

Shaking my head, I turn away and stare blankly at the TV that’s playing the replays of tonight’s football game.

“Firstly, I need to get rid of Marshall and make sure every fucker with a dick in town knows she belongs to me, then I can work on convincing her I’m not a complete douchebag.”

“Try stalking her, that seems to be the Barnett go-to. She can’t avoid you if you’re always around, plus you work together so you have access to her for eight hours a day.”

“Except, she’s in her office and I’m on the side of the fucking mountain,” I hiss sarcastically.

“Seems like you should probably find something to keep you behind a desk for a few weeks then, doesn’t it?” he says conspiratorially.

For a moment I consider his suggestion. It’s not a bad one. I mean, she can’t avoid me that way, and it’ll give me time to make her understand I’m not the dick she thinks I am, and that she’s mine and there isn’t an alternative. We’re endgame, marriage, kids, the whole nine yards.

“I need to get her brothers on my side too,” I say, thinking aloud.

Huck nods. “Tomorrow’s Saturday, I think maybe it’s time for a barbeque.” His fingers tap at the screen on his cell as the front door opens and Beau, Granger, Cora, Bonnie and Alice walk in.

Huck immediately turns to look at his wife and a feral gleam fills his eyes. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen him look at Cora like this, but it’s the first time I’ve felt like I understood. “Hey Peaches.”

Cora marches drunkenly over to the couch and glares down at Huck, her hands on her hips, even as she sways a little. “Huck Barnett, what is he doing asleep on you? We agreed he needs to learn to sleep in his crib.”

Huck flashes her a smile that makes her hands fall to her sides. “I missed you, you know I hate being without you, so I kept him close. Don’t be mad.”

Her shoulders instantly soften. “It’s only been a few hours.”

“I know, but any time away from you is too long. I promise if he wakes up I’ll get up with him so you can sleep.”

The two of them have completely forgotten that anyone else is even in the room with them. They’re completely together, so consumed with each other that no one else is important enough to even concern them.

I’m jealous. I want that closeness with Juniper. I want her to be instantly drawn to me the moment she enters a room. I want her to miss me after only a couple of hours apart. I want

her to be as consumed with me as I am with her. Except I fucked things up and I'm not sure if she's going to let me fix it.

I've spent the last couple of years watching my brothers fall in love, thinking I'd never get the chance to do the same. Now my woman is here, within my reach, the thought that I'm the reason it won't work out is too devastating to consider.

Huck stands and drops his arm over Cora's shoulder, still carrying Maverick in the other hand. "Beau, text the Hendersons, we're having a barbeque tomorrow afternoon so Teddy can win over Buck and Nero."

Beau nods at me and that's it, he's got my back, they all do, my entire fucked-up, huge family are going to help me get my girl. Lighter than I've felt in days, I go to bed and dream about what my life will be like once Juniper is finally, truly mine.

JUNIPER



“We’ve been invited to a barbeque up at the Barnetts’ this afternoon,” Nero says with a smile. “They invited everyone who’s not on shift, I think it’ll be a good time.”

The urge to say no, that it won’t be a good time—because Teddy will be there and I’ll have to pretend like he doesn’t affect me, even though he’s an asshole with a god complex who apparently seems to think I’m his fated “one” but only after I refused to have a one-night stand with him—bubbles to the surface, but I swallow down the words.

If I’m honest, it all seems like convenient timing to me. Sure, when he told me last night that he thought he’d met his destined girl back in high school but hadn’t realized it at the time, I felt sorry for him. By the time he explained he’d been wrong and that I was his, my sympathy had faded to annoyance.

I wonder how many times he’s told other women that exact same story? He doesn’t strike me as the type who has to hoodwink women with the lure of happily ever after, but I suppose it takes all sorts.

I watched him through the window last night after we got home. He stood outside for almost ten minutes just staring at the house, like he was waiting for me to come back out, or maybe to invite him in.

I’ll never admit it out loud, but I was tempted. My head is fully aware of how much of a douche he is, but my body doesn’t care. My sex was screaming yes, yes, yes take me now

almost the entire time we were in the car together and honestly, if I have to spend the afternoon with him, I'm going to need to take a change of underwear.

Once he left last night, I grabbed the groceries from the car, unpacked them, then went to bed and spent a good few hours with my vibrator, trying to convince myself that I was just horny and that Teddy fucking Barnett is just a hot guy.

After I'd made myself come four times to all images of him and the sound of his voice telling me I was his, I fell into an exhausted, drained haze and dreamed about him all night instead.

"I'm not sure I'm up for going out this afternoon, I'm tired, I didn't sleep well last night," I lie to my brother.

"Was everything okay, with you being here by yourself?" Buck asks me, concern lacing his face. "I should have called; I hadn't realized we'd both be on the night shift together."

I wave him off. "It was fine, I'm not a kid, I can stay in the house on my own. I just drank a lot of soda out with the girls and the sugar kept me awake."

"We can just go for an hour, then if you want we can leave early," Nero says, pulling me into a side hug and pressing a kiss against the top of my head.

"Okay," I relent, snuggling into my brother's side.

"Okay, we need to sleep for a while, we were running emergency drills all night and I'm dead on my feet," Buck says, stifling a yawn.

"Go sleep, I'm going to go down into town and explore a little, we've been here weeks and I feel like I've barely seen anything of the town apart from here and work."

"Okay, be safe," Nero says, squeezing me again before releasing me.

"Sleep well," I tell them both as I grab my keys and head to my car.

The town of Rockhead Point is an adorable mix of tourist traps and cute boutiques. I find the clothes store Cora told me

she and her mom run and step inside to look around. Mrs. Cunningham apparently knows exactly who I am and after she greets me enthusiastically, I spend nearly an hour trying to fend off all the clothes she insists I simply must try on. My new job and lack of rent means I can afford to splurge, so I treat myself to a handful of the things Mrs. Cunningham picked out.

She says goodbye with a hug and a promise that I'll wear one of the outfits I bought today to the barbeque this afternoon. I wander the rest of main street and buy a couple of pies from a delicious-looking bakery to take with us to the Barnetts'. Once I've exhausted all of the shops on main, I wander aimlessly through town, then grab a sandwich and sit down on a bench to people-watch while I eat.

I notice a few people giving me the side-eye, but assume it's just because I'm a stranger, until an older guy pauses beside me. "Do you mind if I sit?" he asks.

"Of course not," I say, motioning for him to take the empty end of the bench.

"Thanks," he says, groaning wearily as he eases himself down to the seat. "I'm Fred."

"Hi, I'm Juniper," I smile, trying to remember that I'm in small-town Montana now and not Cali. Back home if a guy had randomly started talking to me, I'd probably have gotten up and left, for fear of him being a creeper, but I somehow doubt this guy is anything but a sweet old man simply being polite.

"I know who you are, you're Teddy Barnett's girl, your brothers are the new firefighter-parachute guys right?"

My brow furrows as I take in his words. "My brothers are the new smoke jumpers, but I'm definitely not Teddy's girl. I work at Barnett Lumber and I'm friends with his sisters-in-law, but that's all."

Fred chuckles softly. "If you know those boys at all you'll know that if Teddy thinks you're his, you are."

He says it like what I want doesn't matter and indignant anger pools inside of me. "I have zero interest in Teddy, to be honest he's a bit of an asshole, and really, does anyone actually believe the whole love at first sight bullshit?" My words rush out of me and by the time I finish my angry tirade, I'm on my feet, looming over this nice old man. "I'm sorry," I backpedal, stepping away from Fred and lifting my hands to cover my heated cheeks.

"Oh, Miss Juniper, don't apologize," He smiles widely. "When I was young, we used to call that fire spunk, and if I was forty years younger, I'd give Teddy a run for his money and ask you on a date myself."

My cheeks stain an even brighter red and I duck my head down in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I'm not usually a shoot-the-messenger kind of person. But please feel free to spread the word back to whoever said Teddy and I were a thing, that we aren't and we never will be."

Fred's smile is so wide he looks ten years younger. "Yes, ma'am."

With an embarrassed smirk, I grab the trash from my sandwich and offer Fred an awkward goodbye as I head back to my car.

The weather is surprisingly mild today so I open my window when I get back into my bedroom and inhale deeply, enjoying the crisp mountain air. Cali is a great place to live, but if I'd opened my windows back there, all I'd smell would be exhaust fumes from the traffic constantly rolling by and the hint of stale Indian food from the shop across the road from mine and my mom's apartment.

Sitting down on the edge of my bed, I blot the water from my wet hair and adjust the towel wrapped around my body. I'm tired and honestly not in the mood to be sociable with anyone, especially not the all-too-tempting asshole who has apparently decided my blatant rejection of him was actually me asking him to try harder.

It takes me forever to get ready. I dry and straighten my hair, then pull on my new jeans and pretty floral tank with a

bright-pink cardigan. I'm comfortable, but when I look in the mirror the innocent, young girl that stares back at me feels all wrong. Pulling off my tank and cardigan, I change it for a bright-red wrap shirt that clings to my curves and gives me instant confidence. Pulling my hair over my shoulder, I twist it into a loose fishtail braid and add a thick coat of mascara and black ankle boots.

This time when I look in the mirror, I pull my shoulders back and nod to myself. I look older, self-assured and in control. As all of the smoke jumpers that aren't on shift and their families have been invited to the barbeque, we all decide to walk the short distance between our homes and the Barnetts'. I'm one of the last to finish getting ready so I meet Buck, Nero and all the others on the lawn outside the houses and we walk as a group, chatting and laughing.

By the time the Barnett house comes into view there're butterflies swooping around in my stomach. I have no idea if Teddy will even be here, but a part of me knows he will be. I'm not sure how many more ways there are to tell him that I have no interest in being his in any way, shape or form. When I first heard about the whole love at first sight thing, I thought it was ridiculous, but also kind of lovely.

I haven't exactly been waiting for my Mr. Right to scoop me off my feet, but I have been waiting for that elusive something. The idea that these big, tough men have all fallen in love in an instant is almost too sweet to be believable and if I hadn't met Bonnie, Cora, Alice and Lulu I wouldn't have believed it. But it did happen and the way they tell their stories is like a series of romance novels.

It's just my luck that the only brother that's interested in me is the one who offers me a long, hard fuck instead of a long, beautiful life.

Our group slows as we approach the house. It's a massive log home that may originally have been big, but has been extended to be huge. Because the plot the house sits on is so large, there isn't a formal fenced-in yard, so when we spot smoke off to the right of the front door, the group gravitates in

that direction to find the entire Barnett clan on a beautiful patio.

Strings of lights have been strung between mature trees, three patio heaters are on, making the air crisp but warm, and a huge grill is set to the side with Bay and Cody manning it. Coolers have been filled with beer and ice, and massive outdoor couches are set up in social groupings. I spot Cora's mom and a guy I assume is her dad, an older man who looks enough like Bonnie to make it obvious it must be her dad, and some of the guys from work as well as several other people I don't recognize.

It's a real party and when Beau, Bonnie and Huck move forward to greet us, our group spreads out, dispersing as they get drinks and are introduced to everyone. Without thought I scan the faces around me, searching for Teddy, and when I don't immediately find him I start to relax.

"How's the jeep?" Bay asks, appearing at my side and startling me a little.

"It's great, thanks, it's nice to have some independence here."

"You're from California?" he asks, furrowing his brow a little.

I nod. "Yep, it's a bit different from Montana."

"I thought Buck and Nero were in Washington before you moved here?"

"They were, we share a dad, but have different moms. I was brought up in California, I didn't even know I had brothers until five years ago. It's a long story, but it turns out my dad liked the sailor's life—a woman in every port." I smile.

"What made you decide to move?"

"My mom recently moved out of the apartment we shared. When the guys found out I was living alone, they went all caveman overprotective and insisted I should move here with them so we could finally all live together as a family. They've been trying to convince me to move to Washington for a while,

but it wasn't until my mom took off that they decided not to take no for an answer."

Bay nods, like my brothers did the right thing and I smirk. No wonder Buck and Nero get on so well with all the Barnetts, they're all the same, over-the-top alpha males. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Just water would be great." I smile. Bay nods and grabs a bottle from one of the coolers, handing it to me. "Thanks."

Someone calls Bay's name and he offers me a smile, excuses himself and leaves. For a moment that crippling anxiety that always hits me at parties fills me. I'm alone, even though I'm surrounded by people, and the urge to find a corner to hide in is almost overwhelming. I'm not really a people person, I wouldn't call myself antisocial, I just prefer a quiet life. Since I moved here the Barnett women have embraced me and I love it, but normally I'd avoid events like this and being surrounded by people who don't know me well.

As I'm wondering if anyone would notice if I left, Teddy appears at my side. Suddenly the black-and-gray existence I was sinking into evaporates and the world comes into full Technicolor like the chocolate forest in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

"Hello, Juniper." His voice is rich and I shudder involuntarily. I don't want to react to him. I don't like him. I don't want him.

A silent scoff falls from my lips at my own internal lie. I do want him. I don't want to, but on a base, fundamental, cell level, I want him. His body chemistry calls to mine like a siren song and as much as I try to deny it, when I'm this close to him all I can think of is what his skin would taste like if I were to lick him.

"Hello, Teddy." I force coolness into my voice.

Turning toward me, his hand grazes my arm and I flinch, as tingles of heat surge to the spot his skin made contact with mine.

"Are you hungry?"

God, he's asking me about food, but my brain is insisting he wants to know if I'm ready for him and Jesus, I am. I'm so freaking hungry; for touch, for sex, for orgasms and apparently I want him to be the one to give them to me. I knew I was attracted to him, but when did that desire become an all-encompassing need? Maybe I should have said yes to his offer for uncomplicated sex.

"Juniper?"

The sound of my name on his lips forces me out of my own head. "Sorry, what?"

A smirk pulls at the corners of his mouth and if I didn't know it was impossible, I'd swear he knows exactly what I was thinking.

"I asked if you were hungry. Let me..." He pauses, a full smile blossoming across his mouth. "Feed you."

Oh good lord, my panties are soaked just from those two words. "No thanks, I'm not hungry," I force out through clenched teeth. How does he affect me like this? I've been waiting for a man who makes me feel passion and lust strongly enough that I can't resist it, but why does it have to be him? Why can't it be a nice guy, or just, anyone but him?

"Let me make you a plate, I'm sure I can tempt you."

Each word out of his mouth sounds like an innuendo-laced taunt and I close my eyes and shore up my defenses. "No thanks, I should find Bonnie and the girls and say hi."

His sigh is so loud I feel it vibrate through me. "Juniper."

"Oh, there she is," I say too brightly, "I'll see you later." I march off to the other side of the patio, not daring to look back at Teddy until I reach the safety of the group of women.

"Hey Juni," Lulu greets, balancing a wiggly baby on top of her baby bump.

"Hi Lulu, hi Poppy," I smile at the baby girl, whose hair has been secured in bunches that seem to sprout from the top of her head.

“Would you mind taking her for a minute, this baby is kicking me like it’s trying to escape and she’s being a real daddy’s girl today when Penn’s manning the barbeque.”

“Of course.” Reaching out to Poppy, I giggle when she practically launches herself into my chest. “Hi Miss Poppy, is your new baby brother or sister kicking you in the butt?” I ask her.

She nods solemnly, her eyes huge and watery.

“Dada,” she points over to where Penn is flipping burgers at the grill.

“Daddy’s busy, so can you hang out with me for a minute?”

A tear rolls down her cheek, but she nods, then flops her face down against my shoulder. An instinct I didn’t know I had kicks in and I start to sway, rubbing my hand up and down her tiny back as she settles, her body going lax and heavy.

“She is so tired, but she’s teething and she’s been awake half the night,” Lulu says. “Do you want me to have her back?”

“No, I’ve got her, she’s fine, you need to be resting. I swear you didn’t look that pregnant last night,” I laugh.

“They’re right at the front of my stomach today and wide awake.” Her hand drops to her stomach and she rubs affectionately.

“They?” I question.

Her eyes widen and she gasps. “Oh shoot, we were going to announce it later. We found out we’re having twins. They missed the second baby at my first scan, they were concerned about how big I was, so my doctor sent me for a scan yesterday and saw two heartbeats and yeah, I’m having identical twins.”

Her giggle is ever so slightly hysterical. “I’m going to have three children,” she whisper-shouts. “Three.”

Penn must be doing his usual Barnett thing and staring at his wife, because he’s at her side a moment later, stroking her

cheek and whispering something against her ear. His hand covers hers on her stomach and even though I know I should be giving them privacy in this moment, I just don't seem to be able to look away.

His hand curls around the back of her neck and she visibly relaxes into him, like just by touching her, he's taken all of her stress and anxiety and given her instant peace. It's kind of beautiful.

"It's magnetic, isn't it?" a female voice behind me says.

Jolting a little at being caught watching, I turn, trying not to startle Poppy and look at the person who is now beside me. "Sorry," the older woman says, smiling warmly. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Chloe, Lulu's godmother. You must be Juniper, I've heard a lot about you."

"You have?"

Chloe chuckles. "I have. We've all been waiting and hoping that Teddy would find someone, he's such a sweet boy."

I shake my head. "Oh, no, Teddy and I aren't..."

"He seems to think you are," she winks.

"That's because he's an asshole who's used to getting everything he wants," I say before I can stop myself.

Chloe's laugh is so loud several people turn to look at us, including Lulu and Penn, who have apparently finished with their private moment.

"What's so funny?" Penn asks.

"Juniper is finding herself a little resistant to Teddy's charms. I love that the women your brothers fall for are always the ones who aren't immediately impressed by how pretty you are," Chloe says with a grin.

"Teddy and I aren't" I start to protest.

"You're mine, Juniper," Teddy says, sliding his hand around my waist and speaking against my ear in a seductive tone.

“No, I’m not,” I hiss, trying to push his hand away without jostling Poppy, who has finally passed out on my shoulder.

“This is so exciting,” Bonnie says as she joins our group. “I just knew you were going to be family the very first time I saw you.”

“What? No,” I gasp, trying to step back and away from this man and his crazy family.

“Resistance is kind of futile,” Cora adds, “we all tried to fight it, but we all gave in to it in the end, it’s impossible to resist how good it feels to be loved by them.”

Carefully, I peel Poppy from me and pass her to Teddy, forcing him to let me go to take his sleeping niece. “No. You guys might all have drunk the Kool-Aid, but I haven’t. I’m not Teddy’s girl, or anything else, because this curse, myth, legend, legacy whatever you want to call it, isn’t real. No one sees a person and instantly knows they’re meant to be together. Especially not him,” I point accusingly at Teddy. “He didn’t know I was his. There wasn’t some grand romantic moment. He wasn’t suggesting forever, he asked to fuck me and was very clear that he was only interested in a one-night stand. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go speak to people who aren’t aboard the crazy train.”

Stomping away from the group, I intend to head for my brothers, but when I spot them chatting with even more insane Barnetts, I detour and instead head into the house, escaping to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind me.

Sitting down on the toilet I exhale shakily, I need to make new friends, especially now Teddy seems to have told his whole family that I’m his freaking unicorn. I’m not sure why he’d do that, I have no intention of sleeping with him, or doing anything else with him either. Maybe if he’d asked me out instead of asking to fuck me things might have been different, but as far as I can see, he’s using this whole family legacy thing as nothing more than an excuse to coerce me into thinking he wants more than sex.

After a couple of minutes, I force myself to get up. I’m being a coward sitting here and hiding, I need to stand up

straight and deal with the Barnett clan for another hour, then I'll fake a headache and leave.

Turning on the tap, I wash my hands and splash some cool water onto my cheeks, then I unlock the door and step out of the bathroom. Before I get a chance to take a second step, I'm backed back into the room by an angry-looking Teddy. I start to protest, but he covers my lips with his, silencing me.

His kiss is anger and fury and want all rolled into one, and I wilt beneath the pressure of his lips and the need to kiss him back when I know I should be pushing him away. Somehow my hands end up tangled in the fabric of his shirt as I hold him to me and push at his chest, in the same conflicted motion that has me moaning and growling in the same breath.

Fingers slide into my hair at the top of my braid and when he tugs, my sounds of protest become mewls of enjoyment. His tongue is in my mouth, his lips ravaging mine, his hand in my hair holding me exactly where he wants me. If this is what ownership feels like, then sign me up.

I protest when he pulls back from my lips, but instead of releasing me, he leaves just enough space between us for him to speak. "You. Are. Mine."

His words are rough and low and possessive in a way that sends goose bumps scattering across my skin.

I want to argue, but all I can do is hold on as he kisses me again, his free hand cupping my sex over my jeans, rubbing the heel of his palm over my clit in a way that sends me onto my tiptoes searching out more friction. When he pulls away, I make a sound that I'm sure will have me cringing once this is all over.

"You'll only come when I allow it," he growls, grinding his hand against my clit again, then immediately pulling away.

"Teddy," I gasp, scolding and begging at the same time.

"Monday morning, I'm going to drive you to work, then home again, you're going to introduce me to your brothers as your man, then that night I'm going to take you out to dinner. Afterward, I'm going to bring you home, strip you naked and

lick every inch of you inside and out until I know your body better than I know my own. Then I'm going to slide my dick into your cunt and make you come so many times you'll never be able to orgasm again without me being there to give you permission."

His dirty, filthy words make my legs tremble and my sex pulse with arousal and desperation, but something splinters the lust-filled haze his kisses and touches have put me in. Once again this is all about sex. He wants to fuck me, he wants to lick me, he wants to own me. Him, him, him. This is all about what he wants.

"No," I manage to whisper.

"Yes, Treasure, we're going to be so fucking good together, I can't wait."

"No," I say a little more forcefully, pulling my head back and putting some space between us.

"What?" He sounds so shocked.

"Let go of me."

His release is obviously reluctant, but he untangles his fingers from my hair and slides his hand slowly from between my thighs. "Why are you fighting this, Treasure? We're inevitable."

"Because you think we're fated to be together?" I ask sardonically.

"Because you're mine," he growls, running his fingers through his hair frustratedly.

"Do you want to know what I think?" I ask, taking a large step back and away from his intoxicatingly male scent. "I think you're attracted to me and you're used to getting whatever you want, so you offered me a one-night stand, never even considering that I might say no. When I did, you got your ego bruised and so you decided that I must be this mythical 'one' to explain why I was able to reject you."

Teddy's eyes widen as he listens to me berate him. "That's what you think?" he says slowly.

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest to both cover my hard nipples and give me a defensive stance against his disarming voice.

“You think I just want to fuck you?”

“Of course. I doubt many women say no to you. I’m just a challenge you don’t want to lose.”

“Maybe I just want you.”

I scoff. “I doubt it.”

“What if I promised not to have sex with you until you beg me? Because I promise you, I’m happy to wait until you believe I want everything with you, Treasure.”

Treasure. Why is it I want to preen every time he calls me that? Pushing away my urge to acquiesce, I shake my head.

“What if I told you I want to fall at your feet and beg you to want me the way I want you?” he asks, his voice laced with dominance despite his offer to beg me.

“I should go,” I protest weakly.

“Or you could stay. How about until you trust that what I’m saying and feeling is true, I just touch you without expecting anything in return? I’ll keep my balls nice and blue while I give you more pleasure than you could ever imagine.”

God, I’m tempted, so tempted, but I shake my head and try to step around him. His hand flashes out and slaps against the door, blocking my exit and keeping me trapped. “Juniper,” he growls, his patience and teasing done and replaced with a stern authoritarian tone that makes my knees try to buckle.

“You’re mine, Juniper Henderson. I’m going to love you and fuck you, then I’m going to give you my name and my baby. I refuse to leave you alone; I refuse to let you walk away because I’m a fucking idiot who couldn’t see what was right in front of me. We are fated, or destined or written in the stars in the sky or the depths of hell, either way, we’re inevitable and I won’t let anyone, not even you deny that.”

His declaration stuns me and I gawk at him. Watching me react to his words, his lips twitch into a determined, sinister

smile, a second before he hauls me to him, pushing his leg between mine and grinding me against his thigh as his lips demand my compliance.

As quick as the kiss starts, it ends and he releases me. I stumble on shaking legs and he steadies me.

“Think about it. I’ll see you on Monday.” Opening the door, he strides away, leaving me wet, shaky and both terrified and exhilarated that this is only a glimpse of what Teddy Barnett will do to get what he wants.

It takes me longer than I’m willing to admit to calm myself down enough to return to the party and when I do, the sun feels too bright, the other guests too loud, and the feel of Teddy’s eyes on me from across the patio too penetrating. In the end I decide to leave and make my way over to Buck.

“Hey,” I whisper, tapping him on the shoulder.

Buck turns, but his smile wilts when he takes in my fraught expression. “What’s the matter?”

“I have a killer headache, I’m going to go home and try to sleep it off.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” I wave away his concern. “Stay, enjoy yourself, I’ll be fine.”

Buck’s brow furrows and he eyes me with concern.

“I’ll be fine,” I assure him. “Serves me right for overdoing the sugar with all the soda last night. Next time I’m going to actually drink, then at least a hangover would be worth it.” I force a smile to my lips and try to laugh.

“Okay, text me once you’re home, one of us will come back and check on you later.”

I nod, pushing up onto my tiptoes and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Can you make my apologies to the Barnetts?”

“Sure,” he nods.

It’s a cowardly thing to do, to leave without saying goodbye, but if today has shown me anything, it’s that Teddy’s

whole family—including all my new friends—honestly believe that the fated love thing is real and that I'm going to be their new sister-in-law. Resisting Teddy is hard enough, but resisting all of them will be almost impossible. Sneaking around the side of the house, I exhale a sigh of relief once the party is behind me. I know I should be strong and forceful and tell Teddy no in no uncertain terms and I will, but that will have to be after I get rid of this aching need between my legs and shore my defenses against his determined resolve to make me his.

TEDDY



I watch as Juniper slips from the party and leaves, and the temptation to follow her is so strong that I do, staying far enough away that she doesn't know I'm there. I watch as she lets herself back into her house. I watch as she moves from room to room until she settles in the one I'm assuming is hers. When she draws her drapes I silently praise her, for making sure that no one else can see what's mine, but a part of me wishes she'd left them open so I could watch her some more.

Breaking into her house is an option, but although she's driving me crazy and I'm kind of stalking her, I'm not ready to add breaking and entering to my obsessive rap sheet just yet. Instead, I sit my ass down on the grass and watch her house, even though I can't see her or touch her, something about being this close to her is calming.

After half an hour when the drapes don't open and she doesn't come back out, I reluctantly get up and head back home and to the party. The one where I'm supposed to be getting her brothers on my side so they won't get in my way as I convince my girl that she belongs to me.

The smell of food and the sound of chatting and laughing fills the air as I circle the house and make my way onto the patio again. The girls have all taken up residence on the huge outdoor couches with the wives of the jumpers I haven't bothered to get to know yet.

Buck, Juniper's oldest brother is chatting to Huck and Bay so I make my way to a cooler, grab a beer and then join them. Granger eyes me knowingly, he might be the quietest of our

rowdy family, but he's observant and from the way he's looking at me, I'd guess he saw me follow Juniper home.

Buck is telling a story about a fire he and his brother attended back in Washington, and about how the helicopter pilot had been new and as a prank had put bright-pink food dye in the fire-retardant solution and coated an entire section of forest in Barbie-pink powder.

"All of our equipment, including the parachutes, was dyed pink, it took days to scrub the color off, the depot looked like Barbie's Dreamhouse," he laughs.

Huck cracks up laughing and I smile and chuckle, even though I couldn't care less about anything he has to say, unless he's talking about his sister.

"So how come you all decided to move out here? Sounds like you were pretty happy in Washington?" Huck asks, and I silently thank him for changing the subject to something that might involve Juniper.

"I was the second-in-command in Washington, my boss recommended me as commander for this new depot and I recommended Nero as my second. We were happy in Washington, but moving here gave us the chance to bring Juni with us. We've been trying to get her to move to Washington for a while but she never would because of her mom."

"You don't share a mom?" I ask, desperate to learn more about my girl.

Buck's lips twitch into a scowl. "No. Our asshole of a dad was married to our mom, but he had Juni and her mom all set up out in Florida, they didn't know about us and we didn't know about them. He had a whole separate family who just thought he traveled a lot for work. When my and Nero's mom found out about Brenda, Juni's mom, she kicked our dad out and he moved to Florida. Turns out he had women all over the country, but the only other kid he had was Juni. Her mom is a fucking pain in the ass. Juni doesn't believe it, but I'm pretty sure Brenda knew about us and just didn't care."

"That's crazy," Granger says.

“Our dad’s an asshole,” Buck sneers. “Anyway, once we found out about Juni, Nero and I reached out, she was only fifteen, just a kid. If we could have, we’d have taken her to live with us then. Brenda is a flake, always expecting Juni to work and contribute even when she was in high school. When we found out she’d taken off with some guy and left Juni to pay for their apartment, we convinced her that a fresh start here with us would be the best thing for everyone.”

“She’s a great girl, I’m glad you were able to bring her out here with you,” Granger says genuinely.

A snarl works its way from my throat and four sets of eyes all turn in my direction. My brothers both know why I’m reacting this way, but Buck and Nero have no clue. I’d planned to ease her brothers into the idea of having me around their sister, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to work out.

“Uh-oh,” Huck snickers.

“Buck, did anyone mention how my brothers and I found our women?” Granger asks calmly.

Buck listens skeptically as Granger explains how he and our brothers found their wives, then he turns to me. “You think my sister is yours?” he sneers angrily.

“I know she’s mine.”

“How does she feel about that?” he asks, his anger changing to a mocking humor in an instant.

“She’s not convinced yet, but she will be.”

“Yeah, sure,” he says dismissively. “Well, come see me once she’s on board, I won’t bother putting the wedding in my calendar just yet.”

I can tell he thinks we’re either crazy, or full of shit, but even though he’s laughing he’s not warning me off his baby sister like I expected him to. I can work with skeptical amusement, but things would have been more complicated if he’d have said she was off-limits. I wouldn’t have taken any notice, but it would have made things more difficult.



Without any real reason to go and visit Juniper, the rest of the weekend drags and by the time Monday morning rolls around, I'm more than ready to go collect my girl and go to work. Normally I start my day a little after six in the morning, but Juniper doesn't start till eight, so I've drunk three cups of coffee and paced the living room more times than I can count by the time I'm putting my car into drive and heading over to her house.

I expect to see her red SUV outside, but it's gone, as is Buck's truck and only Nero's Camero that arrived last week is parked at the curb. Confused, I pull out my cell and dial my brother's number.

"Hey," Beau answers on the first ring.

"Is Juniper at the yard?"

"Er..." I hear the sound of him moving around on the end of the line and then a second later he chuckles. "Yep, she just pulled in. I take it you told her you were planning to come pick her up this morning?"

"Yes."

"Should have been earlier," he laughs.

"Fuck you," I hiss, ending the call, then angrily tossing my cell onto the passenger seat as I tear away from her house and onto the mountain road. Fifteen minutes later, I park my car beside hers and angrily make my way over to her office.

Throwing the door open, I step into the warm, organized space and get hit by a wave of fruity, vanilla scent. I recognize it as the same perfume she was wearing on Saturday and my dick instantly hardens.

I glance at her desk, but it's empty. Her purse is on the floor, and her cell is sitting beside her keyboard. A sound comes from the small kitchen at the back of the office and I take the opportunity to grab her cell and dial my own number. The moment my cell starts to buzz in my pocket, I end the call

and replace her cell back onto the desk where I found it, then lower myself into one of the visitor chairs, cross my leg over my knee and wait.

It can't be more than two minutes later that she appears, wearing tight black jeans and a soft-looking knit jumper with baggy sleeves. Her hair is twisted into a messy knot on top of her head and she's wearing black-framed glasses that I've never seen before.

"Teddy," she greets me coolly. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"There's lots of things I need from you, but let's start with you telling me why when I told you I was going to drive you to work today, you'd already left by the time I got to your house?"

"Why would you drive me? We work different hours and we both have our own cars. Plus I don't like you and you have a nasty habit of saying inappropriate things when we're in a car together," she says, not looking at me and instead forcing her attention to where she's dipping the tea bag into the mug in her hand.

Ignoring her barb, I stand up and take a step closer to her. "We drive together because I said I would drive you, so when I turn up at your house I expect you to be there," I growl angrily.

"No."

"No?" I parrot back.

"No. You don't get to tell me what I'm doing. A normal person would ask. I'd still have said no, but it's polite to ask."

"Give me your keys."

"No," she says, outraged.

"I'll take your car home, then get Bonnie to give me a ride back."

"Can you actually hear anything I'm saying?" she questions.

“Of course I can hear you, but when you’re talking bullshit that I don’t want to hear, I’m just going to ignore it.” I grin.

A smile starts to twitch at the corners of her lips, but as I stare at her, she stifles it and smooths her expression into neutral annoyance. “How can I help you, Mr. Barnett?”

“Mr. Barnett?”

“You are one of my bosses, I like to keep things professional,” she retorts.

Moving closer still, I reach out and run the backs of my fingers over her cheek. “I’m not your boss and being professional is overrated.”

“Teddy.” My name comes out on a moan that I know she didn’t intend, but I take the opportunity anyway and step forward into her body, pressing my chest against hers and feeling the rapid beating of her heart through our clothes.

“Say yes, Treasure, say yes, give yourself to me and I promise you won’t regret it.”

I feel her waver, feel the way she leans into me, then tenses and pulls away. She wants me, even if she can’t say it out loud.

“Think about how good I’d make you feel. How I’ll touch you, how I’ll lick and suck and explore every inch of you until I know everything about you. Imagine giving yourself over and letting me take control so all you have to think about is how good it feels. I’ll drive you so insane with pleasure you’ll beg me to stop, but you won’t mean it, your lips will tell me no, but you’ll scratch and claw at me the moment I try to move away. You’ll clamp your legs around me and beg me to never stop.”

Her breath is ragged and her pupils are blown wide. She sags forward until her hands are resting against my chest and I wish we were anywhere but here. A part of me knows that if I move to lock the door, she’ll second-guess this thing between us again and that can’t happen. I need to cement my ownership, make her mine in whatever way I can. My dick is throbbing, hard and desperate, I want to rip her jeans off, shred

her panties and slam into her, until I can feel her arousal dripping onto my balls, but not here, not like this.

My mind is consumed with all the things I want to do to her, all the filthy depraved ways I want to fuck her, how I want to worship her like the treasure she is, then fuck all her holes like the dirty little tease I know she'll be.

I let my thoughts drift too far from the present and don't realize that she's pulling away until her hands fall from my chest and she tries to take a step back.

"Treasure."

"No, no." Shaking her head she pushes more insistently. "No, this is wrong."

"Nothing about us could ever be wrong," I whisper, leaning in to press a soft kiss against the pulse point in her neck.

A soft, shaky exhale falls from her parted lips, if I hadn't been so close I wouldn't have heard it. "N-no... no, I don't want this," she whispers. Her voice is shaking, she doesn't believe what she's saying any more than I do, but I let her pull away. My dick isn't going to be finding any relief but that's alright, I've broken down some of the layers of her defenses and given her a hint at how it'll feel to be mine and she reacted beautifully. I can give her a tiny bit of space now, because once she's mine I'll want to share every moment, every breath with her because I won't be able to allow her an inch.

"I don't like it when you lie," I say, pushing a dominant tone into my voice as I step back a little, keeping one arm curled around her back.

"I'm not lying." Her voice is a little stronger now, but I miss the breathiness and uncertainty of only seconds ago.

"If I push my hand between your legs I could prove how much you're lying, but for now I'll let you stay behind your veil of deception until you understand just how much you belong to me."

Biting at her bottom lip with her teeth, I watch as she swallows thickly, then closes her eyes and inhales. "I need to

work; don't you have trees to cut down?"

"Beau didn't tell you?" I ask her, letting my lips spread into a wide smile.

"Tell me what?"

"I'm your new office mate."

"What?" she all but shrieks, shoving away from me and taking several steps back.

"We're almost at the edge of our land with this latest cut, we could just move up, but we like to rotate which sections of the mountain to fell, I'll be spending the next few weeks figuring out where we go next."

"So why are you going to be sharing an office with me? Don't you have your own office?"

"I do, but you have all the paperwork and costs in here, I'd be up and down collecting information all day, so it's easier if I just make a base in here with you."

Her face pales a little and it's like being punched in the gut. How can we go from pressed up against each other practically panting with want, to this frigid dislike she's throwing at me now we're no longer touching each other?

"I'm not sure," she pauses, then inhales deeply. "I don't think you being in here with me is a good idea."

"I disagree," I say simply.

"I'm more than happy to send you copies of any paperwork you might need by email," she tries again.

"That won't work, mostly I'll be working off maps, plotting the areas we've already targeted and then planning how to move forward. I need to be in here," I say, adding a bite to my voice and making sure she understands she's not getting out of working in the same space as me, no matter how much she protests.

Beau and I discussed this, he thinks I'm pushing too hard. I reminded him that he dislikes Bonnie going to the bathroom on her own because he hates them having a closed door

between them. He mentioned how he'd ended up getting kicked in the balls for trying to force Bonnie to spend time with him and I pointed at his pregnant wife sitting in his lap. He shut up after that and agreed that I could do whatever I wanted as long as I didn't cross the barrier into sexual harassment.

I promised I wouldn't, but honestly, I don't care. He can fire me if he wants to, no job is more important than Juniper and making sure she understands that I'm not going away and that she will be mine.

"Fine, whatever, I have work to do," she snaps, pulling me back to the present as she sits down at her desk, turns the radio on quietly and starts to flick through a pile of paperwork, effectively dismissing me.

Smiling, I let her pretend to ignore me, as I clear off the office supplies that are piled on the desk opposite hers, pull out a map of the mountain and then settle down into the chair, spreading the map out in front of me.

My eyes stay on her, watching as she pretends to be engrossed in her own work. She's pretty convincing, except she keeps glancing up at me, then darting her gaze away the moment she realizes she's been caught looking. Of course, if I wasn't staring at her, I'd never know she's looking at me, but that's neither here nor there.

The tension filling the room is so thick it feels almost oppressive. Country music is playing softly through the radio, loud enough for me to recognize the song, but not loud enough to disguise the sounds of her shuffling papers.

Standing up, I head toward the small kitchenette. "Drink?"

"No thanks,"

"I know you don't drink coffee, but do you want tea or a bottle of water or something?"

"I have tea already," she says, lifting her mug to prove her point.

I nod, then busy myself setting the machine up to brew and smiling as the smell of coffee starts to fill the room. It's always

been a soothing scent to me and right now, I close my eyes and inhale and exhale slowly, trying to stem the need to pin her to her desk and fuck her. Perhaps if I hadn't fucked things up by propositioning her, we'd be in a better place and instead of imagining it, I'd have her bent over her desk, with a plug in her butt while I fucked her pussy and she bit down on the panties I'd shoved in her mouth to stifle the sounds of her cries and alert anyone to the fact that we were fucking in the office.

Instead, I'm dealing with stiff silence and uncomfortable rejections while I lie about needing to look at maps so I have a reason to spend more time one on one with her. The truth is that I do need to plot where the next cut we make in the trees will be, but normally it's something Beau, Huck and I do over dinner. We draw out the last five years' worth of felling on the map, then look at where we can move to next that will cause the least amount of damage to the trees and ecosystem of the mountain and the plants and animals that live here.

We might be loggers, but we refuse to let our livelihood cause irreparable damage to the mountain. My brothers and I spend months considering the implications of each tree we fell and all the work we do here. In an ideal world we wouldn't cut down a single tree, but if we don't log this land, someone else will, and at least with us in charge we can do it with as little damage as possible.

If Juniper knew our business a little better, or had worked here longer, she'd know that we have years' worth of maps just like this filed away. She'd also know that we have digital copies stored on the computer that I could print out with all the boundary lines, as well as the cuts we've made over the last five years. But she doesn't know any of that, which is why I'll be able to waste at least a week here in this office with her while I hand draw out all the information onto this map, dragging out a task that could be done in a couple of hours into as long as it takes to convince her to give this thing between us a go.

Filling my cup with hot, rich coffee, I head back to my new desk and actually start to slowly work. In fact, I work so slowly, that after an hour, most of which I spent staring at

Juniper, I've only drawn three lines and added a little color to the boundaries.

Juniper seems to have done even less than me. Her attention has been forced so intently on the paperwork in front of her to stop herself from looking at me, that I'm pretty convinced she's read the same page twenty times and gotten nowhere with it.

"Tell me about your friends back home. Will we be getting many visitors?" I ask.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I didn't have many friends left in Cali, the people I went to high school with all dispersed after we graduated, and my coworkers were all a lot older than me. To be honest, most of them were older than my mom, so although I enjoyed working with them, we didn't have much in common."

Nodding, I swallow. It makes sense that she's alone, that explains some of her reservations about jumping in with me, but she is close to her brothers. "So Buck and Nero, they said they only found out you were their sister a few years back."

"Yeah," she laughs softly. "Turns out our dad is a dick, who liked to share his a lot, too much in fact, judging by the number of wives and girlfriends he has."

"You're not close to your dad then?"

"God no, he used to turn up once a month, stay with us for a few days then disappear again. He never bothered to stay in touch the rest of the time and when he was with us, he was really only interested in my mom and their bedroom. As soon as he showed up, I knew I'd be fending for myself for however long he stayed."

Anger pulses through me, "And your mom was okay with that?"

Juniper shrugs. "My mom loved him; if I'm honest, I think she still loves him even though she knows what an asshole he is. I can't say for definite, but I think she knew about Julie, Buck and Nero's mom. I think she knew he had a wife and a family and she did it anyway."

The disgust evident in her tone tells me all I need to know about how she feels about cheating and I'm glad, not that I'd ever give her the opportunity to cheat on me, but I'm pleased to know she's as repulsed by it as I am.

“How was it when two guys turned up saying they were your brothers?”

“Surprising. I had zero clue that my dad had another family, or that I had siblings. I just assumed he was an asshole who only wanted to be a partner and father a couple of days a month. The day the guys turned up, they were waiting for me when I got back from school. My mom didn't want me to have anything to do with them, but as far as they were concerned we were family and so they refused to take no for an answer. Maybe if they'd been younger she'd have been able to send them away, but they were both in their twenties and determined.” A soft smile spreads across her face and I find myself smiling with her, I'm glad she has some family that look out for her, although she has a load more now that she's mine. Six brothers, four sisters, a niece and a nephew, as well as surrogate grandparents and everyone else that's a part of our unofficial family now.

“I'm glad you have them in your life, it's clear they love you.”

“They do, I love them too. I wasn't looking for big brothers, but my life is richer for having them.”

I wait for her to ask me something, to show some interest in my life, but she stays quiet and seems to focus on her work again. It bugs me, but I don't let it deter me. “So what did you do for work back in Cali?”

“I was the receptionist at an imports office. I answered the phones and did most of the admin and stuff. I worked there part-time on weekends and evenings while I was in high school, then they offered me a full-time job when I graduated.”

“You didn't want to go to college?”

Her face hardens a little and she shakes her head. “My mom and I were pretty poor, but my dad has plenty of money.

When they did the assessment for financial aid I didn't qualify. Apparently, it didn't matter if I hadn't seen my father in years, only what his bank balance was."

"What?" I shout outraged. "He refused to pay for college for his kid?"

"The one and only time I've ever called him to ask for his help, he told me that he'd told my mom she should have gotten rid of me and that he wasn't paying for school for a kid he never wanted in the first place." Her tone is full of wry amusement, but I can see the hurt behind her calm facade.

"What's his name, where the fuck does he live?" I demand, jumping out of my seat and crossing the office until I'm beside her.

Her giggle snaps me out of the furious rage that is descending over me and I blink down, wondering how she can be so calm in the face of her father's dismissal and abandonment. "What are you planning on doing? Hunting him down and demanding he pay out tens of thousands of dollars for school for a child he has no relationship with and who he never wanted in the first place?"

"Yes," I hiss, somehow getting angrier at her lack of anger.

"That's weird, but sweet, but it's not necessary. Both Buck, Nero and their mom all offered to pay for school for me. If I really wanted to I could have gone, but I wasn't going to allow my brothers or their mom to get into debt for me. College isn't the only option to success, I have a job, a car, a nice home to live in, I'm not struggling. So I don't have a degree," she shrugs. "It's not the end of the world. At some point I might take online courses."

"You're his daughter," I argue.

"Look, your concern is sweet, and I appreciate it, but it's misguided. I'm not sitting here furious at my dad and you shouldn't be either," she says so calmly it's obvious she means it.

"What were you planning to major in? What schools did you get accepted to?" I demand, forcing my muscles to relax

some and crossing my arms over my chest to hide my clenched fists.

“I was accepted into NYU and San Diego State and honestly, I have no idea what I planned to major in. Something sensible like business management, I guess, a good job was always my goal and”—she lifts her arms and smirks at me —“lookee here, I have a good job, so really, I’m exactly where I planned to be, only a few years earlier and fifty thousand dollars cheaper.”

Trying to feign amusement, I force a smile to my lips, but I imagine it looks as brittle as it feels. An instinctive need to look after her is nudging at me to take over, to give her every opportunity, and all the care and affection she’s missed out on. All I need her to do is to let me.

“Don’t you have work to do?” she says, pointing at the desk and the map I’d abandoned when I stormed over to her.

“I’d rather get to know you better,” I say, offering her my best winning smile.

“Well, unfortunately, you might be able to slack off, but I can’t.”

Reluctantly I take myself back over to my new desk and sink down into my seat, openly watching her, instead of pretending to work.

“Let’s play twenty questions,” I suggest.

“Are you like this all the time?”

“Like what?” I ask.

“A toddler demanding attention.”

I laugh. “I want all of *your* attention, but only yours. I’ve found myself completely uninterested in anyone else.”

“Hmm, sure,” she sighs, propping her elbows on her desk and resting her chin on her steepled fingers. “Fine, one round of twenty questions and then you have to leave me alone so I can do some work.”

“Deal,” I agree quickly. “But you have to ask me questions too.”

“Okay, I’ll go first. How old are you?”

“Thirty-one. Old enough to know better, young enough to do it anyway. And you’re twenty. My turn. When was your last serious boyfriend?” Honestly, the absolute last thing I want to hear about is any guy who’s touched *my* woman, but I need to know if her reticence to be with me, is just because I fucked up, or because of something some other asshole did.

“I’ve never really had a serious boyfriend, I dated a guy for half my senior year, but it didn’t last past graduation.”

Her body language and tone of voice suggests she really is okay with things not working out with the fucker. It sucks that she’s fighting things with me purely because of something I did, but it means when I get her to forgive me, there’s nothing standing in the way of her being one-hundred-percent mine.

“How do you feel being the youngest in your family?” she asks, tilting her head to one side as she waits for me to answer.

“Growing up, at times being the youngest sucked. My dad died when I was really young, the others all have these strong memories of him, but I was a kid, I hardly have any memories of him at all, all I know is what the others have told me. I’m lucky that our mama was a hell of a woman, she made up for Dad passing too early and Beau really stepped up to play dad to the rest of us. My brothers and I are incredibly close, they’re all my closest friends as well as being my family. I know it’s weird, but it works for us and I don’t think any of us would have it any other way.”

Juniper nods thoughtfully. “Having Buck and Nero now, I get it, kind of. I mean, I moved halfway across the country to be with them and be a real family for the first time since they came knocking on my door. A part of me wonders how different things would have been if I’d known them my entire life, rather than missing out on them until I was a teenager.”

“How did it feel going from being an only child to having brothers?”

“Weird,” she giggles. “They wanted this like, instant sibling bond, but I was a hormone-filled, angsty fifteen-year-old who really had no use for two grown brothers thinking they could boss me around just because we have the same dad. It took me a while to really appreciate them and how they just refused to let me push them away. Now I’m incredibly grateful for them.” Her expression is soft and I love that she’s not hiding her emotions, they’re written clearly all over her face. “Hmm, question three. When was your last girlfriend?” Sitting up straighter, she smirks, then wiggles in her seat as if she’s expecting me to be uncomfortable.

“I’ve never really had one. At school I was kind of shy, in college I found my confidence, but I wasn’t really interested in the whole girlfriend, boyfriend thing and since I moved back to Rockhead Point I haven’t met anyone who piqued my interest for anything more than sex. Until you.” The confession feels good coming from my lips. I need her to know it’s only her, that no one else has ever gotten more than a fleeting glance, when I can’t take my eyes away from her.

I wait for her to say something, to react or speak, but she doesn’t. She’s thoughtful, taking in what I’ve said, but it hasn’t provoked the reaction I was hoping for.

“My turn,” I tell her. “My third question is…” I pause, waiting until I know I have all of her attention. “Are you attracted to me?”

Her eyes go wide and her tongue darts out to moisten her lips. “You’re a very good-looking man.”

“That doesn’t answer the question. I don’t want to know if you think I’m objectively attractive. I want to know if *you* are attracted to *me*?”

Coughing, she clears her throat, her eyes darting around the room, looking at everything but me. “Yes,” she whispers.

“Yes what?” I coax.

Her teeth toy with her bottom lip again before she boldly lifts her gaze to mine. “Yes, I find you attractive.”

A slow grin starts at the corners of my lips and spreads until I'm smiling widely. "Treasure, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"I didn't ask," she says, a slight blush rising in her cheeks.

"I know, but I'm telling you anyway. You're stunning, absolutely perfect."

"I'm not perfect." Her gaze dips down to her lap and her blush rises, filling her cheeks with a rosy hue.

"You are to me. To me, you're absolutely perfect."

I wait for her to look at me, but she doesn't for far too long, instead pretending like her hands are the most interesting thing in the world as she stares at them, picking at the side of her thumb.

"It's your turn, beautiful."

"Oh, er, what's your favorite?"

"No," I interrupt. "Not a generic question like what my favorite food is, ask me something real."

"Something real?"

"Yeah, something that matters, that tells you something about me. Something real."

Her eyes go distant for a minute while she thinks and I wait patiently.

"If your brothers hadn't found their wives, would you think the whole love at first sight thing was real?" Her smile is telling, she expects me to lie, but I won't.

"No, if I hadn't watched my brothers fall so instantly into desperate, all-consuming love I wouldn't believe a word of it. I didn't believe it, not until I saw the moment Beau realized Bonnie was his, then Huck, then Granger, then Penn. One by one, my brothers have gone from being normal, rational guys, playing the field, fucking about, but never with any thoughts of settling down and having kids, to these single-minded entities who live and breathe for their women. Not any woman, but their woman."

“How do you know it’s love at first sight and not just a thought brought to fruition? Like when you see a psychic, if they say you’ll meet a girl in a pink dress, you subconsciously search out girls in pink dresses.”

“Until I met you, I might have said that was possible, but now that I know you exist, now that I’ve seen you and touched you and kissed you, I know, deep down inside of myself that no one else will ever make me feel the way you do.”

“How do I make you feel?” she asks cautiously, like she’s not sure she wants to know the answer.

“Like I’ll live in perpetual darkness without you.”

Her eyes widen and I wonder for a moment if I’ve gone too far, if I’m pushing too hard. But she needs to know, she needs to understand that I’m all in. I’m not holding back, or pretending that I’m not as into her as I am. I’m falling in love with her and I barely know anything about her. When I know her inside and out, imagine how I’ll feel then, how obsessed and consumed and fascinated I’ll be.

“We should get some work done.” Her voice is shaking a little and as much as I want to push her more, until she falls into my arms because she doesn’t want to stand up without me, I won’t. She’s got a glimpse of me and what I feel and I’ll let that sit with her, let it permeate and filter through all of the gaps in her defenses. This is only day one of the war for her, this battle might have ended in a draw, but it’s not over, in fact it’s only just begun.

“We can carry on our game later,” I tell her. Standing up, I cross to the whiteboard on the wall and write Teddy 17, Juniper 16, then I move back to my desk and carry on working on my map.

JUNIPER



Having him in my office, in my space, is stifling, but not in a bad way. Even his silent presence is intense, he literally steals the air from the room and replaces it with this intrinsically male scent that's driving me a little mad.

Somehow and I don't know how; he smells like baking, like chocolate and vanilla. I'm working in a space that smells like sexy man cookies and I feel like I'm fighting the urge to straddle his lap and lick him to see if he tastes as good as he smells.

I've honestly never reacted to a guy's scent before. I mean some guys' aftershaves smell good, but I couldn't tell you what they smelled of. Before today I'd have told you the most attractive scent I could think of would be soap and leather, but now all I ever want to smell again is cookies, and all I'll think of will be Teddy.

Working with him this close is almost impossible, so by the time lunchtime rolls around, I've barely made a dent in the work I set out to do this morning and I'm eager to get some air and get away from him.

When his cell rings just before lunch, I take the opportunity to run away. Grabbing my food from the refrigerator, I haul ass outside and settle into a quiet spot just to the side of the path that takes the vehicles and machinery onto the mountain. The view is breathtaking and I can't be the only person that thinks so, because a rough-hewn bench has been made out of a huge log and placed so you can sit and admire the majestic scenery.

Opening my pink lunch bag, I pull out my sandwich and can of soda and place them beside me. Then I grab my little baggy of carrot sticks and start to munch on them as I scroll through my social media.

A message pops up on my screen and I click into it.

Marshall: Hey

I wasn't really expecting to hear from the handsome man I met in the grocery store on Friday night so soon. A part of me assumed that after Teddy pulled his caveman routine, everyone in this tiny town would label me as taken, even if I'm not. So I'm pleasantly surprised to hear from him.

Me: Hey

I'm useless at casual texting, I prefer a good old-fashioned phone call, where you can chat without having to panic about text tone, appropriate emoji use and how long is too long to wait to reply.

Marshall: I know I haven't technically waited the obligatory three days, but I figured I've always been a rule breaker ;)

Me: Is the three day thing still a rule? I think you might be showing your age.

Marshall: Are you calling me old???

Me: Me??? Never!!! ;)

I take a bite of my sandwich as I wait for him to reply. I'm not sure how I feel about this guy. He's cute, but honestly, he's probably a little too old for me. I'm not sure exactly how old he is, but I think Bonnie said she thought he went to school with Cody, who is definitely mid-to-late thirties.

He is nice though and he made me laugh, even his texts are making me smile. Talking to Marshall doesn't come with the pressure that talking to Teddy does. My cell beeps again and I lift it from the bench.

Marshall: Cheeky! I like it. When can I take you to dinner?

Me: When do you want to take me to dinner?

Marshall: The weekend feels like a long way off, so how about Wednesday? It is hump day after all ;)

I giggle, I can't help it. He's sort of adorably cheesy and although I'm not sure that's a trait that necessarily makes me want to get naked, it is nice when a guy can make you laugh.

Me: Now who's being cheeky?

Marshall: Dinner, Wednesday? There's a fantastic Italian place in Great Lakes.

Me: Okay, I'd love to go to dinner with you. Shall I meet you in town?

Marshall: I'll come and pick you up. My old-fashioned values are rearing their ugly head. A gentleman always picks a lady up from her home.

Me: Okay old man lol

Marshall: I'm not that old, young lady. I'll make reservations and pick you up about 7? Is that okay?

Me: Perfect, see you Wednesday

A slow smile fills my lips, I have a date. I'm not exactly excited, that's the wrong word. Optimistic, might be a better descriptor. Whatever happens, Marshall seems like he'll be fun to be around and I'll have a nice dinner that I haven't had to cook. Win-win.

"There you are," Teddy says, surprising me as he appears at the end of the bench and sits down.

Guiltily, I close down the screen on my cell and shove it into my pocket. I feel like I'm doing something wrong, but I don't have anything to feel guilty about. Teddy and I aren't a couple. We aren't exclusive, we aren't anything other than coworkers, so I have nothing to feel bad about.

"You okay?" he asks.

Taking a large bite of my sandwich, I nod, glad to be able to use food as a buffer to not have to speak to him. Guilt

settles like a stone in my stomach and suddenly my sandwich tastes like sawdust and I feel ashamed.

Silently I remind myself that just because Teddy thinks I'm his fated "one," doesn't mean I reciprocate that feeling. Perhaps I am starting to believe that he believes in this love at first sight stuff, but no one really falls in love like that, certainly not me. Teddy is a beautiful guy, but first impressions mean something, and my first real impression of him wasn't endearing, so, I have nothing to feel even remotely guilty about.

I choke down the rest of my food while Teddy sits beside me, his thigh brushing mine and sending waves of goose bumps rushing across my skin every time he "accidentally" touches me. But we both know there's nothing accidental about it, every time he does it, he glances at me to see how I'll react, then smirks when he sees me stiffen. He knows he's taunting me and he's enjoying it. At the end of our lunch break Teddy trails after me, following me back into the office that feels half the size it did this morning when I got here. His presence is huge, he exudes big-dick energy and I have to swallow back the words when I almost tell him that.

He gets a call not long after lunch telling him that he needs to go out onto the mountain, and I'm so grateful I could cry. With every moment I spend with him, the urge to forgive his sexual faux-pas and give him a real chance builds. There's something about him that disarms me and I'm not sure if I like it or not.

Maybe I'm just being stubborn. If I listen to the other Barnett women, they'd have me believing that what I want isn't important, that being his and giving in to him is inevitable. I think that's what bothers me the most. We didn't have some epic meet-cute where we ran into each other in the street, or he rescued me from a mugger, or helped me when my car broke down.

He didn't see me and fall to his knees, he waited a week, then offered me a night of good sex. If we really were meant to be, that isn't the story I want for my grand love, it's not what I'd want to tell our grandkids when they ask how we met.

Once he leaves, it's like I can breathe again, although my afternoon isn't any more productive than my morning and when the clock rolls around to five p.m., I already have my purse in my hand ready to go.

The house is empty when I get home, and for the first time since we moved here the quiet bothers me. Where I lived in Cali, it was never quiet, even in the middle of the night. Here in Montana it feels like there's nothing but quiet and right now, I hate it.

Kicking off my shoes, I plod up the stairs to my room and turn on the faucet to fill the tub in my bathroom. Steam starts to fill the room and I inhale deeply, letting the damp air fill my lungs. There's something about a steamy bathroom that always clears my head and right now I need that more than ever. Adding some jasmine-scented oil to the water, I strip off my clothes and climb into the tub while it's still filling. Too hot water sloshes over my legs and I hiss, grabbing the sides to lift my butt out of the liquid, slowly sinking back down into it as my skin acclimatizes to the heat.

I like my baths hot, as hot as I can stand, then I'll stay in until the water cools. It's a ritual that I've been doing for as long as I can remember, it helps me relax and calm my racing mind. Closing my eyes, I let my head fall to the back of the tub and exhale slowly. The hot water gradually covers my body, until I'm submerged to my shoulders and a fine layer of sweat is coating my face. Turning off the faucet with my toes, I brace my arms on the sides and smile to myself as all my stress slowly melts into the swishing water.

My cell beeps from where I put it on the floor beside the tub and for a moment I seriously consider ignoring it, until it beeps again. Sighing, I open my eyes and sit up, glaring at the cell as if it's beeped to deliberately annoy me. Then I consider that Nero or Buck could be hurt and reach for it, trying not to splash any water onto the floor in my haste to grab it.

It's a text, but it's not from either of my brothers or the guys on their team, it's from Bonnie.

Bonnie: Hi hon, I know your bros are on shift tonight, so dinner is at 8. I'm not taking no for an answer.

For half a second I'm tempted. I don't want to be alone tonight, and spending time in the crazy that is the Barnett home is definitely appealing. But I don't want them to start treating me like I'm Teddy's, like this thing between us is a foregone conclusion.

Me: Thank you for the invite, but I put dinner in the crock pot before I left for work this morning. Tub, dinner, then an early night for me. Exciting right! Ha ha ha.

The three dots appear, then disappear several times before her reply comes through.

Bonnie: Well that sucks, I was looking forward to seeing you.

Me: Sorry Why don't you come have lunch at the yard with me tomorrow, we can catch up then.

Bonnie: Yes to lunch! I'll make some muffins. You can have dinner with us tomorrow night instead.

Me: I don't normally go out on a school night lol. Plus Nero and Buck aren't at work tomorrow, so I was going to cook for them and have a catch up, I've missed them, I've gotten used to them being around since we moved here.

Bonnie: No worries, I'll see you tomorrow

Me: See you tomorrow.

Dropping my cell back to the floor, I exhale a relieved breath. I know I shouldn't have lied, but if I'd told her the truth, she either would have insisted or she'd have told Teddy, so this way is easier.

An hour later, the water is cold and my skin is wrinkled as I climb out, wrapping myself in a towel and setting the tub to drain. Twisting a second towel around my hair, I pick up my cell from the floor and pad back into my bedroom. Once I'm dried off, I grab my favorite lotion and smooth it over my skin. Then I pull on a cute pajama set that's matching shorts and a crop top in a cute pale-pink color. They're probably more

suiting to California, but they're comfy and came with a long cardigan made of the same fabric.

The sound of the doorbell chiming downstairs surprises me, and I slide my feet into my slippers and head down to see who's there. It could be one of the neighbors, one of the guys who's not on shift, or a family member from the couple of guys who moved here with wives and kids.

Our door doesn't have a peephole, so I cautiously open it a crack and find Teddy standing outside.

"Teddy?"

"I brought you dinner," he growls unhappily, lifting the foil-covered plate in his hands to show me.

"I—"

"You were lying."

"I—" I shake my head.

"You were lying, Treasure," Teddy says angrily, taking a step forward.

Instinctively I step back and he takes the opportunity to push the door open and come into the house.

"What are you doing?" I ask, hating how breathy I sound.

"Making sure you eat," he snarls, pushing past me and stomping into the kitchen as I rush to follow him.

"I've eaten," I lie.

Ignoring me, he rips the foil from the plate and puts it in the microwave, setting the timer and then turning around to face me, his arms crossed across his chest.

"Teddy, I've eaten," I insist.

Inhaling sharply, his nostrils flare as he watches me with an intensity that makes me want to confess every lie I've ever told, not just that I've eaten when I clearly haven't.

Taking a step forward he pauses when I retreat and a gleam fills his eyes. "If you were just a fuck, I wouldn't care about the bullshit that's spewing from your mouth right now, but

you're my fucking everything, so we're going to get the rules set out right from the fucking start."

He takes another step closer to me and I back up.

"I won't lie to you, because firstly, it's a shitty thing to do and secondly, because I refuse to bullshit and sugarcoat things when I prefer honesty even if it's brutal. I won't allow you to lie to me because lies and mistruths fester and damage things that should be solid and immovable. I've never been in a real relationship before, but I know how I can make sure you don't ever fucking lie to me again."

"We're not in a relationship," I say through dry lips.

"Maybe not yet, and that's my fault, but we will be and when we are, we might as well both know what to expect."

"Presumptuous much?" I snark.

"Confident," he says, his smile cold and filled with promise. "I'm a pretty laid-back guy. I have a crazy family and the best job in the world. But when it comes to you, I find I have a need for control that I've never experienced outside of the bedroom before. You lied to Bonnie tonight to avoid me."

My eyes refuse to meet his, I could deny his words, but now that he's here, and I can see how angry he is that I lied to Bonnie, I'm not sure I can do anything but tell the truth. "Not just to avoid you."

"But that was part of it?"

"Yes," I agree.

"What else?"

I force myself to lift my gaze and look at him. "I don't want your family to start treating me as if I'm yours."

"You are mine."

"No, I'm not."

"I caused this, I know that, but I'm not going to keep arguing with you. You belong to me, there's no debate and no alternative. I'll make you see it, make you believe it, I'll do whatever it takes."

“What if I don’t want that?” I ask quietly.

“I’ll make you want it,” he says, like it’s just that simple.

“I’m going out on a date with Marshall Ross on Wednesday,” I blurt.

Teddy’s jaw clenches and he swallows visibly. Then his lips twist into a devious smile and he steps forward. Flinching, I jolt backward, shocked when my butt hits the small dining table. “Teddy?”

“What’s the matter, Treasure? Did you run out of places to run to already?”

“I’m not running.”

“You’ve been running since the first time I told you I wanted you. I fucked up. I know that, but I’m going to fix it.”

“There’s nothing to fix, I’m dating another man,” I tell him, feeling incredulous that he seems so sure we’ll be together.

“That’s okay. Go out with him, but I promise you it’ll be the only time I allow it. That can be my punishment for hurting you. I’ll suffer through watching you get dressed up and going out with Marshall fucking Ross. I’ll hate every second, but I’ll do it, I’ll pay penance for treating you like you were any other woman on the earth, not the one who makes my soul sing and my dick hard. I’m so fucking sorry that I made you feel like you weren’t everything to me, I’ll never fucking forgive myself, but I will make this right. This doubt you feel, it’s because of me and it’s the reason you’re not in my arms, in our bed and stuffed full of my dick right now. I’ll accept my punishment, because I know I deserve it.”

He’s so earnest, so honest, despite the macho, alpha male bullshit that comes out of his mouth every time he says I belong to him. Something about him makes me want to curl up into a ball in his lap and let him pour all that want and need and desire he keeps talking about all over me. But another part, the part above my groin and heart, the sensible part of me, my brain is saying that I shouldn’t trust him, shouldn’t allow myself to get caught up in his whirlwind of drama.

“But if I have to take my punishment, Treasure, you have to take yours.”

“What?” I gasp, so far in my own head I hadn’t noticed that he’s practically on me, his chest pressed to mine, forcing me to lean back over the table.

“I fucked up and because of that I have to watch you go on a date with another guy, but you fucked up too. You lied to my sister and avoided your friend to avoid me. You deserve to be punished as well.”

“You...” My voice fails me. “You want to punish me?” I finally force out, my words barely above a whisper.

“I think two things fit the crime. One is pain, the other pleasure.”

“I don’t understand,” I gasp.

“You’re too strong a person to be hiding. You lied and I won’t have lies between us. So you can either turn around, push out that cute butt and let me spank it five times, or you can push down those tiny shorts and let me finger fuck you until you come on my hand.”

My brow furrows. “How is you making me come a punishment?”

His lips spread into a wide grin. “It’s a punishment, because after I make you come, I’m going to leave and you’re going to spend the rest of the night thinking about how I made you feel. You’ll go to sleep and dream about me, then in the morning you’ll wake up, come downstairs and remember how I made you come on your kitchen table.”

Bright, taunting eyes pin me to the spot, he’s not touching me with his hands, not holding me in place, but I feel as immobile as if he were.

“If you really feel absolutely nothing for me, then use me for an orgasm, I promise I’m good at it. If I’m just some asshole who keeps pulling this possessive bullshit. If you really don’t believe you’re mine, then prove it.”

I know he's taunting me. I should let him smack my ass a few times, or better yet, tell him to fuck off and get out of my house, but for some reason I don't seem to be able to back down from his taunts. Suddenly filled with an arrogant confidence that I have never felt in my entire life ever, I push my hands between us, shove down my shorts, then lift my butt onto the edge of the table and brace my hands behind me.

My inner voice is clinging to a metal ball and chain and singing Miley Cyrus's "Wrecking Ball" at the top of my lungs, and when his eyes fall to my pussy I preen, arching my back and putting myself on display for him.

His smile is pure sin.

"Good girl, spread your legs a little wider and let me see my pussy."

I should be mortified, I should push him away and kick him out, or at least fight back or something, but instead I'm doing what he says and not feeling even an ounce of discomfort. At the first stroke of his finger through my folds I throw my head back, close my eyes and moan wantonly. It's been too long since anyone but me touched me there and he wasn't lying when he said he knows what he's doing. His thumb finds my clit, teasing it softly, while he parts my folds and slides the tip of one finger inside of me.

"Soaked," he whispers against my neck.

When did he get so close? Soft lips find the pulse point beneath my jaw and he starts to suck as he pushes one finger all the way into me, pumping slowly as his thumb increases the pressure on my clit. Overwhelmed with sensation, I try to pull away, but he just follows, adding a second finger into my core as he works my clit, my neck, my pussy, my soul.

"So hot and wet, your cunt is sucking my fingers in and begging for more. I can't wait to feel you on my cock, I'm going to stretch you out with my dick and then coat you in my cum. I want you dripping with a mixture of my arousal and yours and when I'm done making you scream, I'm going to coat my fingers in our cream and feed it to you." His dirty words, combined with his fingers and thumb are more than I

can bear and I come, screaming his name loudly as I clench down onto him, feeling my arousal dripping onto my thighs while his fingers still work me, thrusting into me slowly, working me through my orgasm until my muscles gradually relax and I exhale a shaky sigh.

“Fuck,” I pant.

“Any time, any place,” he says, laughing softly. “I’m going to spend so much time with my dick inside of you, you’ll forget what it’s like not to be connected to me. I’m going to wake you up with my tongue in your pussy, then fill you up with my seed before breakfast. We’re going to fall asleep with my dick in your well-used cunt or ass every night. I’m going to make you so used to being cum drunk all day, every day, that you won’t even be able to go a single day without me making love to you. I’m going to make you crave me so badly you hurt when I’m not near, I’m going to make you as obsessed with me as I am with you.”

My eyes are clenched tightly shut, but I’m shaking and I don’t know if it’s from the full-body orgasm he’s just wrung out of me, or from the dirty, scary promises he just made. If I don’t open my eyes I don’t have to deal with it, with him. If I just stay here behind the safety of my eyelids, I don’t have to face how much I want everything he just threatened me with. For so long I’ve craved an all-consuming passion, but now I’ve found it, why am I fighting it so hard?

I’m not sure how long I sit on the edge of the table, my pussy bare to him, my muscles still spasming around the memory of his fingers. When I open my eyes I expect to find him right here, staring at me the way he always does, like he thinks if he watches me for long enough he’ll be able to tell what I’m thinking. Only he’s not here.

I’m alone.

He left.

TEDDY



Closing her front door behind me I question why the fuck I'm walking away when she's spread out, half-naked on the table, her cunt wet with her arousal, practically begging me to claim her with my dick.

But I know why. It's because she's not there yet, she's not ready to admit she's mine. She lied tonight to avoid seeing me and even after the way she responded to me in my bathroom, she still planned a date with another guy. She's not there yet, and that's why I'm walking to my house and not branding her with my cum and hoping to plant a baby in her belly.

This is part of her punishment as much as it is mine. Walking away when she was so wanton, bare and wet and offering herself to me on a silver platter was almost impossible. But I was an asshole and she lied, we both need to pay penance for our sins and this is the way we do it.

To most people, receiving an orgasm wouldn't be a bad thing, and I know I definitely made her feel good, but this is about more than just the physical. Just like I told her I would be, I'm all over that house now. She'll smell me in the kitchen, remember the way I made her feel, dream about me. She chose to let me touch her and that will haunt her too.

She'll question why, she'll wonder why I left. She'll doubt me and her, but the thing is, even as she questions every little thing that happened between us tonight, she'll be thinking about me and I need to be all she can think about. It's fucked up and unhealthy, but I want that. The way I feel about her isn't normal and I need her to want me in the same fucked-up

way. She isn't there yet, but I'll make her want me the way I want her, then I'll breed her and marry her and tie her to me in every way humanly possible until it'll be inconceivable for her to imagine her life without me.

I'm halfway up the hill back toward my place when her front door opens and she steps out, her eyes raking the darkness. She can't see me, there're no streetlights out here and I'm hidden in the shadows, so I pause and watch as she scans the driveway and grassy area that centers the group of homes.

There're two other houses with lights on, but no one else is watching so I'm the only person that sees as her face crumples and she lifts her hand to cover her mouth. I should leave. I should let this punishment settle in, let it fester and permeate. But I can't do it, I care about her too much to watch her suffer when I can soothe her. My feet close the distance between us in the blink of an eye and then she's in my arms, crying against my chest, her fingers tangled in my shirt as she holds me to her, clinging to me.

"It's okay, Treasure, it's okay," I coo, lifting her up and carrying her to her bedroom. Laying her in the bed, I kick off my shoes and climb in after her, tugging her on top of me, and holding her to my chest with my arms banded around her back.

"I'm sorry," she says through hiccuping sobs. "I don't know why I'm crying."

"It's my fault, I pushed too hard. I've got you, it's okay," I soothe, running a hand up and down her back. I don't comment on the fact that she's wearing her shorts again, she must have pulled them on before she came to the door, but a part of me wants to strip her naked, take away that layer of protection while her defenses are down. I won't though, I want her submission, but not in a way that diminishes her choices. Pressing my advantage now wouldn't be her giving herself to me because she simply can't *not*. It would be taking and I won't do that, no matter how much I crave the feeling of her nakedness.

Her sobs gradually subside and I slide her onto the bed, pressing a soft kiss to her lips as I climb off and go downstairs to reheat her dinner and bring it up to her. “Up you get, Treasure, you need to eat,” I tell her, waiting for her to move, then sliding the tray onto her lap.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Eat,” I say, sitting back down on the edge of the bed. She doesn’t move and after a moment, I nod pointedly to the tray.

Sighing, she picks up her fork and stabs at a piece of chicken. “Are you a dom?”

“What makes you ask that?”

Rolling her eyes, she smirks, and I’m glad to see the hint of fire back in her tear-swollen eyes. “Hmm, let me think, the bossing me around, the mine, mine, mine bullshit, the punishment,” she trails off, and I’m the one to smirk this time.

“I don’t consider myself a dominant, no. I enjoy control, especially in the bedroom, but I’m not going to start asking to tie you up, or expect you to call me sir.”

“Maybe I’m into that kind of thing,” she taunts, arching her brow in challenge.

“If that’s what you’re into, I can definitely oblige *all* your wants and needs. I have a friend who is very much in the lifestyle, he’s been suggesting I should get more into BDSM.”

Juniper’s eyes get so wide I’m sure it must hurt and I laugh. “Calm down, I’m teasing. I like to be in charge and from the way you responded earlier you won’t have any problems with that. I’ll admit that in the past I have played with women who consider themselves submissive, mainly because we both knew what we wanted and expected out of any sexual interaction we had, but the Dom/sub lifestyle has never been something that has particularly appealed to me.”

“But you’d expect me to just let you be in charge?”

“I’m sure on occasion I might enjoy you taking control, but for the most part when it comes to sex, I’d lead and you’d follow, yes.”

I wait for her to say something else, to ask more questions, but instead, she continues to eat, just like I told her to. Most women balk at the idea of relinquishing control to a man, even if it's just for sex. I wasn't lying when I said the D/s lifestyle wasn't for me, it isn't, but maybe when I said I only wanted control in the bedroom, I might not have been telling the whole truth either. With any other woman, all I've ever wanted was to be able to boss them around, get them off, get me off, then get rid of them. With Juniper, I want more than that.

I might want more than I've ever wanted.

With her, I think I could let my control issues filter into more of our day-to-day life. Maybe I'd need to know where she was all the time. That doesn't seem that bad, my brothers are the same, they lose their shit if they don't know exactly what their women are doing.

I'm not going to be weird about her clothes, as long as she's not wearing something that shows off what belongs to me. But that's normal, right? And obviously anything about her safety, like driving around the mountain roads, or in the bad weather, or at night.

"I'm not canceling my date," she blurts, dragging me from my internal diatribe.

"I don't expect you to, I already said allowing it is my punishment for not seeing you for the treasure you are the moment we met."

"What if I want a second date?" she asks archly.

"You won't."

"How could you possibly know that? Marshall seems like a really nice guy."

"He is," I agree. "But the reason I know you won't be interested in going out with him again is because when you're sitting there at the table having dinner with him, my cum will be dripping out of your cunt."

Her mouth falls open and she gawks, her fork falling back down to her plate with a thud as she stares at me. "You... you can't say things like that."

“Why not? It’s true.”

“And if I say no?” she asks shakily.

“You won’t,” I tell her with a confident smile.

“I’ve said no before.”

“And I deserved it, I’m glad you said no. I was an asshole, only thinking with my dick, I almost ruined us before we got started and you saying no meant we’re exactly where we’re meant to be. But there’s no point denying it, tonight you stripped off those tiny little shorts, spread your legs wide and offered your pussy to me. Then you came like a fucking freight train over my fingers. I know you want me.” Lifting my hand I cup her face, biting the inside of my cheek to stop my smile when she leans into my touch like a kitten begging to be stroked. “But Treasure, when I left, you chased after me and cried when you found me gone. Right up until today you could argue and deny this thing between us, but not anymore. So know this, baby, I’m allowing you to go on one date with Marshall, but you’ll do it wearing my scent and full of my cum and then the next time he sees you, you’ll either have my ring on your finger or my baby in your belly.” I wink, and her lips dip down into a scowl that I can’t help but lean forward and kiss.

“You really are an asshole, aren’t you?” she asks, trying to sound annoyed and failing.

A small laugh falls from my lips. “Actually, I’m really not. I’m pretty sure all my family would agree that I’m the laid-back peacemaker of the group. I’m the nice one.”

“Bullshit,” she coughs.

Pinching her chin between my finger and thumb, I pull her onto my waiting lips, kissing her with a brutal intensity that I know she won’t forget. “I’ll text you later. You’ll reply.”

“And what if I don’t?” she asks, challenging me even while her pupils are blown with arousal.

“You will.”

I can see in her face that a part of her wants to argue with me, but the greater part of her wants to do as I say, so when she nods, I lean down and reward her with another kiss. One that leaves us both wound up and panting for more.

“Good night, Treasure. Dream of me.”

“Good night, Teddy.”

JUNIPER



The texts start to come an hour after he leaves my house.

Teddy: Did you enjoy your dinner? I forgot to ask.

I reply because honestly, I just can't not. Even though he's arrogant and high handed and too attractive for his own good, the thought of not hearing from him is worse than the failure I feel every time I type out another message to him.

Refusing to believe we're some kind of fated mates is one thing, but denying this magnetic pull I feel toward him is something else altogether. The other Barnett women warned me, they told me resistance was futile but I get it now, because somehow, he's taken over my thoughts, he's bewitched me.

When he suggested his little punishment game I was amused and intrigued. When he told me part of my punishment was basically having him taint every bit of space in my home with thoughts and memories of him, I'd laughed. Because there's no way he could do that with a bit of third-base action in my kitchen, right? But he did. He ruined my home and now two days later, all I can smell is him. It's like he imbued his scent into the walls, the furniture, the drapes, the couch. He's literally everywhere and it's slowly driving me insane.

My body has been in a perpetual state of arousal since Monday night and I'm not used to it. For years I've been in a sexual lockdown and when he touched me, he broke the dam and now all I can think about is him kissing me and making me come, over and over until I pass out from the pleasure.

Tonight is my dinner with Marshall, but I'm not sure I even want to go anymore. As nice a guy as he seemed and regardless of how attractive he is, the only thing I can think about when I anticipate our dinner, is that Teddy promised the only way I got to go on a date with another man is filled full of his cum. That shouldn't make me shudder with arousal but it does.

I half expected to find him in the office when I got here, but instead, there's a hot chocolate and a Danish waiting on my desk with a note from him.

Good morning, Treasure,

I was hoping to spend the day continuing our game, but an issue with the cut my crew are working on has called me out of the office today. Enjoy the hot chocolate and Danish, think of me while you eat them. Please text me what time your date is tonight, I'll make sure I'm there with plenty of time to help you get ready ;)

In the meantime, I'll use my next question.

How do you want me to fuck you for the first time?

Slow? Fast? Hard? Gentle?

Do you want to be beneath me, our eyes locked as I claim you, or bent over the bed while I grip your hips and fuck you like I own you?

Think it over, then text me what you decide.

Your Teddy xoxo

My pulse skyrockets and my throat suddenly feels arid. I knew he sounded serious on Monday night when he said about fucking me before I went on my date with Marshall, but not serious, serious. As in, actually going to do it serious. Only now I'm not so sure.

Dropping my purse to the floor beside my desk, I slide down into my chair and pull in a slow inhale, my eyes reading and rereading the note in front of me. Picking up the hot chocolate, I'm surprised to find it's still warm. He can't have been here that long ago, so he could have waited to say these

things to me in person. But somehow reading it on paper, at work, at my desk, makes it so much more impactful. Is this why hundreds of years ago people wrote letters to each other? Because to have his dirty words in a tangible form means there's no interpretation, no chance of forgetting or misunderstanding. It's here, right in front of me, him asking me to pick how he's going to fuck me before he sends me out on a date with another man.

This letter is just another way he's proving I belong to him; he's telling me he's claiming me, owning me, then he's going to let me go out with someone else and he's confident that there's no way I'll want Marshall more than I want him. Is that arrogance? Or just the honest, firm belief that we're destined to be together?

I eat my Danish and drink my hot chocolate as I mull over what to reply to him. Should I reply at all? Should I tell him that I don't want to fuck him? It'd be a lie, but it feels like I've spent weeks lying about my feelings for Teddy Barnett. What difference will one more day make?

By lunchtime, I've written and deleted ten different texts that vary from asking him to bend me over and take me hard and unapologetically, to telling him I never want him to touch me again. It seems that nothing I write feels right and so I don't send anything. Instead, I ask Beau if I can finish early and skulk away from the yard and the possibility of seeing Teddy an hour before his crew normally comes down off the mountain.

I'm on edge the entire way home, checking and rechecking my rearview mirror to see if he's following me. I never told him what time Marshall is coming to pick me up, or where we're going on our date, so maybe I can avoid him, or I could text him the wrong time and then sneak out before he comes to try and fuck me.

The horny bitch part of me considers just telling him the truth, that by giving me the choice he's made me second-guess myself and if he wants me, he needs to take control, just like he said he wanted to.

Instead, I stay the coward that I am and don't text him at all. Marshall is coming to pick me up at seven p.m., so I keep myself busy, cleaning the house and putting a load of laundry in the machine. By the time six forty-five p.m. rolls around I'm a bundle of nerves, staring out of the front window, terrified that Teddy will show up and silently disappointed that he hasn't.

Buck and Nero left an hour ago to head into town to get a few drinks with the off-shift members of their team, so thankfully they're not here to see me pacing the floor like a patient at an insane asylum.

I expected Teddy to have been texting me incessantly, but I haven't received even a single one, nothing since the note this morning. The lack of contact is freaking me out. The doorbell rings and a wave of guilt battles with the annoyance that has settled in my stomach as I've waited for Teddy to contact me. What happened between us on Monday night and the note this morning makes me feel like Teddy and I have started something, but if that's the case, where is he? I'm so conflicted. I let Teddy touch me, I bared myself to him physically when he got me off on my dining table, and emotionally when I allowed him to soothe and care for me afterward. But he's not here, even knowing I'm going out on a date with another man tonight. I'm unsure if I'm testing him by not texting him, or if he's testing me to see if I'll actually leave with Marshall, either way, I'm confused and anxious as I open the door and greet my date for the evening.

I grab my coat and climb into Marshall's car almost on autopilot, my eyes scanning the area, half expecting Teddy to jump out of the bushes and make some grand romantic gesture.

"How's your week been so far?" he asks, his smile wide and happy.

"Oh, good, it's been a lot of work getting the office in order, but everything is pretty much organized now. I'm starting to get a handle on the actual day-to-day work, and then figuring out what else needs to be done," I reply, glad that

we're talking about an easy topic like work. "How about you?"

"My week's been steady, but then most weeks are steady for me. There's not much excitement in the world of feed," he chuckles, the sound low and full of warmth.

"Is it a family business?"

"No ma'am, it used to be owned by Tommy Nelson, when he was ready to retire, he offered the place to his kids and grandkids, but they'd all moved out of state and none of them were interested in moving back to a small town to take over a feed store. When he mentioned to the town gossip that he was thinking about selling, I approached him. Took a while to work out a deal we were both happy with, then a lot longer to get folks used to the changes and improvements I wanted to make, but now I rub along pretty nicely."

"Owning your own business sounds fun," I say, forcing an enthusiasm I don't feel into my voice.

"I'm not saving the world, but it's not a bad way to pay the bills. I've always wanted to have something that was mine, something to pass on to my kids if I ever have any. A legacy so to speak."

I nod, but the moment he says the word legacy, my mind fills with Teddy and the legacy that has him convinced we're meant to be together.

Somehow, I manage to mumble my way through the rest of the trip into town, but I'm really not paying as much attention as I should be. When we park outside the restaurant, I'm grateful for the gust of cold air that hits me as soon as I climb out of Marshall's car. The instant chill clears my head, and I manage to smile at him as he holds open the door for me to step into the intimate restaurant.

A server leads us to a table for two and I sit down and order a glass of wine, hoping that the alcohol will settle the feeling in my stomach that's telling me I shouldn't be here. Marshall keeps the conversation going as I read my menu and

order my food. It's not as awkward as it could be, but everything about being here with him just feels... wrong.

When the bell above the door dings to herald someone's arrival the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I don't have to turn around to know he's here, I can feel his eyes on me and I don't know if I should cry with fear, frustration or relief.

Patiently, I wait for Teddy to invade our table, to insist I leave, or drag me away, but nothing happens. After several agonizingly long moments when I do nothing but nod, or force a smile in response to whatever Marshall is saying to me, I turn around and search the restaurant until I find him.

He's sitting at a table in the back corner with Cody, Granger and Alice. Dark, angry eyes are staring back at me and as our gazes lock, I feel a shiver of decadent fearful anticipation cascade through me. I try to look away, but I can't, I feel almost compelled to devote all my attention to him, like ignoring him all day has built up this need that only being with him will dispel.

"You okay?" Marshall asks.

Jolting, I spin around and force a fake smile to my lips. "Yes. Sorry, I got a little stuck in my own head for a minute. What were you saying?"

Marshall immediately starts to talk about his family, how close he is to his sister and nephews, how his parents moved out to Florida a few years back to enjoy their retirement in a warmer climate and how he misses them and wishes he got to see them more. I try to engage in the conversation but all of my attention is on the man in the corner, my man.

"Excuse me, I need to use the restroom," I say once our entrées have been cleared."

"Sure," Marshall says, smiling friendlily as I push up from the table and walk on shaky legs toward the bathroom, fighting the urge to stare at Teddy as I go. Forcing all of my concentration into putting one foot in front of the other, I don't notice him moving toward me until his fingers encircle my

wrist and he drags me into the disabled bathroom, closing and locking the door behind us.

“You didn’t text,” he snarls, yanking me into his body and slamming his lips angrily against mine.

“I—” I start, but he kisses me again, shoving his hand roughly up my skirt, cupping my pussy and gripping tightly.

“I allowed you to come here on the agreement that my cum was dripping out of your cunt.”

“I—” I try again, but my words are lost when he shoves the fabric of my panties to the side and pushes two fingers into my soaked core.

“You ignored me all day, then you snuck off early. Did you think I didn’t know that you’d left? Do you think I don’t know that you paced your house waiting for me to arrive, desperate for me to come and do as I promised?”

“Why didn’t you then?” I blurt, my words choked with desperation as he finger fucks me with one hand while the other is tangled in my hair.

“Why didn’t you text me?”

“Because...” I start, then trail off.

“Take off your panties,” he orders. Pulling his fingers free of my pussy, he lifts his hand to his lips and sucks them into his mouth as he waits expectantly.

For a second I think about saying no, but what would be the point? I’ve been desperate for this since I read the note he left me this morning. I’ve allowed my fear of whatever might happen between us to control me all day, and all it’s done is left me agitated and more confused than ever. Bending over, I lift up the skirt of my dress and then peel my panties down, lifting them off first one foot and then the other.

“This isn’t how I wanted our first time to be, but you need this, don’t you? You need to know I’ll follow through on my word, that’s what today’s been all about, hasn’t it? You needed me to take over and prove I was serious.”

I try to nod but all I can do is whimper as he slowly unfastens his belt, the sound of the metal and leather too loud in the tiny room. My teeth pull at the flesh of my lower lip as he unfastens his jeans and pushes them over his hips, his huge, hard and weeping cock springing free.

“Oh my,” I whisper when I take in the size of him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be a perfect fit.” He smiles, taking my panties from me and shoving them into the back pocket of his pants as he pushes my skirt up to my waist and admires my bare pussy for a moment before he lifts me off the ground.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he orders, supporting my ass with one hand as he reaches between us and guides his dick to my entrance.

“Condom,” I say.

“No,” he snarls, pulling me down as he pushes up and impales me onto his massive cock.

He silences my cry of pleasure-filled pain with his mouth as he stays completely still, allowing my body a moment to get used to the feeling of him stretching me.

“We don’t use condoms. I won’t have anything between us. I want you bred with my baby as soon as possible, so I don’t give a fuck about birth control. You’re mine.” The moment he finishes speaking, he lifts me up, letting his dick slide almost all the way out, then brings me back down onto him again, filling me even fuller than before.

“You’re mine,” he growls, impaling me a little faster and harder than before, eliciting a groan from my lips as my eyes fall closed.

“Say it,” he demands.

“What?” I gasp.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m...” I pause and he snarls, bringing me down hard, filling me until I feel like I’m splitting in two.

“Tell me, or I’ll open the door and let the entire restaurant hear me fucking you, until your cunt is gaping from my cock and dripping with my cum.”

“I’m yours,” I cry a moment before I’m struck with an orgasm that makes my entire body curl into him, clenching him so tight he can barely move with the way my muscles are clinging to him.

“Hell fucking yes you are. My cock owns your cunt, it’s mine, this ass is mine and this mouth and these tits, every fucking inch of you belongs to me.”

Forcing a hand between us, his thumb finds my clit and he rubs furiously as he fucks me with an abandon that verges on a total loss of control from both of us. I come again, burying my face into his shoulder to muffle the scream that bursts from me as he grunts, losing rhythm for a moment as he ruts into me four more times before he stills. His dick is so deep inside me it feels like it’s pressing against my stomach and I feel the scalding heat of his cum as he coats my insides, making me unequivocally his.

I stay clinging to him for timeless moments as my heart races and my mind spins at a thousand miles an hour. This feels so right, but so terrifyingly wrong all at the same time and I struggle to process all of my overwhelming feelings.

“You need to get back to your date,” he says, his voice rough and low.

“What?” I mumble, groaning as he lifts me off his dick and lowers me to the floor.

Bending down, he grabs my panties from his back pocket and holds them out for me to put on.

“I need to clean up.”

“No,” he laughs. “You’ll sit for the rest of your date in panties soaked with my cum, feeling the soreness in your cunt from where I just fucked you,” he says proudly.

“I can’t go back out there to him,” I cry.

“Oh yes you can. You should have canceled, but you didn’t want to, I told you what was going to happen, now you need to go and deal with the consequences of your choice.”

“I’m not going out there like this.” I motion to my sex.

“Treasure, you can either go out there wearing panties or not, I don’t mind either way, but like I promised it would be, my cum is going to be dripping out of you. Now I’d suggest the panties rather than sitting in a wet patch on the chair, but it really is up to you,” he laughs.

Reaching out I try to snatch my underwear from him, but he stops me with a glare, waiting patiently until I step one foot, then the other back into the lacy fabric. His eyes lock with mine as he drags them up my thighs, pausing an inch before they would cover my swollen and sticky core. Never looking away, he pushes two fingers into me, pumping three times, before pulling them back out and lifting them up, showing me how wet they are. Smiling a cunning smile, his other hand snaps out and grabs my chin, then he leans forward and paints my lips with the wetness.

“Perfect, you smell like me, and you taste like me. Enjoy the rest of your date,” he taunts, pressing a kiss to my cheek as he releases me, opens the bathroom door and pushes me out.

TEDDY



I'm an asshole.

For the most part this isn't something I'm proud of, but today, I'm a proud ass motherfucker while I sit and watch my woman squirm in her chair on a date with another man, while her cunt is dripping my cum into her panties.

I still hate that she's sitting there with Marshall Ross, but we both know she belongs to me and once this sham of a date is over, I'm taking her back to my bed and learning every inch of her body.

Alice keeps watching me curiously, but my brothers have a fair idea what happened when I followed Juniper from the table. Neither of them have said a word, it's pretty common knowledge in our family that we'll do whatever it takes to claim and keep our women, so stalking Juniper a little and fucking her in a restaurant bathroom is probably pretty mild in comparison with what my brothers have done.

The thing that has them more intrigued is why I'm letting my woman out on a date with another guy in the first place. If I told them it was my punishment for being an asshole, they might understand a little better, but I haven't. I'm ashamed of the way I treated my treasure before I knew who she was to me. I'm the nice guy, or at least that's what they all believe, and admitting that I didn't instantly know who she was to me, feels like a massive failure.

Not that it matters now, it's taken me longer than any of my brothers, but she's mine and I'll do whatever it takes to

keep her, including letting her see what it's like to have dinner with another man. She might think this is her showing me her authority, but actually it's me teaching her that other guys are out there, but none of them will compare to what we are together.

Our food comes, but I can't eat. My eyes refuse to stray from Juniper, she's talking to Marshall, but her attention is on me, glancing over this way every few minutes. When the waitress asks if they want dessert and she declines, I signal to our server to bring our bill and pay it while my siblings chuckle at my hurry.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I follow Ross's car all the way up the mountain, Cody drops me off at the end of the road and I walk down the hill to her house, staying in the shadows as my woman turns her cheek when Marshall leans in for a kiss.

Fury barrels through me and I start forward, fists clenched at my sides, then skid to a stop as Juniper plants her hand on his chest and pushes him back. I'm too far away to hear what she's saying, but I'm ninety percent sure I'm witnessing my woman give him the "it's not you it's me" conversation.

They talk for a few minutes longer, then a dejected-looking Marshall heads back to his car and drives away. Juniper scans the area around her house and I realize she's looking for me, she can feel me watching her.

Stepping forward, I smile as her head snaps in my direction and a relieved look spreads across her face. "Hello Treasure."

"You're an asshole, did you just watch me tell him I only wanted to be friends?"

"Yep, although he's lucky he's leaving with all his limbs since he tried to kiss what's mine."

Rolling her eyes, her shoulders relax and she leans back against the doorframe. "Is that it now, if I'm your girlfriend I lose all my identity and just become yours?" she asks archly.

“No,” I snort. “But you are mine, my treasure. Are your brothers home?”

“Not yet, they went out with some of the other jumpers for beers.”

“You going to invite me in? I’ll help you pack a bag.”

“Where am I going?” she asks, stepping back into the house and allowing me to step inside.

“My place.”

“My vagina is closed for business I’m afraid, she’s been abused, and I’m planning to sit on some ice for an hour before I go to bed.”

A bark of laughter falls from my lips. “How ’bout when we get home, I’ll kiss it better for you?” I suggest.

“How about you stay at your place, and I and my bruised lady bits stay here?”

I shake my head. “Sorry, Treasure, that’s not going to work for me. If we need to, we can stay here, but I’m not so sure your brothers will be too happy to see me wandering around naked in the morning.”

“You live with your entire family, that’s six brothers, four sisters-in-law, a niece and a nephew to see me in my underwear,” she giggles.

The sound is fucking adorable and I make a mental note to make her giggle as much as possible. “No one but me gets to see you in your underwear from now on, baby, but I have my own apartment, it just happens to be joined to my family’s house. Plus, it’s soundproofed so no one but me will hear you screaming my name when I make you come.”

“I can’t just not be here in the morning, Buck and Nero will lose their shit.”

“Okay, we can stay here tonight, then you can move all your shit to mine tomorrow.”

“Move what shit?” she asks, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“Your clothes and girly shit. My place is pretty neutral so you can redecorate however you want as long as it’s not wall to wall pink.”

Her laugh is warm and loud. “I’m not moving in with you, Teddy, we’ve been dating for just over an hour.”

“Time is completely irrelevant when it comes to us. We’re meant to be, made especially for one another, why waste time? Plus, I have pretty strong swimmers, you could be pregnant already.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she scoffs.

“Are you on birth control?”

“Er, no, I tried the pill, I reacted to the hormones in them, but my cycle runs like clockwork, it’s the wrong time of the month for me to be at risk of a pregnancy.”

Disappointment fills my gut. I want her belly round with my baby, I’ve never considered kids as a real possibility before, I just assumed I’d be surrounded by my nieces and nephews and be their favorite uncle. But now I have my treasure, an almost instinctual need to procreate has hit me like a train. My vision blurs and I can see what she’d look like, her belly round and swollen, her tits full of milk, her nipples dark pink and begging to be sucked. Fuck yes, I want that. I want her pregnant with my kid. I want to marry her and keep her and be her fucking everything with an intensity that I’ve never experienced before, and that excites me almost as much as it scares me.

“Teddy?” Juniper says, pulling me back from my daydream and into reality.

“Sorry, baby. I was just thinking. Let’s go upstairs and I’ll take a look at your pussy and check I didn’t actually hurt you.”

“I don’t need you to look at my vagina,” she gasps, her voice laced with shock.

“Baby, vagina is not a sexy word,” I laugh. “Call it your pussy.”

“I cannot call my lady bits a”—she lowers her voice—“pussy.”

“Why not?” I ask, laughing.

“Because that’s such a man thing to call it. Women don’t refer to their girl parts as pussies.” She wrinkles her nose with distaste and I lean in and kiss the tip, smiling, because she’s too fucking cute and she’s all mine.

“How about cunt?” I suggest.

Her gasp is so loud she might as well be clutching pearls. “I will never call my vagina a *see you next Tuesday*.”

“A what?” I ask, scooping her up into my arms, shutting and locking the front door and carrying her up the stairs and into her bedroom.

“A”—she spells out the first letter of each word in the air—“*C-U-N-T see you next Tuesday*.”

Shaking my head, thoroughly amused, I lower her to her feet, then gently turn her around and lower the zipper at the back of her dress. Turning her to face me again, I push the straps down her shoulders and let the fabric fall to a puddle at her feet, leaving her in just a bra and the matching panties that I took off, then helped her put back on earlier.

Unfastening the clasp on her bra, I pull it off her and drop it to the floor, then step back and admire her full breasts. “Fuck, Treasure, you have the most amazing tits.”

“They’re too big,” she whines, reaching up and covering her breasts with her hands.

“Wash your mouth out, they’re fabulous. Think how much bigger they’ll get when you’re pregnant.”

“I’m not pregnant, Teddy,” she admonishes.

“Not yet,” I say beneath my breath. “How wet are these panties?” I ask, not waiting for an answer as I hook my thumbs into the waist and slowly slide them down her thighs, crouching to my haunches to watch as the wet fabric sticks to the folds of her sex. “Fuck, baby, your cunt is all pink and wet, fucking perfect.”

Hurriedly sliding them to the floor, I stand back up and lift her off the ground, letting the wet panties fall from her feet as I carry her to the bed and lay her down on it. “Lie back and then lift your legs and grab your knees,” I tell her.

“I’m not doing that,” she shakes her head.

Crawling over her, I use my size to urge her back until she’s lying flat as I loom over her. Pressing a kiss to her parted lips, I slide my hands along her thighs, encouraging her to lift her legs and wrap them around my back, then I move my hands to the inside and push her knees into her chest. “Perfect,” I whisper against her lips as I pull away before she realizes I just positioned her exactly as I wanted her and she’d refused to do. “Now hold your legs like that so I can check on my pussy,” I smirk, as she realizes what I’ve done and narrows her eyes at me.

“Teddy.”

“I lead, you follow. I told you how it was going to be.”

Shuffling down the bed so I’m lying with my head level with her cunt, I lean forward and run the flat of my tongue from her slit to her clit.

“Teddy,” she gasps louder this time, dropping her legs and trying to clamp her knees together to hide her cunt from me.

“Lift your legs again, Treasure,” I tell her, adding a hint of sternness to my tone.

“You can’t lick me,” she argues.

“Why not?”

“Because you came inside of me an hour ago and I haven’t had a shower yet,” she says, her cheeks stained pink.

“So?” I chuckle.

“So, you’re licking all of our...” She pauses for a moment then cringes as she says, “Juices.”

“You taste fucking delicious. Get used to it, Treasure, I plan to keep your cunt full of my cum all of the time, and that definitely won’t stop me from licking your pussy whenever I

damn well please. Now lift your legs back up and let me taste you.”

I wait as patiently as I can, but she doesn't comply. “Treasure,” I growl, immediately satisfied when she lifts her legs again and I bury my face in her cunt, lapping at the arousal that's leaking from her swollen folds. When I slid my dick into her earlier, she'd been almost impossibly tight, but controlling myself hadn't been an option. Now though, I can see how puffy and red her entrance is and I do my best to soothe it with my tongue, fighting the urge to watch my fingers spread her out, ready to take my cock again.

I'm rock hard, but then that seems to be my permanent state when I'm around her. I want her again, I'm not sure there will ever be a time when I'm not ready and raring to sink into her heat. But right now, I need to control myself, I only ever want to give her pleasure, never pain, unless she asks for it, and I doubt she will. I could see her maybe being into a bit of playful spanking and I'd be down for that, although it's not really my kink.

I'll give my treasure anything she fucking wants and I think she's starting to understand that. When I glance up, her eyes are wide and she's watching me as if it's fascinating that my head is between her thighs, my tongue buried inside her pussy.

Pulling back a little, I drag the flat of my tongue over her clit, watching as she arches. “Does that feel good?”

She nods, but I want to hear her say it, something about her embarrassment about sex stuff makes me want to drag out her inner dirty girl. I want her to tell me what she likes, all the dirty things she wants me to do to her. She'll only get what I decide to give her, but I still want to hear her say it.

“Tell me.”

Her eyes snap open and she lifts her head and looks down at me.

“Tell me,” I say again.

“I...” She pauses, flustered. “I like it when you lick my clit.” Her words come out in a tumble, but the pink that fills her cheeks is more than worth it and I smile as I lick her again, circling her clit with the tip of my tongue before I start to flick at it, quick then slow, building her up, teasing her until she’s squirming, her butt lifting off the mattress, pushing her pussy closer to my face and silently asking for more.

“Beg,” I say between licks.

She’s beyond embarrassment now, too desperate to care about anything but orgasming. “Please, please, please, please.”

“Anything for you, baby, especially when you beg so prettily.” Wrapping my hands around the backs of her thighs, I hold her still while I lick and flick, then nip at her clit with my teeth until she explodes, coming all over my face.

I devour all her arousal until she calms, her butt flopping back to the mattress as her limbs go limp and she drops her legs that fall open, putting her on display in the most innocently depraved way.

Crawling over her, I hold myself up with my arms, then dip down to kiss her, my lips still coated in her arousal. Keeping the kiss light, I roll to the side and pull her into my chest, stroking her hair away from her face.

“Oh my god,” she pants.

“Good?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“So good. I didn’t... That hasn’t...” her words trail off as she struggles to articulate, but it’s okay, I know what she means.

We lie in comfortable silence for a while, her body sinking farther and farther into mine as she starts to fade into sleep. “You need to let your brothers know I’m here, so they don’t try to kill me in the morning.”

She nods, but she’s too sleepy to actually move, so instead I carefully slide from beneath her, loving the small noises of protest she makes. “I’ll be back in a minute, baby; I need to get undressed.”

Her hand reaches for me, and my heart fucking pangs like even being this far away from her is too far. Quickly stripping out of my clothes I pad back downstairs and grab her purse with her cell in it. I make sure the front door is locked, then pick up a couple of bottles of water before heading back upstairs again.

My naked treasure is curled up just where I left her in the bed, her arm still outstretched and reaching for me. My mama taught me never to look through a woman's purse, so I try not to notice anything else as I fish out her cell and connect it to her charger on her nightstand. Then I click into her text app and type out a quick message, sending it to both Buck and Nero.

Juni: Hi, this is Teddy, just to let you know your sister and I made it official tonight. She didn't want you to worry if she wasn't there in the morning, so we're both staying at your place.

Not bothering to wait for a reply, I place the cell on the nightstand, then crawl into bed and drag Juniper into my arms. I sleep better than I have in weeks.

JUNIPER



I wake up warm and surrounded by the most delicious smell. Something soft presses against my neck and I tense as an arm tightens around my waist, while a hand slides between my thighs, caressing my sex.

“Good morning, Treasure,” a voice purrs from behind me, as I feel a hard cock press into my butt cheeks, grinding slightly in time with the probing fingers that carefully slide inside of me.

“Teddy,” I say breathily, as memories of last night and my disastrous date—the sex in the restroom, followed by me having to tell Marshall I just wanted to be friends and then letting Teddy give me oral until I had a mind-blowing orgasm and passed out flash through my mind.

“How sore are you, baby? My dick needs to be in you. I can be gentle if you need me to.”

His fingers are spreading me and I feel the head of his cock at my entrance before I even have time to answer. Slowly enough that I could tell him to stop, he slides the tip inside of me, stretching me and making me hiss when my muscles protest at the beer-can wide intrusion.

“Relax Treasure, you can take me, you’re so fucking wet, just relax and let me in. I was rough with you last night, I didn’t take time to prep you properly, but your cunt is dripping for me now. You’re so desperate to be owned,” he coaxes, his fingers spread around his dick, while his thumb rubs slow

circles over my clit as he gradually fills me with his ridiculously massive cock.

“Perfect, your cunt is unbelievably perfect, you’re such a good girl for taking all of me,” he praises, and his words add another layer of sensation to the way it feels when he slowly grinds, hitting my G-spot with the head of his dick.

“How does it feel to be stretched full, baby? You belong to me now and I’m going to treat you so good.”

He talks the entire time that he fucks me, telling me how perfect I feel, how I’m such a dirty girl for being able to take him all. Then he makes me tell him how it feels, how full I feel, how much I love being owned by him, how I belong to him.

Each word makes me more and more aroused and by the time I’m arching and pushing back into every thrust of his hips, I can feel proof of my desire on my thighs. “Oh god, oh fuck, Teddy,” I pant.

“That’s it, baby, tell me what you want and I’ll give you what you need.”

“Fuck me hard, make me feel you all day,” I beg, my voice broken and weak as I reach down and push my finger to my clit.

“No,” he reprimands, grabbing my hand and pulling it away. “*I* make you come.” His fingers find my clit and he pinches slightly as he slams into me, slow and steady, but so hard I know I’ll be walking timidly for the rest of the day. When my orgasm hits, it takes my breath and I silently scream as he follows me over the edge, filling me with his cum in shuddering gasps.

Once my breath has settled, I try to pull away, to free myself from his dick that still feels almost too big and still rock hard, considering he just orgasmed. “Don’t move.”

“I have to get to work,” I tell him, needing to get away, to get some space and distance from everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours. “And I need to pee.”

Reluctantly, Teddy releases me, sliding his slowly deflating dick out of my sex and rolling to his back. He watches me scurry from the bed as quickly as I can, considering my legs are made of jelly and there's cum dripping down my thighs. Again.

Rushing into the bathroom, I sit down on the toilet and let my head fall forward into my palms.

“What's the matter?” Teddy asks.

“Boundaries,” I cry, finding him in the doorway to the bathroom, his cock still wet and just hanging out, looking impressive despite its softening status.

“I don't believe in boundaries,” he says calmly. “Now what's the matter?” Walking forward, he crouches down, planting himself in front of me while I sit on the toilet.

“Teddy, get out, I'm using the toilet, this is a single-person activity,” I shriek, then immediately glance at my bedroom door, in case my brothers burst in.

“I don't care if you're peeing, I'm intimately acquainted with your pussy, baby. A little pee is inconsequential to me.”

“Well it's not inconsequential to me. Now get out.” I point at the door as if he doesn't know where it is.

“No,” he says calmly. “My brother is always saying no space, no distance to Bonnie and now I get it. So Treasure, no space, no distance, not a fucking inch, and that includes the bathroom. Now explain why you had your head in your hands.”

Sighing, I can feel my cheeks are beet red and I pointedly look at anything but him.

“Juniper,” he scolds. “Answer the question, what the fuck is going on?”

“It's just a lot, okay?” I snap back, resenting his questioning and his no-space, no-distance bullshit.

“What's a lot? Us? My dick? Be specific.”

He's kneeling on the floor now, his hands on my knees, his face, blank of emotion although his eyes are dark and tumultuous. "This." I motion between us. "It's a lot. A week ago, I thought you were just an asshole and now..." I trail off, unsure what to say.

"And now, what?" he asks, pushing up and leaning into me, making my legs spread to accommodate his huge body.

"And now you're in my bed, in my bathroom, we're having sex while my brothers are in the next rooms and you're telling me I'm yours and I'm believing it. It's a lot, okay?"

Warm lips find mine as he smiles against my mouth. "You're mine, Treasure. All mine. It's okay to be overwhelmed, it's not okay to try to push me away because of it."

"I wasn't, I just wanted a minute."

"You don't need a minute, you needed to tell me how you were feeling and let me make you feel better. I can take your doubts, baby. I can take your worry and stress and fear. I'll take it all and I'll make it go away, because we're an us now, not a me and you anymore. We don't keep secrets or keep stuff to ourselves. I want every single one of your thoughts, dreams, nightmares, fantasies, I want them all."

His surety settles something inside of me and I exhale, feeling some of the tension fall from my shoulders.

"That's better," he says, lifting my chin with his thumb and pressing a hard kiss to my lips. "Now do you need me to help?" he winks, and I slap his shoulder.

"Get out and let me use the bathroom in peace," I shout, but I'm smiling too.

"Nope, but I will get in the shower so you can pee, then you can join me."

"I've never showered with anyone else before, I'm not sure mine is big enough for both of us."

"We'll make it work." He grins. "Now hurry up, or I'll think you do need my help after all."

It turns out showering with Teddy is a lot more fun than I expected, apparently he knows uses for showerheads that I have never even considered before and by the time we make our way back into my bedroom, I'm very, very clean.

“What time is it? I'm blaming you if I'm late.”

“It's not even seven yet, we have plenty of time. Get dressed, baby, then we can go back to my place and grab my car.”

“We?”

“Yeah, we, I'm driving us to work,” Teddy says with an arch of his brow that dares me to argue with him.

“What if I have to leave early, or you have to stay late?”

“The only time you've left early since you took this job is when you were running away from me and I won't let you run again, and if I have to stay late you can just take my car and one of the others will give me a ride home.”

“So why can't we take my car?” I ask.

“Because we're taking my car,” he says in a tone that brooks no argument.

While I head for my closet, Teddy pulls on his clothes from last night, then moves behind me, curling one arm around my waist and pulling me back into his firm chest while I peruse my choices. There isn't really a dress code in the office, casual and comfortable mainly, but today my warm knit dress is calling my name. It's comfy, but feels nicer than jeans and a sweater.

I reach for it, but Teddy grabs my hand, stopping me. “Nope,” he says, shaking his head.

“Excuse me,” I snap, spinning around to glare up at him.

“If you wear a dress, I'm going to end up fucking you over your desk, if that's what you want, then go for it, if not, then find something that's not as easy access.”

Gasping, I feel my mouth fall open in shock.

“Don’t look so shocked, baby, I’ve only had your pussy twice and I’m already addicted. I fucking hate that we washed my cum from your cunt, and it’s taking all my control not to fill you up again right now. Now grab some jeans so I don’t really piss your brothers off by waking them up with you screaming my name.”

I’m equally annoyed and turned on by Teddy’s blunt words. What the hell is he doing to me? I hate high-handed men, I spent my teenage years watching the ones who thought they could order my mom to do their bidding, and I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve called her weak when she did what they told her to, but here I am pulling on skinny jeans so my boyfriend doesn’t get the urge to fuck me at my job. Jesus, I’m my mom.

The thought sickens me. My mom allows men to use and then discard her. She spent fifteen years accepting scraps of attention from my dad and never once asked for more. She was happy just to have any part of him, even knowing he was going home to a wife and two more kids. I never want to be like her and yet here I am, letting history repeat itself with me.

Teddy must sense the dark turn in my thoughts because he wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me to him, pinching my chin in his fingers and forcing me to look at him. “Tell me,” he demands, his voice warning me that he won’t give up questioning me until he gets what he wants.

“I won’t let you make me into a doormat like my mom,” I say, choking out the words.

A vicious scowl takes over his usually beautiful face, twisting it into an angry mask. “You’re not a fucking doormat and you never will be,” he spits.

“I’ve spent years watching her let guys order her around and she did what they wanted just to keep them, to make them want her. I won’t become her.”

Some of the anger fades from his expression and his grip on me softens. “Baby, I’m not like those guys and you’re nothing like your mom. I know I’ve never met her, but I can tell already that she doesn’t have even an ounce of the strength

that you have. I like to be in control, that's just who I am, but that doesn't mean that I'll ever take advantage of you allowing me to be in charge. In fact, if I ever do, I want you to go and tell Beau, he'd beat me black and blue before he'd ever allow me to treat you as anything but the Treasure that you are. I promise I will never take advantage of you like that and knowing you like I do already, you'd never allow me to. In the bedroom, I'm going to be the one in control, it's what I need and judging by the last few days it's what you need too. Outside of sex I'm going to do my best to not let my need for you make me a controlling asshole, but if I am, you need to tell me."

"How?" I ask, my voice meek.

"We'll have a code word."

"I thought it was a safe word? You want me to start shouting red at you?" I say with a small smile.

"You don't need a safe word, you're always safe with me. If I ever do something sexually that you don't want, then say stop, and I'll stop, no questions asked. I'm talking about in everyday life, not when I'm fucking you. If I'm being overbearing then you say the code word and I'll do my best to rein my control-freak ways in."

Nodding, I lift my gaze to his and find earnest, concerned eyes looking back at me. "What's the code word?"

When he smiles, it crinkles his eyes and instantly lightens the atmosphere between us. "How about teapot?"

"Teapot?" I giggle.

"Teapot. It's not a word either of us would use in normal life, so if you say it, I'll know I'm pissing you off. I'm not guaranteeing I'll stop doing whatever I'm doing when you use it, but we can stop and talk about why I'm behaving like I am and why it bothers you."

Nodding slowly, I take a moment to think about it and then agree. "Okay."

"You are amazingly fucking strong and I love that about you, I'll never do anything to diminish that, I fucking swear it

to you. All I want is for you to be mine in every way imaginable.” Pressing his lips to mine, he kisses me until we’re both breathless and his dick is rock hard and poking me in the stomach.

“Fuck, baby, we could always call in sick, go home and spend the rest of the day loving each other in my bed?”

Groaning, I push at his chest and he reluctantly backs away, adjusting his hard dick in his pants as I tie my hair into a ponytail and then open my bedroom door. He follows me downstairs, and I’m surprised to find both Buck and Nero sitting at the dining table with matching angry expressions on their faces.

“So this is a thing now?” Buck says, motioning between me and Teddy.

“Yes,” Teddy answers. “Juniper and I are together, she’s mine.”

I cringe at his possessive response; my brothers are alpha males too and everyone knows that if you get too many alphas in one place, they’re guaranteed to butt heads. Especially when my brothers are so protective of me.

“What the fuck makes you think you’re good enough for our sister?” Nero asks, his huge, muscled arms folded intimidatingly across his chest.

Turning, I glance up at Teddy, worried he might be angry, but he’s smiling widely. “You know my family; you know how we are with our women. Juniper’s mine, it’s taken me a while to convince her of that, but now I have, that’s it. I’m going to marry her as soon as I can get her to the courthouse. She’s going to be moving in with me, and you guys are welcome at our place as often as you want. But. She. Is. Mine. As long as you realize what that means, then welcome to the Barnett clan.” He holds his hand out to Buck and I wait, not breathing, waiting for my brother to lose his shit and launch himself at Teddy.

Instead, Buck looks at me. “Is he right? Are you his?”

Shocked, I furrow my brow while I wonder if Teddy drugged the coffee machine or something, because there's no way my protective big brother just calmly asked me that, instead of going caveman on the guy who shared my bed last night and just claimed me so outlandishly.

"Wait," I cry, "just like that, you're okay with everything he just said?" Spinning around I glare at Teddy. "And you. Teapot! We are so going to talk about all the moving in and marriage stuff."

"Juni, honey," Nero says, pulling my attention. "We've spent enough time with him and his crazy brothers, we've heard all the stories. If you say you're his, then we know he'll look after you, that he'll do right by you, because you know and he knows we'll kill him if he doesn't. Can't say we're ready to lose you to him just yet, but that's our problem, not yours. Of course, if you tell us you're not sure, or you're not interested in becoming a Barnett, we'll kick his ass to the curb and leave him missing a few teeth," he chuckles.

Smiling wryly, I shrug. "I appreciate the death threat, it means a lot. And yes, I suppose he'll do, he keeps saying I'm his, so how about I tell you guys, he's mine."

Teddy's arm bands around my waist and he turns me into his chest, lifting my chin and kissing me until my fingers cling to his shirt to keep me upright.

"She's still our baby sister, keep the fucking PDA to a minimum," Buck warns in his growly big brother tone, he's used to scaring every guy I've ever introduced him to.

"I'm yours," Teddy whispers against my ear, completely ignoring Buck as he holds me tightly.

"Eat, there're bacon and eggs on the stove," Nero says, standing up and fetching two glasses from the cabinet and filling them with juice.

After a strangely civilized breakfast with my brothers, Teddy kisses me, telling me he's going to run home, get changed and drive back over here while I finish getting ready for work. He's back less than ten minutes later and he holds

my hand on the short walk to his car parked at the curb and opens my door for me to get in.

He's a strange mix of caveman and gentleman, and I'm not sure which is the real him. I expect him to spend all day distracting me, but although he settles into the desk in my office, he gets immediately on with his work and our morning passes quickly and comfortably.

By the time lunch rolls around, I'm quite enjoying his quiet company. The heavens have opened and relentless rain is pouring from the sky, stopping me from sitting on the bench outside, so I grab my lunch and his from the refrigerator and head back into the office.

"Come here, baby," he beckons, pulling me into his lap the moment I'm close enough and kissing me, while his hand roams over my ass.

"You can't grope me in the office," I hiss, pushing his hand away.

"Who's going to stop me?" He laughs, kissing my neck and nipping at me playfully.

"Me," I say between giggles, pushing off his lap and standing up.

"Get back here, Treasure, I need my fix. I've been good all morning and kept my hands to myself. I need you right here grinding on my dick."

"I'm not going to have sex in my place of work, that's so incredibly unprofessional," I snap, crossing my arms over my chest and taking a stubborn step back.

"Who's in charge, baby?"

"Right now, apparently me, because I'm the only one of us who's thinking with the brain in my head."

Pushing out of his chair, he steps forward, stalking toward me like a lion taunting its prey. "Want to try that again?"

"Teddy, I'm not having sex with you here," I whisper-yell, like someone might pop around the corner and overhear our conversation.

“Treasure, I wasn’t trying to fuck you, if I was, you’d know because you’d be naked and bent over the desk. But you need to stop with this attitude, we both agreed when it came to sex I was in charge, you need to trust I wouldn’t ever do anything to put you in a compromising position.”

“I actually don’t remember agreeing to you being in charge,” I snark petulantly.

“Well, you sure as fuck weren’t disagreeing when you were trying to ride my face last night,” he snarls, planting his feet and crossing his impressive arms across his chest.

Sighing, I shake my head. “This isn’t going to work.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” He’s on me in a second, curling his arm around me and dragging me to him, forcing his lips to mine in a punishing kiss. “You’re mine,” he says, his voice low and rough and full of animalistic promise.

“I know,” I gasp. “I didn’t mean we weren’t going to work, I meant us working together. Maybe I should look for another job.”

“Baby, don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?”

“Me, dramatic?” I scoff. “I’m not the one who just went full-blown caveman.”

“You saying we’re not going to work will always make me stake my claim and prove you’re wrong. Look, it’s only day one. I’ve been panting after you for weeks and now I know what you taste and smell and feel like I don’t want to behave.”

I refuse to admit it, but perhaps there is a slim chance I’m overreacting. But being with Teddy is like riding a roller coaster that hits a hundred miles an hour before you’ve even sat down and got your harness in place. He’s so sure, so confident that this is perfect and right, and I’m not. I’ve only even had one boyfriend and he wasn’t thinking about weddings and cohabitating and babies, he was thinking about homecoming and if he could persuade his parents to let him stay out past curfew on prom night.

“Come sit on my lap and eat your lunch, I promise to keep things ninety-nine percent PG until five p.m., then your ass is

mine. Deal?”

Looking up at him I smile, then nod. “Deal.”

For the next couple of days things seem to click between us and at work he mostly behaves, then when five p.m. hits, he drags me to the car, speeds back to his place and fucks me like he hasn't touched me in months, let alone hours. Everything about Teddy is intense. When you first meet him, he comes across as the most laid back of the Barnett clan, but that's just a facade, he's a constant ball of tightly wound control that appears from the outside to be calm, but the moment we're alone, he's anything but controlled.

“Naked,” he demands the moment the door to his rooms is closed.

Words of protest rise and then die on my lips. My body and sex are sore, but I want him too much to care. We're acting like we're in heat, but it doesn't seem to matter how much sex we have, it's never enough.

My hands move to the hem of my shirt, but he bats them away, gripping the fabric and dragging it over my head, discarding it and my bra as he unfastens my jeans, pulling them and my panties down in one go. Kneeling on the floor, he rips them free of my feet and then attacks, burying his face into the space between my thighs, licking and nipping and sucking at my tender flesh until I cry out, grabbing a handful of his hair and pulling him away.

“You taste so fucking perfect,” he says, licking the inside of my thigh before biting me hard enough to make the skin sting and burn.

Two fingers part my folds, sliding into me and making me push up onto my toes a little at the instant feeling of fullness. Teddy's dick is huge, so despite how I seem to be in a constant state of arousal, I still need a little prep work to make sure I'm ready to take him.

“Fuck, baby, your cream is coating my hand already, tell me what you need.”

“I need you to make me come,” I pant, pressing down onto him as he starts to pump his fingers in and out of me.

“Ask me nicely and I’ll make you scream before I bend you over the end of the bed.”

“Please make me come,” I say, letting my eyes close and my head fall back.

“Good girl. You beg so prettily.”

I’m not entirely sure what he does, but gasping waves of sensation hit me with every curve of his fingers and my knees buckle. His arm wraps around my ass as he holds me tight, fucking me with his fingers while I struggle to stay upright.

“That’s it, Treasure, your pussy is so ready for my cock, come on my hand, show me how good I’m making you feel.”

Almost like my body was waiting for him to tell me to do it, I orgasm, gasping and cursing as my muscles seem to wilt and collapse into a boneless heap of pleasure. Between one blink and the next, Teddy scoops me off the floor and carries me into the bedroom, turning me in his arms and lowering me to the floor with my chest against the comforter, my feet on the carpet beneath the bed. “Spread your legs nice and wide, baby, I want to watch as you take my cock.”

The head of his dick nudges at my entrance and he pushes into me, not stopping until I’m fully impaled on his massive girth. “Christ, woman, the sight of you stretched around my dick, I’m on the verge of coming just from watching you take me. I’m going to take your ass soon, watch your tight virgin hole swallow my cock. I’m going to fill it with my cum and then make you stay still once I’m done so I can watch it drip back out of you.”

The way he talks to me shouldn’t be such a turn-on but it is. If you’d have asked me before Teddy if I’d have enjoyed dirty talk, I’d have told you no without even having to think about it. But when it’s him saying all these naughty, filthy things to me, it acts like a vibrator set to high.

My sex clenches and I come around his thrusting cock, I’m pretty sure I black out from pleasure for a minute, because the

room goes hazy and the next thing I know I'm thrown headfirst into another orgasm. I scream and scream as his rhythm becomes erratic and he slams into me, hard and fast until he hits his own peak, grunting and growling his release, before leaning over my back and pressing a kiss to my spine.

He still refuses to use condoms and even though I know I should, I haven't tried that hard to convince him otherwise. I'm sure with any other guy I'd be terrified and rushing to the doctor for the morning-after pill and a course of birth control, but this is Teddy.

On the couple of occasions I've brought up how stupid and irresponsible we're being, he just smiles and kisses me. Then he spells out our life together, sharing all the little things I hadn't thought about, like the trips we'll take, the dress I'll wear when I marry him, how sexy I'll be swollen with his child in my stomach. How he'll want to taste the milk from my breasts, how he plans to hold me on his lap while I feed our kids. He has it all planned out and the picture he's painting seems so idyllic it's become all too easy to allow myself to be swept up in the fantasy.

Everything between us feels almost *too* easy, *too* good, that I'm finding myself searching for the hitch. Meeting someone and connecting because of fate or whatever, isn't real and sooner or later that's going to catch up with us and throw a wrench in this utopia we're living in right now.

"God, baby, it's never enough," he pants against my back, lifting his weight off me, but not pulling his dick from inside of me. "I just filled you up, but my dick is ready to go again."

"I need a minute," I rasp, turning my cheek and resting it against the fabric of his comforter.

"I'll do all the work," he chuckles, sliding out of me, then flipping me to my back, dragging me to the edge of the bed and slamming back into me again before hooking my legs over his broad shoulders.

"Teddy," I whimper, his dick hitting that spot deep inside of me that makes sparks burst to life again, despite how wrung out I feel.

“I can’t help it, Treasure, I need you.”

This time it isn’t frantic or desperate like it is when he’s had to keep his hands to himself all day. He takes his time, sliding in and out of my sex with an almost lazy pace, lifting his hips each time he completely fills me, hitting my G-spot and forcing moans of exhausted pleasure from me.

Dropping his head, he pulls one of my nipples into his mouth and sucks, alternating between soft and hard in time with his dick filling me completely.

“Tell me who you belong to,” he asks, letting my nipple fall from his lips before he takes the other side into his mouth and treats it to the same exquisite torture.

“You,” I gasp, arching my back to force my breast farther into his mouth.

“That’s right, baby, you’re all mine. Marry me, Juniper, give yourself to me completely.”

My eyes snap open and I stare up at the man above me, his lips parted, his eyes wild with hunger and need and want.

“Say yes.” He punctuates his words with a hard roll of his hips, building the pace, fucking me harder and deeper.

“Say yes,” he growls, slamming into me.

“Oh god,” I gasp, tipping my head back, my mouth opening on a moan.

“Give me what I want, baby, give yourself over to me completely. Say yes.”

At my silence he completely loses control, fucking me as if he can will the answer he wants from me with each thrust of his perfect cock into my soaked and throbbing pussy. He fucks me until I’m babbling unintelligibly, just making sounds of “please,” and “god,” and “more.” But never the word he’s looking for.

When my orgasm hits, my muscles lose all control and I spasm and twitch beneath him, thrashing as far as his huge body will allow. He comes with an angry growl, forcing his

dick into me as far as it will go and gripping my thighs tightly as his cock spills his seed, coating my sex in him.

After a long, tense moment, he slides his now spent cock from me, still holding my legs high. His fingers fill me and he fucks me roughly, then as suddenly as he started, he stops, pulling his fingers free and staring down at me again. Angry, narrowed eyes rake over every detail of my face as he pulls his teeth over his full lower lip. Releasing his hold on my legs, he slides one hand over my cheek, then tips my chin up with his thumb and lifts the fingers that are glistening with the proof of our arousal and pushes them into my mouth.

“Suck,” he orders, dominance sparking in the depths of his eyes.

A part of me knows I should argue, but instead I lave my tongue over his fingers, tasting the salty proof of his release mixed with the sweeter taste of my own.

“We’re getting married, Treasure. In a month. You can plan what you want, or I can drag your ass down to city hall, you pick.”

I try to speak, but he pushes his fingers a little farther into my mouth, stopping me. “The only answer I’m looking for is yes. If you plan to say anything other than that, don’t bother. You belong to me. A ring won’t alter that, but I want to give you my last name and make sure everyone knows who owns you. So do you have anything to say?”

Slowly, he slides his fingers from between my lips, immediately lifting them to his own mouth and sucking them clean.

“Treasure?”

My voice won’t work, I’m simply mute and so I shake my head from side to side and watch more anger and frustration flash in his eyes. When he slowly lets his lids fall closed, I wonder if this is the hitch I’ve been waiting for.

After a while the silence becomes too thick and I wiggle. “I need to use the bathroom.”

His eyes snap open and instead of moving, he wraps his arms around me and lifts me off the bed, carrying me into the bathroom and placing me down next to the toilet. Turning away he twists the faucet on the tub and water starts to pour out.

“Teddy?”

“Pee, then we can get in the tub,” he says, his voice stern and unyielding.

Over the last couple of days I’ve come to realize that Teddy really doesn’t care that I hate him being in the bathroom while I use it. Whenever I tell him this, he assures me that golden showers aren’t his thing and to stop overthinking it. I had to Google what a golden shower was and thank god he isn’t into it because there is nothing sexy about pee.

Reluctantly, I wait until his back is turned to go, then quickly clean up and wash my hands. “I don’t really feel like a bath,” I say, edging toward the door.

“Get in the tub, Treasure,” Teddy says with an edge to his voice that I know has everything to do with me not following his orders like he wants me to.

“This isn’t sex, Teddy; you don’t get to be in control all the time.” I’m not mad, I’m just frustrated that he thinks he can propose in the middle of sex and then fuck the answer he wants out of me. When I agree to get married I want a story I can tell people, I want the man I love down on one knee with a ring in a box that he reveals as he asks me to be his for the rest of our lives.

Without saying a word, he stalks to me, picks me up, then unceremoniously dumps me into the water, not saying a thing when it splashes all over the floor, soaking everything in its wake. Climbing in after me, he bands a steellike arm around my middle, holding me in his lap as he situates us, while I wipe water from my face. Pushing frantically at his arm, I try to free myself from his hold, but he’s like granite, solid and completely immovable.

“Settle down, Juniper,” he yells, reaching around with his free hand and pinching my nipple.

“Ow,” I yelp, slapping his hand away.

“We’re having a fucking bath together, so just calm the fuck down.”

Scooping up a handful of water, I throw it into his face. I know it’s childish, but his caveman, pain-in-the-ass behavior totally warrants it. He’s being a douche and we both know it.

“Did you seriously just throw water at me?” he asks, his voice shocked and maybe a little amused?

“You’re being an asshole. I told you I didn’t want a bath and instead of behaving like a rational human being, you picked me up and threw me in here like an errant toddler. So yes, I did just throw water at you.” Then I scoop up another handful and do it again.

I hear the water hit him, then an ominous silence fills the steamy room. I tense for his anger, but instead, he slides his palm quickly through the water in front of me and sends a tidal wave straight into my face.

I can only describe what happens next as a water fight worthy of recognition in the most ridiculous things I’ve ever done. Two adults, naked, running around his bathroom, throwing water, soaking one another with the spray from faucets and the showerhead until he calls for a cease-fire and pulls me into his very wet chest.

“Teapot?” he asks tentatively.

“So much teapot,” I tell him.

Carefully, he tilts my head back until I’m looking up at him. “I’m sorry.”

I nod.

“We’re still getting married though, I’m not taking it back, but I’m sorry for getting mad at you for me not picking the best moment to ask.”

Opening my mouth to argue, he silences me with his lips, lifting me up off the ground and onto his rock-hard cock. By the time we're done, I'm too tired to protest when he lowers me to the bed and curls in behind me, parting my legs and sliding his softening dick back into my sex as he presses kisses to my shoulders and neck until I fall asleep.

A week later, I pad over to his closet, intent on stealing one of his shirts and find my clothes, all my clothes hanging beside his. "Teddy," I yell.

"What?" he asks, sliding into the room, worry etched across his face.

"Why are all my clothes here?"

Shaking his head, he chuckles. "Jesus, Treasure, you scared me half to death."

"Answer the question. Why are all my clothes here?"

"Because I thought you might need them. As fuckable as you look in my shirt, I'd rather no one but me see you looking like that. I'm more than happy for you to quit your job and stay here as my sex slave, naked and waiting for me, but I'm guessing that's probably not going to work for you," he laughs, pushing his hands beneath the hem of his shirt and palming my ass.

"How did they get here? They weren't here yesterday," I cry, slapping his hand away and pointing at the closet full of my belongings.

"I moved them."

Spinning around I pin him with a glare. "Why would you do that?"

The smile falls from his face, replaced with his stubborn expression that I've dubbed his dom face. "Because normal people enjoy having their things around them in their home."

"This isn't my home."

"The fuck it isn't."

“I live down the hill with my brothers,” I say, swinging my arm around and pointing in what I think is the direction of the house I share with my family.

“Really?” He smirks. “Well, how many nights have you spent there in the last couple of weeks? How many meals have you eaten there? How many times have you even been there when you haven’t been picking up stuff to bring back here? We live here, in my apartment, Juniper.”

“I never agreed to move in with you,” I argue, putting my hands on my hips and fighting the urge to stomp my foot.

“I don’t give a shit if you agreed, you live here. We’re engaged for fuck’s sake. Your brothers helped me move all your stuff up here.”

“They did what?” I gasp, then realize what else he just said. “And we are not engaged.”

“Then what the fuck is that on your finger,” he says, arrogantly pointing at my hand.

Glancing down, I gasp when I spot the enormous diamond ring on my finger. On. My. Finger. “When did you...?” I trail off, struck dumb by the beautiful piece of jewelry and the fact that somehow I’m wearing it and I know I never put it on myself.

“I put it on you after you said yes to me about fifty times in a row while I was fucking you against the door last night.”

“I wasn’t saying yes to marrying you, you asked me if it felt good,” I screech, unable to tear my gaze away from the ring. It’s beautiful, and unable to help myself, I lift my hand and admire the oval diamond surrounded by yellow diamonds on a fine gold band.

“This month or next month?”

“I’m not marrying you, Teddy.”

His smile is pure indulgence. “Yes, you are, Treasure, and you can pick either this month, or next month.”

“You haven’t even met my mom, we’ve been together weeks, weeks, you Neanderthal. Most couples wait years

before they even think about getting married.”

“Most people assume they’ll split up, I know we won’t, so why wait? We can go to city hall tomorrow if you want, then you can plan a big party for in the summer when we can do it outside without worrying about the weather.”

“No,” I shout. “No, no, no, no and just no.” Twisting the ring, I start to pull it off my finger, but Teddy’s hand covers mine, stopping me.

“Baby, I’m going to be all kinds of pissed if you take that ring off,” he warns.

“Well, I’m all kinds of pissed that you put it on me in the first place.”

“I’m serious, Juniper, don’t you dare take it off. You’re mine, woman, I know it, you know it, all of our family knows it and the rest of the male population knows it because they can smell the gallons of cum I keep filling you up with. We’re getting married. You can argue with me as much as you want, but that won’t change anything. I want to make it official. I want to claim you in the eyes of the law, in front of God, if that’s important to you and with everyone we love watching. If you can give me a good reason why you don’t want to get married, then we can talk about it, but as far as I’m concerned, the length of our relationship is irrelevant.”

“I…” I start and then stop, snapping my mouth shut as I try to put together a compelling argument why I’m not willing to marry this man who I adore, despite the fact he’s a pain-in-the-ass caveman.

“Exactly,” he whispers, lifting my hand with my ring on it to his lips and pressing a kiss over the impressive rock. “If other people’s perceptions are the only reason you can come up with not to marry me, then it shows you want this as much as I do, you’ve just been led to believe that couples need years together before they are sure enough of each other to commit so permanently. We don’t need that. I’m sure now, right this second.”

“Teddy,” I sigh, most of my anger draining from me in the face of his honesty.

“Aren’t you sure, Treasure?” he coos, cupping my cheek and gently tilting my face up to look at him. “Are you doubting us?”

A part of me knows he’s deliberately disarming me with his words and his touch, but he’s Teddy. My Teddy, and I can’t resist him. “I’m not marrying you tomorrow.”

“Okay, baby,” he nods, smiling sexily as he leads my lips to his, kissing me.

“Or this month,” I add when he pulls back, stroking my nipple through the lace of my bra.

“But you’ll marry me,” he whispers, bending his head down and running the flat of his tongue over the pebbled tip.

A moan slips from my lips and he scrapes his teeth over the fabric, grazing my skin through the lace. “Say yes, Treasure. Say you’ll be mine forever.”

“Ask me properly,” I pant.

His smile is pure sin as he sinks to one knee in front of me. Taking the hand that’s already wearing his ring he looks up at me. “Juniper Henderson, will you marry me? Will you tie yourself to me for the rest of eternity, will you love me and fight with me and belong to me for as long as we both shall live and then whatever comes after that?”

I nod. “Yes.”

Pressing a kiss to the beautiful ring on my finger he slides his hand up the inside of my leg, rising until his lips are level with mine and his fingers are teasing the edges of my panties.

“Say it again.”

“Yes,” I gasp a second before his fingers move my panties to the side and push inside.

“I love you, Treasure,” he rasps, pulling his fingers free and ripping the delicate lace of my panties, discarding them before he drops to his knees again and devours me.

Licking, sucking and nipping, he works me into a frenzy, before dragging me to the bed and lifting me into his lap, my back to his chest, my legs spread wide, draped over his.

“This needs to be quick, so while I fuck you with my cock, I want you to rub at that little clit until you come. I want to watch you get yourself off with my ring on your finger then tonight when we get back from work, I’m taking your ass, I’m going to cum in all of your holes and brand you as mine.”

My fingers start to move as he speaks and I feel the vibration of his chuckle against my neck as he reaches between us and guides his cock into my core. It doesn’t seem to matter how much sex we have; his cock still feels too big when he first breaches my entrance. It isn’t until he’s halfway inside of me and I feel like I’m going to split in two that my body relaxes and he fills me completely.

We might disagree about his caveman controlling ways, and my constant need to slow things down to a more normal and acceptable speed, but when it comes to this, we’re one hundred percent in sync. When we first discussed his need for control, he told me he wanted to lead and expected me to follow, but I had no idea that would take me to heights of pleasure I never even knew existed.

His body is unbelievable and when he takes over, my body submits to him like it’s exactly what I was always meant to do. I love his brand of control and now I give over to him, doing exactly what he says as he fucks his cock into me, making sparks of heat build in my stomach.

Rubbing the tip of my finger back and forth over my clit, I close my eyes and bask in the sensation of being so full, so owned by him. “Open your eyes, baby,” he demands, grabbing the hand that’s working my clit and sliding it between us, parting my fingers until I can feel his cock sliding in and out of me.

Slowing his thrusts, he encourages me to wrap my hand around his dick, feeling my own arousal coating his smooth shaft. “Push your fingers inside of yourself, I want to watch

you fuck your hand,” he demands, letting his hard dick fall free of my pussy.

“I want your cock,” I whine.

“You’ll have it, after you fuck your hand for a little while, I want your fingers and my ring coated with your arousal.”

Slowly, I push two fingers into my wet channel, pull them out a little and then push them back in again. The slick wetness of my dripping sex helps me thrust easily and I lean back into Teddy, arching my back to change the angle of my penetration.

“Stop,” he orders. “Three fingers, as deep as you can get them.”

I do as he says, adding a third finger and pushing them as far into my pussy as I can. A second later, his own fingers push in with me and I grunt, feeling my muscles protesting.

“Look at you, baby, five fingers gaping your cunt wide, I bet after taking my cock your cunt could take my fist, but not today. Feed me your fingers, I want to lick your cream off your engagement ring,” he rasps, replacing his fingers with his dick, quickly slamming back into me and yanking me all the way down his length as he sucks my fingers clean. “Fuck, Treasure, your cunt loves being stretched wide around my cock. Reach back and put your arms around my neck, I’m going to fuck you hard enough that you’ll feel it every time you move for the rest of the day.”

TEDDY



Pumping into her one final time, my balls pull up and I shoot my load deep inside her. I've never felt anything like being inside my Treasure's cunt, it's the most addictive feeling in the world and I really fucking hope it never stops feeling like this. The hours we spend at work together are pure fucking torture. I've had to force myself away from her office and onto the mountain just so I keep my hands to myself, because if I'm near her my dick is rock hard and it's almost impossible to resist touching her. That wouldn't be so bad, but touching usually leads to me playing with her tits or pussy, which inevitably leads to me filling her with my cock. I feel like a teenager who just discovered what his dick's for.

Everything about Juniper is perfect, it's like she was made exactly for me. In bed she's beautifully submissive, letting me take full control just like I told her I need. I think the fact that she had only slept with one other guy and was by her own admission inexperienced, has helped us fall into the roles I crave and although I want to maim and murder the guy who stole her virginity from me, at least it was only one guy, one time. If I have to spend the rest of our lives together fucking her until I eradicate the memory of her first time I will.

Outside of the bedroom she's feisty and strong and generally just awesome. She regularly calls me on my bullshit and fights back whenever I try to take over. Our code word teapot is used a little more often than I'd like, but it's going to take time for her to understand and deal with my controlling ways.

As our labored breaths start to calm, my eyes fall to the ring on her wedding finger. Until I slid it onto her last night after I fucked her into sleep, I hadn't fully understood the depth of my need to make her mine. I already own her and there's no way I'd ever let her leave me, but something about that band on her finger soothes something ragged and scared inside my chest.

Juniper isn't like any of my brothers' women. They all fought the inevitable, but they were saying yes, even as they were running away. Juniper said no. She denied me and although I had complete faith that she was mine, I had enough doubts to make me fucking terrified that I would lose her before I even had a chance to claim her.

Asking her to marry me for the first time in the middle of sex was an asshole move, but when my dick is deep inside her is the time when she's the most honest with me, when she's guided by her feelings and not by her brain.

I thought she'd say yes. She didn't.

Since then, I've been on the verge of a full-blown meltdown. My panic-stricken brain seriously considered drugging her food and then stealing her away to a house deep in the woods where no one would find us and she could never escape. My desperation to keep her has become a living, breathing need inside of me and I'm not sure at this point if it's me or it in control.

I didn't mention anything to her when I took the afternoon off work yesterday and convinced her brothers to help me pack up and move all of her things here. They don't understand the depth of my obsession with her, but they understand enough to know that I'm not going anywhere. I might also have told them she knew all about me moving her things and that I wanted to surprise her by having it all unpacked when she got home.

Seeing that ring on her finger, hearing the yes on her lips, it's settled that angry snarling beast inside of me and for the first time in days it feels like I can breathe. I don't think I'll feel fully calm until we're married and that baby I'm

determined to put in her is growing, her belly swollen and telling the world she's owned and claimed.

"Oh my god, my legs feel like jelly," she giggles, tapping my thigh and silently asking me to help her move.

"Good, that means I'm doing my job right," I coo, pressing my lips to her shoulder.

"Thank god it's Friday, I'm sleeping in tomorrow morning."

"I like that idea, maybe we should spend the entire day in bed, just fucking and eating, and fucking again."

"You're going to break my vagina, we need to take a break."

"Fuck no," I hiss, lifting my hips and grinding my hardening dick that's still inside of her.

"Stop, I can't take anymore. I'm tired, my sex is throbbing and I'm sore. We had sex four times last night and once this morning. You're on a ban until tomorrow." Wiggling, she manages to lift herself off my dick, and a gush of cum hits my leg as she tries to climb off me.

I laugh. "Baby, that's never going to happen. Neither of us can go that long without me fucking you. But we can give your pussy a rest, I already told you I want your ass tonight."

Her shocked gasp is almost comically loud. "We are not having anal sex," she whisper-shouts, like someone might hear us, in our bedroom, in my apartment, behind soundproofed walls.

"Why are you whispering?" I smirk. "There's only us here. You can say anal as loud as you want."

"Teddy."

"Anal," I shout loudly.

"Shut up."

"Juniper Barnett, I am going to fuck your tight ass tonight and you are going to fucking love it."

Slapping my arm, she clamps a hand over my mouth and glares at me menacingly. “I am not a Barnett and your dick is not going anywhere near my butt. You’ll rip me in two and plus, no, just eww, no, it’s not happening.”

“I’m not just going to shove it in, baby. I’ll stretch you out and by the time you’re ready to take my cock you’ll be begging me to fuck you.”

“No.”

At the sound of that word on her lips my smile falls away and a scowl replaces it. “I don’t like it when you say no, Treasure.”

“I don’t care. How about we shove something up your ass and see how you like it? I bet you won’t mind the word no then,” she hisses, her hands placed sassily on her hips. She might even be intimidating if she wasn’t completely naked except for a bra with my seed dripping down her thighs, her sex wet and swollen.

“I’ve had a plug in my ass,” I tell her, watching as her mouth falls open and she gawks at me, shocked.

“You’re bisexual?”

“No,” I laugh. “It was for a dare back in college.”

“Did you like it?” Biting at her plump lower lip, she looks up at me from beneath her lashes. She has no idea that she looks like a naughty little tease right now, but I notice and my dick hardens in appreciation.

“It felt weird, it wasn’t really my thing and it did nothing for me sexually,” I confess.

“So why do you think I’ll like it?”

“How about this, try it and if you don’t like it, we won’t do it again. I’m not going to pressure you into doing stuff you hate, but have you hated anything I’ve done to you so far?”

Her cheeks blush and I wish I could see inside her head right now and watch whatever dirty memory she’s playing. “No,” she whispers so quietly I can barely hear her.

“What’s your favorite thing I do to you?”

“Teddy, stop trying to embarrass me.”

Standing up, I don’t try to hide my arousal as I prowl toward her, catching her in my arms and tipping her head back so I can stare down at her. “I’m not trying to embarrass you, baby, I just want you to be able to tell me what you like and ask for what you need. I love you and I need you to be satisfied and happy.”

“I love you too.”

My heart stops. Just stops and then when it starts again, I feel forever changed. She might have agreed to marry me, but hearing her say she loves me is something I hadn’t realized I needed. I’ve never considered words that important until I met Juniper. Before, I always thought actions defined a person, but with her, I need to hear it, see it and feel it. She’s turning me into a controlling nutjob and I fucking love it.

Bending down I claim her lips and show her how I feel, how the world starts and ends with her, how she holds my soul in the palms of her hands and how I’ll never let her go, no matter what.

When I pull back, her eyes are glazed and her chest is heaving up and down. “Tell me what you like, what your favorite thing I do to you is.”

Her eyes fall closed and I want to demand she open them again, but I don’t, instead I somehow find the patience to wait for her to open them on her own. When she does, it’s like a window to her thoughts and my breath hitches.

“I like it when…” She pauses, swallows, then parts her lips. “I like it when you lick me.”

Her face is red and she cringes, but I cup her cheeks, refusing to let her look away. “You like it when I eat your pretty pussy? When I fuck your tight cunt with my tongue and lick your clit until you’re squirming and writhing, yanking on my hair trying to get my face closer to your sex?”

“Yes,” she moans wantonly.

“Do you want me to eat you now? Shall I have you for breakfast? Lick you clean with my tongue, then get you all dirty again when you come all over my fingers?”

Instead of words, the only sound she makes is a desperate whine of arousal. As I drop to my knees at her feet, I already know we’re going to be late for work.



“I’m going to get fired.”

“No, you’re not, I texted Beau ages ago and told him we were taking personal days.”

“You can’t just phone in for me, Teddy, it’s unprofessional.”

“Baby, you do know I’m a co-owner of Barnett Lumber, right? Beau, Huck and me are equal partners, so once we’re married, it’ll be your company too. If we want to take a day off to celebrate, we can.”

Sighing, she rolls to her side and buries her face into my neck. “I still can’t believe I agreed to marry you. I’m pretty sure you did some sex voodoo or something to get me to say yes.”

“Nope, I tried that and it didn’t work. You said yes all by yourself and there’re no take backs.”

“I haven’t forgotten that you moved me in here without my permission too.”

“Yeah, yeah, all the teapots, I know,” I chuckle.

“That’s not funny, Teddy. You said control in the bedroom, I did not agree to you taking over my life and making all of my decisions for me. I’m my own person and sometimes I’ll do things that piss you off, that doesn’t give you the right to bulldoze me into doing what you want.”

“I don’t bulldoze, but I like that option. I think we should do that all the time,” I tease, digging my fingers into her ribs and tickling her until she squeals for me to stop.

“I’m serious, Teddy.”

“I know. But you still love me, don’t you?”

“Yes, I still love you,” she says, wrapping her arm around my waist and snuggling in next to me.

She really must have been more exhausted than I realized, because she’s asleep moments later and stays that way until after lunch, when I wake her up by crawling between her legs and licking her until she’s wide awake and begging for release.

After she’s screamed through her second orgasm, I crawl away from her and make lunch, then we spend the afternoon fooling around and continuing with our game of twenty questions.

“What’s your favorite movie?” I ask, playing with the strands of silky hair that are splayed over my chest, where her head is resting.

“*Dude, Where’s My Car?*” She giggles.

“What, the one from the early 2000s?”

“Yep,” she nods, wiggling her head up and down over my nipple. “It’s so bad, it’s good. It’s hilarious no matter how many times I watch it.”

“Where did you go to college?” she asks.

“I went to The University of Colorado.”

“How come you came back to Rockhead Point?” she asks, lifting her head to look at me.

“Because this is my home. It’s where the most important people in my life are. My mom wanted me to see what was out there and I did. I moved out of the house, I met new people from all over the country, I got a part-time job. I experienced something other than this tiny town we live in and I got my degree.”

“You never thought about staying in Colorado? Or moving somewhere else?”

“Nope, not even for a minute. I was homesick the entire four years I was at school. I missed my family, I missed my

home, I missed the life I was waiting to start. The moment I graduated, I packed my stuff, got in my car and drove home. I started working for Beau a week later and he made me an equal partner six months after that.”

“You and your brothers are really close,” she smiles.

“We are. I know it’s weird. Fuck, even we think it’s weird, but we work together, live together, play together. We just like each other and now we’re all settling down, finding our significant others. It could have splintered our bond, but it hasn’t, if anything, now the girls and you are here it’s just bonded us even tighter. I can’t fucking wait for our kids to grow up with all their cousins. This place is going to be like a fucking zoo.”

“Teddy, I don’t think I’m going to be ready to have kids for a good while yet. I’m only twenty.”

“Let’s just focus on the here and now,” I say. In my head I consider warning her that with the amount of cum I’ve put inside her she might already be carrying my kid, but instead I keep my mouth shut. We can talk about this another time, once she has my name and I’ve got her locked down and mine. That doesn’t mean I won’t be fucking her, willing my seed as deep inside her as I can get it and hoping it breeds her as soon as possible, because I will be.

A contented sigh falls from her lips and I feel like an asshole, but I still stay silent, running a hand up and down the length of her naked spine as she lies almost on top of me.

“Are you happy?” I ask.

She sighs again. “Really happy.”

“Good,” I whisper, pressing my lips to the top of her head.

Because we’ve been busy fucking like bunnies in mating season, we’ve barely seen my family or her brothers since we officially got together, so we reluctantly drag ourselves apart and head into the main house to join my family for dinner.

“You’re alive,” Bay laughs when I lead Juniper into the living room and pull her down onto my lap. “Did you run out of food, or just get sick of banging already?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I laugh, throwing a cushion at his head. “We’ve been living in our bubble for a little while, you’ll do the same once you find your woman.”

“Nah,” Bay shakes his head. “I am happy staying single. Variety is the spice of life and I have no interest in having to live with one flavor for the rest of my days.”

“Mightier men than you have fallen, and the Barnett legacy waits for no man, there’re only you and Cody left now, big brother, it’s a fifty-fifty chance that you’ll be next.”

Bay shakes his head, bringing his bottle of beer to his lips and taking a drink. “Nah, bro, the kind of woman I want wouldn’t believe in that shit anyway. Only way I’d give up the single life is for a badass, self-sufficient woman, old enough to have decided she doesn’t want kids, who won’t want or expect all of my time and a wedding band.” He shrugs.

“So basically, you want a part-time, official hookup who expects nothing but sole use of your dick?” Juniper asks quietly.

“You’ve hit the nail on the head there, little sis. I’m too old to be looking for love, or thinking about having kids. I’m forty, I’m all about easy and comfortable. I like my life, I like my home, I like my situation. I’d be happy if the curse missed me completely.”

Snickering, I hold Juniper a little tighter. “It’s not a curse, bro. Look at me, I’m the luckiest bastard in the world. Got my woman with my ring on her finger, my family, my job. I didn’t think I’d ever have this and I pretended that was okay, but it wasn’t. I had my head up my ass and I almost missed out on seeing the best thing that ever happened to me, when it was right there in front of me.”

“I’m happy for you, I really am and I’ll be a kick-ass uncle to however many kids you make, but just because you were pretending this”—he motions to me and Juniper—wasn’t what you wanted, that doesn’t mean I am. I’m happy, my life is good and I don’t want some fated woman to change all of that.”

I want to scoff, to tell him he's talking shit and that he can't possibly be truly happy when his woman, *his* woman is out there waiting for him to find her. But he's not lying, I can see the honesty of his words written all over his face. He's happy as he is and as much as I want to tell him there's more out there, who am I to say what direction his happiness will take him?

"Well, dude, if that's the case, then here's hoping fate doesn't have a different plan in mind for you."

For a while we chill out and watch a TV show with Bay, chatting about the garage and the work he's been doing over at Bonnie's dad, Hal's place. One by one, the rest of my brothers and their wives start to emerge and I reluctantly allow Juniper to climb out of my lap when Cora demands to see her ring and talk weddings with her.

"So when are you thinking for the wedding?" Cora demands, still holding Juni's hand and admiring the ring I picked out.

"We're in no rush," Juniper says.

"This month, or next month, Treasure," I call.

"We are not getting married in the next six weeks, Teddy," she calls back, her voice stern.

"Fine, we can go to city hall on Monday. I'll let your brothers know."

"Teapot," she hisses.

I can't help it, I laugh. I suggested the whole code word thing, thinking she'd use it once or twice, but ultimately get used to my ever-increasing, domineering ways. But instead, she seems to call it out at least five or six times a day, so often that honestly it makes me laugh rather than having the sobering effect of reminding me of her limits when it comes to my high-handedness.

The truth is, that although I've never actively sought out any kind of real power exchange relationship, I wouldn't mind if Juniper ceded complete control to me. When it comes to sex, she's happy to let me be in charge, but with everything else

she refuses to let me get my way, and the need to exert my authority over her is starting to become a little... concerning.

I want to own her, and not in the way I already do. I want to own her thoughts, her actions, her decisions, I want it all. She'll never let me and I know it, but the uncertainty I'm feeling about her unwillingness to just give herself over to me, just seems to push my controlling nature even higher. I'm hoping that I'll chill out once we're married, or I'll figure out a way to manage it, either way something's got to give before I really do kidnap my bride and head for that cabin in the woods.

"Congratulations, baby brother," Beau says, sliding down next to me on the couch.

"Thanks."

"So when are we having this wedding?"

"As soon as possible, I'm antsy as fuck and I think her being Mrs. Barnett might soothe me."

"You good?" he asks, turning to face me, his expression a mask of concern.

"Yeah, just figuring out our boundaries. I'm pushing, she's pushing, we're seeing where the sweet spot in the middle is."

Beau nods. "You're going to overstep, I did, but Juni will put you back in your place just like Bonnie did with me. You'll keep pushing, but you'll figure it out."

"I know, it's just..." I trail off, unsure how to word what I'm trying to say.

"You're scared."

"Fucking terrified," I admit. "She could run."

"She could," Beau nods. "But you know what makes us Barnetts different from other men?"

I shake my head.

"We chase," he smirks. "We chase, and we catch, and then we make sure we never fucking let go."

Dinner is a loud, happy event. My family took Juniper in as one of us almost the moment they met her but now that she's mine, it's like this has always been her home and they've always been her family.

"When you change all your mail over, make sure you put your first name on everything, there're going to be five Mrs. Barnetts soon and we already end up opening each other's bills," Lulu says.

"Oh I'm not going to change my name," Juniper says airily, pulling faces at Poppy who is sitting in her high chair.

"The fuck you're not," I growl, as the table goes silent.

Rolling her eyes, she sighs. "It's the twenty-first century, Teddy, a woman taking her husband's name is an archaic social construct. I'm my own person, that won't change just because we get married."

Anger rolls through me and I clench my fingers into tight fists as I glare at my fiancée. I genuinely consider pulling her over my knee and blistering her ass until she's sobbing and begging to become Mrs. fucking Barnett.

I can feel the eyes of all my brothers fixed on me and all my sisters' batting back and forth between me and Juniper. "You're taking my name," I manage to force out through gritted teeth.

"Teapot," Juniper says, her eyes narrowing.

"Fuck teapots," I snarl, narrowing my own gaze in return.

"Why do they keep talking about teapots?" Cora stage-whispers.

"No clue," Bonnie replies.

Standing up slowly, I push away from the table and move around to where my fiancée is sitting. As calmly as I can muster, I hold out my hand and glare at her until she takes it. "Thank you for dinner," I say to the room in general, helping my woman to her feet and then releasing her fingers to place a stiff hand at the base of her spine.

“Oh shit, if they’re into spanking like you and Beau, she is so going to get it,” Cora singsongs.

“Peaches, you’re going to end up with my handprint on your ass if you don’t stop,” Huck warns.

“Promises, promises,” Cora purrs, her voice fading as we enter my apartment and close the door behind us.

“Teddy,” Juniper says angrily, “That was mortifying. What the hell do you think you’re doing making a scene like that?”

“Juniper, you need to just give me a minute to calm the fuck down.”

“It was embarrassing. I have to see your family every day and you treat me like that in front of them.”

“Juniper, I’m serious.”

“I’m serious too.” She pushes, her beautiful features twisted into an angry scowl. “You need to tone down the caveman shit.”

“Juniper.” My voice is liquid steel, my breath coming in ragged pants as I take a single step closer to her.

“I need some space. I’m going to go home for a few days.”

My vision turns red. The room narrows down to just me and her, nothing else exists as I stomp the distance between us, pick her up off her feet and throw her over my shoulder like the caveman she just accused me of being.

I’m out of control, I know it, but I don’t seem to be able to do anything to stop it. Gripping her thighs with one arm, I lift the other hand and bring it back down on her ass, spanking her once, twice, three times, making her scream and curse like a sailor as she tries to twist and kick free of my hold.

Crossing the threshold of our bedroom, I deposit her onto the bed on her belly, then climb on top of her, yanking down her shorts and panties and laying a hard slap down against her ass before leaning over and biting her butt cheek.

“Get off me, you Neanderthal oaf,” she shrieks.

“You’re taking my name,” I growl, roughly parting her legs to find her... Soaking wet?

“No I’m not. My name is Juniper Henderson and it’s going to stay Juniper Henderson,” she spits, bucking beneath me as if her tiny body is going to unseat me.

Even fighting me, she still parts her own legs wider when I shove my hand between them, then I pull away and slap her pussy. She howls, but the gush of her arousal shows me that she does not hate this as much as she’s suggesting she does. “We’re getting married in four weeks’ time, and you’re going to promise to obey me and then you’ll change your name to Juniper Barnett. You are mine and your name is going to prove that.”

“No, I’m not, you asshole.”

I slap her wet pussy again and instead of shouting, she mewls, arching her back and pushing her sex toward me, begging for more.

My dick is like an iron spike in my pants and the urge to slam it deep inside of her is all-consuming, but I want to explore what’s happening between us right now. She’s never expressed any interest in a little pain to go with her pleasure. She might not have even realized this would be something that would turn her on, but judging by the way she’s wiggling her ass and pussy at me, she’s desperate for more, not wanting me to stop.

The anger drains from me and a slow warmth trickles through my veins, making my hard muscles soften as my tense palm relaxes, rubbing a soft circle on the handprint I’ve left on her ass.

“You’re a naughty little treasure aren’t you, baby? Your mouth is saying you hate the way I just spanked your ass, but your pussy is gushing. So tell me, baby, am I a Neanderthal? Shall I get off and leave you alone, *Miss Henderson*?” Her name tastes like acid on my tongue, she’ll be Mrs. Barnett even if I have to forge her signature and get her name changed myself.

For a second she pauses, her body frozen beneath me. Slowly her head turns to look at me and her eyes heat with passion.

“What’s the matter, baby, you had plenty to say a few minutes ago. Don’t go quiet on me now. Tell me what you want? Do you want me to stop? Or do you want my hands on your ass and your pussy?”

An unintelligent noise comes from my squirming, wiggling fiancée.

“What’s that, Treasure? Use your words.”

Instead of speaking, she lifts her hips and pushes her weeping cunt at me.

“Oh no, honey, I’m a Neanderthal, that’s right, isn’t it? You’re Juniper Henderson, you don’t need anything from me, not even my name, that’s right, isn’t it?” I say, a chilly edge lacing my words.

“Teddy,” she whines.

It kills me, but instead of touching her like I desperately want to, I climb off her legs, back away from the bed and sink down into the chair beneath the window.

“What are you doing?” she gasps, twisting her head around to look at me over her shoulder, her shorts and panties still caught around her knees.

“You asked me to get off.”

“But you...” She trails off as if she’s expecting me to fill in the gaps for her.

“I’m just doing what you asked.” Now that there’s some distance between us and the scent of her arousal isn’t affecting my brain, my anger surges back to life, but in a more rational fashion. As much as I’d love to spank her ass and pussy until she’s dripping and begging with need, we need to have a conversation more.

“Get back over here,” she snaps, widening her legs and flashing more of her wet folds and a hint of her puckered hole at me.

“No.”

“No?” she echoes back incredulously.

I can understand her shock, there has never been a moment when we've been alone outside of work when I've resisted the urge to rip her clothes off and fuck her senseless, but as much as my dick is weeping with precum and so fucking hard it actually hurts, I don't want to have sex right now. That's a lie, I totally want to fuck her hard and long enough that she'll just agree to do what I want, but that's probably not the best course of action, so instead I plant my feet to the floor and keep my ass in the fucking chair.

“What's the matter?” she asks, rolling over and quickly stripping her clothes off, dropping them haphazardly to the floor until she's naked.

“You don't want to take my name?”

Her shoulders slump and she exhales dramatically, rolling her eyes. “Jesus, why does it matter? I know I call you a caveman all the time, but you're being a baby about some macho male bullshit.”

“This isn't macho bullshit; this is my wife not wanting the world to know that she's fucking married.”

“I just don't really see why it matters, I love you, we're together, I don't see what the rush is to get married, it won't change anything.”

“Of course it'll change things, like your name,” I growl.

“I just can't with you,” she cries, bringing her hands up and running them through her hair.

“You're mine.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Teddy, the mine, mine, mine shit is hot in bed, but you can't use it as an excuse to get whatever you want all the time,” she cries, grabbing her clothes from where she just discarded them only minutes ago and pulling her shorts and shirt on, leaving her underwear on the floor.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” I demand. “I love you, I want to marry you, have kids with you. You are my

fucking future, the thing that makes me happiest in the world. You're mine, I'm yours, that's how it works. I'm not trying to get my own way, if I was, you'd be impaled on my dick while I fucked the answer I wanted out of you."

Her eyes widen and she visibly pales. Fuck. The moment the words slip from my lips, I wish I could take them back. I love her, I love the way we connect mentally and physically and I just made her think that I use sex as a weapon. Fuck.

"You'd fuck the answer you wanted from me?" she says slowly.

"Juniper."

"Oh my god, is that what you've been doing this whole time? I'm such an idiot."

"Baby, that's not... I don't..."

"But you do," she says thoughtfully, taking a step back when I stand up and try to move to her. "You always touch me; you always want to touch me. Oh my god, you did it today. I'm here all moved into your home and I didn't agree to that and we're engaged and I'm not sure I agreed to that either."

My heart pounds erratically in my chest, and her fingers tremble as she uses them to cover her mouth. "Oh my god, I'm such an idiot."

"Baby, that's not..." I reach for her, but she flinches as if I was going to hit her and I pull back, letting my arms fall uselessly to my sides.

"I'm my mom," she whispers brokenly. "She lets men manipulate her and I'm doing the exact same thing."

"Juniper, you're not your mom and I'm not your dad. I love you, I'm not manipulating you, just take a breath."

"Don't you think my dad probably said the exact same thing to her? He used to tell her to calm down too, he'd use this patronizing tone like she was an idiot who couldn't think on her own," she yells, spinning around and searching for something.

"But that's not us."

“Isn’t it? How would I know? How do I know what’s real and what’re situations that you’ve controlled by fucking the answer you want out of me?” She throws my words back at me and I feel sick.

“It’s not like that,” I say quietly.

“Then what’s it like? I told you I wasn’t moving in with you and you went behind my back and brought all my stuff here, then when I called you on it, you seduced me, you fucked me stupid and convinced me that I was okay with living here. You asked me.” Her voice breaks as she chokes out a sob. “The first time you asked me to marry you was in the middle of sex.”

Fat tears spill from her eyes and roll down her cheeks and I can’t stop myself, I rush forward and wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my chest and holding her. She leans into my touch for a second, letting me soothe her, then she pushes away from me so violently I release her and she stumbles back, catching herself with her arm on the bed to stop herself from falling. “No,” she screeches. “Don’t touch me.”

“Baby, please. I know everything you’re thinking is so fucking bad right now, but I swear it isn’t like that. I swear I have not been using sex to manipulate you.”

Her head shakes back and forth as I speak, denying my words even as I’m saying them. “I don’t believe you,” she whispers, shakily pushing her feet into her sneakers.

“What are you doing?” I ask, staring horrified as she grabs a sweater and pulls it on over her shirt.

“I’m leaving and you’re not going to follow me.”

“No,” I say, pressing my lips together as I shake my head forcefully. “You’re not leaving me.”

Ignoring me, she darts from the room and runs for the door that leads back into the main house. Running after her, I sprint through the shared living room, and catch her a few steps away from the front door, grabbing her around the waist and hauling her into me, her back pressed to my chest.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I snarl, not caring that we’re not alone or that most of my family are witnessing my life fucking imploding right now.

“Get off me,” she screams, tears still streaming down her face.

“No, you’re mine. I’m not letting you fucking leave, we can go and talk this out, but you’re not leaving.” I yell the words.

“Teddy,” Bonnie says from somewhere behind us. “You need to let her go.”

“No,” I spit, tightening my arm around Juniper’s waist.

“Teddy Barnett,” Cora snaps. “I swear to god, you let her go right now or I will call my brother and get your ass hauled down to jail for the night.”

“Teddy.” Alice’s sweet, timid voice breaks through the red haze that overtook me the moment my woman ran from me. “You’re scaring Juni.”

My grip loosens, then falls away as a big hand lands on my shoulder. I don’t need to look to know it’s Beau. The moment she’s free, Juniper rushes to the door and pulls it open, pausing long enough to look at me with those huge eyes of hers that are full of heartbreak and desolation. Then she turns away from me and disappears into the night.

I lunge forward, physically incapable of watching her leave me, but Beau’s grip holds me back, his arm curling around my neck and restraining me. “No.” He warns.

“I can’t let her leave me,” I scream.

“She isn’t leaving you.”

“She is.”

“Right now, she’s just taking a breather. Give her some space, then you can go get your woman when you’re both calmer.”

“It’s dark and cold and she’s wearing fucking shorts,” I cry, my voice breaking.

“Bay already went after her, he’ll make sure she gets back to Buck and Nero’s okay. Now come sit down and tell me what the fuck happened.”

JUNIPER



Tears stream down my face and I pause, my hand gripping the door as I turn to look at Teddy. His face is a mask of anguish and fear and for a second I don't want to go, even though I know I need to.

Cold assaults me as I step out into the darkness, letting the door swing closed behind me as I take off running. After a couple of minutes, I'm crying so hard I can barely see where I'm going and I stop, covering my face with my hands and sobbing loud, gut-wrenching cries.

Strong arms surround me and I stiffen until familiarity hits, and I recognize the person hugging me as Bay. "It's okay, honey, it's all going to be okay," he coos, his large palm on the back of my head, holding me to him as he rubs his other hand soothingly up and down my back.

"Everything is so fucked," I cry, my voice thick with heartbreak and tears.

"It'll all work out, you'll see. He'll fix this, whatever he did, he'll fix it, I promise."

Warmth surrounds me and I blink, twisting my face from Bay's chest to see him wrapping a blanket around my shoulders.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asks, loosening his hold a little and looking down at me, his expression full of sympathy.

"What's the point? You're his brother, you'll take his side," I say dramatically.

“Not if he’s been a douche I won’t. Come on, it’s too cold to stay out here, I’ll walk you down to your brothers, you can tell me on the way.”

“We were arguing.”

“Yeah, I got that bit.” Bay laughs.

“He was really upset about me not wanting to change my name after we got married.”

“It’s a man thing, but it’d be important to me too, if I was in that situation.”

My cheeks heat as I confess. “We started fooling around, while we were shouting at each other and then he just stopped and...” I fall silent, shaking my head, struggling to find the words.

“You were angry fucking?” Bay asks.

“No, that’s the thing. We weren’t, and then we started arguing about the fact that we weren’t having sex. I said he was just trying to get his own way, and he said, ‘I’m not trying to get my own way, if I was, you’d be impaled on my dick while I fucked the answer I wanted out of you.’”

“Oh,” Bay says, making the *O* shape with his mouth.

“I’m such an idiot, because he had to literally spell it out for me to realize he’s been doing this since we got together. He’s been manipulating me and using sex to get me to do what he wants. I thought we were starting something real. He told me he has”—I clear my throat—“control issues. But I never thought he’d use sex to manipulate my behavior and responses. He moved me in and when I was pissed at him, he fucked me until I forgot to be mad anymore. He proposed in the middle of sex to try to fuck a yes out of me. Every time I disagree with him, he disarms me with his touch and fucks me until I pass out, then when I wake up he convinces me I changed my mind and agreed to do whatever he wanted.”

“Juni, I’m sure he’s not”

I interrupt. “Are you though? Are you one-hundred-percent sure that’s not exactly what he’s been doing? Bonnie,

Cora, Alice and Lulu they'd all admit that you Barnetts will do whatever it takes to get your women and keep them. So tell me why he wouldn't do this?"

Bay's mouth snaps shut and his gaze darts away from me.

"You can't, can you? You can't tell me you're one-hundred-percent sure, because when it comes down to it, you know it's something he, or any of you, would do in this insane quest to fulfill this legacy you all truly believe in."

"He loves you, honey."

"I love him too. But my dad loved my mom, he also loved his wife and his half a dozen girlfriends he had spread out all over the country. Love is great, but it doesn't have to be honest, it doesn't have to be good for you. In fact, I think love might be even more toxic than hate sometimes."

By the time we reach my brothers' house, Bay looks almost as dismayed as Teddy did when I walked out the door. "You got a key?" he asks, looking up at the dark house.

I shake my head. "No, but we have a hide-a-key."

"Both your brothers working tonight?"

"Buck is, Nero isn't, he probably has a date or something."

"I don't like leaving you here on your own, you want me to come in just until Nero gets back?"

"No, I'll be fine, I'm just going to go to bed. Thank you for walking me down here, you didn't need to."

"I'll wait and see you inside."

I nod, slipping the blanket from my shoulders and handing it to him.

"Beau won't be able to keep him away for long," Bay tells me with a wry twist of his lips.

"I know."

"You got my number in your cell still?"

I nod again, tears filling my eyes again at the thought of Teddy coming down here tonight.

“I’ll do my best to keep him away until the morning. If he comes down here and causes trouble, you give me a call and I’ll come drag his ass home. Okay?”

“Why would you do that?” I ask, my throat thick with emotion.

“Because no matter what happens with you and Teddy, you’re family now and we take care of each other.”

I collapse into his arms when he pulls me in for a hug again, he feels so similar to Teddy that fresh tears fall from my eyes, because as much as I hate him right now, I want him here. Somehow, in such a short space of time he’s become the person I want when I’m upset and heartbroken, and I don’t know what to do when it’s him who’s made me feel this way.

My limbs feel heavy as I drag myself down to the porch, open the key safe Buck installed beneath a planter and let myself into the house. I have only lived here for a few weeks, but still, the familiarity makes a fresh batch of tears fall from my eyes. I wish my brothers were here, they’d hug me, then tease me, then probably offer to kill Teddy. Instead, I’m alone, desperately wanting the man who sent me running from him.

Turning, I wave to Bay, who nods, then slowly turns and starts to walk back up the hill to his home. I know if I asked him to, he’d come in and stay with me, but he’s too similar to his brother and having him here will only make me want Teddy more.

A sharp pain in my chest has me lifting my hand and covering the skin above it on my breast, like my touch can somehow soothe the physical pain tonight’s revelations have caused.

I’m not a drinker, but I pad into the kitchen, grab a bottle of Buck’s bourbon and carry it with me back up to the room that used to be mine. My bed and all my furniture are still here, but it doesn’t feel like home anymore.

How can that be?

I didn’t officially move into Teddy’s place until today, although it’s been weeks since I stayed here. Twisting the lid

off the bottle, I lift it to my lips and take a healthy pull, immediately coughing as the heat of the whiskey hits my throat.

My stomach tries to revolt, but I breathe slowly, then take a second drink, cringing and shuddering as the liquor settles like acid in my gut. Placing the bottle onto the bedside table, I sit down on the edge of the bed and try to figure out what the hell happened today.

In less than twenty-four hours it feels like I've gone through every single emotion and now I'm just numb. Waking up and finding my clothes all hung up in Teddy's closet feels like a lifetime ago. My mind stills when I remember the way he'd touched me when I'd yelled at him. How he'd disarmed me with kisses and orgasms until I was too spent and satisfied to argue with him.

A fresh batch of tears fall from my eyes, but I don't wipe them away. I just let them roll down my cheeks, hitting my bare thighs when they fall from my chin. I don't know what's real anymore. I don't know if anything we've had since we became intimately involved is true or if he's been playing with me all along.

I love him and I believe he loves me too, but will that love only last while he can get me to do, and act, and say everything he wants me to? That's what my dad did to my mom, after his wife kicked him out, he moved in with us. My mom was over the moon, but when she started to expect him home for dinner, or to just to come home each night, he'd distract her with sweet words and kisses, when that stopped working, he stopped coming home at all.

Grabbing the bottle, I take another drink as my stomach roils at the idea of not being Teddy's anymore. Before tonight, his touch felt like an extension of his feelings for me. When we first met he only wanted the physical, until he decided it was more than that. I denied him and that's when he saw me, saw beyond his arrogant need for sex and assumption that I'd say yes to anything he decided to give me. It was when he realized I was his, or at least that's what he told me.

Was that true? Was I actually this fated mate, or was that all a manipulation too?

Lying down, my back on the comforter, I stare up at the ceiling like it holds all the answers. But instead of divine inspiration, my eyes start swimming as the alcohol hits me and a wave of melancholy consumes me.

Rolling to my side, I pull my hands up and rest them under my cheek. I want to go to him, I want to believe he's not playing me, that he's not using sex as a weapon against me, but I just don't know, and that doubt is what keeps me on this bed, in a room that isn't ours, in a house that no longer feels like home.

The alcohol must take effect quickly, because I fall asleep and wake up to the sound of someone banging on the door. I don't know what time it is, but it's still dark out, so it's not morning yet. I could reach for my cell, but I don't want to see if he's texted me or called. Teddy put it on do not disturb this morning and I never bothered to change it back.

The banging doesn't relent. It's Teddy, I can feel the tension in the air, my body reacting, my cells zinging with anticipation that he's here, that he's come for me. But can I trust that? Can I trust my own intuition, or has my body been part of the lie all along?

After a few more minutes the banging stops and I hear the sound of Nero's voice. "Barnett, what the fuck are you doing banging on my door at four in the goddamn morning?"

"Where is she? I need to see her," Teddy says, his voice frantic.

"Who? Juni? What's the matter with her? Why the fuck isn't she with you?" Nero demands angrily.

"We had an argument, she's here. Why the fuck don't you know that your sister is in your goddamn house?"

"I got in two fucking hours ago, I was out with... company. Stay here and let me see if she's in her room."

"I'll go," Teddy says, then I hear the sound of his feet pounding up the stairs, quickly followed by Nero's.

The door is thrown open a second later and Teddy's there, backlit by the light coming from downstairs.

"Juniper."

I don't move, I just stay where I am, curled up on my bed, still fully dressed, the bottle of bourbon open on the bedside table.

"Baby," he calls again.

My eyes are open, watching him, unblinking, but silent.

"June Bug, you okay?" Nero asks.

I shake my head.

"What the fuck happened?" my brother asks, but I'm not sure if he's talking to me or Teddy, so I stay silent, staring at them both, two of the most important men in my life, my brother who I trust implicitly and my fiancé, who I thought I trusted, but now I'm not so sure.

"We had a misunderstanding," Teddy growls, clearly hating that he's having to explain anything to my brother right now. "Juniper came here to get some space."

"It's four in the fucking morning. She isn't sprinting into your arms, so I suggest you go home and you guys can talk later, or whenever she's ready. Unless she wants you to stay." Both men turn to look at me and I shake my head.

"She doesn't want you here."

"No, fuck that. I'm not going, Treasure, we're going to sort this out right now. Juniper, look at me, we're sorting this right fucking now."

Blinking slowly, I ignore the desperation in Teddy's voice and roll over, giving both men my back and dismissing them.

"Juniper, please," Teddy begs, but I just close my eyes and will the room to go silent again. There're sounds of a scuffle, but I don't turn to look, pulling my hands over my ears like I did when I was a kid to block out the world.

Sometime later, Nero crouches down beside my bed and pulls my hands away from my face. "You okay?"

Fresh tears spill from my eyes and I shake my head, sitting up and throwing myself into my big brother's arms, wishing he could make it all better and knowing that he can't.

"It'll all work out, one way or another. I love you, sis, I'm sorry you're sad."

I must fall asleep again, because when I open my eyes, it's light and the sun is shining in through the open drapes. I'm still fully dressed, but I'm beneath the covers now and the bottle of bourbon is gone.

Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I rub at the ball of pressure that feels like it's lodged in my chest. I've never felt physical, emotional pain like this, but I know deep down inside that it won't go away until I fix things with Teddy, or leave him completely. Right now I'm not sure which option will bring me the least heartache.

Crawling to the bathroom, I use the toilet, then wash my face. The mirror reflects my swollen eyes and drawn expression. I look like shit, but I just don't have the will to do anything about it.

I don't have any clothes here, so I pad downstairs in the clothes I slept in and pause when I find both Nero and Buck sitting at the dining table drinking coffee.

"Morning," Buck says, his smile weak.

"Nero told you?" I ask.

Buck offers me a single nod. "Yeah, he did, plus the Barnett sleeping outside the front door was a pretty big clue."

"What?"

"Teddy was outside the front door when I got in this morning, apparently he's been there since Nero kicked him out last night. I suggested he go home, he said he isn't leaving until after he talks to you."

"Oh," I say meekly, taking the mug of hot chocolate Nero hands me and sliding into the seat beside Buck.

"You want to tell us what the hell happened? A day ago we were helping Teddy haul all your stuff up the hill so you could

officially move in with him, today you're back sleeping in your old room."

I scoff weakly. "What did he tell you when he asked you to help him pack and move all my things?"

Buck's brow furrows and he looks to Nero and then back to me. "That you'd agreed to move in with him and that he wanted to surprise you by bringing all your stuff up to his place, because you weren't looking forward to packing everything back up again so soon after moving here. Why?"

I laugh and it sounds brittle even to my own ears. "He never asked me to move in with him. He lied to you and then when we argued, we..." I cringe at talking about sex with my brothers. "You know... and he convinced me that I was basically living there anyway so nothing was changing and the only difference was that I'd have all my things there."

"Hang the fuck on," Buck growls. "He was forcing you to live there?"

"No," I shake my head, "He's right, I was basically living there, he just never actually asked me to move in, he just did it and then convinced me it was okay by plying me with orgasms."

Both of my brothers cringe. Apparently talking about my sex life is uncomfortable for all of us, not just me.

"Okay," Nero says. "But if he fucked you happy again, why are you here? And why is he outside looking like his world just fell apart?"

"We got engaged," I say, my voice breaking as I play with the engagement ring that I haven't taken off yet.

"He came and asked" Nero starts.

"He told us," Buck interrupts. "He told us he was going to ask you to marry him. He didn't ask for permission."

"We got into a huge argument because I don't want to change my name."

Both men suck in audible breaths.

“What?”

“You don’t want to take his name?” Nero asks.

“It just feels like an outdated tradition that I don’t really believe in. I won’t be less married if I stay Juniper Henderson, I’ll still be his wife.”

“Got to be honest, sis, I’d be pissed if my fiancée didn’t want to take my name.” Nero shrugs.

“So why are you here if he’s pissed at you?” Buck asks.

“He...” I trail off, not sure how to explain.

“He what?” Nero asks, his expression darkening like he’s bracing for the worst.

“He...” I start again.

“Just spit it out, Juni, because right now I’m thinking the worst and wondering if I need to go and beat the shit out of him,” Buck growls.

Closing my eyes I speak quickly. “I think he’s been manipulating me with sex to get me to do what he wants.”

“What?” both of my brothers say at once.

“Explain,” Buck snaps angrily.

“We were arguing and then we were kissing and then he stopped and said we needed to talk. I said he just wanted to get his own way, and he said that if he wanted to get his own way, he’d just fuck the answer he wanted out of me.”

For a moment no one speaks, the silence is so thick I can almost taste it.

Nero clears his throat, twists his neck from side to side then clears his throat again. “Okay, run that by me once more. He told you that...” He clenches his jaw and grimaces. “That he could fuck the answer he wanted out of you?”

I nod. “And then I realized that every time we argue or disagree, we have sex and somehow afterward he always gets me to agree to whatever we’d been arguing about. He’s turned me into my mom, this is how Dad used to talk her around

every time he had to leave to go to your mom or one of his other women. I'm weak and pathetic just like she was, and I don't know if I'm actually agreeing to stuff because it's what I want or because he's got me so pathetically in love with him that he's manipulating me into doing whatever he wants." Tears burn my eyes and then roll down my cheeks. I hate that I feel like this, that I feel so stupid.

"I don't even know what to fucking say," Buck sighs, rubbing at his temple agitatedly. "Do you want me to punch him? I'm more than happy to, just because he's had sex with my baby sister."

"Maybe," I confess, laughing through my tears.

"Do you think he's playing with you?" Nero asks thoughtfully. "Because, honestly, it doesn't sound likely to me."

I shrug. "I don't know. I think he loves me, but he has issues with control."

Both men narrow their eyes, sitting up straighter.

"He'd never hurt me physically," I rush to reassure them. "I mean, more like he has Christian Grey-style issues."

"Who the fuck is Christian Grey?" Nero asks, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"He's the dude from *Fifty Shades of Grey*," Buck tells him, then looks to me. "Got to be honest, sis, I really don't want to know if you guys are kinky in the bedroom."

"Not whips and chains, I mean, more that he likes to..." I pause, trying to phrase it in the right way. "To take charge."

"And you're good with that, right?" Nero asks. "He's not making you do anything freaky that you're not into or anything."

I laugh, I can't help it. "No, nothing like that. The sex is"

"Don't want to know as long as he's not forcing you or anything," Buck interrupts.

Sobering, my smile falls from my lips. “Mom let Dad use her, he distracted her and manipulated her and every time they argued, he’d drag her into their room and then she’d come out the next morning telling him she’d missed him and begging him to get a new job so he could be with us more. When your mom found out about us, my mom was happy, she was excited for him to move in and she never said a word about the wife and sons he had in Washington, she never said a word about the other women he had dotted over the rest of the country. She was a doormat and I never want that to be me. I never want to let a man blind me with sex or love or anything else.”

“And that’s what you think Teddy is doing? Using sex to distract you? You think he was using you?”

Shaking my head, I sigh, then nod, then shake my head and then finally shrug. “I don’t know,” I admit. “I don’t know, and if I did know, I’m not sure it’d be the truth or just what I wanted to be true.”

When I start to cry, Buck pulls me into his arms, wrapping his huge body around me in the most amazingly comforting bear hug.

“Don’t cry, June Bug, I hate it when you cry, it makes me want to hit people and if I go and beat the snot out of your man and you guys work it out, that’s going to be awkward as fuck at the wedding.”

“Did you move out?”

“I just left, I needed some space, Teddy didn’t want me to go and Beau had to hold him back to stop him from coming after me. I didn’t expect him to turn up here in the middle of the night, or sit outside.”

“He loves you and my guess is he’s scared as shit he’s going to lose you,” Nero says, wiping away my tears with the edge of his T-shirt.

“You going to speak to him?”

I shrug again, pulling out of Buck’s arms and sitting back down in my own seat. “I think I just need some time to think,

but I'm worried that if he touches me, I'll end up telling him this is okay and it's not."

"You want me to get rid of him?" Buck offers.

"Bro, if it was you in this situation, would you leave?" Nero asks.

"No. No, I wouldn't," he admits with a shrug.

Sighing, I push up from my seat. "I'll go and talk to him."

"You sure?"

"No, not at all, but I can't just leave him out there until I am sure. Can I?"

"No, you can't. Go and tell him you need him to give you some space. Shout if you need one of us," Nero says with a concerned smile.

My legs feel unsteady as I pad barefoot to the front door and open it. Teddy is sitting on the porch, his back resting against the front wall of the house, his head in his hands. When he sees it's me, he jumps up and dashes toward me but I hold up my hands, warding him off.

"Stop," I say, forcing a strength I don't feel into my voice.

"Baby, please. Talk to me, let me fix this, let me make this better," he begs. His eyes are bloodshot and there're dark circles beneath them, he looks as bad as I feel.

"Go home, Teddy."

"No," he snarls. "I'm not leaving until we sort this out."

"I need some time; I need to see how I feel away from you and all the ways you affect me."

"Fuck that, we need to be together. You need to let me fix this. I know you think I've been messing with you and manipulating you, but I haven't, not in the way you're thinking right now. I love you, Juniper, I fucking love you and I don't want time, I don't want space, I just want you and me, just us for the rest of forever. Come home with me, baby, let me fix this."

He reaches for me again and I flinch, stumbling back to avoid his touch. “You keep talking about what you want. What about what I want?” I ask, hating how small and meek my voice is.

“You want me, you love me,” he yells, and I don’t know if he’s telling me it’s true, or hoping that it is.

“I do love you,” I admit, wiping away the tears that just won’t stop falling. “But I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

“How could it ever be a bad thing?”

“It’s bad if I use that love as an excuse to overlook all the things you do. It’s bad if I lie to myself and say that it’s okay that you manipulate me. It’s bad if I let my love make me overlook how you think you can just fuck the answer you want out of me. I can’t plan a future built on lies and manipulations and mistruths. That’s what my mom did, and I told you I never wanted to be her. Last night, I felt more like my mom than I ever have before and I hate it. You made me feel that way. That’s why I need some time and some space so that when the haze of the way you make me feel fades, I can figure out what’s left and if it’s worth fighting for.”

I never really thought you could see someone’s heart break, but as I look at the man I love, I see it. I see the moment his heart shatters and it almost breaks me. The pain in my chest intensifies until I’m clutching at my skin as if I can grip the organ that gives me life and physically hold it together.

“I’ll try and stay away,” he says, his voice is lifeless and bland. “I’ll try.”

I nod, but it feels pathetic and hollow.

“I love you, Juniper Henderson. I love everything about you and I know I fucked up and I know I hurt you with my words last night, but I swear. I swear on everything I am and everything we could be, that I haven’t done what you’re thinking I have.”

This time when he reaches for me I don’t flinch away, I let him wipe the tears from my cheeks and then lean down and press the softest of kisses to my lips. “I love you and I swear

I'll make this better." Then he pulls back, turns and walks away, his shoulders hunched and his head hanging low.

TEDDY



I t's been two days. Two days since I fucked up the most important thing in my life. Two days since she ran away from me and back to her brothers. Two days since I turned around and left her there, my heart bloody and broken at her feet.

She begged me for time and space. I wish I could say I've given it to her, but that would be a lie. I managed about two hours before I was sitting at the top of the hill watching her brothers' house, desperate for a glimpse of her. I was shocked when she emerged from the front door and climbed into her brother's car. I was fucking ecstatic when I realized they were going to my house. But by the time I got home, she was taking a small bag from Cora and climbing into her own car and leaving again.

I followed her to work and sat in the sawmill, wondering what she'd do if I used the desk I claimed in her office. Then I followed her back to her brothers' and spent the night in my car, watching, unable to stand a night in our bed without her.

At two in the morning, the passenger door opens and Beau climbs into the seat beside me. "You need to get some sleep."

"I can't sleep," I tell him, my gaze pinned on the front door of the house, waiting for her to come out, to come back to me.

"You need to. She loves you, she knows you love her, she'll come home."

"How do you know?" I ask.

“Because I do. Love, the type we feel, it’s big and it’s scary as fuck. But it doesn’t fade and it doesn’t dissolve beneath a little pressure. You dented her trust and right now she’s questioning everything. But she’ll come home to you, if not, we’ll come up with a new plan.”

“I feel crazy, I feel like I should steal her away, take her somewhere where she can never leave me.”

“Don’t fucking tell her that,” Beau laughs, shaking his head at me. “Come on, let her have her space.”

“If it was Bonnie, would you? Would you let her have space?”

“Hell no,” he laughs. “But then I warned Bonnie that I was an over-the-top asshole right from the get-go.”

“Huck basically kidnapped Cora.”

“Yeah, well I’d have had this chat with him if I’d have known what he was planning on doing too. Look, come home, get some sleep and give her the rest of the day. If she hasn’t come to you, then go caveman on her ass tonight when Buck and Nero are both at work.”

Squinting into the darkness, I watch the drapes on her bedroom window move. “She called you, didn’t she?”

“I knew you were here, but yeah, she called. She was worried about how cold you’d get sleeping in your car again.”

Pulling out my cell, I type out a message, then hit send.

Me: I love you. I’ll fix this xx

Sighing, I start my car and leave, counting down the seconds until I can reclaim my woman. Beau’s right, I’ll give her a few more hours, then if she won’t come to me, I’ll go to her, and this time I won’t be leaving that house without her.

The rest of the night passes in agonizing slowness, minutes take hours and by the time the sun is peaking over the horizon, my dick is hard and my heart is thudding with the need for her. I don’t just want to fuck her, although I desperately want that physical connection we share, but I just fucking miss her. In the weeks since we got together, we’ve barely been apart more

than a handful of hours at a time. Being away from her now is like losing a limb and I crave her like an addict.

Forcing myself out of bed, I shower and dress on autopilot. We take it in turns to cook for the entire family, but Juniper and I have mainly kept to ourselves, too insatiable to keep our clothes on long enough to be social.

Right now I need my family, so I pad out of my apartment and into the main house. It's early, but we've always been morning people and all my brothers are already here.

"Hey," I say, padding over to the kitchen counter and pouring myself a coffee from the full pot.

"How you doing?" Granger asks, his eyes full of sympathy.

My sigh is ragged and full of sadness. "Not great," I admit.

"I can keep Buck and Nero busy for a while if you want to go grab her," Huck suggests.

"Huck," Beau admonishes with a half-hearted growl.

"Oh, stop pretending like you wouldn't do it if Bonnie tried to leave you. It worked for me, no reason why it can't work for Teddy too." Huck laughs.

"Maybe you should stop being such a Neanderthal and just give her some time, then apologize," Cody says in his quiet, intense voice.

Cody is definitely the most reserved of all my brothers, he rarely says anything, so when he does speak up, we all tend to listen. "When you meet your woman, you'll understand," Huck argues.

"How do you know I haven't?" Cody says, shocking me enough to turn around and stare at him.

"Have you?" I ask.

"No, I haven't, but if I had I wouldn't be acting the way you all have. I'd try dating her, coax her into a relationship, not knock her over the head with my club and drag her back to

my cave. Have any of you considered just acting normal?" Cody asks.

A smile tips the corners of my lips and I can't help it, no matter how broken and melancholy I'm feeling inside. I laugh. Beau, Huck, Granger and Penn all join in and soon we're all bent over, consumed by laughter, while Bay and Cody stare at us like we've lost our minds.

"I'm going to remind you that you said that once you meet your woman. I'll bet you a hundred bucks right now, that you lose your shit and do something caveman within twenty-four hours of finding her," Penn says.

"You're on. I'm not like you guys, I can behave rationally," Cody says with a decisive nod, holding his hand out for Penn to shake.

"Oh, I can't fucking wait, this is going to be fun to watch," Granger says with a low chuckle.

It's not my turn to make breakfast, but I do it anyway because I've missed the last two times when I should have cooked. The girls all start to appear just as I'm plating the French toast and bacon and one by one, they hug me and tell me they hope Juniper and I manage to sort things out.

We eat all together as a family and it's exactly what I need, the only way it could have been better is if Juniper was here too.

When it's time for work, I force myself to ride with Beau and not drive down and follow Juniper up the mountain in her car, then I tool up and head out with my crew before she even arrives. Everything about it feels wrong, but I need to give her the space she's asked for, even if it's only for a few more hours.

I type out a hundred texts, then delete them again, she never replied to my message last night and texting her and not having anything back is only going to make me feel worse. I'm acting like the worst kind of little bitch, but she's my woman and I want her back.

For the first couple of hours, I try to lose myself in work, but I'm so fucking distracted I'm putting myself and my crew at risk.

"I'm going to go and mark out the next cut," I tell Smithy, my second.

He nods, the noise of the chainsaws and machinery too loud for us to have a real conversation. Normally we communicate via a series of hand gestures, but there isn't one for "I'm a mopey bastard and I'm going to get someone killed if I keep working."

Grabbing a radio, I push it into my back pocket, then pick up the spray paint and marking tape and head out to the next cut of trees to be felled. This is something I usually do, but not until we're about ninety percent done with the cut we're working on. Out here, the weather can change on a dime and trees that are good to stay today, might need to be cut in a week's time.

Regardless of the fact I'll have to do this job all over again when we're actually ready to move to this cut, I still push on and walk until the sounds of the machines are only a quiet hum.

While I traverse the tricky terrain, I think about Juniper. I fucking love her. No, what I feel for her is more than love, it's all-consuming need. She's a part of me now and without her, nothing makes sense anymore.

As the thought crosses my mind, I smile. I sound like a fucking pussy, but it's true. I'm not just me as a single person anymore, it's me and her and someday—hopefully soon—it'll be me and her and a brood of kids.

"She could be pregnant," my inner voice reminds me and fuck, I hope she is. She said she wants to wait a while, but if that were true she'd be more concerned with birth control. I just hope I've got strong swimmers with a good sense of direction, because my baby could be growing inside of her already.

Moving through the thick forest, I mark trees, already planning a cut route in my head, distracting myself from storming into her office, locking the doors and fucking her so hard and so deep, the orgasm I give her instantly makes her forgive me, or at least hear me out.

I get why she's pissed, she thinks I've been manipulating her, but because of her mom's history, she's instantly made me the villain, when it's really not as bad as it sounds when you say it out loud.

I'm completely guilty of distracting her with sex and orgasms, but when it came down to marrying me, she made that choice without my dick inside of her, because even when I tried to fuck a yes out of her, it didn't work.

She's nothing like her mom and I'm nothing like her asshole dad and if she'd just talk to me, I know she'd see that.

"Tonight," I say aloud. Tonight, I'll make her talk to me, I'll drag her ass to my place if I have to, but tonight, this ends. I've gone long enough without her; she's had all the space she's getting.

Full of resolve, I keep walking and the next time I look at my watch, it's been nearly three hours since I left my crew, and I'm miles away from the cut and the work I should be doing today.

Sighing, I grab my water from my pack and take a healthy pull, then grab my lunch that I'm glad I remembered to bring with me. Sitting down on a tree that must have fallen at some point, I reach for my cell, then remember that I'm in the middle of nowhere and there's no way I'll have any signal out here.

Another person might panic being in the middle of dense forest, miles away from civilization, but the mountain is my playground. I'm not concerned for anything other than the cold spell that's moving our way, judging by the chilly nip in the air now that I'm not walking anymore.

Once I've finished the sandwich, brownie and apple in my lunch bag, I put my trash back in my pack and check I'm

heading in the right direction before I start back the way I came, my muscles burning as the incline increases.

I've probably only traveled two or three miles from where my crew are working, but it takes almost two hours until I start to hear the sounds of saws and machines, then another thirty minutes before I reach the man-made path we've created to be able to have access for our vehicles and machinery.

I feel like a bastard for ducking out of work for almost half a day, but when I see the pile of tree trunks waiting to be loaded, I'm pleased to find that my slacking hasn't affected our daily output. Now that I'm confident Juniper will be back in my arms and our bed by the end of the night, my head feels clearer and I decide to jump onto the grab and start to load the wood onto the transport wagons that we'll haul back to the yard this afternoon.

When the first wagon is full, I jolt as someone bangs on the cab's window and turn to find a worried Smithy looking in. Killing the grab's engine, I wait for him to jump down, then swing the door open. "You okay?"

Smithy's eyes look past me, as if he's expecting someone else to jump out behind me. "Where's your girl?"

"What the fuck do you mean?" I ask as the hairs on the back of my neck prickle and my heart takes up a galloping staccato in my chest.

"Beau called on the sat phone about an hour ago, letting us know your girl was on her way down here. I told him you were marking and we've had Benny keeping watch, I figured you'd intercepted her and that's why she hasn't turned up yet."

Dread washes over me and my fingers tighten around the door handle I'm holding. "I haven't seen her. Why the fuck didn't anyone call me on the radio?" I growl.

"We tried, you didn't answer and we just figured you were..." he clears his throat. "Busy."

"Fuck. Fuck," I yell, jumping down from the grab. "Where's the sat phone?"

“It’s right here.” He holds it out to me and I dial Beau’s number.

“Hey, you good now? I told you she just needed some time,” he says the moment he answers.

“How long ago did she leave? What vehicle is she in? She’s not with me, Smithy had Benny keeping a look out and she isn’t fucking here. Who the fuck let her come down here?”

“She left about an hour ago, she was in the jeep, she asked me if she could use it and I set the GPS to bring her out to the cut you’re on. I’ll come head down that way, you start coming back up, maybe the jeep broke down? She’s got one of the sat phones, I’ll check which one and call her. I’ll call you straight back.”

I end the call and let my hand fall to my side. Allowing myself only a moment of pathetic fear, before I firm my resolve and start to give out orders.

JUNIPER

TWELVE HOURS EARLIER



He left.

It's what I wanted, what I hoped would happen when I called Beau in the early hours of the morning. But a part of me thought he'd refuse. A part of me thought he'd sit out there forever staring at the house until I talked to him.

It's good that he's gone. The weather is changing and the report is saying we'll get snow soon, he'll freeze to death in his car. He hasn't even got the engine running, he's just been sitting there watching.

Now I'm alone. Buck should be home, but there was a problem during the day and he texted me to say that he was staying late to fix it, and he would probably sleep in the barracks rather than drive home.

I wouldn't be alone at the Barnetts'. Even if I wasn't with Teddy there would still be Bonnie and Beau, all the other girls and all his brothers too.

A wave of longing so strong I have to wrap my arms around myself hits and I gasp. I miss him. More than I ever thought it was possible to miss a person. Not touching him, not speaking to him... it's hard.

I've never been in love before, but I always thought of it as a happy emotion. That love would be all smiling and wonderful with cupids floating around and, well, you get the gist. But this love I feel for him it isn't happy or fluffy or joyous. It's intense and consuming, and just a roiling cauldron

of want and need and lust and desire and obsession squashed together into a heart shape and shoved inside my chest.

I'm angry at him, but the longer I go without him, the more I want to know what's true and what's not. Now that my mind's had a chance to clear, I'm remembering things that my upset brain had forgotten, like how he proposed to me during sex, but that I said no. Like the fact that although I was frustrated at how highhanded he'd been moving me in with him, that I actually really wanted to live with him.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that maybe I've been using sex as an excuse to agree to all the things I think I shouldn't be doing. Teddy was open about his need for control in the bedroom and it turns out I am more than okay with submitting that control to him. He wants to lead and I am all about following, because the sex is better than I even imagined was possible.

When it comes to his need for control outside of the bedroom, this is where things I'm starting to realize become a little blurry. He wants us to get married, and I want that too. He might have put this ring on my finger without my consent, but when I finally agreed, my mind was sound and completely clear from orgasm-induced haziness.

He wants to drive me places and he moans about wanting to fuck me at work if I try to wear dresses. I can live with both of those things. He wants control, but it's not like he's telling me when I can use the bathroom or expecting me to call him sir.

I stay at the window long after he drives away and when I finally do crawl back into bed and fall asleep, I dream about him and wake up alone and missing my man.

I expect to find him outside the house waiting for me the next morning, but when I pull back the drapes he's not there. After I've eaten breakfast I get into my car to go to work, expecting to find him following me like he did yesterday, but he's not there either.

By the time I pull into the lumberyard, my stomach is a twist of knots and anxiety. His car isn't parked in his usual

spot and I start to freak out. Did Beau convince him to give up on me, did he decide that I wasn't worth the bother, that he should really just leave me alone?

Unlocking my office, I hang up my jacket and stow my purse beside my desk. My eyes immediately stray to the desk opposite mine that Teddy has claimed as his, and tears fill my eyes, but for the first time in days they're not tears of anger or sadness, they're tears of fear and worry.

This whole thing between us is because I don't want to become my mom, someone who lets men use her and manipulate her because she's desperate for someone to want and love her. But I'm not my mom.

I'm not my mom, and oh god, Teddy is not my dad. He isn't an asshole who has a family and half a dozen girlfriends, he's mine and I'm his.

He warned me that he needed control, but he has toned back his need to take over and even gave me a code word to alert him when he was taking things too far. Yes, he absolutely uses sex as a tool to convince me to do things, but I'm complicit in it, it's all in good fun and he's never really crossed any actual lines that I haven't let him cross.

I agreed to marry him. I let him move me in and apart from a few annoyed words, I never really protested my stuff appearing at his house, and I could have. I could have insisted that I didn't want to live with him. I could have put my foot down and insisted he tone down his caveman tendencies, but I didn't.

Does that make me a doormat? Or is it just that none of the things he did bother me enough to fight over, that none of his behavior is a deal breaker for me?

My mind swirls as I sit at my desk and think about the fight that sent me running from him.

"I love you, I want to marry you, have kids with you. You are my fucking future, the thing that makes me happiest in the world. You're mine, I'm yours that's how it works. I'm not

trying to get my own way, if I was, you'd be impaled on my dick while I fucked the answer I wanted out of you.”

When he'd said those words to me I'd been so focused on him saying he could use sex to get his way, that I'd overlooked everything else he said. That he loved me, wanted to marry and have kids with me, that I was his future. When I'd heard him suggest he could manipulate my decisions to get me to do what he wanted, all I'd thought about was the way men had treated my mom for years and suddenly, I felt like that's what Teddy was doing. But was it? Is it?

My mom's weak, she's so desperate for love from a man—any man—that she allows them to treat her badly. But I'm not my mom. I'm nothing like her. If I was, I wouldn't have been single for years, waiting for someone to come along who made me feel something so big I couldn't walk away from it. If I was like my mom, I would have taken Teddy up on his offer of uncomplicated sex, hoping it'd somehow make him fall in love with me. If I was like my mom, I wouldn't have run at the thought that I was being used and manipulated.

I'm nothing like my mom.

The thought is startling, but it shouldn't be. I watched her while I grew up, she wasn't the best mom in the world, but she taught me how I never want to be treated in a relationship, my mom taught me what not to look for by example. I saw her be used and mistreated over and over and I know I'll never let that happen to me.

Teddy. My head fills with images of his broken expression, his hurt and fear and devastation. The way he looked when I found him sitting on my brothers' front porch should have been enough to tell me that he's nothing like the men who treated my mom so poorly.

He loves me and he knows he did stuff wrong, but he hasn't done what I'm accusing him of. I heard those words about fucking the answer he wanted from me from his lips, and all of my doubts and fears overshadowed the things I know about him and me together. Instead of sitting down and talking about it, I ran.

Suddenly all I want is to talk to him. Pulling my cell out, I dial his number but it goes straight to voice mail. I dial again, but the same thing happens. The cell signal isn't great anywhere on the mountain, but up here, the moment you move away from the offices it's almost nonexistent until you get back down to our houses.

Rushing out of my office, I dart up the stairs and knock on Beau's door, but he doesn't answer and I remember that he and Bonnie have a doctor's appointment today. He was here when I got here, but he must have left. I could head down onto the mountain to see if I could find Teddy, but without a GPS, I'm not sure I could figure out where the cut is, and the access road goes for miles past where they were working the last time I went down there weeks ago.

Antsy, I go back to my office and dial Teddy's number again. When it goes to voice mail for a third time, I dial Buck's number instead.

"Hey," he answers, sounding a little breathless.

"I think I made a huge mistake."

"What happened?"

"I think I really overreacted. Teddy and I fought and he said that thing about how he'd get me to do stuff and all I could think about is my mom being used by Dad and all the guys who have come since and"

"You put two and two together and came up with twenty-five," Buck says knowingly.

"I think I really overreacted. I mean, he still shouldn't be such a control freak, but he's not using me or manipulating me or lying to me."

"I know, June Bug," Buck says softly.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because you needed to figure out you aren't your mom on your own. I can tell you, Nero can tell you, hell, Teddy can tell you, but until you realized it for yourself, it wouldn't have mattered what we said."

“A heads-up might have meant I didn’t spend days crying and torturing my fiancée,” I groan, feeling more desperate than ever to see Teddy and apologize for assuming he was an asshole, when he’s not, he’s just a controlling Barnett man.

“You pair made up then?”

“Not yet. He’s not answering his cell. There’s no signal out on the mountain and I don’t know where he’s working, so I’m waiting for Beau to get back so I can find out where he is. I need to see him.”

“You love him.” Buck doesn’t pose it as a question, because he knows I do.

“I love him so much. Do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“There’s nothing for him to forgive. He’s gone two hundred miles an hour since you met, sooner or later, one of you was going to have a wobble and this time it was you. Couples argue, even ones who are fated to be together, and two days out of a lifetime is nothing. When you see him, you’ll get right back on track.”

“I hope so.”

“You just watch, you’ll be locked up in that apartment of yours blissfully happy and planning your wedding by the end of the day.”

“Thank you for looking after me.”

“Always, that’s what big brothers are for.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too. Tell Teddy we’re coming for dinner on Friday night.”

“Is that you inviting yourselves?” I laugh.

“Hell yes, those fucking brothers know how to cook.”

Giggling and feeling a little lighter, I end the call and try to distract myself with work, glancing from the window—watching for Beau to get back—to my cell, just in case Teddy tries to call.

It's almost twelve thirty when Beau finally returns. I gave up on the idea of getting any work done over an hour ago, after I'd read the same invoice three times and not taken in a single detail. So I jump up from my desk and throw the door open, rushing over to him.

"Beau," I shout, running toward him.

"Juni? What's the matter, are you okay?" He's instantly concerned and I skid to a stop beside him, the cold wind wafting my hair around, my thin sweater suddenly nowhere near adequate for this weather. "Where's your jacket? Come on, let's get you inside before you freeze, they've forecast snow, hopefully it won't be too heavy."

I let Beau hustle me back into my office, and I'm shivering by the time he closes the door behind us.

"Beau, where's Teddy?"

"He's out with his crew."

"I figured that, but where? I need to see him. I..." I pause, swallowing down a wave of emotion. "I really need to see him."

Beau smiles softly. "I'm not sure which cut they're working on, but he'll be back in a few hours."

"I can't wait. I messed up and I hurt us both and I need him." My voice breaks and Beau pulls me into a hug.

"Come up to my office, let's see where they're working today."

Nodding enthusiastically, I follow Beau outside and then up to his office, he unlocks the door, then herds me inside and slides into his seat, bringing his laptop to life and clicking into the screen.

"Okay, they're working about a mile off the access road. John has the jeep right now, but he's only gone into town to pick up a new blade for the saw so he should be back soon. Were you okay the last time you drove the access road?"

"Yes, I was fine, I just went slow and then waited for someone to come up to get me. I can take my own car though;

I don't need to wait for the jeep."

"Yes you do, the jeep has harnesses and a roll cage, it's also got higher clearance off the path. You might have an SUV, but it's not designed for off-roading and I don't want you getting stuck on the track or blowing a tire on the ruts." Beau rubs his head. "This storm front is rolling in quickly, I'd rather drive you down there myself, but I have a meeting in ten minutes and I'm guessing you're not going to want to wait until it's finished for me to take you down there?"

I shake my head. "I'll be careful and I'll be there way ahead of the storm if I go alone. If you can put the coordinates in the GPS then I can take one of the radios and let him know I'm there."

Beau chuckles. "I'm glad you're ready to talk; he's been going out of his mind. Not sure I could have convinced him to stay away tonight too."

"How angry is he?" I ask, hoping I haven't let my issues fuck things up between us.

"Juni, that boy is shit scared you're never going to forgive him, he's not angry, he's fucking terrified."

Tears fill my eyes and I feel stupid and young and equally terrified that when I tell him this is all me, he might not forgive me either.

"Just breathe, it'll be fine. I've programmed the GPS, so just follow it like you did last time. Here's the sat phone, the numbers are programmed in for the other phones, and each crew has one. I'll call ahead to let Teddy know to be looking out for you, speed dial one is the phone kept in the office, two is Huck's crew, three is Teddy's, four is the main office number, and 9-1-1 works just like any normal cell phone."

I nod eagerly, fighting the urge to rip the cell and GPS from his hands in my desperation to go to my man. Somehow, I manage to restrain myself and wait until he hands them to me, motioning down to the Barnett Lumber jeep that just pulled into the yard.

"Be careful."

“I will,” I say in a singsong voice, rushing down to the jeep and snatching the keys out of a shocked-looking John’s hand. “Sorry, in a rush,” I tell him, jumping into the jeep and strapping myself into the harness. A few minutes later I’m pulling onto the access road and finally on my way to Teddy.

Anticipation has me cursing every rut and rock in the road that forces me to slow down, when all I want is to hit the accelerator and get to him as soon as possible. Instead, I plod along, glancing at my cell phone every few minutes, urging it to ring, or beep, or do anything to let me know he’s thinking about me as much as I’m thinking about him and that I haven’t completely fucked this up.

When the sound of a cell phone ringing fills the cab of the jeep I almost swerve off the track in my excitement to answer it, only it’s not my cell. It’s the sat phone which I put on the passenger seat, only when I look for it, it’s not there and it’s not actually ringing it’s beeping.

“Shoot,” I curse, spotting the phone on the floor. The rocky road must have made it slide off the seat and into the footwell. The beeping stops for a second, then immediately starts again and I reach down, wiggling my fingers, trying to catch the edge of it.

The phone is barely an inch out of my grasp and I take my eyes off the empty road in front of me for a second while I lean down and try to grab it, contemplating removing the harness so I can reach.

The next few minutes happen almost in slow motion. With my fingers scraping across the sat phone screen, I don’t notice the huge rock that knocks the jeep out of the rut in the road. Abandoning the cell, I sit up and oversteer to the right, trying to get the jeep’s tires back in line, only the overcompensation makes the jeep jump from left to right, bouncing over the deeper ridges on the edges of the path.

My heart is going at a hundred miles an hour as I move my foot, slamming it down on the brake, but instead of making things better, the jeep starts to slide through the muddy section on the side of the makeshift path. Panicking, I accelerate

again, but the surge of speed somehow pulls the steering wheel out of my grip and to the right.

The jeep lurches, then inch by terrifying inch, the passenger-side window lowers toward the ground and the jeep rolls off the path and down the incline to the right. I'm not sure how many times I roll, once, twice, maybe more, my head swinging from side to side as the tin can bounces down the mountain like a yo-yo that's come loose from its string.

The sounds of smashing glass and creaking metal fill the air before an almighty crash makes my ears ring. The jeep hits the trunk of a tree, stopping the momentum instantly and leaving me hanging upside down, suspended from the harness that's still attached to the seat.

The last thing I hear before blackness fills my vision is the sound of the sat phone beeping somewhere outside.

TEDDY



Fear like I have never felt before ricochets through my body as I back the quad off the trailer and kick-start it, never more grateful than now that we always bring the all-terrain vehicle with us for emergencies. To my knowledge it's never actually been used for a real emergency situation before, the handful of times we've had accidents or injuries, we've always been able to make it back to the yard with the rest of the machinery.

Right now, I couldn't give a fuck about anyone but Juniper. She's been gone for an hour and it's only a twenty-minute drive from the yard to the cut we're working on, thirty if she drove really slowly. I'm praying the jeep has broken down, or run out of gas, or fuck, I'm almost hoping she changed her mind and will pull back into the yard soon, safe and sound, but still pissed at me.

I'll happily take her anger if it means she's safe. Because the alternative doesn't bear thinking about. If she's not still angry at me, it means something has happened to her, something that's stopped her getting to me, and out here on the side of the mountain that I love so fucking much, accidents can easily become life altering in the blink of an eye.

Twisting the throttle, I push the quad to its limits, needing to find her to see she's okay, but the road is empty and the air full of the silence I normally love so much.

If she's had an accident she'd be shouting, wouldn't she? She'd use the sat phone Beau made her bring; she'd call for help. *Unless she can't call for help*, the voice inside my head

whispers as I round a bend, finding the road still empty and the sound of her voice still absent.

After riding for nearly ten minutes, my heart stutters when I see uneven marks on the track up ahead. Slowing down, I kill the engine and jump off the quad, spinning in a circle as I try to understand what happened here and where she is.

If the jeep broke down, she'd stay with it, she knows it's not safe out here on foot, but something happened. I can see the way a much smaller vehicle than the trucks we transport our machinery on has churned up the edges, like she was weaving from side to side.

Or...

A sickening feeling hits me as I move to the edge of the road and glance down to the right, down the mountain and to where the jeep is upside down, pushed up against a tree, the roof bent into a distorted shape, the windshield and front windows smashed.

My legs try to buckle as I dart to the edge, sliding over the side and grabbing saplings to slow my descent as I scramble down to the vehicle, hoping and praying to every god that exists that she's okay.

"Juniper," I yell. "Juniper, baby, can you hear me? Tell me you're okay, Treasure."

There's no sound other than the creaking of metal and the soft rustle of earth as loose soil is dislodged beneath me.

"Oh fuck, oh baby, please be okay, please be okay," I chant, finally reaching the jeep as the sound of a sat phone ringing interrupts the ominous silence. Ignoring it, I circle to where the hood is smashed up against the trunks of two ancient cedar trees and duck down.

"Juniper," I scream when I find her, suspended from the seat by the harness we had fitted in the jeep. Her hair is hanging forward, covering her face, but there's a small pool of blood on the roof of the jeep immediately below her.

Reaching forward, I inch my way into the cab, but the sound of splintering wood stops me. I want to crawl in and get

her, but there's a very real possibility that if I disturb the jeep without securing lines to it, the trees could snap and the jeep could continue its descent down the mountain.

"Juniper. Baby, wake up," I shout with panic-laced words, just as the fucking sat phone rings again.

Crawling back out, I spin around, frantically searching the ground for it. Spotting it a few meters from the jeep, I grab it, stabbing the screen as I bring it to my ear. "Beau."

"You found her?" he demands.

"The jeep came off the road, she's about forty feet down from the path, upside down. There's a couple of trees stopping her from rolling farther, but she's unconscious and I can't get into the jeep to get her out. The trees are holding for now, but when I tried to crawl in, I could hear them splintering. I can't get to her."

I sound like I'm freaking out, and that's because I am. I have never felt this useless and impotent in my entire life, because all I want is to keep Juniper—the love of my goddamn life—safe, and right now she's in danger because she was coming to find me. She's here because of me and I need to fucking save her, even if she leaves me, even if she hates me, I need to make sure she's safe.

"Okay, I should be on you soon, five minutes, tops. I have the sat phone pinging your location right now. I'm going to call in mountain rescue, but I'm in my truck and I can secure a winch line to the jeep, so even if the trees go, the jeep will be safe. Just hold tight, brother, I'll be there soon and we'll get her out."

I nod, even though he can't see me.

"I need to call mountain rescue now, keep the sat phone with you and then keep talking to her, she might still be able to hear you and she'll be less scared when she wakes up if she knows you're there with her."

"Okay. Tell me she's not going to die."

"She's not going to fucking die," he snarls. "Now go talk to your girl."

Ending the call, I crawl back to the jeep, as close as I can without actually getting inside and affecting the balance.

“Juniper baby, I’m here, we’re going to get you out and everything is going to be okay, I promise. I fucking love you, Treasure, so much, and I’m so fucking sorry I hurt you. I’m going to fix it, I’m going to make it right and make you love me again.”

“Teddy,” a small voice whimpers.

“Juni, fuck, Juniper, I’m here. Don’t move, okay? Beau’s going to be here in a minute and we’re going to attach a line to the jeep so it can’t roll again, but until that’s in place I need you to stay still.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I do,” she pants, her voice thin and broken. “I freaked out and you didn’t do anything. I love you so much, Teddy. I love you.”

“It doesn’t matter right now. We can tell each other how much we love one another once we’re at home in bed tonight.”

“But”

“No,” I interrupt. “No buts. Tonight, once we’re home, we can talk and then I’m never letting you out of my sight again, deal?”

“Deal,” she croaks a shuddering sob, making her move and the trees creak. “Teddy,” she cries, panic and terror filling her voice.

“It’s alright, Treasure, just don’t move. Beau will be here in a minute.”

“I’m scared.”

“I know, baby, I’m really fucking scared too, but I’m going to get you out of there and into my arms, I promise, okay?”

“Okay,” she gasps.

“Teddy,” Beau calls, and I exhale shakily with relief.

“Down here,” I shout to him, then turn back to Juniper. “I’m going to go and help Beau get a line on the jeep.”

“No,” she cries. “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me.”

“I’m going to be a couple of minutes then I’ll be right back to get you out of there. Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know. My head hurts, and my arm. I think I’m okay.”

“You’re being so fucking brave, baby, you just sit tight and I’ll be right back.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Jumping up, I scramble up the hill and exhale with relief when I realize Beau has two more guys with him. One is already anchoring Beau’s truck to a tree on the other side of the road, while the other is running a metal line out of the winch on the front fender, ready to throw it down to me to secure the jeep.

“She okay?” Beau asks, working the winch lines from the control unit in the bed of the truck.

“She’s hanging upside down, there’s blood beneath her, but I can’t get to her to find out where it’s coming from. She says her head and her arm hurt, but she’s scared, Beau, I need to get her out of there.”

“Mountain Rescue are out searching for a hiker that’s gone missing, they asked the smoke jumpers to respond, so Buck and Nero are on the way with their medic, let’s just get the jeep secure in case those trees go before they get here.”

Nodding, I wait for the line to be thrown down to me, then secure it to the chassis of the jeep, exhaling with relief once the line is pulled taught and some of the jeep’s weight is taken off the trees that are keeping it from sliding farther down the mountain.

Rushing back to Juniper, I carefully slide into the jeep until I’m lying on my back beneath her, and can push some of the hair from her face and look at her.

“Hey, Treasure,” I coo softly.

There’s blood on her face and in her hair, but it doesn’t look like it’s running anymore, so I’m hoping it’s more of a superficial cut from the crash. Her arm is twisted at a strange angle and all of her weight is being held hanging by the harness—that I’ve never been more grateful for—attached to the seat.

“Teddy,” she sobs, tears falling from her eyes and landing on me beneath her.

“We got the jeep all secured and your brothers are on their way to get you out of here.”

“I can’t get my arm to work, just unclip the harness.”

“I don’t want to do that until the medic can check you over, if you’ve hurt your back, or neck, then moving you could do more damage.”

“I want to go home,” she sobs. “Please just take me home.”

“I will, I promise, soon as I possibly can, I’ll take you home.”

“Our home,” she says, lifting the arm that doesn’t seem to be broken and reaching for me.

“Our home, baby, but don’t move, okay? Buck and Nero will be here soon, can you hear that? That’s the chopper, it’ll be here in a minute,” I tell her, cupping her cheek in my palm and twisting my fingers with hers.

The sounds of the chopper get louder and louder until the ground beneath us seems to vibrate with the rotation of the blades. When they stop, I hear the sounds of men talking and then the stomping of feet, as Juniper’s brothers and their team move around outside.

A part of me wants to help, but the rest of me refuses to leave the woman I love. She needs me and I won’t let her down. The sound of feet moves closer and then Buck appears at my side.

“Juni, how you doing in there?” he shouts, crouching down by my feet so he can see inside the partially crushed jeep.

“I’m fine, just ready to get out of here,” she calls back, forcing some strength into her voice for her brother.

“Love you, sis, but now I’m going to ask your man how you’re really doing.”

“She’s being held up by the seat harness, pretty sure she has a broken arm and she hit her head, there was some blood, but it seems to have stopped now. She was unconscious when I got here, but she came round and has stayed conscious and talking coherently since then. She can move the arm that’s not hurt and although I’ve told her to keep still until we got the jeep hooked up to the line, she’s moved both legs and her neck without complaining of pain,” I tell him, forcing myself not to scream and rant and freak the fuck out, like I am on the inside.

I just about see Buck’s head nod before he stands up, speaks to someone, then crouches back down again. “Juni, Oz is going to come in and check you out. As soon as he says it’s okay we’re going to cut the harness and get you out.”

“Okay,” she says, her eyes filling with tears again as she looks down at me.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. Oz is just going to check you’re not going to hurt yourself anymore, just a few more minutes and we’ll be out of here.”

A moment later, a tall redheaded man shuffles into the tight space—on his back with a wide, reassuring smile on his face. “Hi Juni.”

“Hi Oz,” she whimpers.

“Looks like you’re having a bad day.”

“I’ve had better.”

“Want to know about my worst day?” he asks, then proceeds to tell her about the day he rushed a fraternity, only to find out it wasn’t the frat he thought he was rushing, but one for gay Catholics. While he talks, he checks her over, assessing her injuries like the professional he is. “Okay, so the

good news is, that on my initial assessment you don't seem to have damaged your neck or back, which is great, because it means we can move you. I'm pretty confident you've broken your arm, so I'm going to put that in a splint and I'm going to put a neck brace on you so we can restrict your movements until you can have X-rays and a proper examination at the hospital. In a minute we're going to slide in a spinal board and we're going to keep that underneath you, so when we cut the harness we can position you flat on your stomach, on the board, and keep you as still as possible. Once we get you out of here, we can turn you onto your back to transport you to the hospital. I'm going to ask your man here to crawl outside for a minute"

"No," she cries, gripping my hand tightly. "I don't want Teddy to go."

"It'll only be for a couple of minutes, baby, so Buck and his team can get you out," I say, hating that I can't get her out myself, but knowing that these guys are professionals and better trained to keep her safe.

"No, Teddy, please don't leave me, please," she begs.

"Calm down, Juni, Teddy can stay and help. Let's start by splinting that arm and getting a brace on your neck."

Shuffling out of the cramped jeep, he returns a moment later with a bulky black arm splint and a neck brace. Juni screams in pain when he carefully wraps the splint around her arm and tightens the straps in place, then fits the brace around her neck.

"Buck, slide in the board, then you and Anders get in here and help support the weight while I cut the straps."

Buck winces when he sees his sister, but seconds later his fear and worry is hidden behind a professional facade that he forces into place. He, Oz and Anders work together to get the spinal board into position, then tell me what to do to help as Oz releases Juni from the harness and onto the waiting board that's ready to take her weight.

The whole thing takes less than twenty minutes, but it feels like a lifetime later by the time Juni is free of the jeep and strapped faceup on a stretcher, her broken arm positioned on her chest.

“Teddy,” she whimpers as the guys lift the stretcher and carry her toward the chopper that will take her to the closest hospital in Boseman.

“I’m going to be right behind you, baby.”

“You can fly with us,” Buck says, and I almost hug him, restraining myself and offering him a grateful smile as I climb into the helicopter behind her and position myself by her head, pressing my lips to her forehead as the chopper lifts off the ground and smoothly into the air.

The flight to the hospital seems to take an eternity, but the pilot calls ahead and when we land on the helipad on the roof, there’s a team of doctors and nurses waiting for us. I follow Juniper out, along with Buck and Nero, who said goodbye to their team, letting them know that replacement team members will be waiting to cover for the brothers when they get back to base.

Once they have Juni on a hospital stretcher, a nurse advises we can’t follow her. We have to go down to the emergency room waiting area to fill in all of her insurance details and then someone will come and fetch us once she’s been examined.

“I love you,” I tell her, hating watching them wheel her away, fighting the urge to go full-blown caveman and shove the nurses and doctors away.

“She’ll be fine, come on, let’s go fill out some forms, and hopefully we’ll be able to see her soon,” Nero reassures me, squeezing my shoulder with his palm.

I follow Juniper’s brothers down from the roof and into an elevator that takes us to a busy waiting room. Buck speaks to the nurse behind the desk, who gives us some forms to fill out and points us toward a family waiting room. My feet move on autopilot, and I slump down into an uncomfortable plastic

chair, burying my face into my hands while the sound of a pen scratching against paper fills the silence.

“What the fuck happened?” Buck asks eventually.

“I don’t know. I was marking trees in the next cut and when I got back to the jobsite, Smithy, my second, asked where Juniper was. He said Beau had called ahead to let my crew know she was coming down to the site, and that when she didn’t show they assumed she was with me. As soon as I heard she was missing I went looking for her and found the jeep where it was.”

“Why the fuck was she allowed to drive off on her own on the side of a fucking mountain?” Nero growls, the calm, professional facade gone and replaced with a scared big brother.

“She called me,” Buck says. “She realized she’d messed up cutting you out these last couple of days and was desperate to make things right.”

“Fuck,” I hiss, just as Beau barrels through the waiting room door with Huck in tow.

“You okay? How is she?” he questions.

“How the fuck are you here already?” I ask.

“I drove fast. Now, have you heard anything?”

“Not yet,” Buck answers.

Huck sits down in the chair beside me and reaches over to place his hand on my shoulder. “She’s going to be fine. Beau said she was talking and that the medic said there was no obvious sign of a spinal injury.”

I nod, but don’t speak, because until I can see for myself that she’s truly okay, I won’t believe it. It’s taking all I have not to demand to go behind the swinging doors that separate the treatment room and here to be with her and hold her hand.

After a while, the rest of my family show up and we fill the small waiting room. Eleven Barnetts and two Hendersons, all waiting on a doctor to tell us our girl is okay.

“Family of Juniper Henderson,” a distracted-looking doctor calls, wandering into the room, his attention firmly on the clipboard in his hands. “Oh,” he says, looking up and finding the room cramped and full of huge men. “Which of you is Juniper Henderson’s family?”

“All of us,” someone says.

“Who is the immediate family?” he asks.

“I’m her husband and these are her brothers,” I say, lying effortlessly as I push my way to the front of our crowd as Buck and Nero do the same.

“Okay, shall we go outside for a moment?” The doctor suggests, eyeing my brothers and sisters.

We follow him out into the corridor, where he smiles weakly, then flips through the notes on his clipboard before clearing his throat and looking up at us again. “Okay, my name is Doctor Phillips, I’ve been the attending physician taking care of Juniper since she arrived. Juniper presented to us after having been involved in a car accident where the vehicle flipped and rolled several times down an incline. She’s broken both her ulna and radius in her left arm and we’ll be taking her down for surgery shortly to pin the bones with metal plates. She sustained a few minor cuts to her head which we’ve had to stitch, but I’m confident scarring should be minimal. She has a mild concussion from the impact, but we’ve done X-rays and an MRI, and there’re no signs of any spine trauma or any internal injuries. All in all, given the severity of the accident, she’s come away relatively unharmed and that seems to be due to the harness. The straps have left her with some nasty bruises and whiplash but without it I’m confident her injuries would have been substantially more serious.”

I exhale a shaky sigh of relief and hear both Buck and Nero do the same. “Can we see her?”

“A nurse will take you back now, she’s just being prepped for surgery, so I can only give you a few minutes with her, but you can visit with her once she’s back in recovery.” His gaze lifts to me. “Your wife is a very lucky lady.”

I nod. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“Yeah, thanks Doc,” Buck says.

“You’re welcome, follow me.”

The three of us follow him until he finds a nurse and directs her to take us to Juniper. She holds the swinging doors open for us, then leads us to a private room where Juniper is lying in a hospital bed, her arm in a sling strapped to her chest. There’s a canula already inserted into her uninjured hand and she looks small and so fucking young, bruises already starting to darken on her face.

“Hey baby,” I whisper, rushing over to the bed as her eyes open and tears immediately fill them. “Hey, don’t cry, you’re fine, they have to fix your arm, but other than that you’re going to be just fine.”

“Teddy,” she says, tears spilling from her eyes.

“I love you, you’re fine, and I’ll get to take you home soon.”

Buck and Nero crowd around the other side of the bed as the nurse—I hadn’t even noticed was in the room—clears her throat.

“We’ll be taking her down in a minute, she’s a little out of it because of all the painkillers we’ve given her.”

“Can we wait here for her?” Nero asks.

“No, you’ll have to stay in the waiting room, we’ll come and get you once she’s back in her room.”

“Hey sis,” Buck says, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “You could have just told us you were missing us; you didn’t need to roll a car down a mountain to get our attention.”

Juniper laughs, then groans.

“Take it easy, June Bug,” Nero tells her, moving past Buck to carefully smooth her hair back from her face. “Teddy promoted himself to husband today so he could come in here

and see you. You'll have to give him shit about it in a day or two."

"Okay," she nods, her eyes falling closed before she blinks them open again.

"Juniper, we're ready to take you down now," the nurse tells her.

"I love you so much," I tell her, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips before I reluctantly step back, releasing my hold on her hand as two orderlies step into the room, wheeling her bed out and down the corridor toward the waiting elevator at the end of the hall. Helplessness consumes me the moment she's out of sight. "I fucking hate this."

"Me too," Nero agrees.

"She's tough, she'll be fine," Buck says, his outward appearance calm, except for the tic in his jaw that lets me know he's just as freaked out as I am. "Let's go get some coffee, she's going to be a few hours."

By the time we get back down to the waiting room, that's still full of my family, a low buzzing has settled inside my skull as I count down each minute, waiting for the nurse to come and fetch us once Juniper's surgery is done.

I'm relieved that she hasn't hurt herself worse, but I still feel responsible that she's hurt at all.

"Here you go," Alice says, sitting down in the chair beside me and holding out a paper cup full of steaming coffee.

"Thanks," I say, taking the cup, but pausing before I bring it to my lips.

"I know nothing anyone says right now is going to make you feel any better, at least not until Juni is out of surgery and home safe. But I recognize the look in your eyes right now. I'm really familiar with guilt, I felt it as a constant companion for years. But do you know what I've learned since I met Granger?"

Lifting my gaze from my hands, I turn to look at her and shake my head.

“Guilt doesn’t do anybody any good. I know you feel like this is all somehow your fault, but it was an accident. Juni drove down that path of her own free will, you didn’t ask her to, you didn’t even know she was coming until after the accident had already happened. It’s not Juni’s fault either, or Beau’s or anyone’s. It was just an accident and thankfully she wasn’t hurt badly. I know you’re sorry it happened, I bet she is too. So when you see her next, don’t allow your guilt to stop you from appreciating that you have each other, that she’s okay and that as scary as today has been, it wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

Smiling softly at my sister-in-law, I nod. “That’s good advice, Alice, thank you. And thank you for the coffee too.” Weirdly, her words do make me feel a little better. I stop counting every minute that passes and instead, count every two. It’s not a huge leap, but it’s a concession that stops me feeling like a total psycho. After an hour, I manage to make it to a point where I’m only counting every five minutes and honestly, it feels like that’s probably the best it’s going to get.

Almost three hours after she was taken down to surgery, the nurse comes and collects me, Buck, and Nero and escorts us back to the room Juniper is in.

“Visiting hours end in fifteen minutes, after that you’ll have to come back in the morning, when hopefully she should be discharged,” the nurse tells us.

“I’m staying,” I say forcefully.

“And you are?” the nurse asks.

“Husband,” I, Nero and Buck all say at the same time.

The nurse scowls, but doesn’t protest, and I thank every deity out there that Juniper’s brothers didn’t try to fight my right to stay with her.

The lights in the room have been dimmed when we enter and a sleeping Juniper looks tiny, lying in the hospital bed. Her arm is still strapped to her chest, but now there’s a huge pink cast surrounding the limb, making it appear almost comically large. In the time since I last saw her, the bruises on her face

have darkened, and I can see the hint of more bruises on her shoulders and chest beneath the thin hospital gown.

Moving to stand at her side, I take her good hand and bring it to my lips, pressing a kiss against her knuckles. “Hey baby,” I whisper against her skin.

Buck and Nero both take it in turns to press kisses against her forehead. Buck carefully smooths her hair back and cautiously examines the cut on her head just below her hairline. “She isn’t allowed to drive along that mountain again.”

“Agreed,” I say with a nod.

“Cavemen,” Juni says weakly, blinking her lids slowly open as her tongue bobs out and licks at her dry lips.

“You can call me a caveman every day for the rest of our lives, I don’t care as long as you’re safe.”

“You thirsty, June Bug?” Nero asks, a softness in his tone that I’ve never heard before now.

She nods, her eyes falling closed, then slowly blinking open again. Nero steps out of the room and I just stare at my woman, broken and lying in a hospital bed because we had an argument and then she came to see me and had a fucking car accident. I hate it, I hate it so fucking much, but what Alice said is true. No matter how guilty I feel about her lying here like this, my guilt won’t change things, all it will do is affect how Juniper and I move forward.

Exhaling a shaky breath, I kiss her knuckles again as Nero comes back into the room holding a small plastic cup with a straw in it. “The nurse said you can have small sips of water, but not to drink too much right away.”

Juniper nods her head a little, then winces, but her eyes are closed. When Nero brings the straw to her lips she takes a small sip, stops then takes another sip before he takes it away and she licks at her lips again.

“I feel like I got hit by a truck,” she groans.

“No truck, June Bug, but you were in the middle of a fight between a jeep and a tree, and the tree won,” Buck jokes, forcing some amusement into his tone despite his stiff posture.

Blinking her eyes open she looks to me. “I want to go home.”

“The nurses say you have to stay here tonight, hopefully you can go home tomorrow.”

“You’re a Barnett, go make them let you take me home,” she pouts adorably.

“No can do, but I’m going to stay right here with you.”

“You’ll stay right here,” she echoes back at me, her voice trailing off as she falls back to sleep.

“Fuck, I hate seeing her like this,” Buck growls, echoing my own thoughts.

“Me too, this should never have happened.”

“It was a fucking accident, it was scary as hell and I swear I aged ten years when we got to the incident site and she was in that fucking jeep hanging over the side of the mountain, but she’s here, she’s going to be fine. That’s what we should be focusing on,” Nero says, leaning down and kissing his sister’s forehead again before he whispers into her ear, too low for me to hear what he’s saying.

Buck stares down at her for a second, then kisses her cheek. “Love you, sis, see you tomorrow.”

When he straightens, he looks to me. “We’ll come back in the morning as soon as we’re allowed in, we’ll bring you both some clothes. Hopefully, by then she’ll be discharged and we can take you home.”

Exhaling appreciatively, I nod. “Thanks, can you tell my family that I’m staying here and to go home?”

“Yeah, we’ll let them know. You got your cell?” Nero asks.

“Yeah, I think so, the battery will be dead soon though.”

“We’ll find you a charger and send it up so you can keep in touch with us through the night if you need to.”

“Thanks,” I say, standing and holding out my hand to my soon-to-be brothers-in-law. They take it in turn, shaking and then nodding.

“You take care of her; we’ll see you in the morning,” Nero says gruffly, clearing his throat as he takes a last look at Juniper before turning and heading out the door. Buck follows and then it’s just me and my treasure.

Pulling a chair over to the side of the bed, I sit down as close to her as I can without getting into the bed with her. If there was more room that’s exactly what I’d do, but I don’t want to jostle her arm, even though the urge to hold her is so fierce I have to remind myself over and over that she’s here, she’s fine and soon I’ll get to take her home.

A nurse comes in to check on her and eyes me warily, but she doesn’t say anything as I hold Juniper’s uninjured hand in mine. The blinds on the room are drawn and the lights are turned down low so it feels like the middle of the night even though I bet it’s not even ten in the evening. Today has been one of the worst days in my entire life so far. The jubilation of knowing she was coming back to me barely had time to process before I was scared and frantic, desperate to find the woman I love and make sure she was safe.

I love this woman with all my heart and for those seconds when I found the jeep upside down and didn’t know if she was even alive inside, I have never felt fear or terror so vividly, nor do I ever want to feel it again. How I imagined even for a second that the glimpse of desire I felt for that girl in high school was the same as this all-encompassing love and adoration I feel for Juniper, I have no idea.

Sure, fate might have thrown her in my direction, but loving Juni is all about who she is and how she makes me feel, destiny or family legacy has nothing to do with it. I love her because she challenges me, she fires up all of the protective instincts inside of me that I never even knew existed. She makes me desperate for control, but equally desperate for her to push at the limits of that control and force me to evolve and change to be the best man I can be for her.

It feels cliché to say she makes me want to be a better man, but to a certain degree it's true. I want to be better for her, for the children I want us to make, for the life I know we'll have together.

Loving Juniper Henderson is the best thing that has ever happened to me and although I know we'll fight and make up and then fight some more, I'd rather spend the rest of my life groveling on my knees for this woman than a single moment without her.

I still plan to spank her ass and refuse to let her ever drive anywhere without me for probably the rest of our lives, but given the way she reacted the last time I spanked her, she'll love it and ignore my rules anyway.

There's a knock on the door and an orderly carrying a bag steps inside, glancing warily over his shoulder. "Hey, I'm not supposed to do this, but your family sent this up for you. The sister on this ward is a bit of a demon, so keep this hidden, okay?" he says, handing me the bag.

"Thanks." Taking the bag, I open it and find a brand-new charger cable, an inflatable neck pillow, some candy bars, a bag of chips and a still-warm meatball sub wrapped in wax paper.

Smiling, I thank the orderly again and he taps the doorframe and then leaves. The rest of the night is quiet, nurses come in every couple of hours, they wake Juni up, take her temperature and blood pressure, check her pupils and ask about her pain level and then leave again, barely even glancing in my direction.

Each time she's woken, Juniper seeks me out, her eyes wide and panicked until she finds me, then her shoulders relax. "I'm here, I love you," I tell her every time, and she whispers, "I love you too," back to me.

By the time the sun starts to rise in the sky, I'm exhausted and every muscle in my body hurts from sitting in this chair all night, but I couldn't care less, especially when Juni's eyes blink open and she looks at me, her full lips spreading into a smile. "You're here," she says, sounding surprised.

“Of course I’m here.”

“Have you been here all night?”

“Yeah, baby, you don’t remember?”

“It’s a little fuzzy,” she says, trying to sit up and then wincing.

“Are you in pain? It’s been a while since the nurses came in, I can go get them if you need more pain meds.”

“No, no, don’t leave me.”

“Hey, it’s okay, Treasure, I can press the call button,” I say, rubbing my thumb over the back of the hand I’m still holding.

“I’m okay, my arm hurts, but I kind of just hurt all over.” Her voice is the clearest it’s been since I found her, and I exhale a little of the tension I didn’t realize I was holding on to.

“The next few days are going to suck, baby, you have bruises on your bruises. I was so fucking scared when I found you.”

“I was too, the sat phone Beau gave me slipped off the seat and I was reaching for it, I only took my eyes off the road for a second and the wheels jumped out of the ruts and then the jeep was tipping and then...” She trails off as tears flood her eyes.

Standing, I carefully hug her, kissing her gently and wiping away her tears with my thumb. “Hey, hey baby, it’s okay, you’re okay,” I coo, stroking her cheeks as she cries.

“I thought I was going to die with you hating me,” she sobs.

“I could never and will never hate you. I was coming for you anyway. I was giving you until after work yesterday and I planned to haul you home over my shoulder if I had to. I don’t care if you hate it, baby, you belong to me almost as much as I belong to you, and I couldn’t stand one more minute without you. I don’t ever want you to run from me, but if you do, I’ll always chase after you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“I do, I have so much to be sorry for.”

Silencing her with my lips on hers, I cup her cheek in my palm. “All that matters is that you’re okay. We can talk about who’s the most sorry once we’re home and in bed. Deal?”

“Deal,” she nods.

“Why don’t you go back to sleep, baby, it’s still early.”

“Will you get in with me?” she asks.

Shaking my head warily, I look at her casted arm and then the hospital bed. “There’s no room, baby, and I don’t want to hurt you. I promise we can spend the next week in bed when we get home.”

“Please, I just want to lie with you,” she begs.

“Baby” I start to protest but she cuts me off.

“Just try, if I’m in pain or it really won’t work you can sit back in that uncomfortable-looking chair.”

Sighing, I nod and carefully sit my butt on the edge of the mattress.

“Help me sit up, then I can lie back down on you,” she says.

“Promise you’ll tell me if it hurts.”

“Promise.” She nods eagerly.

Sliding one arm beneath her shoulders, I slowly, inch by inch, help her to sit up, then shuffle farther onto the bed. Once I’m half on the mattress, I carefully lower her upper body back down onto me and she sighs happily, burying her face into the fabric of my shirt.

“That’s better.” She exhales, closing her eyes and gripping my hand tightly when I slide my fingers back between hers again.

“Sleep, baby.”

“Uh-huh.”

I stay as still as possible as her breathing evens out and she falls asleep with her head resting on my chest. After a minute, my racing heart settles and I relax beneath her, after a while my eyes slowly close and I fall asleep, finally feeling a moment of peace now I can feel her breathing on top of me.

The sound of a throat clearing pulls me from sleep, and I snap my eyes open to the view of a disapproving-looking doctor standing at the end of the bed Juniper and I are still sharing.

“Mr. Henderson, I assume? My nurses did mention there was a family member refusing to leave a patient’s room.”

“Barnett, Teddy Barnett actually, Juniper just hasn’t changed her name yet,” I tell the snippy-sounding doctor.

The doctor tips her chin and purses her lips. “Perhaps you’d like to remove yourself from my patient’s bed so I can examine her.”

“Of course,” I say, managing to hold back the growl I want to let loose. Reluctantly, I slide out from beneath Juniper, who wakes up and protests.

“No, stay,” she says sleepily, going to grab for me with her broken arm and then hissing in pain.

“Baby, be careful,” I admonish her softly. “The doctor’s here to check you over.”

Blinking sleepily, Juni opens her eyes, looks at me, then slowly turns her head to look at the doctor.

“Good morning, Mrs. Barnett, my name is Doctor Jiraldi, how are you feeling this morning? How are your pain levels?”

“I feel like I was in a jeep that rolled down a mountain,” Juni says with a wry grin.

The doctor’s lips twitch as she steps forward. “The nurses have reported that there’re no signs that your concussion has

worsened and that you only asked for pain medication once during the night.”

Juni shrugs, then looks to me and I nod.

“Okay, I’d like to examine you and as long as everything looks good, we can discharge you into your husband’s care. You’ll need someone with you for the next twenty-four hours just in case you start to feel dizzy or disoriented.” As she speaks she checks Juni over, shining a light into her eyes, listening to her chest and then taking her blood pressure. “If your husband will excuse us, I need to check the bruises on your chest and abdomen.”

“I’d rather he stay,” Juniper says.

The doctor nods, standing and pulling a curtain around the bed, before helping Juni sit up and pulling the gown she’s wearing down so her chest is bare. The purple-and-black bruises look a thousand times worse than they did yesterday, darker in the places where the harness kept her hanging from the seat.

“Nothing looks untoward,” the doctor says, helping lift the gown back into place around Juniper’s shoulder and covering her fully again. “Okay, so your concussion appears to have almost fully gone and your lung sounds and blood pressure are both normal. There’s no swelling around the cast and the bruising looks nasty, but should fade in the next couple of weeks. Given the severity of your accident, Mrs. Barnett, I’d say you’re a very lucky woman. I’m going to get your discharge papers started, have some breakfast and someone will be back in the next couple of hours with a script for some painkillers and an appointment for you to come back to have your arm checked. The cast will stay on for the next six-to-eight weeks depending on how fast the bones heal, but you’ll probably need some physical therapy before you get your full range of movement back.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” I tell her, holding my hand out for her to shake.

“Take care of her, Mr. Barnett, and Mrs. Barnett, may I suggest no more joy rides on the side of mountains.”

Juniper giggles, then nods. “Absolutely, thank you, Doctor Jiraldi.”

Once the doctor has gone, I lean down and press a kiss to Juniper’s lips, then sit back down in the chair beside the bed. “I need to call Buck and let him know you’re okay and that you’re being released.”

“Teddy,” she calls.

“Yeah, baby?” I say, lowering my cell back down.

“I really love you.”

Smiling, I chuckle. “I really love you too, Mrs. Barnett.”

“I’m not getting married with my arm in plaster.”

“Oh, we’re getting married in a couple of days, just us and your brothers and my brothers and sisters. But we don’t have to tell anyone else, then you’ll plan a big wedding in the summer when we can invite everyone else and pretend like it’s the first time.”

“I’ll take your name, if you want me to. I don’t know why I picked a fight over it,” she says, her gaze dipping like she’s ashamed.

“You picked a fight because I was being an asshole.”

“I know, but I was being a combative bitch.”

“If you really want to stay Juniper Henderson, I’ll change my name. I don’t care what surname we have; I just want it to be the same one,” I tell her, genuinely meaning it. Barnett, Henderson, it doesn’t matter.

“I think Juniper Barnett sounds better than Teddy Henderson,” she giggles again. “But I’m not marrying you with my arm in a cast.”

“We’ll see,” I wink, leaning into her and kissing her, claiming her lips with mine until we pull apart breathless and smiling.

JUNIPER



My eyes keep moving back to Teddy as he speaks on the phone to my brothers, arranging for them to bring me clothes and take us both home. After that he calls his family and puts us on speakerphone, I speak to everyone and assure them that I'm okay and looking forward to getting home in a few hours.

A nurse arrives with a breakfast tray for me and a coffee for Teddy, she's young and attractive and she blushes a vivid pink when Teddy thanks her. Eating with my left hand is a pain in the ass, as is the pain every time I move.

In the end, Teddy pushes my hand away and feeds me, grinning at my surly expression. "I can already tell you're not going to be a good patient, are you?"

I shake my head. "Definitely not. How the hell am I going to work one-handed?"

His expression darkens. "You're not."

"I can't just not go to work."

"Baby, I'm not sure I'm even going to be able to let you out of my sight again, there's no way I can have you up the mountain for a while. Hell, I'm not sure I can go up the mountain again for a while, so we're both going to have some time off, I might even rent us a house down in town."

"Teddy," I exhale softly. "It was a freak accident."

"It was yesterday," he says, inhaling sharply. "I thought..." Pursing his lips together he shakes his head. "I thought I lost

you, so, I'm sorry, I know it's going to piss you off, but I'm going to be a controlling bastard for a while. Long enough for me to forget the way I felt when I saw the jeep upside down being held in place by trees that were getting ready to break."

"Teddy," I say quietly. "I'm okay."

He nods rapidly, blinking away the emotion I can see brimming in his eyes. "I know. And I'm going to make sure you stay that way."

"I know you will. But I don't want to stay in some rental house, I want to go home to our bed, with all our things, minutes away from all our family."

A taut smile pulls over his lips and he nods once, exhaling some of the tension from him. "Okay, baby, but you'll do as I say, let me take control for a little while."

"For a little while," I agree.

Buck and Nero arrive with a bag full of clothes and some food. The breakfast burritos smell amazing and I don't even protest as Teddy holds one up to my lips, feeding me a bite, then taking one for himself.

Nero protests when Teddy tells the guys he'll help me get dressed, then quickly relents when I tell him it's either Teddy helping me or I have to get naked in front of him or Buck. It hurts like a bitch when I try and push my casted arm through the sleeve of one of my shirts, so Teddy helps me into his much larger one, tying a knot at the bottom and then helping me into clean panties and yoga leggings. He even brushes my teeth and the knots from my hair and promises to run a hot bath for me as soon as we're home.

By the time the nurse arrives with the script for my pain meds, I'm fully dressed, surrounded by huge guys and more than ready to leave.

"Wow, girl, is this some kind of reverse harem thing?" the nurse asks, then immediately slaps her hand over her mouth.

I laugh, and her cheeks redden. "Fiancé." I point to Teddy. "Brothers," I say, pointing to my confused-looking brothers.

“What’s a reverse harem?” Nero asks, eyeing the nurse with interest.

“One girl, multiple men,” I tell him.

His lips purse into an angry scowl. “Nope, definitely not, I don’t share.”

The nurse’s eyes widen and her lips make an *O* shape as she stares unabashedly at my big brother.

Clearing his throat, Teddy calls her attention. “Did you have Juniper’s discharge paperwork?”

“What?” she says, her gaze pinned on my brother. “Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, yes, I do.” She then goes on to explain about caring for my cast, the meds the doctor has prescribed and how to take them, as well as telling me the dates and times for my next three scheduled appointments, to have my cast checked and X-rays taken to see how well the bones are healing. “Okay, I think you’re all set and you seem to be in good hands.” Eyeing Nero again she blushes, then quickly tells me she hopes I feel better soon and darts from the room.

Snickering at the embarrassed nurse, Teddy turns to me. “You ready to go home?”

“So ready,” I tell him as a different nurse enters with a wheelchair. “I’m fine, I can walk,” I tell her.

“Hospital policy, honey,” she shrugs.

Reluctantly, I sit down in the wheelchair, feeling like an idiot as I’m pushed through the halls to the main entrance, where Nero is waiting with the car. Teddy offers me his hand to help me from the chair and into the car and then buckles me into my seat, carefully making sure my cast isn’t caught behind the belt.

“Are you coming home or...” Buck trails off.

“We’re going to our place,” Teddy answers before I get a chance.

I expect my brother to protest, but he just nods, then turns back to stare out the windshield. When we get to the Barnett house, Buck jumps out and opens the back door for me, while

Teddy unbuckles me then lifts me from the car like it's my leg that's broken not my arm.

Both of my brothers follow Teddy and me into the house and then into my and Teddy's apartment. It's the first time they've been inside and from their expressions, they're as shocked as I was the first time I realized there really are seven two-bedroom apartments inside of Teddy's family home. It's a weird setup, but it's been done in such a way that even though it's odd, it makes total sense.

Without putting me down for even a second, Teddy carries me straight through and into our bedroom, peeling back the comforter and lowering me down onto the mattress. I lean forward, intending to pull off my sneakers, then realize that even something as simple as taking off my shoes is a pain in the butt with only one hand.

"Here," Teddy says, kneeling down and pulling first one shoe, then the next off and peeling my pants down my legs, leaving me in just my panties and his shirt. My brothers are both standing in the doorway, not coming into the bedroom, but obviously anxious to make sure Teddy is going to take care of me.

"You're more than welcome to hang out in the living room, or crash in the spare room, but Juniper needs her meds and to get some more sleep," he tells them.

"We'll be back later to see how you're feeling," Buck tells me.

I nod. "Thank you for everything, I love you both."

"Love you too, sis," Nero says, striding into the room and kissing my forehead, before slapping Teddy on the back and marching back out again.

Buck walks more cautiously to me, bending over me and hugging me carefully, his hand on the back of my head. "No more nearly dying, deal?"

"Deal," I whisper back, squeezing his arm with my good hand.

“Take care of her,” Buck tells Teddy sternly with a look that warns of a painful death if he doesn’t, then he turns on his heel and leaves too.

Teddy follows them both out, coming back a minute later with a glass of water and my pain meds. I take them from him and then watch as he strips down to his boxers before crawling into the bed next to me. “I need to take a shower, but I just want to hold you for a minute, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree, shuffling closer to him and carefully resting my head on his chest.

Neither of us speaks and instead of being awkward, it’s nice. My body relaxes into his and the more I do, the tighter he holds me, like he’s worried I’ll melt into the bed and disappear.

“Juniper.” When he finally whispers my name, I almost tell him he doesn’t need to say anything more, just my name on his lips tells me how scared he was, how glad he is that I’m okay, how guilty he feels about it happening at all, how much he loves me and how sorry he is that we argued. Three syllables and it’s like he’s done an hour-long soliloquy.

“Can I talk first?” I ask him, wincing a little as I push up from his chest.

“I—”

“I know,” I assure him, “but I need to say this first, okay?”

He nods and I exhale slowly.

“I love my mom, she’s great and she loves me, but she’s bad with men. She really wants to be important; she wants to be loved, but unfortunately she has a habit of picking guys who just aren’t capable of loving her that way.”

Teddy opens his mouth, but I shake my head and he nods, allowing me to continue.

“When we found out my dad had a wife and two kids I was shocked, my mom was over the moon, not because it meant I’d have siblings, but because she thought now that his wife had kicked him out, he’d love her enough to stay and be

faithful. It didn't matter to her that she was the other woman, or that she wasn't his only mistress. She just saw it as her chance to be his." Smiling sadly, I sigh. "When he moved in, she was ecstatic and then a month later, when he moved on to be with one of his other women, it honestly broke her heart. Since then she's gone from loser to loser, hoping to find the man who will love her the way she so desperately wants to be loved."

"But you're—" Teddy interrupts.

"Please just let me finish."

Nodding, he purses his lips and waits.

"I love my mom, but I never want to be like her. I told you that when we got together. I fell for you hard and fast, it might not have been destiny or fate, like it was for you, but for a girl who had chosen to avoid relationships until I found someone who forced me to reconsider, it was scary. I fell in love with you and it was great, but it was scary too and I started to panic. I freaked out even more when I found myself enjoying elements of your controlling nature. Becoming my mom is my biggest fear. Loving you the way I do, I worried that I was becoming her, so when we argued I spiraled. I allowed all my fears and worries to escalate and I ran." Guilt ridden and feeling like the worst person in the world, I glance up, trying to decide how mad he is, but his expression is still exactly as it has been the entire time I've been speaking, calm but eager to interrupt. "Yesterday I realized, I'm nothing like my mom and you're nothing like my dad. I know it shouldn't have taken me so long to figure it out, but the moment I admitted it out loud I realized that our argument, us being apart, it was all my fault."

He tries to speak, but I place my finger over his lips.

"I freaked out. When you said you could fuck the answer you wanted out of me, I panicked and I snowballed all of the worry and anxiety I was feeling and made it this whole big thing, when really it was just my insecurities rearing their ugly heads and attempting to sabotage me. I love you, Teddy, and I'm so sorry."

"I love you too."

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too, but this was as much me as it was you.”

I shake my head, but his palm cups my cheek and stops me. “You might have freaked out, but everything you accused me of, you weren’t one-hundred-percent wrong. I have a need for control that I don’t really understand, and although I haven’t been lying and manipulating you like you said I was, I probably have been extending my control issues out of the bedroom. I get why you ran.”

“I didn’t run because you like control. I ran because I was scared over how blinded I am by this thing between us. I know you don’t use sex to manipulate me and I’m so sorry I ever accused you of doing it. Half the stuff that I let you sex me into agreeing to I’d already decided to do before you’d even touch me. To be honest, I like you being in charge more than I really want to admit. When you...” I swallow, then look up at him again. “When you spanked me, that was...”

His grin is feral and I have to look away as heat fills my cheeks. “I just freaked out and then I made you the bad guy when it was me being an asshole and letting all my mommy and daddy issues out to play.”

Sighing, he rubs his thumb over my cheek. “I push and you push back; I love that about us. We’re going to fight, we’re going to argue, but you can’t run from me again. I love that you’re a match for me, that you’re my equal in every way, but I want everything with you and it scares the crap out of me that you could just say no and walk away. I wouldn’t survive it, Treasure. From the moment you agreed to be mine, I feel like I’m always a second away from losing you and so I hold on tighter and push a little harder, because I need all of you, I need to own you, I need to consume you the way you consume me.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” I tell him, cautiously rolling upright and propping myself up with my good arm. “I love you and we’re getting married, I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ve been trying to get you pregnant,” he blurts.

“I know,” I laugh.

“You know?”

“Teddy, we’ve never once been careful and I’m not on any birth control.”

“But you said you wanted to wait a while before we have kids,” he says, a confused expression making his eyes wrinkle at the corners.

“I know.”

“So why haven’t you insisted we use condoms, or that I pull out?”

“Because a part of me wants to have your baby, and I love that every time we have sex you fill me with your cum,” I admit.

Teddy’s lips lift into a grin. “You want to have my babies?”

I shrug, then duck my head down and close my eyes to avoid his penetrating gaze.

“Did the hospital do a pregnancy test?”

“I don’t know, it’d probably be too early to tell anyway.”

Curling his hand over my stomach he presses a kiss to my lips. “I want it, baby, I want you to marry me, I want you to have my babies and I want us to live happily ever after.”

Opening my eyes I lift my chin and look at him. “I want that too.”

EPILOGUE

TEDDY



It's been nine weeks since Juniper's accident, and she finally got the cast off her arm. The metal plates they used to repair her broken bones will stay in her arm for the rest of her life and she thinks the scar on her arm is ugly, but I'm still grateful every day that nothing more serious happened to her.

She wasn't pregnant. But hopefully she will be soon. I'm still filling her with my cum every time I fuck her, and she doesn't try to hide how much it turns her on that I'm trying to fill her with a baby.

No matter how much I tried to convince her, she refused to marry me with her arm in a cast, so our wedding is today, exactly one week after her final hospital appointment. Her doctor still wants her to have some physical therapy, but he's confident the breaks won't affect the use of her arm.

Pulling her closer, I curl my arm around her waist and slide it between her thighs. Just like I expected, she's wet and her legs part as if commanded to do so. She loves it when I wake her up with my tongue or fingers or dick inside of her and this morning, I plan to do all of that before I drive her to the courthouse and make her mine in every way legally possible.

"Teddy," she moans sleepily, as I part her folds and fill her with two fingers, using my thumb to tease at her clit.

"Good morning, wife," I growl against her ear.

She shudders in response the same way she always does, parting her legs and begging me to do whatever the fuck I want to her. Before the accident, I worried that my need for

control in the bedroom was spilling over into our everyday lives and that Juniper would leave me. But it turns out she likes me telling her what to do, almost as much as I like it when she refuses.

My fiancée is a bit of a brat, who enjoys being spanked on occasion and so when I'm struggling to rein in my dominant ways, she offers up her ass and we both end up relaxed and thoroughly refreshed and recentered afterward. Neither of us is searching for a true power exchange, so the games we play satisfy both my need to be in charge and her need to be my naughty little treasure from time to time.

A couple of weeks after her accident, Juniper's mom came to visit. She's as warm and sweet as her daughter, but she lacks the inner strength Juniper has. Somehow, meeting her mom made me confident that I'll never end up taking advantage of any submission Juni offers me, because she would never allow it. Juniper Henderson has too strong a sense of self to ever wilt and end up the doormat she's so scared to become.

Adding a third finger, I pump in and out of her pussy, pushing her closer and closer to release, without letting her fall over the edge. This morning I want her to come with my dick inside of her. I want her walking down the aisle to me, with her cunt full of my seed.

"Teddy," she protests when I pull my fingers out of her and fill her with my dick instead. She clamps down on my length and comes on a cry that makes her back arch, pushing her ass into me as her fingers search out mine.

As if the sound of her orgasm unlocks something deep inside of me I start to fuck her, slamming my dick into her over and over while she falls from one release straight into a second, then a third, that has arousal gushing from her and coating the comforter and sheets.

I follow her over the edge, pumping into her one last time before she milks my cock, her muscles holding me so tightly, I can barely move.

"Oh my god," she gasps. "I love you, oh fuck, oh my god."

Her babbling exaltations make my chest swell with caveman pride, and I wonder if this is the time that will result in the baby I so desperately want to see her body swelling with.

“I love you,” I tell her, holding her tightly, knowing no matter what, I’ll never let her go.

EPILOGUE

JUNIPER



With Buck on one side and Nero on the other, we walk down the short aisle to where Teddy and the justice of the peace are waiting at the other end. After all my concerns about becoming a doormat incapable of saying no to the man I love, it turns out I'm surprisingly good at denying Teddy when I have to.

It's been nine weeks since my accident and he's arranged our courthouse wedding six times, and each time I've refused. I don't care about the big wedding, although I'm sure whatever we organize in the summer will be beautiful, but I refused to get married with a huge ugly cast on my arm.

When he told me he'd booked the justice of the peace today, I let him show me all his good moves in an attempt to convince me and then finally agreed. I'm not wearing a poufy white dress, we don't have a hundred guests, instead there're me, him, my brothers, his brothers, his sisters and the kids.

My mom has no idea this is happening and honestly, I'm glad. When she found out I was engaged she started planning a wedding fit for royalty, the wedding of her dreams. The one she's never had, because she doesn't value herself enough to find someone who wants to commit to her the way Teddy's wanted to commit to me since the day I agreed to be his.

It used to be that my biggest fear was becoming my mom, but I'm not worried about that anymore. All my fears melted away when I truly gave myself to Teddy, because as long as I have him, there isn't much for me to be scared of anymore.

Call it fate, destiny, or sheer dumb luck. My Barnett brother, my beautiful mountain man, found me, saved me, and now he plans to keep me and I can't wait to enjoy my happily ever after with him.

Belonging to the Mountain Man

Montana Mountain Men #6

Coming Soon

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Book number nineteen!!! This is book number nineteen!!! How did that even happen? I remember writing *Echo* and honestly thinking that would be it, that I'd fulfilled a lifelong dream and written a book, but I never really thought I'd ever do it again; and now here I am five years later, writing full-time and loving every minute of it.

This book feels like it's taken ages to finish, but also weirdly like it's over too quickly. I think that's because I know there're only two more books in this series and then it's over, no more Barnetts.

Of course, even when I've written all seven of the brothers' books, it won't be the last we'll see of the Barnett clan. My next series is still going to be based in Rockhead Point, and the Barnetts will definitely still be characters that frequently appear in my new heroes' stories.

Weirdly it feels like *The Montana Mountain Men* books are the ones that have made me feel like a real author. I'm not sure why, maybe it's because I pitched the idea to my publishers and told them I really, really wanted to write about sexy lumberjacks and then brought them to life. Whatever it is, this family has become vividly real to me and I'll be sad not to get to write about them every day.

Well, 2022 feels hopeful, a lot more hopeful than 2021. The world has started spinning again and I'm excited to get out there, but I'm also sad to not have the excuse to sit in my house and make up stories about a fictional town and fictional people who haven't been impacted by the pandemic.

I mean, I live in a fantasyland about seventy-five percent of the time normally, but now I've not got the excuse of lockdown and a world in chaos to fall back on, lol.

As always I have some people to thank.

To my awesome publishers, Hudson Indie ink, thank you for not questioning the need for sexy lumberjack porn and just letting me do my thing. You guys make this all happen, and I'm incredibly grateful to have such a brilliant team behind me.

Sarah, my fabulous editor, apparently brought vs. bought is a UK vs. USA thing, I had no idea, but I tried really hard not to put either word in just in case. As always, thank you for always saying my timescales are doable—even when they're not—and for loving my guys almost as much as I do.

To my wonderful bestie Sarah Stanley, you get a mention just because I love you.

And last, but by no means least, my wonderful readers. Thank you for reading my books, loving the Barnetts and helping me live in a world of my own creation. You guys rock. For all things Barnett and Gemma Weir, check out my social media pages

Facebook – <https://facebook.com/gemmaweirauthor>

Instagram - @gemmaweirauthor

TikTok - @gemmaweirauthor

Gemma's Groupies (reader group) <https://facebook.com/groups/gemmasgroupies>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma Weir is a half crazed stay at home mom to three kids, one man child and a hell hound. She has lived in the midlands, in the UK her whole life and has wanted to write a book since she was a child. Gemma has a ridiculously dirty mind and loves her book boyfriends to be big, tattooed alpha males. She's a reader first and foremost and she loves her romance to come with a happy ending and lots of sexy sex.

For updates on future releases check out my social media links.



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