



5 Mountain Men of Lonely Peak

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Description: Five hot, rugged mountain men. How can I possibly choose?

I never expected to go back to my childhood home on Lonely Peak. But when tragedy struck, I was left with no choice. Now I'm stuck here, all alone in the wilderness, settling my late grandmother's estate.

Well, maybe not all alone...

In the middle of a storm, the power goes out, and who shows up but my teenage crush. Cayden Tucker is just as gorgeous as he was a decade ago, but his time in the military turned the sweet boy I knew into a rock hard alpha man. He left civilization behind and lives as a recluse now.

But it doesn't matter. He smiles at me, and my heart flutters. My blood goes hot.

When he insists I come stay with him, how can I resist?

Only I wasn't counting on the army buddies he lives with in his mountain cabin being just as ripped, just as tempting.

His best friend from junior high, Jax, was a bad boy when I knew him. Turns out, he's still a jerk, but his teasing feels charged now. Carnal. Then there's cute, nerdy Adam.

Quiet, intense Sergio.

And Deandre, a guy who wears size fourteen shoes, if you know what I mean. His huge hands feel so good on my skin as he tells me to sit back and let him take care of me...

I'm seduced into bed with one of them, then another. Occasionally with more than one man at a time. There's no jealousy. They're happy to share me, and I'm happy to be passed between them.

Before I know it, I crave their touch, the peaks of pleasure they bring to my body.

But my body isn't the only thing they touch.

Falling in love with my teenage crush all over again isn't a surprise. But when all five of them find their way into my heart, it seems too good to be true. I've been burned before, and the sting of rejection left me scarred.

Reality looms over our isolated mountain life. I have my job back home and my family to think about, not to mention my reputation.

What I'm letting these men do to me is wrong. It's filthy.

And even if it weren't...

A girl can't stay in the wilderness with her five perfect boyfriends

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"I hate to leave you like this..." My father hesitates one last time as he wraps his scarf around his neck.

I do my best to stay strong and show him a cheerful smile. Yes, he's abandoning me, leaving me all but stranded here on Lonely Peak. But it's not as if he has a choice.

Neither of us does.

"I'll be fine," I reassure him. I reach up and fix the collar of his thick wool coat.

"If the power goes out..."

"I know how to start the generator."

"And the extra wood for the fire—"

"Is in the basement. I know. Now go, before you miss your flight."

He brushes the backs of his knuckles across my cheek and tucks a bit of my chestnut hair behind my ear. "I'm allowed to worry about my little girl. All alone up here on the mountain..."

"We agreed it was for the best."

Someone has to stay here, after all. My father has his law firm to get back to, and

while neither of us is in dire straights, he can't afford to be let go. Me, on the other hand—I took a leave of absence from my classroom the instant my grandmother took a turn. My sabbatical extends through the end of the semester, provided my small town school can keep a long-term substitute engaged.

Provided my ex doesn't decide to screw me over.

And that's if I even want to go back at all.

Working with my ex lording power over me is bad enough. It doesn't help that I've been feeling particularly ineffective as a teacher just of late. Art programs like mine keep getting slashed. My dreams of becoming an artist in my own right keep getting met with rejection, and my muse for painting has up and left.

I've been uninspired in just about every area of my life, basically.

Lord knows I don't want to stay up here, seeing to my grandmother's estate. But going home isn't exactly appealing, either.

So I'll stay.

Presuming I can get my father out the door.

Dropping his hand from my face, he frowns again. "If you get into a jam..."

"I'll call."

"But if you can't get through. You know reception can be spotty up here."

"Dad..."

"Just—if things get really bad, remember the Tucker place is right down the road."

How could I forget? My cheeks heat as the image of Cayden Tucker's face floats across my vision. First the beautiful, blue-eyed boy I'd known back in middle school. Then the big, hardened man he became after his stint in the army.

And finally, the version of him I was reintroduced to at my grandmother's funeral last week. Grandma had told me he and his army pals had come back to Lonely Mountain to take over the old Tucker lumber mill, but I hadn't realized that he had embraced that new life so fully. He'd arrived in a dark suit so fitted he'd nearly busted the seams, his hair long and his beard scruffy, tattoos peeking out from under his collar and sleeves. Truly a mountain man.

A hermit, if the stories Grandma told me are right. He and his friends rarely leave the mountain. Never associate with anybody unless it's necessary.

Though he did still associate with my grandmother. Her hazy eyes had gone warm and soft as she talked about the visits he would pay to check up on her from time to time, resupplying her with extra food they'd "accidentally" bought too much of, or pretending he saw something funny over by the generator, giving him an excuse to refuel it or give the old broken-down machine a quick once-over.

That was Cayden all right. He might be gruff and reserved now, but he'd always been kind to my family.

Back when I was picked on at school—even by his own best friend, Jax...Cayden had always been kind to me.

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But I don't have time to go losing myself in the past, mooning over my middle school crush or indulging in explicit fantasies about the ripped mountain man he is now.

My dad's frown deepens. "I know you and that Tucker boy were close, and he was good to your grandmother, but..."

"But?"

"The rest of that crew he's living with." He shakes his head. "I'm not sure if I trust them."

Oh. Right. Cayden had come home from his hitch in the army with Jax in tow, along with three other men, each of them as muscular and rugged as the rest. I've never spoken with any of them during my visits, but I've glimpsed them and their powerful physiques from a distance. They were a damn sight, taking up half the room at the funeral, their shoulders nearbroad enough they could each fill a pew on their own. One was so tall his head almost scraped the ceiling.

I shiver as a low flicker of heat sparks to life inside me. I'm not sure if I trust them, either. Or maybe I should say that I'm not sure if I trust myself around them.

But it doesn't matter. The point is moot. "Don't worry, Dad. I can take care of myself. The chances of me needing to go to those big scary men for help is between slim and none."

His scowl finally softens. "Okay, pumpkin."

"Now go. You don't want to still be on the roads after dark." Up here on the mountain, they can get treacherous.

"Okay, okay. Promise you'll call if anything goes wrong?"

"For the thousandth time—"

"Fine." He pulls me in.

With a hug and a kiss, I basically shove him out the door. He goes, looking back a couple of times as he makes his way to the rented SUV he drove up here from the airport exactly two weeks ago today. I stand there in the doorway, even though it's letting the frigid night air in. I can't feel the cold. All I can feel is the solitude, slowly draping itself around me.

Lonely Peak, indeed.

My father blinks the headlights at me, and mustering one last burst of cheer, I force a smile and wave. I close the door and peer out through the faceted glass as he pulls away.

And then it's real. I'm here. Alone.

I shake off my melancholy the best I can. I should be used to being by myself by now. People have walked out on me enough in my life.

This feels different, though, somehow.

The wind outside howls, and is it just me, or is the siding on this old house more rattly-sounding than it used to be? Oh, God, what if there are animals living in it? Grandma had a whole nest of possums living under the rafters once and had to chase

them out.

I can just picture it—her with her glasses on and her gray hair pinned high on her head, screaming while shaking a broom. The image makes me smile, right before it crushes me with a wave of unbearable sadness.

I just miss her, is all.

For a moment, I want to grab my keys and get into Grandma's old truck and chase after my father. Tell him to take me with him or beg him to stay. This house is too much for any single person. My grandmother may have managed it, but she was stronger than I am.

Another gust of wind makes a branch scratch against a window, and I almost jump clear out of my skin. What the hell was I thinking, staying here?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I imagine what my grandmother would say, seeing me freaking out like this. I can almost hear her voice.

"It's fine," I mutter to myself. "It's all going to be all right."

Opening my eyes, I force myself to look around.

There's work to be done here. We're going to have enough trouble selling this old place as it is. Finding a buyer who wants to live on the mountain, out in the middle of nowhere is a challenge, but in this state? It would be impossible.

I hate to admit it, but the place is a total mess. My grandmother may have been strong, but she wasn't strong enough to battle her cancer and the cobwebs both, there at the end. The whole house needs to be cleaned out. Generations worth of my family's things need to be sorted and stored. Repairs must be made. The job falls to

me. How could I let my grandmother down, after everything she did for me?

Nodding to myself, I clench my hands into fists at my side and face the wreckage. There's no time like the present to get started.

As emboldened as I'm going to be, I head toward the basement where some of the easiest pickings live. Stuff has been accumulating down there for decades, and I'm pretty sure most of it can be donated or thrown away. The rickety stairs creak beneath my feet. Through the small half-windows set into the cinderblocks, I can see the world outside getting dark.

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I make it all the way to the base of the stairs before another fierce gust of wind rattles the siding.

Two seconds later the power goes out.

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It's okay. It's all going to be all right.

I climb back up to the main floor of the house repeating that reassuring mantra in my mind, but it does little to set my jangling nerves at ease. Darkness is falling fast. Up here on the mountain, the power goes on and off at random. It could be up again in a couple of minutes, or I could be sitting here for days.

At least we have contingencies.

As I make my way to the generator, I call the power company on the phone to report the outage, for what little good that will do. There are only a handful of families living on Lonely Peak, so we're pretty literally their last priority.

By the time I get outside, a light, frigid rain has started up. I pull the hood of my jacket over my head and hold it up against the heavy wind as I dart toward the shed. My father made sure the generator had plenty of fuel, so I go ahead and get it fired up.

Only.

Nothing.

Despair claws at my chest. I mean, I'll be okay without power for a little while. We have plenty of firewood and candles, but mygrowing sense of dread about being out here in the wild alone is crowding out my rational thoughts.

I try again and then again. I swear my father tested this the other day, but something must be wrong. I troubleshoot the best I can, but I was a dummy and forgot to bring a flashlight, and the light on my cell phone is only doing so much.

Okay, breathe.

I dart back to the house to get a light and maybe an Idiot's Guide to Home Repair. I find the former if not the latter. I'm going to have to make do. I put my hand on the doorknob and look out through the glass to find the sky nearly black, the rain pouring down in sheets.

Only then the darkness breaks. Bright light pierces through.

Headlights.

Irrational panic makes my breathing speed. There aren't many serial killers living on the mountain—or at least I don't think there are. It's too soon for the power company to be here, though, which leaves...

"Cayden?" The name escapes my lips before I've really thought it through. Huge surges inside me, making my lungs expand. A little of the panicked haze clears.

Because I'd know that bright blue pickup truckanywhere.

Back when I lived here for real, we were both too young to drive. This pickup was his

daddy's. He'd come to pick us up from school sometimes, and Cayden and I would ride in the bed, laughing and tumbling around as the truck climbed the twisty mountain roads. It's a wonder we didn't manage to get ourselves killed, but man, we had a time.

When Cayden's father passed, it only made sense that he would have inherited his truck. Every time I've been back here to visit Grandma, I spotted the truck around town or saw it parked at the head of the Tucker place's driveway. I saw it in a corner of the lot at the funeral home last week.

And now it's here, pulling up in front of my grandmother's old, abandoned, darkened house, and in my entire life, I've never had a sight fill me with more pure relief.

Right up until the moment the truck shuts off and the cabin lights come on.

Right. Because of course Cayden wouldn't come to rescue me alone. He had to bring his asshole best friend, Jax.

Back in middle school, the two of them were practically inseparable, and I never in my entire life understood why. While Cayden was kind and soft-spoken, Jax was brash and abrasive. He put up with me when Cayden was around, but whenever the nice boy from next door was out of sight, Jax would pull out this sneering face that always made me feel small and pathetic—and maybe I was. After skipping a grade in elementary school, I was always the youngest one around. Dweeby and awkward and more interested in classic painters than the latest country pop stars, but really—did Jax have to throw it in my face all the time?

The open, soaring part of my heart shuts down. I step through the door as the two of them dart through the rain. Holding up my lit flashlight, I greet them with a probably-too-defensive, "What are you two doing here?"

My resolve is tested as they step into the torch's glow.

They're soaked through. Cayden's sandy hair glistens with water, and the T-shirt he's wearing underneath his leather jacket is plastered to his muscular chest. Jax is just as wet. He slicks his long, black hair from his face. His dark eyes gleam in the harsh light. Somehow, he doesn't even have to say a word and I can feel his judgment. It makes me feel self-conscious and self-aware in a way I never really am around anyone else. Naked.

Warmth pools in my blood.

These guys have always been unfairly handsome, but right now they look like they just stepped off a runway. You know, if male models doubled as lumberjacks, that is. Jax licks his lips. Something in his gaze goes predatory, and for a second I have this shocking awareness of how vulnerable I am right now. I'm all alone in the middle of nowhere. If I screamed, no one would hear me.

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Only I'm not entirely sure I would scream. I've had a crush on Cayden forever, and as much of a jerk as Jax can be, I can't pretend he isn't hot. His teasing has always had this undercurrent I haven't quite been able to name, a tension that's drawn me to him even as the words coming out of his mouth have pushed me away.

If either of them made a move right now, what would I do? Scream and fight?

Or invite them to stay?

I clench down deep inside, empty, a low hum of arousal kindling low in my belly. I shudder, only it turns into a shiver.

Just like that, I remember where I am and what's going on. I'm standing here under the slight cover of the porch at my grandmother's ramshackle house while darkness falls and icy rain pours down. I have no electricity and the generator is on the fritz.

And I'm thinking about sex.

Jeez, it's been too long. I haven't had a relationship in over a year. My last breakup left me too scarred to try again so soon. And while I'm not opposed to the occasional casual fling, random hookups aren't really my style. But clearly, my dry spell is starting to affect my thinking.

I blink a couple of times, shaking my head as if that will help to clear it. Then I pose my question again. "What are you doing here?"

Cayden takes another step closer. Rain drips down the bridge of his nose. "Haley..."

He starts to reach out, then stops himself. There's no explanation for the way my body wants to sway toward him, into that stolen promise of a touch.

Fortunately, Jax interjects. "We saw your daddy's car."

Even that he manages to say with a sneer.

"So?"

"So," Cayden says, shooting Jax a nasty look. "We were worried."

Jeez, does no one on this mountain think I can take care of myself? I mean, all evidence available at this moment kind of supports them, but they could cut me a tiny bit of slack.

I bristle. "Well, you don't have to. I'm fine."

Terrified and abandoned and cold and probably about to die, but fine.

"You shouldn't be alone out here," Jax rumbles.

"Is that a threat?" It feels like one. So why does it excite me, making my nipples tighten and my pussy throb?

"It's an offer." This time Cayden actually does reach out.

His hand connects with mine. It's the most glancing of touches, but the warm brush of skin on skin sends tingles racing through me. Cayden feels like safety and home. It's almost enough to make me forget that Jax feels like danger and grit, or that I'm supposed to be pretending that I'm fine, living up here on the mountain alone.

Almost.

I pull my hand away. "You don't need to..."

"Haley, come on—"

"Don't be an idiot," Jax says.

Cayden looks like he might actually punch him in the face. Sadly, he restrains himself. I would have paid to see that.

"Don't be a martyr," Cayden corrects him. "Look, if you really want to stay out here alone, just say the word and we'll go." He tilts his head to the side, his tone going conspiratorial. "But I know this place always used to creep you out."

I swallow hard. He isn't supposed to remember that kind of stuff. Hell, I barely remember it myself.

My father and I moved here after we lost my mother. I was six and hurting, and I loved my grandmother, but I hated her house. I hated this mountain. When we left a few years later, I missed my grandmother. I missed Cayden and his soft smiles. But I was happy to see this place in my rearview mirror.

The whole time I've been here taking care of my grandmother through her final days, I've pushed my disquiet aside. Since she passed, there's been too much going on for me to dwell on the creaking floorboards or rattling shingles. The cobwebs and the fogged up windows and dust.

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If watching my father drive away wasn't enough to remind me, Cayden's words sure are. I shiver, and it's not because of the cold.

Maybe he sees my hesitation.

"We saw your father's car heading down the mountain, and I just...worried. Then when the power went out..." He casts a backward glance at Jax. "I know when he said it, it sounded dickish, but we really are worried. This place isn't safe, and you shouldn't be alone. Not after everything."

"I'm fine," I lie, but his piercing blue eyes see right through it.

"Just—come stay with us, won't you? We have plenty of room. The guys won't bother you." He points his thumb to Jax. "Not even this guy."

My eyes mist, because the offer is so welcome. I don't want to stay here. I want to follow Cayden to warmth and safety, and when he says he'll protect me from his own best friend, my chest glows. I believe him.

"But..."

"No buts. We've got dinner going and a fire burning." And it shouldn't be possible. He's rough and rugged, with a thick beard and a hardness to him that screams of the literal war he's been through. But his eyes go soft. "Don't make me worry about you tonight, Haley. Please."

He holds his hand out.

The world narrows down to this man, wet with rain, gorgeous and safe, asking me to let him whisk me off to a place that's warm and dry. My reservations crumble in a heap.

What else can I do?

I place my palm in his.

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Turns out I forgot one little detail about the Tuckers' old pickup truck. Namely, that it has no backseat, and the bench seat is narrower than it looks. Even if there was any chance that Cayden would let me ride in the bed the way I used to, it's too stormy out.

So here I am, squished in the middle between these two lumbering hulks of men. To avoid the gear shift, I have to keep my legs spread, so the outer edges of my thighs are plastered to Cayden's and Jax's. The corded muscles of their legs press to mine, and heat pours into me even through cotton and denim. Their broad shoulders crowd me, and their rich, masculine scents surround me, and suddenly my recent dry spell is becoming a deluge as my panties go damp with wanting, my breasts tingly and my skin too tight.

Cayden spins the steering wheel, taking us around one of the mountain road's hairpin turns. His body leans into mine, and the momentum of the truck throws me up against Jax. Jax puts a hand on my thigh to steady me, but it doesn't help. I'm still a ragdoll, tossed about by the motion of the cab. Am I just imagining things, or does his hand linger a little too long, his fingers edging toward the seam of my jeans? My clit twitches, and I suck in a breath at the surge of heat in my blood.

But then his hand is gone. I chance a glance up at him to find him staring pointedly ahead, hard eyes blazing. His dark, stubbled jaw clenches, and there's that sense of

danger again, but I'm not afraid.

I'm turned on.

Jeez. As soon as I can get myself behind a locked door, I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands. I spare a moment to regret that I didn't have time—or the nerve—to grab my vibrator when I tossed a toothbrush and a spare set of clothes into a bag to take with me. Cayden had been looming, unwilling to let me out of his sight.

What would he have done if I had gone ahead and slipped that monster rabbit vibe out of the nightstand of my childhood bedroom? I've always been a bit of a size queen. I like to feel nice and full when I'm getting fucked—even if I'm the one fucking myself.

Would he have seen that big fake cock and offered me another way to scratch my itch?

My gaze darts to the fly of his jeans, and I lick my lips. He certainly looks like he could be packing some heat in there.

God, what am I thinking? This is Cayden, my childhood friend. My teenage crush. Sure, we have a spark, but this is madness. He's not the kind of guy who would ever go for me—and even if he did, I'm not in a position to be getting into a relationship. Hell, I don't even plan to stay here beyond the couple of months I have left of my sabbatical.

And if there's one thing I know, it's that there's no way Cayden Tucker is leaving this mountain. Not ever again. Not for anything.

Definitely not for me.

It's a short ride from my grandmother's house to the Tucker place, but between my raging hormones and the two guys pressed against my sides, it feels like it takes forever. When Cayden finally turns into the driveway, I say a silent prayer of thanks. He parks beside a van that looks like it's seen better days and turns off the engine.

Jax opens his door immediately and all but leaps out of the car, like he can't get away from me fast enough. I try not to be hurt by that, even if it's basically par for the course.

It helps that Cayden takes the time to hold out his hand to help me out of the cab. The instant I set my feet down on solid earth, I feel better, my head clearer for the blast of fresh, cold air. I take my hand back and hitch my bag on my shoulder, then steel myself as I follow these men inside.

As promised, the house is warm—cheery, even. A fire blazes in the main room, and there are candles burning all around. Cayden ushers me in with a hand between my shoulder blades, while Jax brings up the rear, closing the door against the wind and chill outside.

I glance around. I haven't been here in years. Superficially, it's unchanged. There's still the big old comfy sofa and the leather chairs. The built-in bookcases and the solid brick of the hearth.

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But some things are different. Most of the feminine touches are gone, and I swallow hard.

Cayden lost his mom and dad a few years after I'd left the mountain. I heard about it too late to go to the funeral. I sent a card and even tried to call, but he'd already been gone. To hear my grandmother tell of it, he'd barely waited for them to be put in the ground before signing up for the army and shipping off. He couldn't bear to be here without them.

But he's back now. And he's not alone.

I'm reminded of that fact by the gruff sounds of voices coming from the kitchen. I knew there were other men living here, but the reality still makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"Come on," Cayden says, leaning in close, his breath warm against my ear. "Let me introduce you to the guys."

4

For a second, I think I've wandered onto the set of a sexy calendar photoshoot.

Cayden stands at my back as we enter the kitchen, brightly lit with what must be an entire store's worth of candles. Jax shoves past us and heads straight to the fridge for a beer. He cracks it open and brings it to his lips, and the sight of him like that, head leaned back, throat bobbing with the deep pulls he's taking off that can should be riveting.

Only it's got some stiff competition.

By the stove, there's a pale guy with red hair stirring a pot of something that smells delicious. A green thermal shirt clings to his leanly muscled chest and firm shoulders, cargo pants riding low on his hips while suspenders hang uselessly but tantalizingly from the waistband.

Beside him, back turned to the counter, is a broad man with deeply tanned skin and silky black hair that falls in uneven waves to the collar of his blue denim shirt. A toothpick dangles from his sexy, full lips, and dark stubble decorates his chin.

The final mountain man in the kitchen finishes washing out a frying pan and hangs it from a hook on the wall, then turns, and my throat goes dry. He's huge—a solid foot taller than me. His skin is the color of midnight, and his eyes are just as dark. His hair is buzzed short, but a full beard decorates his chin and jaw. He must have splashed himself doing the dishes, because his thin black T-shirt is plastered to his chest, showing off the dips and ridges of hard, cut muscle.

My head spins, looking at these guys. They all were kind enough to pay their respects at my grandmother's funeral, but I didn't have a chance to really appreciate them, then. Now it's all I can do.

I must make some sort of noise, because their chatter cuts off abruptly. They all turn to look at me, and that feeling of intense vulnerability rears its head again.

And again, I don't mind.

Jesus. There's not a man here who isn't a specimen. If any one of them made a move on me, I'd be tempted. No one does, though. At least not right then.

A warm hand grazes the small of my back, slipping beneath my jacket. Cayden's

touch is brief but steadying. "Hey, guys."

A round of "hey"s ring out in reply.

"You remember my friend, Haley."

They nod. The guy by the stove connects his gaze with mine. His voice is a low rumble, cut by a deep southern accent. "Sorry to hear about your grandma, miss. She sounded like a fine woman."

My heart squeezes. "She was," I manage to squeak out. "Thank you."

"Sorry." He shakes his head and sets down his spoon, then wipes his hand on his pants before stepping forward and holding it out. "Adam."

I hesitate, glancing at Cayden for some reason I can't explain. He nods, and it gives me the confidence I was apparently looking for. I put my palm in Adam's, and he closes his fingers around my hand, and wow. He has a firm grip. His hand is smooth, despite his rough-hewn look, and all I can think about is how it would feel on my body, sliding over my inner thighs or cupping my breasts.

His green eyes sparkle. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise."

Cayden steers me to the left as Adam lets go, toward the man with the toothpick and the thick hair just begging for me to run my fingers through it. As I focus on him more fully, I notice a fine web of scarring on one side of his face. It runs down his throat, toward the ink that peeks out from under the collar of his shirt.

I'm taken aback for a moment, but then the guy smiles, and you'd never even notice

his injury.

Cayden holds his hand out toward him. "And this mook is Sergio."

"Hola," Sergio says.

Oh. His voice is warm velvet.

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I don't really speak Spanish, but I manage a mumbled, "Hola," in reply.

"Don't worry," Cayden says, conspiratorial. "He speaks English, too."

"When he bothers to speak at all," Jax adds.

Sergio just tips the brim of an imaginary hat at him, and I get it. Strong, silent type, eh? I can get behind that.

And I really, really wouldn't mind the last man still standing at the sink getting behind me. Bending me over this very counter, opening me up and then driving in deep.

"And this guy here is the heart and soul of our operation." Cayden claps my shoulder. "Haley, meet Deandre. Deandre, Haley."

My tongue is thick in my mouth as he looks me up and down.

"Well, hello there, little lady."

And I do feel little, but not the way I do around Jax. I feel delicate. Pretty. Wanted. My cheeks bloom with heat, and I can't seem to find any reply, so I drop my gaze, nodding.

Only a finger fits itself beneath my chin. Deandre lifts my face until I'm looking right into his dark, dark eyes. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. Just." What am I? Besides drunk on lust and sexual frustration and the sheer static electricity rolling off the bodies of all the ripped guys surrounding me? "Overwhelmed," I finally settle on.

And it's true. Jesus but it's been a day. A week.

A month.

"Well, you just take a load off then." Deandre points back toward the living room. "Adam's just about finished with the grub. You rest and relax and we'll bring your supper to you in a minute."

And god, why does it feel like such a relief to have someone telling me what to do? It's not the gentle nudging of Cayden's invitation to come stay with him or the irritating poking of everything Jax says. Deandre acts like he knows best and like he knows my own mind to boot, and it's just...nice.

All this time, I've been putting on a strong face for everyone around me. Suddenly, it feels like I can let it go.

I sag, letting my shoulders fall. With Cayden as my escort, I retreat exactly the way Deandre suggested I should. I collapse onto a corner of the couch, right near the roaring fire. Its heat seeps into my bones. Cayden takes my bag from me and sets it on the floor, then helps me shrug out of my jacket and drapes a soft, red wool blanket over my lap. I thank him and lean into the soft cushions, curling up and resting my head on the arm of the couch.

For a while, I drift. Cayden disappears around a corner and returns not long after dry and in a different set of clothes. When I catch sight of Jax again, he's similarly cleaned up. Sergio takes a couple of trips from the kitchen to the living room and back, arms laden.

"Better?" Deandre's rumbling voice comes from beside my head.

I look up dreamily. His smile is soft but bright in the flickering candlelight. I nod. "Much."

"Glad to hear it, girlie." He reaches down and pets my hair, brushing it back from my face, and the touch sends licks of honey-like warmth flowing through me. His fingertips linger, trailing along the side of my neck. Tingles bloom from every point of contact.

"Dinner's up," Adam announces from the doorway. He smiles at me. "Hope you like beef stew."

"Sounds amazing." I struggle to sit up, with my bones turned to jelly the way they are. Deandre puts his hands under my arms and hoists me up. Holy cow, he's strong, his huge hands making me feel small all over again.

Adam ladles up a heaping bowl for me, then passes it to Deandre who passes it to me. Deandre grabs a bowl of his own and sits on the hearth, close to me but not too close.

Cayden plops down beside me. I'm not exactly sure what to make of the way he's been sticking by my side. There's a certain possessiveness to it, but not a threatening one. Deandre's touches and Adam's warm handshake didn't seem to phase him.

I tuck that observation away for later and dip my spoon into the stew. It's thick and hearty, full of big chunks of beef and carrot and potato. Without really thinking about it, I bring some to my lips and blow, then glance up to find an awful lot of sets of eyes focused intently on my mouth. I flash an uncertain, self-conscious smile, then take a bite. Rich flavor bursts over my tongue, and I let out a little moan of pleasure.

A spoon clanks loudly against porcelain, but I can't tell who dropped it. The room is

filled with a nameless tension, practically vibrating with it, and my skin tingles. There's just so much male energy here. Something about my presence seems to have upset a delicate balance, and I both want to apologize and to revel in it.

"Taste okay?" Adam asks, voice rough.

"Delicious."

"Good."

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After a few more moments of tense—but not awkward—silence, everyone seems to at least sort of relax. The guys tuck into their own bowls, and a batch of crusty bread gets passed around. I eat until I'm full, then lean back, practically glowing with comfort.

Right up until a shrill, electronic beep sounds out, and all at once the lights come back on.

5

I blink for a solid minute, practically blinded by the sudden onslaught against my eyes. Finally, they adjust.

But the damage has been done. I feel like I've been under some kind of spell this whole time, cast by the sexual tension simmering in this room and the dim, romantic, flickering light. As a harsh set of overhead bulbs come on, though, everything is thrown into stark relief.

Jesus, these guys looked good under candle light, but now that I can see better, they're practically perfect. Adam's eyes are greener, Sergio's hair more gleaming and his scars more pronounced. Tendons and veins stand out on Deandre's forearms.

And then there's Jax, to whom the years have been good. He's unfairly chiseled as he stands on the opposite side of the room, literally as far away from me as he can get while still being part of this meal. And that feels symbolic to me.

I am interrupting something here. I'm upsetting a dynamic.

And I no longer have any reason to stay.

I glance at my watch and wince. "Wow, it got late." In response to the murmurs of agreement from around me, I look up. I don't want to say this, but I have to. "Sorry. I should be going. The power's probably back at my place, too, and—"

"Like hell," Jax of all people says.

I snap my head up. "Excuse me—"

"Stay," Cayden says, smoothing over Jax's edges the way he's always done.

"But..."

Cayden shakes his head. "Don't try to argue. I don't care if the power's back on. I don't like you being there all alone."

"I'll be fine."

"But you'll be more fine here." He reaches out a hand and places it over mine. Heat flares up my arm. "Please. I'll drive you back if you want, but you should stay."

"You're welcome as long as you like," Deandre insists. "We got plenty. Plenty of food. Plenty of space."

"Oh."

Heads all around the room nod in agreement. Sergio is silent, but his gaze speaks volumes.

Adam chimes in with, "You don't want to miss my homemade muffins in the

morning, do you?"

"You really don't," Cayden supplies.

Still, I hem and haw. "I don't want to put you out."

Cayden squeezes my hand. "You wouldn't be. Promise."

"Stay," Jax says. And then just because he can't say anything nice without saying something dickish, he adds, "Otherwise this asshole"—he points his spoon at Cayden—"is just going to be moaning about how worried he is all night, and none of us wants to put up with that shit."

Cayden groans, and Sergio throws a wadded up napkin at him, but I laugh. A couple of hours ago, Cayden was mostly a fond memory, a boy I used to know. The idea that he'd be fretting about me warms something in my chest.

And apparently he wouldn't be the only one.

"Don't make us worry about you, girly," Deandre says, and it's an echo of what Cayden said earlier tonight as he was coaxing me to come with them. It's a guilt trip, is what it is.

And damn them all, it's working.

Really, it's not as if I want to go back to my grandmother's old, creaky, drafty mountain home. Especially not when it's so warm and inviting here. And if there are fringe benefits—like the eye candy and the casual touches from beautiful, unobtainable men, well... You can't really fault a girl for taking advantage of something like that, can you?

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As if the universe itself is trying to tell me something, at just that moment, I yawn. I can't quite stifle it, either.

"See?" Cayden strokes his thumb over my knuckles. "You're dead on your feet. Stay the night, at least."

At least? What is he trying to imply?

I'm too tired to argue any more, though. We can continue this discussion in the morning. "Fine, fine."

"Good." Cayden glances at my empty bowl. "You done?"

I nod.

"Let me show you to your room, then."

Setting the blanket aside, I let him haul me to my feet. He scoops up my bag, and I'm grateful all over again that I left my vibrator at home, because the flap falls open. An assortment of things falls out. I packed hastily, so it's a mishmash of stuff—shampoo and sweatpants.

Skimpy lace panties and a matching, barely-there bra.

My face heats. I duck down to reach for them, but Cayden beats me. The sheer fabric looks even flimsier when it's gripped in his big, work-worn hands. He's gentle with them, though. The image of him peeling the panties off my body assaults me. Would

he be that delicate then? Or would he tear the lace in his rush to get at hungry flesh?

Blushing hotter, I take the stupid things from him and shove them back into my bag.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Don't be." His voice stops me in my tracks. It practically drips with heat, and I feel a wash of it hum through my body. I meet his gaze, and my breasts ache with wanting. I clench down inside, only it does nothing to ease the need.

"Come on." I drop my gaze, hoping he'll just lead me from this room.

My fog of desire is even worse than it was back in the truck, sandwiched between Cayden and Jax's big, muscular frames. I'm not thinking straight. I have to get myself behind a locked door and get myself off before my lust-addled brain really lands me in hot water.

He takes mercy, thank God, leading me out. I skirt past Deandre, who gives me a reassuring, lingering pat on the shoulder as I pass. Sergio just nods, while Adam tries a smile. I refuse to so much as meet Jax's gaze, but I feel him like he has his own gravity. Like he's as big and as hot as the sun.

I heave out a breath as we turn the corner. I'm trying to be subtle about my relief, but I don't do so great of a job.

Cayden shoots me a concerned look. "Sorry, I know those guys can be a little much."

"No. It's not that. They're nice." I shake my head. "Well, except Jax, he's still an asshole, but..."

Cayden laughs. "You two are still like oil and water, huh?"

"Maybe oil and kerosene..." I don't know what it is about him, but he sets me off every time. Gets under my skin—and not in a good way. At least not for the most part...

"Jax aside, though. You seemed really tense in there."

"It wasn't the guys." I shrug. "It's just...everything. You know?"

"I can imagine." With a sympathetic look, he wraps his arm around me. "You've had a rough time of it."

"You don't even know..." Out of nowhere, my eyes sting, my vision blurring.

He knows about my grandmother and my father having to go back to work. But he doesn't know the rest. The pieces of my life I'm going to have to face again eventually.

The mess with my ex, Richard, and my disenchantment with my job. My missing muse and my stagnant aspirations.

All the things I'm hiding from, up here on Lonely Peak.

"You want to tell me about it?"

For a second, I consider it, but I'm an exhausted mess, and this is Cayden Tucker holding me as he guides me down the hall of his childhood home. So many pre-teen fantasies are close enough to taste. I don't want to mess them up by crying all over him, or letting too much spill out.

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I shake my head and blink until my vision clears. "Not really. Nothing personal..."

"It's okay. I mean, we haven't seen each other in years."

"Decades."

We've seen each other. But we haven't been close since we were fourteen.

We're picking right back up where we left off, though, it seems, only with a lot more touching. A lot more of him running out into a storm to rescue me and dragging me home to this old house he shares with four other guys...

Okay, so my pre-teen fantasies didn't include much of that. But I'm going with it.

I sigh and lean into him. "Maybe some other time?"

"Only if you want to." He leans in to kiss the top of my head, and I just about swoon.

Only then he's stopping. Letting go, he pushes open a door, revealing a small room with a twin bed on a metal frame.

"I know it's not much," he hedges.

I step forward and move to sit on the edge of the bed. For all that the frame isn't much to look at, the thing is sturdy. The mattress hits that sweet spot between firm and soft, and the cozy down comforter spread across it begs me to burrow.

"It's fine. A hell of a lot better than my grandma's house."

Oops. I didn't mean to let that part slip out. I'm still planning to leave tomorrow. I don't need Cayden getting any ideas that I'm not living in comfort over there.

He furrows his brow. "That place is falling down."

Ugh, maybe I'm not giving him any ideas because he already knows.

"It's not so bad..."

"It is, and you know it."

"It just needs a little work."

"More work than you can put in by yourself."

"Hey. I'm handier than I look."

He shakes his head. "More work than anyone could put in by themselves. Look—I'm not Jax. I'm not doubting your capability."

"Then what are you doubting?"

His jaw flexes, and he reaches up, running a hand through his sandy hair. Finally, he lands on, "If you really need to live like that while you're fixing it up. If you're too stubborn to accept an offer of help."

Oh. So that's where we're going with this. "You don't have to—"

"I know I don't. But I liked Miriam." His throat bobs. "I like you. I'd like to help the

both of you out, if you'll let me."

His just saying my grandmother's name makes the fatigue in my bones grow. I sigh and worry the strap of my bag between my fingers. "Look. Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

To his credit, he backs off immediately. "Of course."

"I just—"

"Like I said. You don't have to explain."

It's like a weight lifting off my chest. "Thank you."

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"No problem. Look. I've been talking your ear off—

"No." It hasn't felt like that at all.

"We brought you here so you'd be safe. So you could rest."

"You rescued me from a creaky, cold, dark house and fed me stew and gave me a room. You're doing a pretty great job."

"We're trying." He flashes me that same smile that used to make my heart melt back when we were in middle school. He looks around the room. "You have everything you need?"

I nod. I remember the layout of this big, rambling house well enough from our childhood. "Bathroom's still around the corner?"

"Yup, though be careful. You're sharing it with Adam and Sergio."

Oh, Jesus. A hundred dirty fantasies flash through my mind. Them walking in on me in the shower, me catching one of them drying off, skin slick with water, muscled chest exposed, and their cocks...

I slam the door shut on that particular branch of thought. "Got it. I'll make sure to knock."

"Okay. Just. Make yourself at home, okay?"

"I'll try." I have a feeling that conversation we're going to have tomorrow about me staying here is going to be fraught, but for now, I don't have the energy to fight it.

"Good."

With that, he turns to leave. There's something about the way he's framed in the door. I'm usually so distracted by his face that I can forget what his body looks like these days. But as he turns away, all I can see is the silhouette of him against the light spilling in from the hallway. His shoulders seem to take up the whole doorframe. His waist is trim, his thighs muscular, and his ass...

Well.

I lick my lips. His name escapes before I can call it back. "Cayden..."

"Yeah?"

What was I even going to ask? Stay with me? Kiss me?

Do you ever wonder what might have happened between us if I had stayed on Lonely Peak?

I'm not brave enough to ask any of those things. What if he rejects me? I was never really in his class back in the day. I strongly doubt that I am now. I'm a high school art teacher, and he's a veteran, a hardened mountain man, working the old lumber mill of the Tucker property. I'm only here for a couple of months.

I've been discarded before. Rejected and thrown away with little more than a laugh.

But I'm not thinking of that. For a moment, all I can think about is tonight, and what it would be like if he pressed me down into this bed. Kissed me hard and stripped me

down and pushed inside.

"Haley?"

The fantasy disintegrates. I meet the warm blue of his eyes, and they're guileless—not clouded by the same fog of wanting I've been wandering through all day.

I shake my head. "Nothing. Just." I cast about for some reason—any reason why I would have called him back. I'm pretty sure I can figure out where the towels are, and like I just said. There's really nothing else I need.

And maybe that's the key.

"Just—thanks," I finally manage to stammer out. "For everything."

"You're welcome, Haley. Anytime. Always." And maybe there's that hint of heat I was searching for a second ago, only now it's too late

I give a weak, appreciative smile. The next thing I know, he's closing the door behind him, and I'm alone in this room.

I flop backward on the bed, grab a pillow and hold it over my mouth. I stifle a scream in it.

What the hell am I doing?

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My whole world is in chaos, and the boy I had a crush on in middle school put his arm around me and held my hand like three times today. I'm a mess of hormones and avoidance issues, and I couldn't even bring myself to ask the guy if maybe he wanted to make out a little or something.

What am I doing here?

Besides finally,finallybeing behind a closed door for the first time since I almost spontaneously burst into flame in the cab of Cayden's truck when Jax put his hand on my thigh.

Jesus. The sense memory flares, and suddenly I'm back there, penned in by two huge, hard male bodies. My pussy throbs, dampness flooding my panties.

With a groan, I toss the pillow aside and flop over onto my stomach. I know it's weird, but that's how I've always been the most comfortable masturbating. I undo the fly of my jeans and reach my hand inside.

The first contact of my own fingers on my overheated flesh sends ripples of pleasure through me. Oh man, this is going to be quick. I slip my fingertips through my lower lips, gathering up my wetness. I'm slick and swollen, ready to pop any minute.

Sliding up to touch my clit, I put myself back in the cab of that truck. I imagine Jax nudging his hand up a little higher, gripping my thigh and then cupping me through my jeans. What would he be like as a kisser? Probably savage. He'd probably bite.

But he and Cayden have always been at their best when they were working together.

What if Cayden pulled over?

Right on the side of the road, they could have had me. Cayden could have pushed me back until I lay against Jax's rock solid chest. I rub my clit harder, sneaking my other hand under my shirt to tug at my nipples, and the tight flare of sensation winds me higher.

Cayden would be a sweet kisser. Passionate but kind. I imagine him attacking my entire body, sliding his lips to my throat and sucking a bruise there, before sliding lower. Putting his mouth on my breast or on my pussy. God, I bet he'd be so good with his mouth, nice and wet, with lots of tongue.

I bury my face into the bed, swallowing my moans and trying to calm my breathing, but I'm spiraling toward orgasm too fast.

What if the both of them had taken me there in the cab of the truck? Cayden, hard and intense, face to face, thrusting in and out of my hot, wet pussy, a hand on my clit, making me come around his thick cock. He'd come, and then Jax would throw me over the seat. Take me from behind and fuck me hard. Savage.

And what if it wasn't just them?

In a flash, my fantasy relocates itself to their living room. The truck becomes their couch. Jax pulls out after filling me with his come, only to be replaced with Adam, and he'd be nice about it, too, wouldn't he? He'd fuck me nice and sweet, and then Sergio. What would I give to thread my fingers through his long, silky hair as he fucked me good. He's the strong, silent type, right? He'd fuck intensely, with his whole concentration bent to it. He'd come silently and take me right over the edge with him, screaming my release.

Only to be thrown into Deandre's arms.

Pleasure spikes, sharp and hungry in my cunt. God, that man is just so powerful. He could throw me around, take me in all kinds of crazy positions. Probably throw me against a wall, and he's got to be huge. I imagine the stretch as he splits me open with his monstrous, fat cock.

And just like that, it's over. I come with sparks shooting across my eyes, groaning into the mattress, five guys' names on my lips, and it's not enough. The emptiness inside is a physical pain as I clench and throb.

I want to go downstairs. I want to ask these guys to fuck me just like that, maybe one in my mouth or my ass—I've never done that before, but I'm suddenly so willing to try.

It isn't until my unsatisfying orgasm fades that I hear it.

Creaking.

I shoot up, pulling my hand from my pants, my eyes snapping open. The instant I still, the sound stops.

Because it was the bed frame. Oh, God. That whole time, the bed was making a racket, squeaking with every moment of my hips. I didn't even wait until I was sure Cayden was gone. I didn't lock the door.

What if everybody heard?

What if they heard me call all their names?

6

I wake up feeling like crap.

Rolling over, I tug the covers over my head and pretend for just a second that I can stay hidden here forever. Funny how Cayden supposedly brought me here so I could be safe and get some rest, but I couldn't sleep to save my life.

After the little show I may or may not have given them last night, touching myself to the fantasy of getting fucked by each of them in turn, I hid out for the longest time, scarcely daring to breathe. The voices of all those men were muffled but audible. They must have been able to hear. They must have.

Eventually, I'd tucked my tail between my legs and wandered out to wash up for bed. I hadn't run into any of them, thank God, but I'd felt paranoid about the possibility all the same. Exhausted as I was, I'd tucked myself in and then proceeded to stare at the ceiling for half the night, worrying and fretting. I must have drifted off at some point, because it's arguably morning now.

With a sigh, I roll out of bed and pad over to the window. Early pre-dawn light seeps over the horizon. The rain has eased up, reduced to a misting drizzle—or maybe a light snow? It's always colder up here on the mountain, but seriously? Snow?

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I shake my head and let the shades fall back into place.

I had a good dinner last night, but my stomach growls, and I'm in desperate need of coffee. I bite my lip. Maybe if I sneak downstairs now, at this ungodly hour, I'll be able to help myself to something without running into any of the guys. Unless I want to walk a mile uphill in the spitting, freezing rain, I'll need one of them to drive me back to my grandmother's house. But that's a debate that can wait until after I get some caffeine.

Just in case I do run into anyone, I make myself at least sort of decent, pulling on a pair of yoga pants and a fleece. I poke my head through the door and find no one there, so I risk it.

The house is eerily quiet as I make my way to the kitchen, especially after all the warmth and activity that filled it last night. For a second, I think I've made it through scott free, that I can avoid looking any of them in the eye for a few more hours.

Except then, as I round the corner toward the kitchen, I hear it. Quiet humming and the clink of metal on ceramic.

Oh, no.

Adam is standing there at the counter, a big green bowl tucked in the crook of his arm and a whisk in his hand. He's dressed in a white T-shirt that shows off his toned arms. His reddish hair is damp, presumably from a shower, and unlike the other bearded wonders who live here, he's clean shaven.

And I really, really don't want to face him right now.

I shift my weight, but before I can turn around and go back, a floorboard squeaks beneath my feet, and I wince. Sure enough, Adam snaps his head up. Bracing myself, I try to turn my wince into a smile.

I'm not exactly sure what I'm expecting, if he actually did hear me last night—teasing? Mockery? For him to call me a slut and offer me the chance to suck his cock right there by the island if I really want it so bad.

But there's none of that. He lights up. "Haley. Good morning! I didn't expect to see you up so early."

I'm turned around by his totally normal greeting, but I shake it off. Still wary, I tuck my hair behind my ear and shrug. "Couldn't sleep."

"Sorry. Was it the room—were we too loud?"

Pretty sure I was the one who was too loud. But I shake my head. "No, just—strange place, and a lot on my mind, you know?"

His smile twists, but his frown is soft and sympathetic. "Yeah." He sets down the bowl. "Hold up one second, okay?"

I nod. He gives the bowl one more stir, then sets it aside and covers it with a towel—bread he's allowing to rise, maybe? With that done, he dusts himself off and turns to the cupboard. Two coffee mugs seem to materialize out of thin air. He holds one up in question.

"Yes, please."

He fills it and passes it over, directing me to the cream and sugar while he pours his own. Then he grabs a basket and gestures with his head toward the other end of the room.

I follow him to the back of the house and a four season room. It's chilly as hell, but the bank of floor to ceiling windows lining two walls makes it worth it. He indicates a spot on a sofa that's turned to face the windows, and I sit, clutching my coffee close. I take a sip, and it's like I can actually feel the life-giving caffeine seeping into my bloodstream.

"Here." He tosses one end of a heavy blanket at me. I start to drape it over my lap, but before I can get very far with that, he sits beside me and repositions it, wrapping it over our shoulders. It's big enough that the ends cover our laps. It's warm and cocoon-like, and the best—and worst part—is that sharing it with him like this means sitting snuggled up together. His side presses to mine. Our thighs touch.

And I'm not as desperately horny as I was last night, but he smells delicious. His heat and his leanly muscled frame feel heavenly against me. My head swims to feel him so close. I sway, wanting to lean even further into him, but I manage to keep myself under control. Gripping my coffee mug tighter, I take another sip, holding onto the ceramic as if it were a lifeline.

Adam reaches over to the basket he set down on the table and flips aside the cloth that had been covering it. It's filled with fresh muffins—blueberry, if I'm not mistaken. He grabs one and holds another one out to me to take.

"Thanks." I have to set my coffee down to tear into the muffin, but it's worth it. The thing is still warm. A blueberry pops in my mouth, and my eyes flutter shut. "Mmm. This is really good."

"Glad you like it."

"You made these?"

"Yup. Secret recipe."

"I might have to try to weasel it out of you."

A sly smile twists his lips. "Good luck trying."

I wonder what it would take. If he trades baked goods for sexual favors, for example...

I mentally shake my head at myself and pop another bite into my mouth. "So is that what you do around here? Cook?"

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"Among other things. I'm kind of the house elf. Cooking, cleaning. I keep the books, too, and manage the website. I mean, I do some stuff out in the mill, but only in a pinch."

That makes sense. He looks strong and plenty capable, but he doesn't quite have the same ruggedness to him that the other guys do. His hands last night were soft.

I get lost looking at them for a moment as they peel the paper back from his breakfast treat. His fingers are long and unscarred. They look like piano player hands. Like the kinds of hands that could play me, if they wanted to. Hands design to pinch and pluck at tight nipples or thrust deep into a hungry pussy. Fingers that would know their way right to a woman's clit, that would know all the right places to hit.

I shiver, a trembling warmth spreading from that achy, damp place between my legs.

He misinterprets it, though. "Cold?"

"No, I'm fine—" But before I can really protest, he's wrapping the blanket around us tighter, and that makes it so much better and so much worse. "Oh."

"You'll warm up in a second."

Believe me, I'm feeling plenty warm, now.

We sit there in companionable silence for a few minutes, snacking on muffins and sipping perfectly brewed coffee. Through the pane glass, the sun is rising over the valley below. The clouds part, and a ray of light shines through, casting the landscape

in brilliant shades of gold.

"Wow."

Adam chuckles fondly. "Makes the chill worth it, huh? This is my favorite place to have breakfast every morning. I'm usually up before the rest of the guys, so I get stuff cooking, then come out here with my coffee and maybe something to eat and just watch the sun come up alone."

"It's beautiful."

"Yeah. It is."

There's something in his voice. I shift, turning to find him looking less out the window and more at me.

Oh. Electricity crackles in the space between us. I'm pretty sure he just called me beautiful. I feel like a nightmare, dressed in workout clothes, my hair swept up in a messy ponytail, no make-up or anything. I wasn't expecting to run into anyone.

After my charged evening with Cayden, I sure as hell wasn't expecting this.

But it feels right. Comfortable. Kind of like when Deandre told me what to do last night, there's no burden of expectation here. Adam doesn't really know me, and our lack of history makes it easy to just sit here together, sharing coffee and a gorgeous view and a moment of connection.

And if there's heat in his gaze and a sticky-slow buzz of arousal in my body, well...

He drops his gaze. His pale, long lashes sweep across his cheeks, casting shadows there, and he's so beautiful I could paint him. Maybe, someday, I will.

Then he stares into my eyes again, and it's incredibly intimate. Soft, hushed, he says, "I really am sorry, Haley. About your grandmother."

Oh. That's...not where I expected this to be going. But somehow, the way he brings it up doesn't rip open the hole of grief in my heart. Real sympathy shines in his eyes.

"Thank you," I manage. Normally, I would spit out some platitude about how she's at peace now. She's not in pain anymore. I'm okay. But none of those come to my lips now. He's still gazing at me so intently. I have to look away.

I stare off into that brilliant sunrise, hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder with a terribly kind stranger. I bite my lip.

"It's been really hard," I admit, and out of nowhere, my vision blurs. The crisp landscape laid out before us becomes a soft watercolor.

Because my grandmother would have loved this view. She was an artist in her own right. She loved sketching and painting the nature on this mountain, and I suddenly regret not getting back here more often. She talked about adding on to the old house, maybe building a porch. If I'd been a better granddaughter to her, I could have come back some summer and built that for her—or found someone to do it, in any case.

If we'd caught the cancer earlier, she could have been here, enjoying the view right alongside me.

As if he knows the gulf of pain opening up inside me, Adam reaches out and takes my mug from my trembling hands. He sets it aside, then intertwines our fingers, and it doesn't matter that he's the least burly guy in this house. He has a gentle, quiet strength to him. With the power of his steady touch, he pulls me back to shore.

"Of course it's hard," he murmurs. "It's only been a week."

"I feel like I've been losing her for a year."

That's how much time we had after her diagnosis before she finally succumbed. I could have used it better. Could have, should have, would have. None of it makes a difference now.

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"It'll get easier," he promises. "It just takes time. And a lot of ice cream?" He ducks his head at that, smiling into the face of my pain, and it helps. It really does.

Laughing, I tug one of my hands back and swipe the back of my wrist over my eyes. It comes away damp but not soaked. My vision is clearer already, my heart lighter.

It just felt so good to admit that I was struggling. To not have to pretend to be fine.

"Sorry," I sniffle. "Didn't mean to get all weepy on you."

"I'm honored that you did. You've got to let it out sometimes, you know?"

I nod, then rub my eyes again. I look back to him, and the golden light of the sunrise reflects off his features, making them brighter. His hair glows a coppery red. And his expression is so soft.

"How do you know the right thing to say?" I ask.

Because there's something there. Something that goes deeper than the way he clearly takes care of everyone in this house. The way he instantly, automatically inserted himself into my day and swept me away. The way he's taking care of me right now.

His sad smile is all the answer I need.

But he offers me another one anyway. "I've lost things, too. A lot of things." He gestures around himself. "We all have. I mean, there has to be something going on in your life to want to give it all up and come live in the wilderness on the top of a

mountain, right?"

My grandmother said that kind of thing all the time. Maybe she was right.

I have so many questions about the guys he lives with and their arrangement here, but for the moment I stay focused. "Can I ask? What you lost?"

"Sure." He keeps hold of my hands but directs his gaze off into the distance. "Everyone. Everything. My parents first. Car accident, so I got sent to live with my grandma, only..."

Oh, hell.

"Only...?" I prompt, even though I feel like I have a pretty good idea where this is going to go.

"She got real sick. When she died, I was still in school, but I was over eighteen. There wasn't any place in the system for me. I was homeless for a while, living in shelters, trying to get my degree."

It's my turn now to crush his hands between my own.

"Adam..."

"It's okay. It's been a long while." One corner of his mouth flickers up, but it's a ghost of a smile. "Part of how I can say with confidence that time really does make it better."

"But it never goes away, does it?"

"No. No, it does not."

"What made it better for you?"

His voice, which had been wavering, solidifies. "The army. On a whole lot of levels. Having something to fight for. These guys, for sure. Don't know where I'd be without them. And other things, too. Finding some purpose. Someplace to call home." A sharper focus returns to his gaze. He slowly turns his head, and his warm green eyes settle on mine. "Remembering to find some beauty in this world. Taking it where I can find it."

And we're suddenly so close I can taste him.

He darts his gaze between my eyes. It flickers toward my mouth, and I can't breathe.

This man is beautiful and kind, and he's let me release some of the words that have been holding me down. He's fed me up and warmed me, and now he's looking at me as if I'm the most precious thing he's ever seen in this world.

So when he leans in, I don't resist. His eyes hold a question.

With the tiniest of nods, I say yes.

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In the back of my head, I'm pretty sure this is a bad idea. I had a real connection with Cayden last night, and there's still my complicated history with Jax to consider. This group of guys is a band of brothers, and the last thing I want to do is come between them.

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But as Adam leans in closer, I remember the way Cayden held onto me last night as he introduced me to his friends. There was no jealousy. No caveman efforts to keep me to himself.

I sway forward half an inch. And that's all it takes.

My first kiss with Adam is warm and soft. His lips press to mine, damp and gentle, before retreating.

"Is that okay?" he asks, and God, it's all the more okay for the way he's checking in.

I nod.

"Thank God," he breathes out in a rush, and then his mouth covers mine again.

This kiss is hungrier. He slides his lips over mine and parts them. Searching forward with his tongue, he requests entry, and I grant it to him happily. He cups my cheek with his hand, holding me where he wants me. He's been gentle through every step of this, but I kind of love this little hint of command. He doesn't want to push, but he still wants to be in control, and I'm so, so eager to let him.

With a groan, he deepens the kiss. His teeth scrape over my bottom lip, and that hint of a sting goes right to the hot, needy place between my thighs. I grab onto him, getting my hand on the fabric of his shirt and clinging tight.

The couch creaks as he shifts. He gets up onto his knees. He doesn't separate from my lips, but the new position gives him leverage. Bearing forward with his weight, he

presses me down into the couch, and before I know it, I'm on my back with him looming over me. Instinctively, I spread my legs. He settles between them, gripping the back of my thigh. It opens me further, and another rush of wetness floods me.

Jesus, I want him so bad. My hormonal rush from the night before might have been soothed by my quick, unsatisfying solo session, but the effects were short-lived to say the least. I'm suddenly starving again, and the taste of his mouth is only driving my hunger higher.

"Do you want to—?" I breathe.

"So fucking bad." He groans into my mouth and slides his hand under my shirt.

I'm not wearing a bra, so his searching fingers find my breast immediately. The first touch to my nipple sends jolts of pleasure shooting through me. My pussy clenches again, and I wrap my legs around him, drawing him in. His hips collide with mine, and oh God.

He's wearing jeans, and I'm still in my yoga pants, but I can feel so much. The long line of his cock rubs against me through our pants. It's hard and thick, and I want it in me. It's been so long since I've had sex, and I just want it. Want the rush and the clench, want that feeling of fullness that only comes from being fucked really deep.

Grinding against me, he kisses his way to my jaw, then my ear. The wet sound of his breath there turns me on like crazy. He bites at the lobe and licks the shell, tweaking my nipple, and then his other hand is at the waistband of my pants.

"Can I?" he asks, panting.

"Yeah, yeah, please—"

He shoves his hand beneath the fabric. He grips the globe of my ass, then skirts around, and I was right. I throw my head back as he slips those long, perfect fingers through my wetness. He rubs across the folds and dips inside, then circles my clit, and it feels so good. Driving two fingers deep inside, he buries his face against my throat.

"You're soaked," he groans. "So hot, I want—"

"Yeah."

And then we don't need words. I fumble with his belt but get it undone. Tear at the button and the zipper of his fly until finally they give. I shove my hand into his boxers, and fuck yes.

He's big—really big. Nice and long, and I might like a little thicker, but this will easily do. I give him a stroke, sliding the slickness at his tip all down his shaft, and he lets out this growl that has me ready to explode already.

And then he's in motion. He lifts up and tosses me over. I land on my hands and knees, my ass in the air, and this is all happening so fast, but I love it, I need it, I need more.

He kisses down my spine even as he's pushing my pants and underwear off my hips. They end up in a tangle around my knees. I can't get my legs as far apart as I'd like, but it doesn't matter. His fingers are back, pushing in, opening me up.

And then there's wet heat. He licks inside even as he's rubbing my clit hard with his thumb, and that's all it takes.

I scream as my vision shatters. My whole world splinters into brilliant colors with the force of my climax. He takes me through it, pressing just right against my inner wall.

Only when it subsides, I'm still dying for it.

I collapse forward. My face lands on the arm of the couch. I get an elbow under me, bracing myself while I reach back for him with my other hand, beckoning him closer.

He withdraws his fingers. They land, sticky and wet, on my thigh, and then he's climbing me. His mouth collides with mine, and it's awkward as hell, but I don't care. We kiss, tongues tangling, his body held in a tight line over mine. His hard cock presses to the cheek of my ass, and I want it.

"In me," I beg. "Please. Fuck me."

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He groans, and slams his forehead into the arm of the couch beside me.

"I don't have..."

"I don't care." And I don't. I've been on birth control forever, and I'm definitely clean.

"I'm safe. You're—"

He laughs. "It's been literal years."

And why does that send such a thrill through me? These guys live in the middle of nowhere, all alone. The mountain man hermit lifestyle doesn't exactly lend itself to casual conquests, but I'm still delighted to hear that he's breaking as bad of a dry spell as I am, maybe.

"Then do it. Just—"

But he pauses, wrapping his arms around me. "You're a fucking dream, Haley."

If I am, then, "I don't ever want to wake up."

His chuckle hums through me. He kisses me once more, deep, then hoists himself up, straightening his spine as he kneels behind me.

"God, you look good," he murmurs.

I'm not even naked. All he can see is the wet, swollen mess of my pussy, the pale white of my ass. With my back arched like this, I'm on display, just asking to be

taken and used. But he's reverent as he looks me over.

His long fingers trail over my lower back before hooking themselves into the crease of my hip. With his other hand, he grasps himself. He skates the blunt, wet head of his cock over my flesh. It stutters over my ass to my thigh. He traces it in a line over the seam of my pussy before teasing over my clit, and it's the sweetest, most delicious torture I can imagine. I groan, closing my eyes, surrendering and just letting myself feel.

Then he's drawing back. He nestles himself right in against my entrance. I half expect him to stop, to ask permission again.

But then there's just the deep slide, the hard push. He's huge, and I'm not entirely open, my legs squeezed together the way they are. The stretch blinds me.

And it's the best thing I've felt in years.

He's relentless, too, pushing and pushing. My wetness eases the way, as does the orgasm he already gave me with his fingers and his mouth, but that first thrust feels like it goes on forever. Until finally he's there, seated deep, hitting the absolute limits of my body as his hips come to rest against my ass.

We groan in unison.

"You feel incredible," he stutters out. "Your pussy's so hot. So tight."

All I can do in response is nod. I'm flying, split open on his dick, and I needed this. Through this whole awful, terrible week, this whole month, this whole year. I've needed someone to take me out of my head. To understand me and give me some connection to the world. Something to live for.

And a fuck like this might just be the thing.

He grabs my hip hard and withdraws. The slide is just as long, but when he slams back in this time, he doesn't go gently. He fills me up, forcing the breath from my body, and it's so good, so deep.

"Yeah, baby." He picks up the pace. "Let me hear it. Let it out."

Have I been talking? Moaning? I don't even know. I tend to be loud during sex, but usually I have the presence of mind to at least try to keep it in. That's not the case now.

At his prodding, a litany of yes and harder and deeper and fuck me tumbles out of my mouth. It's catharsis, and it's freedom, and I give myself over to the slamming of his raw, long cock into my needy body.

He fucks me like that for the longest time. I take it all and ask for more, until I'm a shaking mass of pleasure, my pussy dripping with my juices and his pre-come, and all I need is one more push to get me over the top.

And then it's there. He drapes himself over me, covering me with his body. His mouth lands near mine, and he tips my head into him. He kisses me, and it's like this feedback loop, our bodies connected, his cock pistoning in and out of me, hips jackrabbiting with the fevered pitch of his thrusts. His tongue presses inside, and he releases my hip to sneak his hand around.

"Come, baby. Come on my cock, let me feel—"

One glancing touch to my clit and I'm gone. Climax crashes over me, and finally, finally, finally, I have a hard cock to squeeze down around. The fullness takes my pleasure and multiplies it, lifting me into the atmosphere.

He lets out a groan loud enough to wake the house, slams into me one more time, two, three, and then he shudders. Hot wetness pumps into me as he fills my hungry with his seed.

"That's it, Jesus, Haley, milk me..."

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And I do. I pull his orgasm from him until he's collapsing over me. He crushes his face against my cheek, breathing hot against me.

For a minute, there is absolute peace.

I lie there, blanketed by him, filled with him. We inhale and exhale in unison. An aftershock rocks me, and he twitches, shooting another hot spurt inside me.

The noisy, worried part of my brain is silent, the hole in my heart sealed over for at least a moment. The sexual need that's plagued me all night and into the morning is finally satisfied.

I've just never felt so good before.

I hum in pleasure. He chuckles and kisses my cheek.

Just like that, the spell is broken, but the warm haze of carnal satisfaction remains. He eases out of me and—ugh. I haven't gone bareback in ages, and even then it was just once or twice with a committed partner. I've definitely never done it with someone I met less than a day ago. The regret should probably be setting in now, along with the reminder of how messy this is, but I still feel fine. Happy, even, with my decision.

I hum with appreciation when he somehow magics up a couple of napkins. Gently, tenderly, he helps clean me up. He tucks himself away and refastens his pants and belt. All I have to do is pull mine back up, and then we're decent again.

Sort of.

His coppery hair is a mess, and mine is probably worse. I touch my throat where I think he bit me at some point in the midst of fucking me hard, and he winces.

"Sorry, I kind of left a mark."

That should probably bother me, too, but it doesn't. "Good."

Then we're standing there, staring at each other, fully dressed fresh after a random, impulsive fuck.

He cracks first. A smile breaks over his face, and I can't help but return it. I giggle, high and giddy.

"Gotta say, that is not what I expected from my morning," he admits.

"Me, neither."

"I'm really, really glad it happened, though."

"Yeah?"

He looks at me like I'm an idiot. "You're gorgeous, Haley. I've been dying to get my hands on you since the minute you walked in the door."

"Oh."

"Silly girl," he mutters, and then he's pulling me in.

And I don't want to make it sound like my other partners were assholes, or anything. But I don't know if I've ever been given a bearhug post-sex before. It feels good. Friendly and warm, and any fears I might have had about awkwardness between us

are gone. I relax into his arms, and I feel so comfortable and at peace, it's hard to believe.

Except then my stomach growls.

He chuckles and releases me. "Come on. A workout like that calls for second breakfast."

"I like the way you think."

He takes my hand and leads me back to the kitchen, and it's idyllic. Perfect.

Until the minute we round the corner.

And find all four of the other guys sitting there. Their eyes all turn to us. And suddenly, I'm left with no doubt.

Yeah. They know what we just did.

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What have I done? My instinct is to pull away, but there's no point. Adam and I weren't exactly quiet just now. These guys must have heard everything.

And I thought it was bad last night when I only suspected that they might have heard me getting myself off.

Flames of embarrassment rise on my face. They grow hotter as I look to Cayden. Have I just ruined everything with him? We reconnected yesterday, and I thought it was going somewhere. Only I just went ahead and let one of his best friends fuck me.

And yet I can't bring myself to regret it. What just happened between me and Adam...Ineededthat. I feel a hundred pounds lighter than I did when I arrived last night. My body hums with satisfaction, and my heart is this tiny bit less empty. Adam offered me a shoulder to lean on and a kind ear. He listened without expectations, and I never could have gotten that with someone like Cayden. Our history would have loomed over us. This was easy. It was freeing.

And now it's done, and is it just me or is Cayden...fine with it? There's definitely something knowing to his gaze. He's not a fool. But no matter how I probe his expression, I can't find any trace of judgment. If anything, I just see...hunger.

Oh.

My body, well-fucked and sated as it is, experiences a low tremble of heat. My clit twitches, and every mark Adam left on my body glows under Cayden's examination.

A chair leg scrapes against tile. I jerk my gaze to the side to find Jax rising. His

stormy eyes connect with mine, piercing as ever.

"Nice of you guys to join us," he says, dry.

Adam clears his throat. "Got held up."

"Yeah, sure." Jax goes to the stove and produces a spatula. "Saved you some bacon and eggs if you want em."

And just like that, everything's normal again. My head swims as Adam thanks him for cooking and accepts a plate. He guides me to the table we ignored last night in favor of eating by the fire. I sit, and Cayden places a plate in front of me. He touches my shoulder as easily as he did last night, and I don't understand. Not a single freaking thing makes sense.

Who am I to complain, though?

Beneath the table, Adam squeezes my knee. He gestures toward my breakfast. "Go ahead."

So I tuck in. The eggs are still warm, and the bacon is deliciously crisp. Around me, conversation starts back up again. There's talk of the work set out before them all today, and something about some show a couple of them are binging on Netflix, and it's just so normal is the thing.

I almost get lost in it. Right up until Cayden sits down on the other side of me.

I nearly choke on my bacon, but manage to recover.

"Hey," he says, all casual like. "What are you planning on doing today?"

I chew more slowly than I really need to, considering. I should say I need to head back to my grandmother's house. It's the right thing to do. These guys took me in when I was feeling low and scared. They got me through the power outage and the storm, and Adam breathed some new life into me. I can't possibly impose on their hospitality anymore.

Worse, a cowardly part of me is itching to escape before the consequences of sleeping with one member of this set of army brothers can catch up with me. This idyllic morning seems too good to be true. It has to break at some point, right?

Carefully, I answer, "I'm not sure. I need to head back at some point..."

"To get your stuff?" His eyes twinkle. Oh, he thinks he's so clever.

"No, not just to get my stuff."

"Well, I don't know why else, since you're obviously staying here now." He leans over and plucks a piece of bacon off my plate.

"Hey!" I swat at him.

"First rule of Tucker Lumber and Woodworking. You snooze, you lose." He takes a crunching bite.

Is it just me or is he talking to Adam as much as he is to me? I glance his way to catch him nodding, and yeah, there's definitely some sort of silent communication happening between these two. Probably about me, but if they're not going to get into a catfight about things, then I'm willing to ignore it and just carry on.

Guarding the rest of my bacon jealously, I shake my head. "Whatever. I do have to go back at some point, though. It's not like I can stay here forever."

"Why not?" Deandre asks from the other end of the table.

I startle. I hadn't realized he was listening. Suddenly, the whole room seems to get awful quiet. Like they're all listening.

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"I mean. I." How is this a question a person can ask? "This is your home. I don't want to—" To what? Stay? Be comfortable?

Deandre saves me from myself. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, girly. But that includes leaving—if going back to that ghost house is what you really don't want to do."

When he puts it that way, it makes both a whole lot more and a whole lot less sense.

I grasp onto the one thing I know for sure. "I need to do so much work over there. Cleaning, sorting through all her stuff. Repairs."

"Then we'll go over this morning," Cayden says. He looks to the others. "You all can spare me."

Dry as a desert, Jax rolls his eyes. "Somehow, I think we'll get by."

I shake my head. "I couldn't possibly."

It's not his responsibility. It's mine.

"Then I'm going to have to insist," he says. "I want to help, okay? It'll get the job done faster."

And it means I won't have to be alone over there.

"Fine," I concede. "But only if you really don't have anything else you need to be

doing."

"Believe me." His eyes gleam. "There is nowhere else I would rather be."

9

The good news about Cayden driving me back to my grandmother's house is that at least I don't have to sit in the middle this time.

Without Jax's body crowding me into Cayden's, I have room to breathe. More dangerously, I have room to think.

Cayden has continued to act as if nothing is different, even after I slept with his friend Adam this morning. Loudly, messily, publicly. But he doesn't seem to care. Maybe it's a sign that he's really not that into me. Except his flirty touches and his protectiveness and enthusiasm for keeping me close haven't gone away at all. Either he has a really weird way of showing he's not interested or he's really weird about monogamy.

Either way, I'm a mess of emotions. Heading back to my grandmother's house doesn't help.

As we climb the mountain road, I stare out the window. The rambling, ramshackle house comes into view, and a sinking pit of dread opens up in my stomach. I love my grandmother—dearly. I miss her so much. But I never liked that old, dusty, falling apart house. The task of cleaning it out and fixing it up for sale is beyond daunting. Even though I'm pretty sure I should be discouraging him or flat out sending him back home, I'm insanely, irrationally glad that Cayden is coming to help.

He parks in the long gravel driveway, more or less in the same place he parked last night. What a difference a day makes. The sun shines bright light on the uneven wood

siding and the patches of green growing in the cracks on the roof. The windows reflect, they're covered in so much dust.

With a sigh, I open the door and step out.

Cayden gets out, too, and falls into step beside me as we climb the rickety porch.

"I tried to help, you know. This was always too much house for your grandma, and after she got sick..."

"I know. She told me you loved to make up excuses to check in on her."

"She was a proud old broad."

I chuckle. "Stubborn, too."

I didn't bother to lock the door last night—who would even be around to take advantage, up here? I push on through and step inside. It's dim and gloomy, despite the sun outside.

Funny, how I didn't really notice that, the month I was here taking care of her through her final days. A pallor of sickness and death held over everything. I chalked up any additional gloom in the decor to that.

My eyes are clearer now, though.

This is just how the place is. The only way to change that is to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

Cayden nudges me. "So where do we start?"

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And yet again, I'm so grateful for his presence, I could cry.

I grab his sleeve and turn to him. His bright, warm blue eyes meet mine.

"Thank you," I say, too fervently. "For being here. For doing this."

"It's really not a problem, Haley."

"It might not be to you. But to me, it means a lot." It means everything.

Only I don't know how to tell him that. I suddenly, urgently need him to know, though.

Without letting myself think it through too much, I tug on his shirt and lunge up onto my tiptoes. His hand comes to my side to steady me. His brows rise in surprise, but I go through with it anyway. I plant my lips just to the side of his—close enough that it could count if he wanted it to. Far enough away that he could write it off as a cheek kiss.

I dart my gaze to meet his. His eyes dance. He reels me in, and I close my eyes. He presses another, firmer, less ambiguous kiss to the center of my lips. His beard tickles my chin, and warmth tingles all the way to my toes.

It doesn't last long, but that doesn't make it any less perfect.

He lets me drop back down but he doesn't let go. "That's one hell of a thank you."

"Well, I really mean it."

"Then you're welcome." He grins, squeezing my side. "And feel free to show your appreciation any time."

My breath races. "Oh yeah?"

"Oh, yeah." With that, he plants another single kiss to my cheek. His lips end up close to my ear, where the heat of his breath sends tingles of awareness to the tips of my breasts. To the warming place between my legs. "Been wanting to do that since eighth grade."

I bury my face against his chest and breathe him in. If I actually was in eighth grade, I'd be running off to my room to doodle his name in my journal, and probably stifling a squealing scream of pre-teen joy into my pillow. But I'm a grown-ass woman, so a moment of silent crowing while I breathe in his warm, amber scent will have to suffice.

"Me, too," I admit.

"I always hoped..."

"Yeah."

And how awesome is it to know that we're on the same page here? It may be awfully late, and it may be coming on the heels of a lot of other stuff I didn't see happening, but I don't care. As long as he doesn't, either...

I lift my head from his chest and bite my lip. "About this morning..."

But he shushes me, shaking his head. "It's fine."

"Really?" Part of me thinks I should run with it; the other part wonders if I need to just go ahead and spell it out. Only he can't be that oblivious, can he?

I have to smell like Adam. My panties are still wet with my desire and the faint remaining traces of his release. He fucked me two rooms over from where this man was having breakfast. He kissed me and sucked a mark into my shoulder and gave me two delicious orgasms. He came inside me, bare.

That has to mean something.

But Cayden just puts his other hand on my shoulder. His thumb reaches out, stroking right where Adam's mouth left a bruise on my skin. His eyes stay warm. Maybe warmer. Darker. He licks his lips.

"I promise you, Haley. It's fine."

The moment drags on. I want to kiss him again, but deeper this time. I want him to throw me against this wall and thrust in deep, claim me. But somehow it doesn't quite feel right.

He doesn't seem to think so, either. With a smile, he squeezes my shoulder. He leans in for one more soft, small peck, then pulls away. "Come on. Let's get to work."

10

By the time the sun goes down, Cayden and I are sweaty and dirty, and not in a good way, unfortunately.

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Heaving out an exhausted sigh, I dust off my hands on my jeans and look around.

We actually managed to accomplish a lot today. We sorted through enough stuff in the basement to fill a dumpster, probably. A small pile of photo albums and actual family heirlooms has been tucked into boxes and stacked near the door, ready to be placed into more secure storage. Cayden cleaned all the little half windows so they sparkle, and chased a couple of mice out of the ducts. I'm pretty sure he fixed the wiring so that the light near the stairs doesn't flicker anymore.

It's been a good day's work. The task still sitting in front of me remains daunting, but visible progress makes me feel a lot better about the whole thing.

Cayden makes eye contact with me across the room. "You about ready to call it quits?"

"Yeah. If I look at one more box of newspapers from the thirties, I think I'm going to get hives."

He laughs, then leans over and makes one more adjustment to the hose behind the washing machine. "Good, because I'm starving."

We raided the fridge for lunch, but it was slim pickings. My father and I finished up most of the sympathy casseroles from the people who were kind enough to drop them off after my grandma passed. Crackers and peanut butter can only keep a girl going for so long.

"Come on." Cayden leads the way back upstairs. We shut off lights as we go.

And there's really no debate. My will to pretend I want to stay here evaporated around the time we kissed, and he doesn't seem to see fit to try to resuscitate it.

"You want to grab any more of your stuff?" he asks.

"Yeah, actually." I head upstairs. My childhood bedroom where I've been staying for the last month looks even sadder, now that I have someplace better to go.

Working fast, I repack my suitcase with fresh changes of clothes. Checking that Cayden didn't sneak up here while I wasn't looking, I slip my vibrator into the suitcase, but I doubt I'm going to need it. Not when Adam fucked me within an inch of my life this morning. Not when Cayden's spent the whole day giving me looks as if he's gearing himself up to do the same.

The sexual tension between us has held at a nice simmer since we kissed. There have been a few more casual touches—just enough to get my engine going again, but not enough to devolve into us tearing each other's clothes off and going at it on the cold basement floor.

A couple of times, it's come close, though.

My pencils and sketchbook make it into the suitcase, too, and I think that's basically it. I haul the thing off the bed and make it to the top of the stairs. The instant Cayden sees how much crap I've got, he bolts up the stairs to meet me and insists on carrying my suitcase to the truck. He tosses it in the bed and gets in the cab. I meet him there, but as I go to buckle myself in, he stops me.

He puts his hand on my cheek, and then somehow, suddenly, he's across the seat, pressed flush with me. His lips are red and damp, and he smells like dust and hard work, sure, but he also smells like amber and spice. I breathe him in, my gaze darting between his darkened eyes and his mouth. My pulse pounds, and my pussy throbs,

and then he's leaning in.

The kiss he lays on me this time has nothing to do with the ones we shared in the entryway of my grandmother's house. He kisses like he means it, hot and wet, his tongue demanding entry as his teeth scrape my bottom lip. I let him in without hesitation. His rough beard burns against my skin, but I don't care. Wetness gathers between my legs as he fucks my mouth with his tongue, leaving no mistake about what he'd like to be doing with my body instead. For a minute, I think we're going to do it, too.

My younger self screams into her pillow again. So many of my idle teenage fantasies involved making out—or more—in this very truck.

But before we can make any more of them come true, he pulls away.

"Sorry," he says. "Been waiting to do that again all day."

"Definitely don't apologize." My cheeks are warm, my lips kiss-bitten.

He squeezes my knee. "I'm really glad you're coming back to the house tonight."

"Me, too."

"The guys are going to want to hang out. You don't have to if you don't want to."

Oh, right. Somehow, I'd almost forgotten that he lived in a house full of chiseled, rugged mountain men, and that they were all accustomed to the company of each other.

Now that he's reminded me, though, I'm actually kind of...excited?

"No. That sounds like fun."

They all seem really nice—I mean, except for Jax, but that's nothing new. It's makes me flush harder to think, considering I just let Cayden stick his tongue down my throat, but I'm looking forward to getting to know Adam better. Sergio and Deandre, too.

"After, though..." Cayden's eyes burn, and they make the desire he stirred up in me glow hotter, too.

"Yeah?"

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"Don't run away too fast or anything. I mean. I don't want you to sleep in the guest room. Okay?"

My heart leaps. "That is so much more than okay."

"Good." A wide smile spreads across his sultry, full lips. "Because I can not wait to get you in my bed. Believe me, Haley. I have got so many plans for you."

11

"You sure you don't want any more?" Adam pauses on his way to get up and grab another helping of roast chicken for himself.

I shake my head. "I couldn't eat another bite."

"Okay." He leans over and presses a kiss to the crown of my head.

My cheeks burn as I lean into the touch. Instinctively, my gaze darts to Cayden, who's definitely watching, but still doesn't seem upset by the display of affection.

Neither does anyone else, and this is all so fucking weird. It's definitely going to require a conversation at some point, but how do you bring up something like that?

For now, I'm just going with it.

Cayden and I returned from my grandmother's house to find the guys all back from whatever it was they did around the lumber yard. Sergio and Jax were playing video

games in the den while Adam and Deandre worked on dinner.

Now we're all sitting around the big oak table in the dining area attached to the kitchen, finishing up another delicious meal. I spare a thought of sympathy for Adam as he portions out the last drumstick. Every one of these guys eats like a horse, and it's not like there are a lot of good take out options on Lonely Peak. The guy must spend half his life cooking just to keep up. He doesn't seem to mind, though.

And I sure as hell don't mind watching. From behind, the lean lines of his body are on display. He's wearing jeans that show off his firm ass, and I clench down inside, imagining how it must have looked as he hovered over me this morning, wiry muscles bunching as he took me hard from behind.

Under the table, Cayden grips my knee. A different, more immediate wave of heat washes through me, and I remember viscerally the way his eyes glinted with hunger when he asked me to sleep in his bed tonight. Shame twists in my belly, mixing with my arousal and driving it higher. Cayden slipping his hand up my thigh doesn't help the situation as he gets dangerously close to the inner seam of my jeans.

It's so wrong to be thinking about getting fucked by one guy while being all but felt up by another.

But it also feels so, so right.

These men are clearly a unit. They move around each other as if they can anticipate each other's actions. The lack of jealousy among them is weird to me, but there's something natural about it, too.

As Deandre and Jax laugh about something at the other end of the table, my curiosity finally boils over.

"So how did you guys all end up living together like this anyway?" I nominally direct the question at Cayden, but the wider group picks up on it. A few glances are traded across the table.

"Well," Cayden says. "We met in the army."

"Right. My grandma told me—you signed up right after." I stutter. Should I be bringing this up? "After—"

"After my parents died." Cayden's mouth curls into a soft, sad smile. "It's okay."

"I mean, it's not, but..."

"But it is. I lost them, and I kind of lost my focus. But the military helped me get it back."

"It has a habit of doing that," Adam says, quiet. He puts the lid back on the pot and returns to the table, sinking down to sit beside me again.

"Right." Because he told me his story this morning, and it was awfully similar.

"Don't worry, girly," Deandre says. "Not all of us have tragic backstories."

Thank God. I glance between him and Sergio. "How did the rest of you..."

Jax volunteers, "Some of us followed our idiot best friends."

"No one made you sign," Cayden says, holding up his hands.

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"Well, someone had to watch your punk ass. Keep you from getting yourself killed."

"Don't think I'll forget that." Cayden's voice goes sober.

He and Jax exchange a meaningful look, and there's a story there.

Those two were always inseparable. But as they talk about their time in the military, the strength of their bond is even more clear. Something happened to them over there, and it made them closer than ever.

A beat passes in silence. Sergio looks around, then offers, "Nothing noble over here. Just needed the money."

It's the most he's said in one burst in the entire time I've been here. I blink, and he shrugs.

Deandre nods. "Lotsa guys get into the service like that."

"How about you?"

"Money sure didn't hurt. Always figured I'd get out and go to college on Uncle Sam's dime, only after..."

I look from one of them to the next. Shadows hang on all their faces, and I suddenly regret ever bringing this up. I was curious, but I didn't mean to kill any cats.

I didn't mean to remind them of anything they didn't want to have to think about.

"A lot of things didn't go according to plan," Adam says. "We did three tours. Active duty. Lost good guys and got into all sorts of messes. We hope we did more good than harm, but you never know."

How can he not know? "I'm sure—"

"Lots of shades of gray out there," Deandre echoes.

Jax's gaze goes far away. "Lots of things you can't ever forget."

Silence hangs for a long moment.

I swallow hard. "But you all came back."

"Yeah," Cayden says. "Banged up as hell and not quite right in the head, but we came back."

"Took a bullet to my leg," Jax says. "Ain't never gonna heal right."

"Shrapnel," Sergio says. He runs his hand over his arm, then the side of his face.

"You come back different," Adam says quietly. "Normal life doesn't make sense the way it used to. I had all these hyper-vigilance problems. Thought everything could be a bomb, everyone could be an enemy."

"I almost pulled a gun on my baby sister," Deandre admits. "Knew I had to get out after that."

"And none of my brothers or sisters wanted this place." Cayden gestures around. "All had other things going on by then, so I came back, but it was too much. Asked Jax if he wanted to move in."

"And then everybody else just started showing up," Jax says.

"Army buddies are like fungus," Deandre says. "Can't get rid of 'em, no matter how hard you try."

Cayden flashes a wry smile. "Wouldn't know. Never tried."

"So here we all are," Adam says.

I look down at my plate, overwhelmed by everything they just shared. "Well, I sure am glad you are."

Cayden removes his hand from my leg and grasps my palm, above the table this time. "So are we."

"So is the world," Jax says, and there's that swagger I expect from him. The seriousness that had darkened his gaze melts away, leaving only his dickish, brash self.

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Sergio balls up his napkin and throws it at him. It hits square on, and Jax howls in protest. Sergio winks at me, then jerks a thumb at his own chest. "Sniper."

Yeah, that makes sense.

The lighter mood has even me cracking a smile. "And what do you guys all do here now? You can't be running the whole mill by yourselves."

The place was practically shuttered back when Cayden and I were kids, but supposedly, in its heyday, it employed a hundred guys during the season. These five are strong as hell, but there's still just five.

Deandre shakes his head. "Turned it into a specialty woodworking operation." He points to Sergio and Jax. "These guys deal with the lumber part. I do carpentry."

"I wouldn't just call it carpentry," Adam protests. "He's an artist."

Cayden nudges me. "Like you."

"You're an artist?" Deandre asks.

I squirm. "Sort of. Not really. Not anymore."

"Yes, you are," Cayden says.

"You should come by my workshop sometime," Deandre says. "I'll show you around."

My heart leaps. I haven't had much passion for making art of late, but the idea of seeing another person create something from nothing...that's appealing.

"I'd love that."

A slow, pleased smile spreads across Deandre's face. "Good. Do it, then."

"I will."

"Anyway," Jax says, picking up the thread. "Cayden does a little bit of everything, both at the mill and in the carpentry workshop. And Adam runs the business."

"And the kitchen," Adam reminds them all.

I grin. "And I thank you for that." I gesture at my scraped-clean plate. "This was delicious."

"Happy to cook for you anytime," he says, and there's a saucy flirtatiousness to the way he says it that makes me flush anew.

"Happy to have him cooking for you," Deandre adds. "If I knew all it took was a pretty girl to have him bringing his A-game..."

"Hey!" Adam protests.

"Don't listen to him," Jax says. "You know he's just talking shit."

"Not the only reason I'm glad to have a pretty girl around, though," Deandre says. He flashes a panty-dropping smile my way.

And if Adam was being flirty, Deandre's being downright seductive.

Wow. I might have forgotten it with all the heavy conversation, but I'm suddenly reminded anew that I'm surrounded by a group of incredibly attractive men. That I'm the only woman here—maybe the only one half of them have seen in quite some time.

Normally, that might make me feel selfconscious. But between Adam's and my encounter this morning and the simmering sexual tension that Cayden and I have practically promised to explore tonight, I'm feeling...well, sexy. Unusually so.

All the appreciative eyes on me feel like actual caresses on my skin. And I may not be hungry for food anymore.

But I'm definitely, definitely hungry for something else.

My fantasy from last night flashes before my eyes. I'd imagined being taken in turn by each one of these strong, gorgeous, ripped men.

And it was just that. A fantasy.

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But the way they're looking at me right now...

What if it was more? What if it could be a reality?

The room suddenly feels too hot, my skin too tight. The sexual energy in the place is thick enough to be cut with a knife.

Apparently, I'm not the only one to feel it.

Cayden places his napkin on the table and pushes his plate away. He stands.

"Haley. That thing we were talking about earlier..."

I rise to my feet so fast I see spots.

Yes. Hell, yes.

I want him. I've wanted him since I was thirteen, and I can't believe I finally get to have him. He told me this afternoon that he had all kinds of things he wanted to do to me, and I can imagine a list about a hundred miles long.

I want him hard, I want him fast. I want his mouth on me, and I want the hot, silky length of his cock pushing into my throat.

I want him soft and sweet and slow.

He holds out his hand, and I take it immediately.

And I never would have imagined I would do this, but I hesitate. All those other gazes are on me. Adam looks as turned on as he was this morning, but he makes no move to challenge Cayden's claim. Jax looks openly ravenous while also kind of customarily pissed about it.

And Deandre and Sergio just look like they're biding their time.

Cayden tugs on my hand. With effort, I pull my gaze away from the other guys.

But as I let Cayden lead me to his bedroom, I can't get their aroused stares out of my head.

I can't help but wonder if my wild fantasy is really as wild as it seemed...

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In the span of a breath, any thoughts of fantasies are driven from my mind.

Because reality is so, so, so much better.

The door to Cayden's room closes behind us, and he slams me up against it. His mouth meets mine with all the fire of our kiss back in the car, only its embers have been burning for hours now. It flares, hot and bright, blinding me, engulfing me in flames of need.

Desperate to quench myself, I cling to Cayden's neck. He gets his hands on my ass and hoists me up, and I wrap my legs around his hips. I groan as his sizable erection grinds into my pussy. Even through our clothes, he's hard and hot and pressing just precisely where I need him.

"God," he breathes, sounding just as wrecked as I am. "You don't know how long I've

wanted this."

I laugh, light and free. "It can't be as long as me."

"Want to try me?" His smile is sunshine against my lips. He breaks the kiss, but it's only to slide his open mouth to my jaw and then my throat.

I throw my head back as he licks and sucks at tender skin. "Middle school," I manage to pant.

"Jesus." He thunks his head against the door behind us.

"You were my first crush."

"And you were mine."

Brightness floods my heart. "I always hoped. Never thought—couldn't believe."

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He pulls back enough to look me in the eyes. "You were the prettiest girl in that school. You were smart and talented. Everybody had a crush on you."

"Bullshit." I was awkward and weird, never the popular kid. The boys used to torture me, and sure, my grandma always liked to tell me that they pulled my pigtails because they liked me, but that was sexist bullshit then, and it's sexist bullshit now.

Even Jax, Cayden's best friend, thought I was a dork.

Cayden shakes his head, meeting my lips once more. "You have no idea, do you?"

"You remember middle school very, very differently from how I do."

"Don't make me dig up my yearbook."

I let out a squeal that's part laughter and part indignation. "Don't you dare."

"I will. Don't test me."

"No," I groan, but the protest is cut off with another clever, delicious twist of his hips.

Our mouths meet again, slower and wetter. He licks past my teeth and I open to him. I run one hand through the soft strands of his ashy blond hair, then scratch my nails over the scruff of his beard.

When he pulls back, I cup his face in my hands, rubbing my fingers over his cheekbones and staring into clear, blue eyes.

"We wasted so much time."

He shakes his head, twisting to press a kiss to my palm. "Wasn't a waste. But I'm real damn glad we're here now."

I search his gaze, wanting to protest, but can I? Really? "I guess..."

One corner of his mouth tilts up. "Besides. Couldn't have done this back when we were twelve."

He grinds against me, dirty and slow. Heat and pleasure bloom along my spine, pulling a moan from me.

"Good point."

Maybe the years we spent apart were worth it. Because there is seriously nothing else I would rather be doing right now than this.

We kiss again, wilder, deeper. Our bodies are flush, our lips and hips connected. He moves against me, and I'm pinned between his body and the door. I slide my hands over the roughness of his beard to his broad shoulders and firm chest. All that gorgeous muscle feels like heaven, and a part of me could stay here, just like, this forever.

The other part needs more.

Impatient, I start to fumble with the buttons on his shirt. They give beneath my fingers, revealing smooth skin and another freaking shirt—and I get that it's cold, but how many layers do I have to get through to put my hands on that chiseled body?

He rumbles a low laugh into my mouth, then grabs me by the ass again. "Hold on

tight, baby."

Happily.

But even with that warning, I'm thrown when he peels my body off the door. I scramble to throw my arms around his neck, clinging as he walks us across the room.

I only get vague impressions of the space flying by me as we move. This is definitely his childhood bedroom, but it's also undergone some serious renovations. The handful of movie and country rock star posters that graced his walls back in middle school are gone, replaced by what looks like local artisan work. A couple of paintings and a driftwood piece. There are photos I can't quite make out, though I'm pretty sure a few contain hard-bodied men in desert fatigues. A flag is folded neatly and displayed in a case, and it hits me all at once.

Those years between the children we were and the adults we are now really weren't wasted. We spent them. Him defending his country and me learning and teaching and trying to make art.

We clicked immediately upon reuniting. But I can't wait to go deeper. To find out who he really is now, what he's seen and where he's been and what he's done to become the rough-hewn man currently kissing me breathless.

Clearly, we're going to start that process of discovery by learning about each other's bodies, though. And I can't say I regret that at all.

We arrive at the edge of a big bed that definitely wasn't part of this room back when he was thirteen. The crimson bedspread welcomes me as he sets me down. I sink into the mattress's embrace. He kneels up between my legs, and together we scoot backward until we both at least sort of fit on the bed. I can't be bothered to worry about what parts of us might be dangling off the edge when he devours my mouth

again.

His weight presses into me deliciously, and it only gets better when he skims a hand beneath my shirt. That contact of flesh on flesh sends waves of goosebumps rippling over me, heat pooling in my center. I drag him closer, grinding up into him, and sparks blur my vision.

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"God, you feel good," he groans.

"Yeah—Cayden—"

"Uh-huh." He somehow seems to understand my unspoken plea, because his hands hook in the fabric of my top. He pushes it higher, lifting away from me just long enough for us to get the offending fabric off and over my head. He reaches behind his head to grab his collar, somehow managing to get both layers off as one.

When he lays back over me this time, it's even better, because there's skin. I run my hands over all of it, and holy shit.

I knew his time in the army and his work at the mill had been good to him, but I'd had no idea. Ropes of thick muscle bulge beneath my fingertips. He's hot and hard, with a dusting of sandy hair across his chest, and I want it all.

We're both in too much of a rush to deal with my bra. He pulls the cups down and scoops his hands inside. His rough palms on that soft flesh makes me even wetter, my clit twitching and nipples screaming at how good it feels. He pinches each tender nub in turn, and I groan into his mouth.

He nips at my bottom lip. "I love the noises you make."

"I love the way you touch me."

"Mmm, I love that, too."

With that, he pulls away from the kiss to lick and suck his way down my throat. He lingers again on the mark that Adam left there, but I don't have time to think about it. Reaching behind me, he unclasps my bra. I help him to tear it away, and then his mouth is on my tits. The warm, wet suction makes need flare deep inside me. His chest is between my legs now, and I miss the hard bulge of his cock against my center. I can't grind against him like this. I'm suddenly desperate for relief.

Rubbing myself against him both fruitlessly and shamelessly, I thread my hands into his hair. I don't exactly push him down, but I maybe encourage him to head in that direction.

He lets out a little growl, tugging at my nipple with his teeth. Pleasure and pain zing through me at once. "Patience, baby."

I whine in frustration, but submit to his onslaught. His mouth on my skin feels so good, but I want more. After this morning's romp with Adam, I should have a little stamina, but it feels like Cayden has awakened a whole new level of sexual energy in me. Maybe it's the decades of wondering what might have been. Maybe it's just him. Maybe there's something in the water, or my dry spell, or the insane tension of being the only woman in a house filled with so many desirable men, but I can't handle it.

Finally, he relents, releasing my breasts to travel lower. He kisses beside my navel, then fits hands to my hips. I buck into that touch, reaching for the fly of my jeans. Before I can, though, he leans down.

My breath shudders and stops when he presses his lips to my pussy through the denim. It's the faintest flicker of pressure, but the heat of him seeps through.

"You want that, baby? Want me to eat you out?"

I throw my head back, dizzy, delirious. "Fuck, yes."

He makes quick work of my pants, tugging my underwear away as well. They're soaked, and they must carry the hot scent of sex from the way Adam filled me with his come this morning, but Cayden doesn't seem to notice. He casts them aside, and then I'm naked, spread for him.

Shoving my legs apart, he groans. "Pretty little pussy."

He slicks his thumb between my lower lips before grazing my clit. Fireworks shoot off inside me. I clench down inside, getting wetter and more ready for him.

But I'm still not prepared for the way he dives in. I cry out at the first swipe of his warm, soft tongue on my softest parts. He dips inside, then works his way up to my clit, and Jesus.

Cupping the backs of my thighs in his big hands, he opens me up wider. I let him, until I'm holding my own knees up and out of the way. I'm on display this way, my pussy throbbing to be filled, but he concentrates solely on my clit until I'm thrashing, tossing my head back and forth against the bed, close, only I can't quite get there.

"Inside," I chant, "please, please, need—"

"Fingers or cock?"

"Both—either—I don't—"

How can I possibly decide? I want everything, to be taken by this man in every way. In the last, remaining, rational pieces of my mind, I know we'll have a chance to do this again. Everything we've said today certainly implies that this isn't a one time thing, but I can't seem to convince my body of that fact.

Thank God, he makes the decision for me.

Pulling away from my pussy, he slides his slick lips up my abdomen. He makes a slight detour to kiss my breasts, but it doesn't last long. Before I know it, he's at my mouth again, pressing his tongue inside and working his belt free.

The leather finally gives. He pushes his jeans down, and I spare half a second to regret not having time to get him all the way naked, but the thought is there and gone in an instant, because then he's there. The fat head of his cock shoves at my needy cunt. He slips through the liquid there, getting himself slick with my juices.

"Can I? Need it—God, Haley—"

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"Yes, yes, please—"

And I'm such a slut. But I feel powerful, sexually alive in a way I've never been before. I'm still holding myself open for him, and he's pushing in bare, the second man to take me today, and I scream.

Jesus, he fills me up so right. He's almost as long as Adam was and even wider. He strokes all along my G-spot as he slides inside, then grinds into my clit with his hips when he bottoms out. He shudders, eyes clenching tight.

"You feel so good," he groans.

I need my hand, so I drop my leg. He fits his shoulder to the inside of my knee, and yes, that's even better. He's folding me in half with how deep he is inside. I grab him by the back of the neck and haul him in, lunging forward as I do for a kiss. His teeth scrape over my lip, and he grinds into me, rough and dirty, but our connection makes it something more somehow.

Adam and I shared an instant rapport this morning. The fact that we didn't really know each other had its own appeal. But Cayden's and my relationship goes back years, and it shows in the way we fuck. He snaps his eyes open, and they stare into my soul as he rocks his hips. I clench down around him, and we both moan.

Finally, neither of us can take it anymore. He draws back and slides home once more, and electricity zips up my spine. I feel taken, possessed. There's just so much of him. The massive girth of his cock stretches me, and the breadth of his shoulders crowds me. I can't see anything but him, can't feel anything but the way he's fucking me so

deep and good and right.

I get lost in it, and maybe so does he. It's a chilly night, but sweat pools on my skin. The slick slide of our bodies makes the dirty things we're doing all the more carnal and raw. Orgasm hovers over me, ready to sweep me away at any moment, but I hold on.

His restraint is slipping, though. "Jesus, Hayley, I can't—I'm going to—"

"Yeah, do it, come in me, fill me up."

"Wanna feel you come first, God, your pussy feels so good, can you do it? Come for me? Squeeze me? Come around my cock—"

How could I not?

He shoves his hips flush to mine, and it's the perfect pressure against my clit. I tense my abs and jerk up, sealing my mouth to his. Digging my nails into his shoulder, I chase release until it's there, shining and crystal.

I don't know when I closed my eyes, but I snap them open, and he's right there. Our gazes lock, and our bodies are connected in the most intimate way two bodies can be.

"Cayden..."

I shatter spectacularly, going to pieces, but he's there, putting me back together with his cock and his hands and—dear God—with his love.

Because that's what we're doing here. Not just fucking but making love. The brilliance of the connection surges through me. My climax is blinding light, and then he's rearing back.

He pounds into me hard, all restraint gone as he takes me, stakes his claim, and then he's coming, too.

His cock pulses inside me, hot release filling me up. I milk him for all he's worth, wanting more, more, more.

Then he slams home. My orgasm crests, and I hold onto him as he collapses over me. He crushes me to him, and it's perfect, just perfect. It doesn't even matter that I can hear the voices of his housemates leaking through the walls. If anything, knowing that they just heard us making love drives my ecstasy higher.

I fold my legs and arms around him, plastering our sweaty bodies together. I rest there with him like that.

And I feel hopeful for the first time in so long.

13

Movement in the bed wakes me. I stir, luxuriating in the warm cocoon and the hot press of naked flesh to mine. Cayden's lips are wet and soft on my shoulder. I roll into him, tilting my head to the side to give him access, and he takes full advantage.

He's behind me, his hard cock a bar of iron against my ass. My head is pillowed on his bicep. He skates his other hand along my side, dipping down to caress my breast before continuing over my abdomen and down. I sigh in sleep-drunk pleasure at the tease of fingertips slipping through my folds. He finds my clit and rubs at it gently, and I slide my legs apart.

"I have to go..." he groans.

"Nooooo..." It's still dark outside.

"Sorry. Duty calls. I didn't want to wake you, but..." He kisses my ear, tongue dancing over the shell, breath hot and raspy, and my pussy throbs in anticipation as he grinds against my rear. "You were so beautiful. Wanted you too bad. I couldn't resist."

I twist around to capture his mouth with mine. It's a wet kiss, sloppy and soft and easy. "I'm glad you didn't."

"Me, too."

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We kiss for a long minute. His hips undulate against me, cock skating against naked flesh. He's wet at the tip, and I'm achy and empty and half asleep.

He rolls me a little further onto my stomach. He slides his big palm along my side again, gripping the back of my thigh and urging it up, making space for himself.

And then he's there. He drags his cock through the slickness between my legs, the blunt head nudging up against my entrance before sliding forward to tease my clit.

"Can I? Can I have you one more time?"

"Please..."

We groan as one when he glides back. When he pushes forward, he enters me so easily. I'm slick and open and soft with sleep, and he feels so good.

There's none of the urgency of last night, for all that we're both into it. He presses his chest to my spine, glues his lips to the back of my neck and fucks me nice and slow.

I go boneless, letting him have me. I'm half on my side and half on my front. His body is a sweltering heat all along my back, and the mattress holds me up. His cock is relentless as it fills me, his thrusts steady and strong, and I'm floating in a haze of pleasure.

After the longest time at that leisurely pace, he grips my breast and starts to move faster.

His voice, when he speaks, is strained. "Haley..."

"Yeah—yeah—"

He moans and sinks his teeth into my throat. His fingertips reach around to find my clit. He rubs there, nice and firm but not too hard.

"I can't. Have to..."

He shoves in deep. His cock kicks inside me, and then there's more wetness flooding me as he fills me with hot come. The sensation of him releasing inside me triggers my own orgasm. Climax rolls through me, as soft and warm as everything else about our pre-dawn lovemaking has been. I whisper his name and clench my eyes shut tight, pulsing around him as I bury my face in the pillow.

For a long moment, we lie there, panting. I'm half drifting off again, comfortable and well-fucked, but before sleep can fully embrace me, a slice of cool air invades our warm little pocket.

I grumble in protest, grabbing at him as he retreats, but he shushes me. He presses one last, lingering kiss to my lips, then another gentle one to the center of my brow.

"Sleep," he urges.

"But..."

"I'll be back before you know it." He smooths my hair back from my head, then stands, tucking the covers around me, but it's no replacement for his heat.

I watch through half-lidded eyes as he dresses in the dark. The clothes he pulls on are rugged clothes, work clothes, and that makes sense. He told me last night that taking

the day off to help me clean out my grandmother's house put him behind. He has things to do at the mill. Rationally, I understand, but that doesn't make me any less pouty about it.

I roll over in the bed. His pillow smells like him, and I breathe it in, even as I'm sliding my hands down my naked body. I'm sore in all the right places, my thighs sticky from my own juices and Cayden's release. My breasts tingle from where they've been bitten and pinched, and if I shoved back the covers, there would be fingerprint bruises on my thighs and hips. I feel fabulous, basically. I suck in a deep breath and let it out long and luxurious.

"You sure I can't tempt you to stay?" I ask.

Cayden chuckles darkly as he tugs on his boots. "You are the most tempting thing I've ever seen." He approaches the bed again and gives me one final, firm kiss. "Tonight," he says, and it sounds like a promise. One I'm going to hold him to.

For now, though, I let him go. He casts a glance back at me over his shoulder on the way out the door, his gaze wistful.

But then he's gone.

I drift for a while. I'm never aware of falling asleep again, but time seems to pass. When I open my eyes again fully, pale light streams through the gaps in the utilitarian, navy blue curtains. I strain my ears, but I only catch the sound of the wind outside. If there's anyone going about their life here in the house, they're being awfully quiet about it.

With a sigh, I cast the covers off. A sharp chill assaults me. I tug on Cayden's discarded flannel shirt from the night before, hugging it around myself as I scurry to the attached bathroom, where I take care of business and clean myself up from my

morning sexcapades. I shake my head at myself as I do, because wow. This is no how I expected my time on Lonely Peak to go.

Refreshed, I retreat back to Cayden's room. I didn't take the time to grab my things from the guest room, so I forego underwear and rummage through Cayden's drawers until I find a pair of sweatpants. I have to roll them up to a ridiculous degree, and I should probably cinch the waist, too, but they'll do. I'm just heading a few doors down the hall, anyway.

Or so I think.

Because the instant I step out into the hall, I run headlong into the one person in this house I don't want to see.

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The one person I'm one hundred percent sure wants nothing to do with me.

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"Well,hellothere." Jax catches me right before I can collide with him. His big hands grip my shoulders.

My cheeks burst into flames as I shrug him off. He's wearing that smug smirk I've been wanting to punch off his face for decades now, his brows raised in implication, and why should I care? Yes, he did just catch me mid-walk-of-shame, but I have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm a grown woman who had amazing, incredible, fantastic sex with a guy I've been crushing on for years. If anything, I should be proud of my conquest.

The way he's looking at me makes me feel inexplicably dirty, though. All I want to do is get away.

"Sorry," I mumble, edging around him.

But he blocks my way. "What? You don't even want to say hello?"

"Not really."

He laughs, mocking. "Jeez. I was hoping if Adam couldn't do it that my boy Cayden could finally fuck that stick out of your ass, but apparently not."

Forget flames. My face is an inferno. Shame I have no freaking reason to feel burns

in my gut, and I hate this guy. Ihatehim.

"Maybe you should give it a try," I spit at him, and holy shit. Where did that come from?

I regret it immediately, my mouth opening to take it back, only his eyes flash dark. He leans in closer, and my breath stutters in my chest.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"No. It was a—a joke. I—" I what?

I mean, Jax has been an asshole to me since we were pre-teens, but that doesn't change the fact that he's smoking hot. His long, brown hair is pulled back into a messy man bun at the back of his head, a couple of stray strands framing his chiseled, stubbled jaw. His full, pink lips are wet and sultry, his gray eyes piercing, and something uncomfortable turns over in my stomach.

It's never boiled over, but our sniping has always had a charged note to it. Suddenly, the tension is hot enough to throw sparks.

Only...only...

Cayden and I finally got together last night.

Shit. Maybe that's what's going on.

"Fuck off." I shove him back, and he goes, but it only buys me a fraction of an inch.

"If this is some bullshit bro test, I'm not taking it."

"Excuse you?"

"You know what I mean. I finally get together with your buddy, so you try to get in my pants to see if I'm a cheating skank for him. No way."

I don't know what I expect, but it's definitely not the full-throated way he throws his head back and laughs.

"What?" I demand. God, this guy. If he isn't making me feel like whore, he's doing shit like this and making me feel about two feet tall. "Stop laughing—

He does. In an instant, his mouth snaps closed, and his whole demeanor changes. Intensity colors his gaze as he focuses it, laser-like on me. "He didn't tell you."

"Didn't tell me what?"

"Oh, this is too good."

He backs off, not much, but just enough that I can breathe.

And yet somehow, inexplicably, I miss his presence. The fiery thing that burns between us and maybe always has.

I step forward, getting in his face again. "What?"

"No, I can't."

"Bullshit. What didn't he tell me?"

"You really want to know?"

"Obviously."

I hate feeling like I'm not in the loop. I hate how Jax makes me feel stupid.

I hate the rumbling in my gut telling me that what happened between Cayden and me last night was too good to be true.

What if this is all a trick? What if they're all just fucking with me as they're fucking me, laughing at me behind my back while I go ahead and get invested?

It wouldn't be the first time.

Jesus, what if this is Richard all over again?

Jax pulls me out of my spiral with a hand on my shoulder. The weight of his grip is steady, somehow, even though a part of me wants to push him away. He tucks a finger under my chin until our gazes lock.

"You know what being in the service together does to guys, right? We're brothers. Forever."

"Okaaay..."

"That means no one gets between us. Especially not a woman."

And there's that churning in my gut again. Great. So it really is as bad as I think.

"Message received." I start to shrug out of his grip, but he holds on tight this time, refusing to let me pass.

"No. I don't think it has been."

"Bros before hoes, blah blah blah. He can't be with anybody—

He speaks over me. "None of us can be with anybody. No one leaves, not for anyone."

"Well, enjoy your little monastery, then. Hope you all love your right hands."

When I try to peel away again, he's having none of it. He slams me back into the wall. The movement takes me completely by surprise. I turn my gaze up at him, stunned, but he's looming over me, crowding me in with his bulk, and he smells so good. My blood is up, the arousal of anger bleeding into the arousal of a hot, hard body so close to mine.

I shake my head, but he doesn't let me get a word out.

"None of us can be with anyone unless she's willing to be withallof us. Unless all of us want to be with her."

Oh.

Oh.

He hasn't left me any room to doubt, but my mind instantly revolts. No, there's no way that can be right.

And even if it was...

"So what, you're the hold out?"

I have no idea if Sergio or Deandre wants to get with me, but Jax hates me. He always has. Right?

Doubt creeps in.

And then he leans closer. I shiver uncontrollably, my skin tingling with hot, wrong desire when he puts his lips right next to my ear. "I'm the one who told Cayden he needed to fuck you first. Because otherwise I could never, ever do this."

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I see it coming a hundred miles away, but it doesn't matter. The searing crash of his mouth into mine shocks me like a bolt of lighting. I'm deaf, dumb, frozen as he assaults my mouth. His kiss is as infuriating as his sneering face has always been.

And I'm instantly, utterly addicted.

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"Wait." I can barely manage to get the word out as Jax's tongue does dirty, dirty things to mine. But no matter how much I want to give in, my conscience prickles. I pull away from his mouth, gripping the back of his head as he moves to kiss my jaw, my ear, my throat. I close my eyes, trying to focus through the haze of need he's building in me. "You sure Cayden isn't going to mind?"

"Mind?" Jax chuckles darkly, then sucks a stinging bruise into my collar bone. "He's probably jerking off to the idea right now."

And isn't that an image? I bang my head against the wall, overcome with arousal as I picture Cayden thinking about this, as I picture him watching.

"He knows?"

"He knows I'm going to talk to you."

"Good talk," I manage, and then I'm hauling him back to my mouth.

The kiss we share this time is savage. He mauls my mouth, and I give back just as

good as I get. A particularly brutal scrape of his teeth leaves my bottom lip stinging, and the coppery taste of blood makes everything hotter.

He's just as rough with the rest of me. His hands shove their way under my borrowed shirt, clawing at my breasts. My already sore nipples sing, and I clench down inside, my pussy flooding with wetness, aching empty and desperate.

"Touch me," I demand.

He doesn't hesitate, thrusting one of his hands into the loose waistband of the sweats I stole from his best friend after spending the night in his bed. He groans when he meets bare flesh, no panties to bar his way. He finds my clit immediately, and Jesus, how can I be this close to coming already?

"Yeah, yeah, right there." I throw my head back and moan.

He switches to rubbing my clit with his thumb and roughly pushes two fingers into me. "Fuck, you're soaked."

I'll bet I am. Cayden's come is still inside me, and Jax's kisses are fire burning me alive.

"If I'd known you were so hot for it, I would have done this years ago."

My head spins, because that doesn't make sense, he hates me, and I hate him, but I can't focus. Not when he's fingering me so brutally. My pussy lights up with pleasure, and I grind myself against his hand.

Jax drops to lick and bite at my throat again. I tilt my head to give him access, tearing at his clothes. The flesh beneath his shirt is searingly hot, his muscles hard. He dips lower with his mouth, letting go of my tit to shove my top aside, baring my shoulder.

He groans.

"You smell like him," he says.

My skin tingles, and my pussy pulses with a fresh wave of need. "That do it for you? Knowing your best friend was just here?"

He rips his mouth from my flesh and meets my eyes. "Damn right it does."

And then we're in motion. He wrestles me away from the wall just enough to pull my shirt off. He shoves my pants down, and then I'm naked in the hallway while he's still fully dressed, and I don't care.

He grabs my hand and puts it on his dick through his jeans. He feels huge against my palm. I rub the denim and he moans.

"Get me out."

Happily. Thank God he's wearing sweats, too. I shove them down, taking his boxers with them. They bunch around his muscular thighs, and then I have him in my hand. He's thick as hell—God, he's going to fill me up so good. I give him a couple of rough strokes, and fluid leaks from his tip, and I want it. I want him to fuck my mouth and make me take it, want him to come down my throat.

But I want this more.

He hoists me up, throwing me around like I weigh nothing at all. My spine impacts with the wall again, his hands under my ass, holding me up. I spread my legs on instinct, circling them around his waist. With one hand, I cling to his neck, and with the other, I line him up.

He shoves in with one brutal thrust, and forget that I'm dripping slickness all down my thighs. The stretch is pain and pleasure all at once. My cunt has been pushed to the limit over the past couple of days, but it can take more. Ineedmore.

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Our lips meet again, and he doesn't waste any time. He starts up a hard, fast rhythm with his hips, pounding into me. His cock is so big it hits all the right places on every thrust, and his hips grind into mine every time he bottoms out, banging into my clit.

"Fuck, Haley," he rumbles, kisses going sloppy and wet.

"Jax—"

"Wanted this—wanted to fuck that prissy look right off your face for years."

Was that really where this was all leading? Were the years of bitterness and scorn all foreplay?

I don't care. "Well, here's your chance. Give it to me hard."

He doesn't disappoint.

Damn, the guy has some stamina. His thighs must be screaming, and his shoulders are corded with the strain of holding me up, but he fucks me so good, regardless. Over and over, he fills me up, until my own legs are shaking with the effort it takes just to keep them wrapped around his bucking hips.

He drives me wild—always has. I've never felt so crazed with lust before. So animalistic.

I claw at him, biting his lips and raking at his hair, shoving a hand under his shirt to dig my nails into the flesh of his back. I want him as marked up as he's going to leave

me, and he eats it up. Every too-rough touch only makes him redouble his effort. Sweat drips off his brow, and his mouth is going slack, the powerful rhythm of his hips uneven.

"Come, Haley, come on my fucking cock, scream, scream my name like you did Cayden's—"

I throw my head back and do just that. "Jax!"

The orgasm he tears out of me wrenches me apart, shreds me to pieces. I chant his name over and over, and fuck, maybe I don't despise him after all. Maybe I love him, because I've never had sex this savage before. I've never felt like an animal in heat, like all I need is to be fucked and fucked and fucked like this forever.

All good things must come to an end, though. Just as my orgasm is starting to fade, Jax slams in deep and stays there. I have the presence of mind to open my eyes, and damn am I glad I do. His sneer is gone, his smug, angry face twisted in pleasure, and most guys' O-faces look sort of silly, but Jax's expression is pure sex. And I did that to him. I made him come this hard, made him lose his composure for the first time that I've ever seen.

His fat cock pulses inside me, shooting another huge load into my cunt, and it makes me ripple with an aftershock that's almost as intense as my first climax was.

Then he sags into me, face slack. I let my eyes flutter closed.

For a minute, everything is stillness except for the heaving panting of our breaths. I'm in ecstasy, clinging tightly to one of the hottest guys I've ever met, after probably the best hard fuck of my life. I'm radiantly happy.

Until the reality of what just happened crashes over me.

My body is still trilling, pleasure buzzing through my veins. But my brain is basically on the verge of a panic attack.

Jax is too close, I can't breathe, my chest is tight. I gasp, trying to pull away.

"Jax—"

"Yeah, baby?" Sluggishly, he turns his head from where he'd buried it against my neck. His customary smugness curls his lips. Right up until the moment he meets my gaze. "Whoa—"

"Let me down." I shove at him ineffectually. He's still inside me, pressing me into this wall, pinning me with his cock and his arms. My feet dangle above the floor, and I'm naked in the middle of a hallway in a house where five guys live. What the hell was I thinking?

I wasn't. Clearly, not a single thought has entered my head in the past ten minutes, because if one had, I would have had the intelligence to stop this insanity before it was too late.

"Hey. Hey—hey—" Jax must have been trying to get my attention for a little while. The sharpness in his tone finally snaps me out of it. The hand on my face doesn't hurt, either. "Haley, you have to breathe."

I choke on an inhalation that fills my lungs with much-needed oxygen, but it doesn't lend me any clarity. I push him away again.

He seems to get the message this time that we're not getting anywhere until he lets me go. With a grunt, he pulls out. Slick come slides down my thigh, right, because I let

him in me without a condom, because once I've taken as many risks as I have in two days, why not go ahead and take a few more?

He sets me down. The coolness of the hardwood beneath my bare feet helps to ground me, at least a little. I reach down and grab the shirt and pants I'd stolen from Cayden after I let him fuck me, too. I pull the shirt over my head because that'll hide a little more of me. It falls to mid thigh. I hold the wadded up mass of his sweat pants in my hands, frozen, because I don't know what to do or how to escape or how this happened.

"Here."

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Thank God, Jax takes over. My brain is screaming at me not to trust him, but I'm so paralyzed that I don't know what else to do. He puts a hand on my arm and hauls me along down the hall. Before I know it, we're in a bedroom I've never seen before. In my haze, I vaguely recall that it used to be one of Cayden's brothers'. It's big enough to have an attached bathroom, in any case, and that's most of what matters.

Jax moves with such authority, with a kind but firm gentleness that I never would have expected from him. Without making a single asshole comment or giving me any looks that make me want to die inside, he hustles me into the en suite. There, he sits me on the counter, and God, this is so embarrassing. He parts my legs, though, and I'm wet with him. With his claim. But he doesn't make any bullshit comments. Instead, he grabs a washcloth and soaks it in warm water in the sink. Dropping to his knees, he spreads my legs farther. He runs the cloth over me, cleaning the semen and my own juices from my legs. When he reaches my pussy, he's achingly delicate, and it's a good thing, too. I'm raw from so much sex after years without. But his touch is so tender that it doesn't hurt. If anything, it makes low warmth gather there.

Only, for the first time since I arrived, I have the presence of mind to think about something other than sex.

I reach out, stilling him. I clutch his wrist too hard, but I don't know how to let go.

I don't know why this is happening.

"But you don't even like me," I choke out.

And it's like the words spill from me. I sure as hell didn't mean to say them. I

definitely didn't mean to speak in a voice that small. That weak.

Jax huffs out a low, dark laugh. His head hangs low for a moment. Then, with what seems like great effort, he lifts it, raising his gaze to connect with mine. "I like you way, way more than I should."

"What?"

My head spins. That...isn't possible. I don't remember everything from my childhood on Lonely Peak, but a few things are clear. Cayden Tucker was kind and sweet, and Jax Bane was an asshole who hated me and made fun of me and wanted absolutely nothing to do with me.

As if he's remembering the same conflict-filled history that I am, Jax sighs heavily. He takes one more gentle pass with the cloth over my sex, then tosses the washcloth into a hamper and pats my legs, encouraging me to close them.

"Come on."

His voice holds none of the command of a few minutes earlier, when he was coaxing me through a moment of crisis, though it's still firm. Unsure what else to do, I hop down off the counter. He hands me the pants I was wearing earlier, and I pull them on, then follow him into the main part of what must be his bedroom.

Much like Cayden's, the room is incredibly masculine. But unlike the blend of old and new pieces that gave Cayden's space a cozy, traditional feel, Jayden's decorated in only the most modern of styles. His bed is a platform made of bleached birch. He has a bookcase and desk to match, all the accents in glass and chrome, and it looks like it belongs in another house entirely.

Suddenly, everything I thought I knew about this mountain man has been turned on

its edge. He's been gruff and cruel, secluded, but he's also kind. He has style.

And he likes me.

That's the part I really can't get my head around.

"Sit," Jax invites.

He stands beside a window. Pale gray shades have been raised, leaving plenty of glass available to view the mountain around us, and he keeps his gaze trained squarely there, at the world beyond this room as I move to sit on the edge of his bed.

When he doesn't speak, I finally find my voice. "I am very, very confused."

"Yeah, I got that."

And it's a glimmer of the Jax I've known since I was a kid, just tempered by the newer, gentler one that's revealed himself this morning.

"Care to help clear things up?"

"Not really, but I guess I have to." He turns, then, facing me partially. "Did you know that Cayden and I have been best friends since we were four?"

I nod.

"You don't betray a guy like that, okay?"

"Okaaay..."

"So when he confessed to me when we were twelve that he had a massive crush on

you, what the hell was I supposed to do?"

Excuse me? "You've liked me since we weretwelve?"

"Don't say it so loud, Jeez. I have reputation to maintain."

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"I think you, me, and the trees are going to be able to keep it to ourselves."

He rolls his eyes, but resists the opportunity to give me shit, so he really must be turning over a new leaf. "Yes, I liked you even then. But Cayden did, too, and he was the first one to get up the balls to admit it. So I had to sit on how I felt, and holy hell, Hayley. You were so fucking cute back then. So smart."

"I was a dweeb."

"You were an angel." He says it with conviction. The only way I could keep a lid on how I felt was to push you away. Keep it to myself."

He gazes at me expectantly. Part of me is convinced he's messing with me. Is there a hidden camera around here somewhere? I can't find one, and besides. If he is setting me up, he's a hell of an actor.

And it's weird, because I can see the old Jax and the new one, too. They overlap in these strange ways. He's still got this twist to his lips that I've been interpreting as a nasty sneer for years, but what if that's just my own prejudice?

I shake my head. Even if it is, I've had good reason to assume the worst.

"Sorry, this is taking me a minute to get my head around. Am I just supposed to be forgiving and forgetting that you were a total jerk to me when we were kids now?"

He huffs out a breath, gritting his teeth as he faces the window again. "Cayden warned me you might see it that way."

"How else am I supposed to see it? So you liked me. Okay. But you made me miserable in seventh grade."

"I didn't mean to."

"But you did."

"I'm sorry. God. Can't you see that? I am so fucking sorry. For all of it."

Crap. My eyes sting, but I refuse to let him see me getting emotional about this.

Just... I don't think I knew how badly I needed to hear that until right now.

"I appreciate the apology. Like, a lot. But...I still don't know if I can forgive you that easily."

He shifts, directing the full power of his piercing gray eyes on me. "Can you try?"

"I..." I swallow hard, but my throat is desert dry. "I don't know."

Can I? His teasing haunted me, and it inspired others to be jerks as well. He ran with a popular crowd, and the fact that he was mean to me gave a whole bunch of kids license to do likewise. Cayden kept it from getting too out of hand, but that doesn't change what Jax did.

Just because he did it for a good reason doesn't change things.

Except...

Does it? He's looking at me now with real regret in his eyes. His gaze bores into me, and he's always had a way of looking at me. He made me feel small and stupid and

sometimes dirty, but he also got my blood pumping and my temper up. We clearly have chemistry. The things that happened between us happened ages ago.

And Cayden vouches for him.

If the story he's telling is true, Cayden wants me to be with him.

Cayden wants me to be with all the men who live in this house.

My head hurts. "Can we back up a minute? Not that I don't want to keep rehashing our entire middle school feud, but..."

"Be my guest."

"You guys. Everyone who lives in this house. You really share women like that?"

He rolls his eyes. "Not women, Haley. Woman. You. We want to share you."

"I only just met most of you."

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"You knew Adam about two seconds." He lifts his brows meaningfully.

I wrap my arms around myself. "That was unique. I don't usually..."

"Calm your tits. I'm not saying anything. I'm glad you trusted him. He's a good guy."

Yeah. He was. He seemed to be. I really, really hope he still will be, when this all shakes out.

"But the other guys..."

"Serge and Deandre are good dudes. You'll like them, if you give them a chance."

My stomach dips. This next question is too telling, but I have to ask it. "How do you know they'll like me?"

"I don't know how they couldn't. You're—well, you. Funny and smart and sexy as hell. Creative." His gaze flashes dark. "And I can say with authority now, you are a hell of a fuck."

I squirm. There's that dirty feeling in the pit of my stomach, only it's not all bad this time. He doesn't seem to be implying that my being easy for him—and half the members of this house—is something to be ashamed of.

"But you didn't know that until ten minutes ago." I somehow manage to keep my voice even, to not betray the quaking inside. "And yet you all were willing to take this chance on me?"

"Because two of us have known you forever, and we've been in love with you forever. That's a pretty good vouch, if you ask me."

Holy shit. Holyshit. Who said anything about love?

He stiffens, like he realizes at that very moment how much he's given away. He doesn't take it back, though. He stares me down.

"Look, whatever. Just—think about it, okay? If you really hate me that much, I can stay out of things." His brow creases, like it's literally killing him to say that. "But we're a package deal. Fuck me or don't fuck me, but give the other guys a chance."

I can almost hear his other plea on the silent air.

Give me a chance.

A part of me wants to. The other part just isn't sure.

I stand, hugging my arms tighter around myself. "I need to think about all of this."

"You should. Talk to Cayden, too. Because whatever else happens here, he's a good guy, okay? Don't take anything out on him."

"Yeah." That's fair. God knows I have enough questions for him. "Okay."

"Okay."

We stare at each other, and it's awkward in a way it's never been before. We always saw each other clearly—or so I thought. My conceptions have all been thrown on their head, though. I don't know how to feel.

I just know I need to get out of this room.

I point at the door. "I'm just going to..."

"Right. Sure."

Ugh, how is this suddenly worse than when he was an asshole all the time?

I turn to go. I make it almost to the door before he stops me.

"Haley?"

I pause, spinning around, suddenly breathless. "Yeah?"

And he's there. He reaches out, almost tentative. When I don't stop him, he plows forward, cupping my face. He leans in to plant a hard kiss that speaks volumes to my lips.

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"Just. Really think about it, okay? Don't write the idea off. Don't write me off. Because this—all of us. It could be incredible."

And that's the problem.

I'm absolutely terrified he's right.

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I spend the rest of the day floating around in a dream. Jax's words replay themselves in my mind over and over, and they seem more impossible every time.

Thank God I had someplace to retreat to. The hike up the mountain to my grandmother's house was brutal and cold, but it was exactly what I needed. Now I'm sitting on the floor in her dusty dining room, sorting through her china cabinet, trying to focus on the tedious, heart-breaking work of settling her estate.

But focus is nowhere to be found.

Five men. Jax actually, honestly seems to want me to agree to a relationship with five men—including him.

I still don't know what the hell to do with his personal revelations. Normally, they'd be enough to have me reeling by themselves. Paired with my childhood crush, Cayden, actually being interested in me, and the soft-eyed look Adam gave me as I walked out the door, and the idea of five fucking men at the same time—I'm in total overload.

There's no way it could work. Right? Men are jealous and possessive. A bunch of reclusive soldiers penned in together in the same house, fucking the same woman, loving the same woman... Because that's what Jax implied. Sex with five men would be one thing, but he was talking about a relationship. He had to have been. He was talking long term.

And there's just a whole extra can of worms. What do they expect of me? I'm on a leave of absence from my teaching job. Yeah, I've been feeling kind of useless at work recently, and having to see Richard every day sure hasn't helped. I've flirted with the idea of quitting. I could use some time away. An opportunity to reconnect with my creative side and actually make some art instead of trying to keep unruly high school students from sniffing the rubber cement they're supposed to be making boring, ugly collages with.

But am I supposed to just give up my career, my life, to relocate to Lonely Peak full time? I've worked hard for my independence. The idea of giving it up to live in this house with these men makes my stomach churn, anxiety running just beneath my skin.

It's too risky. They don't know me. Jax and Cayden may think they do, but we haven't been close in ages. Adam and I had an easy connection, and it's not as if I haven't noticed the heat in Sergio's eyes or the casual intimacy Deandre has treated me with.

But they don't know me. I don't know them.

Even if I wanted to change my entire life like that, they have no reason to keep me.

My heart pangs, the old scar Richard left on it smarting like a bruise you accidentally press too hard on. I let myself get too invested in him. I gave up my time, my art.

And in the end, when I expected a commitment, he threw me away.

I know better than to write off all men after one lousy affair, but I'm gun shy now. It won't be easy for me to trust like that again.

For a moment, though, I allow myself to imagine what a relationship with five gorgeous, rough-hewn, muscular men could be like. My very first night here, I got myself off to the fantasy of them taking turns with me, fucking me one after another after another, and the idea hasn't lost its appeal.

What would that be like? My sex life has been fairly vanilla in general, and fairly nonexistent just of late. Getting naked with three different men in the space of about twenty-seven hours is definitely a new record. Could I do that every day? Just get passed from one guy to the next, getting fucked over and over?

Would I take more than one of them at once?

Heat ripples through my body, my pussy clenching and nipples tightening. Holy hell. The vivid image of being naked in a room full of sweaty, hard men overtakes me. I picture myself on all fours in their living room, one man in my pussy while another fucks my mouth. I've never done anal before, but could I fit a third? Could I ride one man while another presses in from behind, stretching me open, filling me up to the brim?

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood. My fantasies are wrong—so wrong. But God, I want it. I want it so bad. My pussy is dripping at just the idea, and it doesn't matter that I've had more sex this week than I had last year. The idea of all those cocks invading my body, bringing me pleasure, makes me so wet. So needy.

But I have to keep my head on straight.

Getting my heart broken by one man devastated me. There'd be no coming back from having it broken by five.

Carefully, I put down the ancient gravy boat I've been dusting off for about an hour now. I drop my head into my hands for a minute and just breathe.

There's no reason to jump into this headlong, and there's no reason to be afraid of it, either, if it's something I'm actually interested in. I haven't even talked to Cayden yet. Right now, I'm working off Jax's word alone, and that's not smart. I have to slow down. My head always gets ahead of itself. Nothing that's happened over the past few days has been planned. That's worked out for me pretty okay so far. I should just keep both eyes open and...see what happens.

A dry laugh erupts from my throat. Wing it. Yeah, that sounds like a great plan.

But for the moment, it's the best one I've got.

With a sigh, I scrub my hands over my face and do my best to push my worries from my mind.

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Over the remainder of the afternoon, I manage to clean up most of my grandmother's dish collection. Some pieces should stay in the family, while most of the rest can be sold or donated. By the time I box things up, the sun is getting low in the sky. My work here for the moment is finished, and the idea of staying here after dark holds little appeal. Already, in the growing dimness, the rattling of the siding and the cobwebs in the corners seem more menacing.

My stomach gives a nervous twist. Going back to the guys' place holds its own menace. But not going there means excluding the possibility of this happening all together.

I'm not ready to write it off so fast.

The one good thing is that I have a vehicle of my own, now. If I want to escape, I can run at any time.

And if I want to stay...

Well. There's nothing keeping me from doing that, either.

18

Apparently, I lingered at my grandmother's house longer than I thought.

My plan was to find Cayden and try to get him alone for a serious heart to heart as soon as I walked in the door, but by the time I make it back to the guys' place, the dinner rush is in full swing. The smell of baked pasta wafts through the air, making

me remember my hurried breakfast and my sparse lunch. My stomach growls.

In the kitchen, I find Adam at the stove and Sergio chopping up stuff for a salad. Deandre is setting the table, while Jax pours drinks, and Cayden, the guy I really need to talk to, is up on a ladder, changing light bulbs of all the ridiculous things.

Crap. There go my chances of pulling him aside without anyone noticing.

Not that the odds of that happening were good to start with. The instant I turn the corner, Sergio nods at me. Adam picks up on the motion and turns, hitting me with a bright, soft smile that melts my insides.

"Haley, you're just in time. Hope you're hungry?"

"Starving," I admit. I glance at Cayden again. He meets my gaze, and I'm transported to his bed in my mind, remembering the soft kisses he gave me on his way out the door, promising to do more delicious things to my body tonight. I swallow, warmth flowing through me.

Only then Jax steps into my line of view. His jaw is tight, his smile tighter.

Jeez, I really must have done a number on him, leaving the way I did this morning, without giving him an answer. I still need more time to process how I feel about him, but I nod at him all the same.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi." He sets down the bottles of beer he'd been carrying and steps closer. "You okay?"

Suddenly, the room seems a lot quieter. No one stops what they're doing, or is so

obvious as to actively stare, but the attention of every one of the guys is like a weight, pressing in on me.

Incredibly self-conscious, I fiddle with the hem of my top. "Yeah, um. Yeah. Fine. Got a lot done at my grandmother's house."

"I figured that was where you went. Though you could have said."

Oh. Yeah, in hindsight I didn't tell anyone where I was off to this morning. That was kind of inconsiderate—and potentially more than kind of stupid. The hike up the road isn't terribly dangerous, but you never know.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I just would have offered you a ride, or something."

I shrug. "I wanted to walk. Needed to, you know. Clear my head."

His throat bobs. "Right. How'd that go?"

And we haven't actually said a damn thing about his revelations, but the subtext is just as heavy as the attention we're attracting. If I didn't believe him about the whole group sex thing, I sure do now. Everyone seems keenly interested in my answer.

Only I don't have one. "Still working on it."

"Got it." He nods tightly.

Everyone in the room seems to take a breath as one, and just like that, we're back in motion. Jax turns on a dime and takes the beers to the table. His posture is rigid, and he doesn't meet my gaze. I probably would have read a lot of things into that kind of

attitude yesterday.

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Today? I have no idea what to think.

I'm so lost in wondering that it takes me by surprise when Deandre appears at my side. The guy is huge; if he can sneak up on me, I must be really out of it.

"Here," he says. "Let's get you off your feet."

"I'm fine," I protest.

"Didn't say you weren't. Just think you might like to have a seat. Maybe a glass of wine?"

Oh. Right. Deandre's been seeing to my knees and offering to take care of me from the minute I walked in the door. This is just more of that.

I let out a breath that feels like all the air flowing out of my lungs. "Wine sounds fantastic."

"White or red?"

"Red, please."

"On it." Then he swoops in and presses a kiss to my cheek, and honest to god butterflies flutter through my chest.

Jeez. For the first time, Jax's suggestion that I could date all the men here seems like a good thing. Because I adore Adam and I love Cayden. I have insane chemistry—good

or bad—with Jax. And Deandre does these things to me.

And Sergio...

He's still hardly said five words to me, but my gaze searches him out as I make my way across the room. He has this slow intensity to him, this quiet presence. As if he can feel my stare, he meets my gaze with his own, and I shiver. The scarring on the side of his face proves his heroism, but the injury didn't make him hard. He has the most beautiful eyes, and that sexy, long hair. That smooth caramel skin and those tattoos... I want to know what's happening beneath the surface, what he's thinking behind that secretive half smile.

Seriously. If I had to choose from among these guys, it'd be the hardest decision of my life. It makes me giddy to imagine I might not have to.

My reservations remain. But I'm starting to see a couple of perks I might not have thought of before.

Hopes still rising, I seat myself at the big dining room table, right in the middle where I was last night. Cayden drops down from the ladder, burnt out bulb in his hand. He makes a beeline for me and plants a kiss on my lips, then gestures toward the sink. "Just gotta go wash up."

"Okay," I say, dizzy.

Moments later, Deandre places a glass of wine in front of me.

And then there's nothing for me to do except watch these gorgeous men buzz around the kitchen, while I sip on a nice, full-bodied cab, and try to figure out how on earth I got here.

And if I can really afford to let this opportunity slip through my hands.

19

On the one hand, dinner tonight is exactly the same as it was last night. The food is still amazing, and Adam is still humble about his skills. The guys still joke around and talk shit.

On the other hand, everything is different.

Jax must have told them that he let the cat out of the bag. Suddenly, where there was a low-key unspoken sexual tension in the room, there's now a palpable sense of anticipation. Adam isn't as subtle when he runs his fingers over the back of my neck as he places a plate of meaty, cheesy, delicious lasagna in front of me. Cayden sits right next to me and holds my hand where anyone can see it, and Jax keeps giving me looks like he can't decide if I kicked his puppy or if he wants me to suck his dick. Honestly, it's probably a little bit of both. I feel kind of bad about the puppy thing, but the dick-sucking I could be down for.

And then there's Sergio and Deandre. The two guys in the house with whom I have yet to become intimately acquainted.

You wouldn't know it from the way they act, though. Sergio's penetrating gaze has a new intensity. He's yet to see me naked, but the way he's looking at me, it's like he has X-ray goggles on. Like he can appreciate every curve.

Meanwhile, Deandre sits at my side. He's kept an eye on my wine glass and maintained it at exactly the right level so I'm never wanting, but I'm also not in any danger of getting drunk. He hasn't made any overt moves, but his knee grazes mine every time one of us moves. Shivers float up and down my spine at the contact. And I want more.

So, so much more.

As the meal comes to a close, Deandre pushes his plate aside and sits back in his chair. "Time for our business meeting?"

A couple of groans greet the suggestion, but no one argues. I perk up. Yesterday, they told me a little bit about what they all do around here, but I'm eager to know more. I tell myself it's not because I'm curious as to how I would fit, if I decided to stay, but I'm not exactly sure who I'm kidding.

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"Adam," Deandre says. "Books look good?"

"Best month on record, so far." Adam goes on to rattle off a bunch of numbers, right off the top of his head. I'm amazed by how smart he is. It's hard to believe that this is the guy who was homeless and hopeless for so much of his youth. Here, he clearly shines.

Deandre nods at the end of his report, then turns to Jax. "Any problems at the mill?"

Jax shakes his head. "Everything's running smoothly. Got the shipment of cedar out this morning." He eyes Cayden, who nods. "So I guess we're all caught up."

"Good." Deandre sighs. "Guess that means the only asshole who's behind right now is me."

I frown. The guys make their protests out loud.

Deandre waves them off. "Nah, it's true. The chairs for that big order we got last month are taking forever."

"You need help?" Cayden asks.

"Might, if they all can spare you. A hand with the staining would help me get caught up."

Jax nods. "Not a problem."

I hear my own voice ring out, long before I've decided to speak. "Anything I can do?"

The place gets real, real quiet.

"I don't know," Deandre says, long and slow. "You got your own tough row to hoe, girlie."

That nickname of his should make me feel small, or insulted, even. But all I get off this big mountain of a man is protectiveness.

I shake my head. "It's okay. I got a lot done at my grandmother's house the past couple of days. I could use a break, honestly."

"I don't want to be putting you out..."

"You wouldn't be. And—I mean. I've been staying at your house. Eating your food. I'd like to contribute."

I'd like to contribute something more than just sex, that is.

My worries from the morning come floating back to me. If I really do start up a relationship with all of these men, that means turning my back on my life. I can't stay up here on Lonely Peak and hold on to my teaching job. I'm disillusioned with my classroom, but I fear losing my independence.

If I had a job here, a purpose...maybe that would help.

"Well, then." Deandre glances at Cayden, then back at me. "I heard you were an artist?"

"Sort of..."

Once upon a time, art was my passion. I got bogged down with my career, though, and Richard discouraged me pursuing my 'little hobby'. I let set my easels and canvases on the back burner, and then never found the inspiration to take them off.

"Sort of. I'd like to be again. I mean, if I had time."

"Got any experience with woodworking?"

"Not much, other than woodblock prints. So I guess I can do a little carving."

Cayden shakes his head. "She's downplaying things. You should see her stuff. It's amazing."

"I don't doubt it," Deandre says. "If you can carve, I can teach you anything else you'd need to know. You really want it, I can find some work for you."

"I want it."

Suddenly, just like that, I do. I really, really do.

Deandre's dark eyes sparkle wickedly, like we're talking about way more than just carpentry and art.

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I suck in a breath. Because maybe we are.

"Well, then," he says. "Come morning, you head on down to my workshop. And I'll see if I can show you a thing or two."

20

That night, I end up in Cayden's bed again, where he does wicked things to me with his tongue. I get to have him in my mouth for the first time, and then we make love soft and slow.

Come morning, he heads off to the old saw mill to get some things done there, with a promise to meet me in Deandre's workshop later. I have a delicious breakfast of pancakes and bacon and gentle kisses from Adam, and then I'm bundling up and heading out into the cold.

But when I push open the door to the garage that's been converted into a woodworking shop, it's gloriously warm. No—it's hot.

Or at least the view certainly is.

Deandre is bent over a lathe, a look of intense concentration on his face. He's wearing safety glasses and loose jeans and work boots and nothing else, and I nearly swallow my tongue.

Holy shit, the guy is ripped. His midnight black skin gleams beneath the overhead lights, a fine sheen of sweat making it shine. As he works the block of wood through

the machine, his muscles bulge. He has to bend to see what he's doing, he's so huge. I might have imagined that a guy of his size would be a bull in a china shop, but he's graceful, attending to delicate details.

He's beautiful, is what he is. Everything in me longs to touch.

I'm pretty sure that would be welcome, but I'm here to help, so I attempt to shake off my fog of lust.

With the sound of the machine, he doesn't seem to have noticed my presence. I cross the room, trying to put myself in his sightline if he should happen to look up.

When I'm about a half dozen feet away, I pause, raising my voice to be heard.

"Looking good." Nominally, I'm talking about the chair spindle he's creating, but as he lifts his head to meet my gaze and smirks, I'm pretty sure he knows that the wood isn't the only thing I'm appreciating.

"Glad you think so." He bends to his work again for a moment, getting to a stopping point, I guess, then turns off the machine and straightens to his full, impressive height. "Morning, girlie. Was hoping you'd show up."

"I told you I would."

"That you did."

We stand there in heated silence for a moment. Without the noise of the machine, I take in other details, like the crackle of a wood stove burning in the corner, filling the space with heat. A set of speakers is set beside him. The music was barely audible a moment before, but it's clear as can be now. I lick my lips. Apparently, Deandre likes to listen to sexy R&B while he's working.

Like, really, really sexy R&B.

As the singer croons about spreading his lady's thighs, my own tremble.

But somehow I manage to keep it together. "So you were going to put me to work?"

"If you're still up for it." A heat to his voice says he's thinking about working me over hard, maybe bending me over something and making me sweat.

I nod. "Absolutely."

"Good."

He swipes his hands on his jeans, then holds one out for me. I take it, and my skin tingles with the heat of his touch.

Apparently, at least for the moment, we're staying literal, though. Keeping hold of my hand, he shows me around his workshop. I'm familiar with most of the equipment, though I learn a few things in the quick primer he gives me on its use.

Over in one corner, a pile of completed but unfinished chairs has been stacked together. He gestures at them. "And right here we have the current bane of my existence."

"Oh?"

"Yup. Big venue out on the coast ordered fifty of these babies. It's good work for us, but their deadline was tight."

"When are they due?"

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"Couple of weeks. I'm going to be pulling long hours getting them done, but with a little help..."

"What can I do?"

"How do you feel about sanding?"

"Show me what you need."

He does. Before I know it, I'm installed in a little station of my own. He takes my hands and places them on the wood, running my fingers over rough spots and explaining what to do. I somehow manage to pay attention, even if the warmth of his touch and his attention continue to build inside me.

"Got it?" he asks.

"I think so."

He returns to his work, then, and I set to mine. It's easy enough, smoothing out the splinters and getting everything ready to be stained. The dirty music continues to pour out of thespeakers. The suggestiveness of the lyrics doesn't exactly help my concentration, but after a while, the low, steady thrum of arousal fades into the background. I split my attention between the project in front of me and the ripples of Deandre's gleaming muscles and the achy, tender spot between my legs.

For a while, we work side by side. We each seem to make good progress. The pieces I'm helping finish for him are exquisite; Cayden wasn't lying when he said Deandre

was an artist. I appreciate the curves and twists of the wood, the shapes he created with his own two hands, and they're just like him. Sturdy and strong, delicate and graceful—all at the same time.

I'm nearing the end of the stack he gave me when the lathe shuts off. I don't think anything of it until he says, "Hey, girlie."

"Yeah?"

"You said you done some carving before?"

"Uh-huh."

"Want to learn how to do some more?"

"Sure."

I set aside what I was working on and move to join him on the other side of the room. He has a few chair backs set aside. A couple of them are already finished, intricate, smooth scroll work etched into each one. It's nothing at all like the choppy woodcut blocks I used to make in my printmaking days. A prickle of doubt makes me frown.

"I don't know if I can do anything as fancy as all that."

"Bet you can. C'mere. I'll show you how."

He plants his big body in an old, repurposed work chair. Beside him are laid out a variety of tools, some of which I recognize. I stand there, expecting a demonstration, but then he reaches for me.

"Come on. Can't see from that far away."

Oh. Jeez, he's strong. He pulls me into my lap, and my brain goes fuzzy with static for a second. I feel tiny held in his embracelike this. His bare skin pours off heat, and the rise and fall of his muscular chest is a force against my spine. His breath washes across my ear, and I shudder.

"Here." He pulls at my thighs, getting me to straddle his lap, and it's basically reverse cowgirl, except with all of my clothes and half of his still on. The position makes me more stable, right until he hauls me back against him.

I can't help the moan that falls out of me. He's not even completely hard, but the ridge of his cock presses into my ass when we're like this. He's enormous, and God, I want it.

"Deandre..."

"Shh. Focus."

And then, Lord help us all, he picks up a piece of wood and a tool.

What follows is the sexiest, most torturous woodworking lesson in the history of mankind. There's something so soothing about his presence, though. As he instructs me on the kind of carving he does, my mind goes glass smooth. I'm a throbbing mass of need and want, but I'm also an attuned student, absorbing his tutelage, ready to do as he asks of me.

Submissive, honestly. Without so much as a whip or a chain or a rough word in sight.

Under his direction, I pick up a piece of my own. He keeps his hands on mine, and together, we create something from a hunk of bare wood, and satisfaction boils in my breast. It's been so long since I've made something with my hands, and it feels good. Almost as good as the heat of his body encompassing mine, as the warmth of his

praise washing over me, as the increasingly huge bulge of his cock beneath me.

"Got it, girlie?"

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I nod.

He hands me another piece of wood. A quiet stillness falls over me. I focus intently on the task at hand. He murmurs quite encouragement, and I go to work.

The low thrum of arousal becomes part of the labor of creation, and hell, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to so much as smell wood shavings without getting instantly, achingly wet ever again.

It only gets worse now that he's not holding my hands. His broad palms settle first on my thighs. They're grounding as they run up and down my legs. Then they start to creep higher, curling closer to my center. Before long, he's brushing the crease where my thighs meet my cunt through my jeans with every pass, and I pulse. My vision goes hazy, but that focus he demanded of me remains.

"Good, baby girl. That's real, real good."

Oh, God, that simple praise shoots to my pussy. My clit throbs, and my head spins.

Then he starts shifting higher with his touch. He caresses my sides, palms my hips. His fingertips trace just beneath my breasts, and my breathing stutters.

He still doesn't cross any lines, though—not while I'm working. He doesn't touch any of the places I desperately want him to, and this is foreplay. This is the hottest fucking thing I've ever done.

Finally, I look up, and the design is finished. I breathe in a lungful of fresh air. "Oh."

I did it.

But I'm still waiting for approval. A moment passes and then another, and then Deandre takes the carving from my hands. His fingers brush mine, and it's crushingly erotic.

He turns the piece of wood over a couple of times, and I feel like I'm hanging in mid air.

Until finally he sets it down.

"It's perfect. Absolutely perfect, little girl. Knew you could do it."

"I didn't."

"I know. That's why I had to teach you how. You believe me now?"

I nod, fervent. I believe everything he says. Every word.

"Good. So good, baby girl."

His praise lights me up like I'm aglow.

And then his hands are on me again. He just dives right in, planting them on my hips, pulling me back against him.

His voice is gruff when he asks, "Now. You ready for me to show you something else?"

Idon't think I've ever been so ready to get fucked in my life. The first moment I saw Deandre, I wanted him. The past few hours of working side by side, watching him create while also using my own two hands to make something, has taken that idle desire and shaped it into something sharp. Some people, like Adam, you get to know by talking to them. Some like Cayden you spend a lifetime knowing, and some like Jax you never understand at all. But sitting here with Deandre has given me a better glimpse into who he is in his heart than a hundred conversations or a decade of occupying the same small town.

Iknowhim. I want him.

I need his hands on me, now.

"Fuck, yes," I murmur, and then I'm in motion.

He throws me around like a rag doll, lifting me off his lap and turning me. When I land astride his huge, hard thighs again, I'm facing him. He tears off his safety glasses and flares his nostrils. I have about three seconds to appreciate the naked desire in his eyes before he's hauling me in.

He kisses the way he works, slow and steady and undeniable. I let his tongue past my lips, and he takes me apart with it. His big hands travel my body, sliding from my knees to my hips.

He pulls me flush against him, and I groan into his mouth. Holy shit, he's big, and I can't wait to get him inside me.

"Please," I mumble, "Please."

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"Shh, I got you, baby girl. You just let Daddy take care of everything."

Oh, God. Oh, God.

No one's ever asked me to call them that—I didn't really know it was a thing people did outside of cheesy pornos, but right here, in this man's lap, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

"Daddy..."

His groan rumbles through my body, making my nipples light up and my pussy throb. He grinds into me, and I answer him with a twist of my own hips. It feels so good, writhing against his monster cock, and we're both still clothed, but I feel close already.

"Please, please," I chant, rubbing myself against him harder. "Need—Daddy—"

His grip goes to iron on my hips. He tears his lips away. "What did I say, little girl?"

What? "I—"

"You gonna be a good girl? Let Daddy take care of you? Or is Daddy gonna have to take you over his knee?"

Flames erupt inside me. I can't possibly want that, but a part of me does.

"Would you?" I whisper.

"If you want to be a little brat, I just might."

I flex my hips against his again, testing.

He doesn't let me down.

His eyes flash dark. My head spins as he lifts me. The next thing I know, I'm laid out across his lap, my chest draped over his thighs and my ass in the air. I shiver with an impossible need, all the breath shoved out of me, and then his hand tucks into the waistband of my leggings. He tears them and my panties down, exposing my rear to the air. I moan, shaking my head, and my eyes leak.

"Daddy—"

"This is for your own good, baby girl."

The moment drags on and on. Anticipation builds inside me, a wave ready to crash.

The crack of his broad palm hitting tender flesh rings out in the air, shocking in its sharpness. The sting radiates through my ass a half second later, followed by heat that threatens to carry me away.

He spans me again, once, twice, and oh fuck. Orgasm hovers right over me, and he hasn't even touched my needy pussy yet.

"You gonna be a good girl for Daddy now?"

"Yes, yes, I swear—" I'm babbling, crying, and what's happening to me?

Oh, then sweet relief floods through me. He cups the hot cheeks of my ass and rubs, then slides his big fingers lower. I groan, dropping my head as he connects with the

lips of my pussy. He slips his fingertips through my slit, and I'm so incredibly wet.

"There you go, baby," he says. "Daddy's got you. Daddy's gonna make you feel real good, sweetheart."

"Daddy, Daddy—"

He slips two fingers inside, stretching me, and then his thumb connects with my clit, and I'm gone.

Orgasm sweeps me away to another plane. Nonsense words fall out of my mouth as I shriek and sob. He gentles me through it, working my pussy while stroking my back with his other hand. As I start to come down, he slides his palm higher, cupping my neck, brushing my hair back from my tear-streaked face.

Holy hell. That was so intense. I can hardly catch my breath, but I feel more relaxed and at peace than I have in so long. Maybe years.

"You gonna thank your Daddy for making your little pussy feel so good?"

"Thank you." My voice comes out cracked and sore. I hardly recognize it. "Thank you."

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"You are so welcome, baby girl."

He still hasn't withdrawn his fingers from my pussy. A new spark of warmth lights inside me, and it's too soon, but try telling my body that.

He notices, groaning. "Hungry pussy. Want more?"

I nod wildly. "Yeah. Yeah, please..."

His hand on my face holds me in place. "Okay. You just let me drive now. Gotta open you up. You're so tight, girlie..."

That seems impossible considering how much cock I've taken recently, but I'm not going to argue. I luxuriate into his touch, eating up his gentle praise as he keeps working me. Another finger slides in, and the stretch is intense. It only gets more so with the fourth.

A whine escapes me, but he pets my back soothingly.

"Shh, just take it, baby girl. I'm gonna fuck you real soon. That's what you want, right? Want Daddy's big cock plowing you open?"

That soundssooogood. "Yes, yes, please..."

"One more, first. Think you can come again for me?"

How could I not? I nod and close my eyes, giving it up. It feels so good to let him

take control of my body. I concentrate on the pure pleasure he's wringing from me. He sets up a steady rhythm on my clit again, and before I know it, I'm right there...

"Do it, baby. Come, come for Daddy—"

I cry out again as another, softer orgasm rolls through me. He drives his fingers in deep, and I feel so full.

But not nearly so full as I'm going to be.

As the last aftershocks fade, he finally stills his hand. He pulls it free with a filthy, wet sound that makes my pussy clench again. I sound used, well-fucked and open, and I haven't even seen his cock yet.

He pats my ass and helps me to sit up.

"Strip," he orders.

I stand on shaky legs. His stare fixes on me. I feel it like a physical touch, and normally this sort of command would make me self-conscious and unsure, but if he wants it, then I want it, too.

I bend as seductively as I can and push my leggings the rest of the way down. My boots and socks go with them. I tease the hem of my top for a moment, gazing into his lust-drunk eyes. He raises a brow expectantly, and a hot flush of arousal surges through my body.

Maintaining eye contact, I nudge the fabric higher. Deandre licks his lips when my pussy is revealed. He's already felt how wet I am, but can he see it? Is the dampness all down the inside of my thighs visible even from here?

My vision is cut off when I peel the shirt up and over my head. I stand there in nothing but a bra for a moment, then reach to unclasp it and discard that, too. My breasts bounce free, heavy and full with need.

"Beautiful, baby," he murmurs. "Now come here."

He pats his lap. I climb up again, and it's all the more erotic, now that I'm naked and he's still half dressed.

He urges me forward, and I go easily. Our lips connect while I grind my bare pussy over the bulge in his jeans. Then he takes my wrists in his huge hands and hooks my fingers in his belt.

"Undress me."

Happily.

But not before taking advantage, at least a little bit.

God, his body is a feast. I run my hands over the bare skin of his chest for a moment. His chiseled muscles are a delight to the touch, his ebony skin smooth and hot. When I touch his nipples, he huffs a sigh into my mouth, and I grip his shoulders for a moment before returning to my task.

His belt gives easily beneath my hands. I undo the buttons on his fly, then reach inside. He's wearing silky boxer briefs. They're wet right over the head of his cock, which strains the fabric with its crazy length and girth. Jesus, is that thing really supposed to fit inside me? I'm wet at the thought of finding out, but I won't deny a frisson of anxiety.

I dip my hand beneath the fabric and give that hot, silky length a nice stroke. He

grunts, bucking into it.

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"Your hands feel so good on me," he says against my mouth. He lets me continue for a moment, pleasuring him like that, then puts his hand on my wrist, stopping me. "Too good. You still want your daddy inside you?"

"More than anything."

"Up, then."

He helps me rise onto my knees. Together, we push his jeans and underwear down.

His cock bobs free, and my breath halts in my throat. Forget monstrous—that piece of man meat is a freaking beast. It's beautiful, too, for all that its size is intimidating. The skin is a dark, dark brown all down the shaft, then a little pinker at the tip. The base is nestled in a neat thatch of black hair and big, full balls.

"Like what you see?"

I nod, dumb.

"Come here, then, baby girl." He hauls me in and devours my mouth. Gently but firmly, he grabs me by the hip and pushes me down. "Come sit on daddy's cock and make it feel so, so good."

I do as he bids, fuzzy in the head with how bad I want it. I don't have to sink far before the fat head of his is nudging up against my opening. Thank God I'm so slick; thank God he prepped me so well. I push, and he holds himself up for me to impale myself on. For a moment, I don't know if I'm even going to be able to get him in. He

feels wide as a baseball bat, and I whine.

"Go on, baby, take it. Take that big cock..."

A high, impossible sound tears itself from my throat as I shove down and he finally drives in. I throw my head back. Even the head feels enormous, and he only keeps going.

He starts moving me on his cock, bouncing me in little motions that slowly bring me lower and lower. Every inch he slides inside feels like new parts of my body opening.

With his other hand, he caresses the front of my body, pressing his palm to my heart before sliding lower. He cups my breast and my throat, then the dip in my waist. All along the way, he gives me little encouragements, telling me how I'm his sweet baby girl, how he wants me, how good I feel and how well I'm taking his huge, thick dick.

Finally, finally, my hips meet his, and I nearly black out with the pleasure. Jesus, I've never felt so full—sotaken.

He growls, rubbing his mouth along my jawline and holding me close. "Told you, baby, told you you could do it. God, your pussy feels so good. Sweet, wet little pussy, so nice and tight around daddy's cock. You like it? You like being filled up with this big cock?"

"Yes, yes, yes, Daddy, yes, fuck me, fuck me, please—"

And I'm practically crying again, sobbing, my eyes wet with how he transports me away. I'm nothing but a mass of sensation now, only a wet hole being fucked by my daddy, and it feels so insanely good.

"That's right, I got you. Gonna fuck you so right."

And he's true to his word. Slowly he draws me up, pulling his hips back at the same time. He fucks up into me and shoves me down at the same time, and I'm riding him, but he's in control. I feel like a toy. I feel used.

I feel so amazing I could scream.

Maybe I do. I don't know. All I'm sure of is that within seconds, I'm on the cusp.

"Daddy—gonna—"

"Yeah, come on daddy's cock."

I explode. Everything else fades away, my body reduced to the thundering pulse of how he shatters me. For minutes or hours or maybe days, I come—it feels like it's endless.

When I open my eyes, he's still inside me, but we're moving. He picks me up as if it takes no effort at all. I fall, shrieking, but I don't have a worry in me. My back collides with a work bench, and oh, yeah. I lie back on the rough wood, shavings getting in my hair, but I don't care.

His eyes are on fire as he bends over me. With me on my back and him standing between my open thighs, he really has the leverage to pound into me.

And I thought he was huge before, but when he shoves in deep and really starts thrusting, it goes to a whole new level.

I come again, just like that, and he groans. Planting a hand beside my head, he keeps going, fucking me through my orgasm. Filthy words spill out of his mouth, but I can hardly hear them.

Until he's there. His eyes slam shut, and he hits about eighty miles an hour with his hips.

"Here it comes, baby girl. Gonna fill you up, fill you up with daddy's come, tell me you want it—"

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"Gimme," I beg. "Please, please, need it. Need your cock, need your come—"

His mouth drops open, and oh Jesus.

He pulses inside me so powerfully it triggers another sharp climax. His hot load floods me, and I love it. I love being his wet hole, his baby girl, his come dump. I dig my nails into his skin and tighten my legs around him, lost in ecstasy.

Until the sound of a closing door wakes me.

I snap my eyes open. Deandre doesn't seem fazed. He just keeps on enjoying his orgasm, slowly moving his hips in small, gentle thrusts. His come leaks out around his cock, dripping down the crack of my ass.

And there I am. Spread open and speared and full of another man's release while he's still coming inside me.

From across the room, I meet Cayden's eyes.

And they're not jealous.

They're not jealous at all.

22

"I still don't understand how none of this, like, bothers you."

I'm lying on my back in Cayden's bed, staring up at the ceiling. His head rests pillowed on my thigh. I idly run my fingers through his soft, sandy hair, occasionally dipping to scratch them through his beard. It's calming. Soothing.

But my head is still kind of a mess.

Turning his head to look at me, he shrugs. "Why should it?"

"I don't know. Male pride? Caveman instincts? I've just never heard of this kind of thing working out before."

If anything, society feeds us all the idea that one man and one woman is the only way to go. Obviously, that's not entirely true. I know a decent number of happy gay and lesbian couples, too—but that's the key word. Couples.

Groups? Much less groups of guys, all sharing one girl?

I remain skeptical to say the least.

I can't deny the evidence, though. Cayden literally walked in on me getting fucked by another guy, and he just smiled and waited patiently for us to finish. Deandre eventually pulled out, then turned around to wave at Cayden, his dick still out, my legsspread and my used pussy on display, and everybody was fine with it. I got cleaned up and dressed, and we all went back to work without so much as having a conversation about it.

At dinner, Adam kissed me, and Sergio gave me a little backrub while we were watching TV, and now I'm here, in Cayden's room, naked and recovering from another round of fantastic sex, and everything seems...normal. Too normal?

"Look," he says, shifting his head off my lap. He lies on his side, braced on one

elbow and regards me. "I know it's unconventional, but we all talked it over. We're fine with it."

"When exactly did this talk happen?"

"Originally? In Afghanistan. I mean, we were just shooting the shit, you know? But then when these guys agreed to move up here and help me get the business going again, we made a pact. We'd never let anything come between us." He chuckles, smiling crookedly. "Well, except maybe literally..."

I swat at him, but I don't really mean it. "Focus."

He strokes a hand up my thigh, gaze dark. "Believe me. I am very, very much focusing."

A shiver hums through me, but I brush the low thrum of arousal aside. "Focus on something other than sex."

He pouts. "Well, that's no fun."

"Try. For me."

His gaze softens. "For you? Anything."

A different kind of heat warms me, less sexual and more emotional. This guy is just so sweet sometimes.

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But I have to think this through. We didn't really have much of a chance to talk about stuff last night, other than for him to confirm that Jax hadn't been full of shit. I have questions.

Some of them aren't easy ones, though. "So this has always been your plan, then? Come home and find some girl who's willing to sleep with all of you?"

A tight knot of anxiety forms in my lungs. I can't entirely explain it, except I don't want that to be what this is about.

Cayden reaches out. He takes my hand and stares deep into my eyes. "We were waiting for you. We didn't know it yet, but we were."

He sounds so sincere, is the thing. But there's this unhappy brain cell in the back of my mind that says it could have been anyone. They all seem to like me well enough, but I'm disposable.

For a moment, Richard's frowning face swims before my vision. For him, I really could have been anyone.

And here, I'd imagined he could be the one.

"Okay," I finally say. But it's less because I believe Cayden's promise that I'm special and more because I'm paralyzed by my own conviction that I'm not.

He senses at least a little of my doubt. "I don't expect you to accept this all at once. None of us do. But soon enough, you'll see. You fit here."

I nod again. He leans forward and presses a soft kiss to my lips. That helps—it really does.

It just isn't quite enough.

We settle in for the night soon after. Maybe it's a little weird that I've slept with four of the five men in this house, but I always end up here. Cayden keeps extending the invitation, though, and I keep accepting. He feels safe. Comfortable.

Even his presence can't quiet my mind tonight, though.

Exhausted as I am, physically and emotionally, I can't seem to settle. Long after Cayden has slipped off to sleep, I lie there, my mind going a hundred miles an hour.

Finally, I give up. I manage to sneak out from under Cayden's arm and dress in the dark. Grabbing the book I've been reading, I pad to the door and out into the hall.

It's late, but there are still signs of life in the house. While most of the closed bedroom doors I pass are dark, the muted sounds of some sort of action flick drift through the air. A mindless movie holds a certain appeal, but in the end, I'm craving solitude more.

Funny, how I left my grandmother's house in part because I was afraid to stay there alone. But after a few days of almost constantly being surrounded by people, I'm ready for a little alone time.

Avoiding the big den where the TV lives, I head for the living room.

I pause right at the threshold, though. Turns out, I don't have this space to myself, either.

And its occupant is a decorated ex-military sniper.

At the tiniest, barely audible squeak of a floorboard beneath my feet. Sergio lifts his head. His dark gaze settles on me. Wordlessly, he lifts his brows.

His calm quiet flusters me. I trip over my words. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not."

His voice washes over me, honey warm.

"I just. Couldn't sleep. So." I hold up my book helplessly.

To my surprise, he holds up one of his own. It's a big, thick one, too—non-fiction from the look of it. My cozy mystery suddenly feels about as thin as the paper it's printed on. My reading's been about fun and comfort, lately, though. I'm just glad I didn't bring down one of my steamy romance novels.

He points to the low fire crackling away in the hearth and the blanket draped over the side of the couch. "Plenty of room, if you want."

It's an awfully tempting invitation. I thought I was craving solitude, but maybe it was just quiet. Sharing silence and a nice warm reading nook doesn't sound half bad. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all." When I waver, he flashes a crooked, self-effacing smile at me. "Promise I won't talk too much."

I chuckle at that. Yeah, too much chatter is definitely not what I'm worried about when it comes to hanging out with Sergio.

"Thanks."

I pick my way over. Hesitating, I glance between the recliner in the corner and the other end of the couch where Sergio is parked. As if he can sense my dilemma, he scoots over a little, leaving a nice open spot. He grabs the blanket off the back of the couch and unfolds it, holding it out.

Well, that's definitely too much to resist. I smile gratefully and settle in opposite him. An entire couch cushion separates us. Somehow, it's both too much space and not enough.

"C'mere." He motions for me to come closer. I look at him, confused, until he reaches into my space and pats my knees, then makes another gesture, beckoning me to swing around.

Oh. I put my back to the arm of the sofa and stretch my legs out in his direction. Firmly, he takes my feet and places them on his lap. He spreads the blanket out over my lower half, and just like that, I'm cocooned in warmth.

"Comfy?"

"Yeah. Perfect."

He smiles, squeezing my ankle, then turns his attention back to his book.

Something antsy and anxious inside me smooths over. I breathe out a deep exhalation, and the tension in my shoulders bleeds away. I open my novel and relax

for real for the first time in days—maybe months.

Sergio's been a bit of a mystery since I met him, but as we settle into an easy, companionable silence, it's easy to forget that we're basically strangers. He rubs my ankles and shins through the blanket, and his thighs are warm beneath my feet. But other than that casual, intimate contact, we're just two people reading together.

And it's...nice.

For all that I thought Richard could be 'the one', we never had easy, quiet moments like this. He always wanted to be doing something, be it having sex or going out places I could barely afford or watching high definition movies on his state of the art entertainment center.

This is better. Much, much more my speed.

Thankfully, the book I brought is fairly fluffy, because it only gets about half of my attention. Sergio's face in the flickering firelight is even more beautiful than I realized. He keeps his gaze on the slowly turning pages in front of him, leaving me free to study him in more detail.

His dark, silky hair shines in the warm glow. He has those masculine brows and deep eyes, a fine, aquiline nose, and full, sultry lips. In profile the way he is, I can't see the scarring that I know graces half of his cheek on the other side. Without it, he looks younger. More at peace.

The dark scruff of his stubble just makes his deep tan skin look all the more smooth and touchable, and part of me wants to do just that—touch.

But do I really need to? I've been passed around between the men of this house enough in the past few days. I've had so much sex, I'm sore. I never really imagined

that a person could have too much of such an incredibly good thing, but I'm appreciating the break, honestly.

Am I leaving him out, though? I said at the beginning of this that I didn't want to cause any conflict among this band of brothers, only—what if I am, and I just don't know it yet?

Finally, I can't hold it in any more. "Aren't you going to try to fuck me or something?"

The only sign that he's so much as heard is a subtle flick upward of his brows. I instantly feel silly. Jeez, what a thing to blurt out there. But that's what I did. And there's no taking it back now.

Carefully, he places a bookmark between the pages of his book, then sets it aside. He turns to me, and the full power of his stare pins me in place.

"Do you want me to fuck you?"

Well, when he puts it like that... I lick my lips. For a second, I indulge the fantasy. I imagine pulling him on top of me, wrapping ourselves up in these blankets and stripping down. Exploring every inch of his rich, deep skin with my hands and mouth until he took me slowly, powerfully in front of the crackling fire.

My pussy throbs.

But not one hundred percent in the good way. I swallow hard.

"Like, existentially, or right this second?"

A hint of a smile tugs at the corner of his lips. "Whichever."

"In theory, hell yes." And maybe that's too much to admit, but what's the point in pretending? I've already been invited to a long-term orgy with these people. There can't be much harm in admitting that I think this last member of the team is incredibly sexy. "Right this second? Not particularly." I wince. "Sorry."

He shrugs. "Then, no. Right this second, I'm not going to try to fuck you."

"But some other time?" A hint of insecurity makes my voice waver, because I hadn't fully considered that part of the equation, had I? Jax and Cayden had both assured me that everyone was into it, and Sergio himself has given me enough heated stares to make me assume he'd want to do the deed with me at some point. But he's kept his distance so far. Maybe that's a sign.

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Before I can get myself too worked up with wondering, he smirks, that same heat burning in his gaze. "Hell, yeah, chica."

I inhale, lightness entering my chest, warmth tickling my skin.

"Okay. Cool."

I want to cringe again, because I sound like an idiot, telling this strong, scarred man that it'd be cool if he wanted to fuck me some time.

Good Lord.

He squeezes my ankle reassuringly. "Figured if you wanted me to touch you, you would let me know. Until then, I can be patient."

"Ah."

"But don't you doubt for a second that I want my hands on your body."

Nodding, I clench down inside.

"Glad we had this little talk." He smirks and reopens his book.

I move to do the same. But before I can, the sound of the television in the other room clicks off. I snap my neck around to find Jax of all people coming down the hallway.

And just like that, the easy quiet intimacy of my late night reading with Sergio fades

away.

Great. Just great.

23

From across the length of the hallway, Jax's gaze connects with mine. For a second, he falters. Crap, we must be thinking the exact same thing. I just don't want to deal with this right now. He hides it quickly enough, though, his face twisting into his usual sneer—which apparently is just his face, or so he's told me.

My stomach dips.

If this whole dating five guys scenario is a jigsaw, then Sergio was one of several missing pieces from the puzzle. One concern that had been keeping me up tonight.

That piece has been more or less been slotted into place.

But that still leaves a whole section of the board in disarray, and that crumbled corner has Jax Bane's name spray painted in red all over it.

I still don't know what to think about him. He treated me like dirt in middle school, and yes, that was a long time ago, but the memories still plague me. He claims now that he was only mean because he was trying to keep his distance. That he liked me even then and likes me more now. His previous behavior was only out of loyalty to Cayden, and I can understand that. I'd do a lot of things to save Cayden pain, too.

Just because I can understand doesn't mean I can forgive, though.

It definitely doesn't take me from the weird, awkward stalemate we're currently dealing with to some sort of functional relationship where he and I live in the same

house and I occasionally sleep with all his friends.

And with him.

God. Even now, when he's looking at me with so much conflict on his face, the chemistry between us practically screams in my bones. He pushes so many of my buttons. Finally giving in and letting him fuck me into a wall opened a dam, and I don't see it swinging closed anytime soon.

So, basically, it's all a mess. He makes me angry and hurt and horny all at the same time. How am I supposed to deal with that?

Not well, is my current answer.

As he approaches, I look away, unable to stare into those clear gray eyes. They're challenging and pleading and accusing, and it's just too much.

In my periphery, I observe his reaction to my refusal to engage. He clenches his jaw and diverts his own gaze straight forward until he looks like a man headed to the gallows, and I fucking hate that I put that expression on his face. But I still don't think it's my fault.

He passes by without a word, but the hurt rolls off of him in waves. My own heart clenches in sympathy. Guilt churns in my gut. His heavy footfalls continue around the corner.

The slamming of a door down the hall makes me jump.

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And it's not that I'd forgotten I was sitting there with Sergio, but the gentle touch of his thumb on my ankle bone still takes me by surprise somehow.

His voice shocks me even more. "He's really not as much of an asshole as he pretends to be, you know."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"Jax. He's a good guy, under all the bullshit."

"So he keeps trying to tell me." Bitterness colors my tone.

It's not just Jax, either. Cayden's been assuring me since we were teenagers that Jax really isn't so bad, once you get to know him. I've always wondered how the two of them could be such good friends. It only makes sense that there's more to Jax than I ever realized. I just don't know how to accept it, is all.

"Look, I know you two have history..."

I laugh. "That's an understatement. He was such a bully. You don't even know."

"I don't," he concedes. "I just know he pulled me out of a building that was on fire." He turns, showing the scarred side of his face more clearly. "I was lucky to get out with just these—if he hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been so lucky."

I swallow hard. "Oh."

"He didn't have to do it, either. Nearly got killed himself."

Well, now I feel like the asshole.

It's easy to remember that Sergio is a war hero, but all these guys are ex-military. They've all done things and seen things. They've sacrificed huge parts of their lives.

Sergio leans in closer. "And just between you and me?"

"Yeah?" This isn't a sexy move, but with our heads bent so close together, the warm scent of him washes over me. A trill of excitement hums up my spine.

"Cayden wasn't the only one looking in on your grandmother."

I startle, rearing back. I glance down the hallway in the direction Jax disappeared in a huff. "He—?"

But he didn't even know my grandma. He sure wouldn't have felt any obligation to her—not the way I can easily accept that Cayden would have.

"You should ask him about it. But yeah. All the time."

With that, Sergio gives my ankle another squeeze. Then he bends his head back to his reading.

Conversation closed, apparently.

I don't mind his sudden silence. The fact that he spoke up at all, given how reserved he is, speaks volumes. I want to know more, but his advice isn't lost on me.

If I want to get to the bottom of who Jax really is—and who he is to me—I need to

talk to him.

And I need to do it soon, before this whole new life opening up in front of me slips away.

24

Except I don't talk to Jax. Not that night and not the next day or the next. I'm pretty sure he's avoiding me, but between the work I'm doing at my grandmother's house and the hours I'm putting in, helping Deandre finish up that order of his, I'm not around that much to avoid anyway.

I've settled into a groove, and I'm reluctant to upset it. A few days ago, Deandre and I had another mind-blowing session in his workshop that carried over into his bed. I slept in his arms, kissing my new daddy softly before drifting off—only to wake and let Adam take me on the countertop while a breakfast casserole finished baking in the oven. Sergio and I have spent a couple more late nights reading in quietly charged companionship, and Cayden's been warm and loving through it all, looking honestly pleased to see me bouncing between his best friends.

Except one.

Inevitably, the stalemate had to end, though.

After another afternoon spent cleaning out my grandmother's attic, I return to the guys' house to find the furniture in the living room being completely rearranged.

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"Uh..." I give them a funny look as I unwind my scarf from my neck and hang it up with my jacket. "You guys suddenly into feng shui?"

Jax scowls as he drags in another chair from the dining room to set beside a big table I don't recognize. "It's poker night."

"Oh. I didn't realize."

"Figured someone would tell you," he says, and yeah, that's a little passive aggressive, but Cayden doesn't take it that way.

He abandons the chips he was sorting to come over and plant a kiss on my lips. "Sorry. Meant to mention it last, but I got a little—ahem—distracted."

He shoots me a smiling leer and grabs my ass, and yeah, last night was pretty distracting. I can't fault him. "It's okay."

Adam wanders in, then, absorbed in his phone.

"Hey." Jax puts his foot out as if to trip him, and I grit my jaw.

Apparently that's just a running gag with these guys, though. Adam doesn't seem to be paying any attention, but he spots it coming a mile away. He shoots an arm out to the side, shoving Jax in the chest and neatly sidestepping his foot, grinning slyly. "Nice try, asshole."

"Yeah, whatever."

Jax shakes it off, but it's not as easy for me to ignore. Not when that was the kind of shit he used to pull with me in the hallways of our middle school. Maybe it was meant in fun back then, too, but if it was, he didn't let me in on the joke, and my bitterness about that still lingers in my throat.

Adam is still looking at his phone as he brushes a kiss across my cheek. I put my hand on his waist, but he keeps moving. I frown, but Cayden waves it off.

"Someone's wrong on twitter. This could take a while."

"Twitter? I thought you guys were hermits."

"In real life, yeah, mostly, but Adam's a tech guy. Told you he does the books and our website."

"And occasionally gets into fights on Twitter."

"Exactly."

"Just don't try to poke any Nazis today, okay?" Jax says. "You know the trolls give you indigestion."

Adam shakes his head. "I make no promises."

"Great."

The edges of my lips curl up. I kind of love the idea of him getting into it with bigots online. So long as it doesn't distract him too much...

"Is someone else making dinner, then? Should I?"

"Taken care of," Adam says absently.

Sure enough, about a minute later, Deandre and Sergio bust in the door. Deandre's got a stack of pizza boxes that goes halfway up his chest, while Sergio is hauling a case of beer in each hand.

"Speak of the devil," Cayden says.

Deandre skirts around the game table the guys are setting up to put the pizzas down on the coffee table. "Dig in."

"Don't mind if I do," Jax says.

Adam magics some paper plates out of nowhere. Jax takes them and starts serving up. To my surprise, he approaches me, plate in hand. On it sit two slices of Hawaiian—extra pineapple.

My brows furrow. "That's my favorite."

"Duh. Why do you think we ordered it?"

"I..."

He raises his brows and tilts his head to the side, then shoots me finger guns as he walks away backward.

God, that guy has me so twisted up inside.

That doesn't stop me from enjoying my pizza, though. I take big bites of gooey cheese and delicious pineapple, sipping on one of the fancy beers they brought home. Around me, everyone else does likewise. As they do, they shoot the shit about their day, and I chime in, too, falling into the conversation as if I've been a part of this group for years—not weeks.

And it's almost uncomfortable to be so...well, comfortable. Richard was the kind of guy who eclipsed your life while you were dating. I didn't realize it at the time, but as soon as we broke up, it became painfully clear that all of our friends were actually his friends. I had good people I worked with—people who had my back. But no one that I would just hang out with like this.

By the time all the boxes start to get cleared away, my belly is pleasantly full, and my head is just the right kind of floaty—tipsy without edging over into drunk. It feels nice. I tip my beer back again, finishing it off, then accept a refill when Deandre places one in my hand.

"So, you guys planning on sitting around gabbing all night?" Jax asks, showily playing with a stack of chips. "Or are you ready to play cards?"

That second option is met with enthusiasm. Chips start getting doled out. Adam seats himself at the table and starts shuffling, making bridges that would make a Vegas dealer proud. I start to reach for a pile of chips, only to have Jax stop me.

"Sorry, toots. You gotta have a buy in."

"Excuse me?"

Everyone else just took their chips. What the hell?

"I have money." Not a ton—I am a teacher, after all. But some.

"Your money's no good here." Jax nods at Adam. "He pays in technical support and cookies." Sergio. "Gun cleaning and knife sharpening." Deandre. "Extra hours at the mill, working like a stiff like the rest of us instead of the usual artist bullshit."

Deandra pipes in, "That artist bullshit pays your bills, asshole."

Jax ignores him. "Cayden lets us all live here for free, so he gets a pass."

"And what about you?"

"Don't you worry about me. The question is what you bring to the table."

I glance around. Shit.

There's only one thing I can think of right off the top of my head.

And it's one thing to offer it to all these guys for free.

It's another all together to put it out there like this.

To treat my body like it's something to be lost...

Or won.

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I have no idea how long I stand there, mouth opening and closing like I'm some kind of land-based fish. It must be too long, though, because eventually Jax's wicked smirk fades.

"Hey. I mean—"

Cayden interrupts. "Haley's a wicked artist. She could do portraits."

"I'm not that good," I promise, finally finding my words again.

"Sure," Jax said, even though it's clear that art was not what he meant.

"Kisses," I blurt out. Because that's cute, right? I'm not offering sex for a poker match, but kisses seem both sexy and...safe.

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The sound of a bunch of uncomfortable swallowing and shuffling greets me.

"What?" I ask. "Any of you have somebody else who's been offering you those?"

Jax rolls his eyes, "Well, actually..."

"No one we want to accept them from, that's sure," Deandre says. "Sounds like a fair form of currency to me."

"Well?" I ask.

Jax holds up his hands. "If the D-man says it's okay, then it's okay by me."

"Great." I smile tightly, then lean forward and pluck a chip from his hands, then spin it between my fingers.

I have no problem kissing any of these guys. Not even Jax, though there'd probably be more teeth involved.

But that isn't the point. I know something they don't.

Namely, that Richard was a card shark, and he left me with some emotional scars. But he also left me with a pretty good knack for playing the odds.

And I really like mine, right now.

A few minutes later, I'm seated at the table with my stack of chips. Adam is by my

side, still messing around with the cards.

I hold out my hand. "Want me to deal?"

"Okaaay..."

There are some muted chuckles, but I take the deck and give it a couple of quick, efficient shuffles, then offer it to Cayden to cut. He does so, a smile tugging at his lips like he's got an idea about what these boys have just gotten themselves into.

"You guys like to pretend you're from Texas?" I ask.

Deandre chuckles, catching on, too. "Sure do."

I put on my best fake accent and straighten an imaginary hat. "All righty then."

I don't bother with fancy tricks. I just flick the cards out, one after another, nearly too fast to see. Once they each have two, I turn to Adam, then Sergio. "Big blind, little blind. Jax, you paying to see the flop?"

For a second, everything is silence.

Then Deandre says, low and slow, "I don't know, girlie. You might be too damn rich for my blood."

Jax, the ass, doesn't even look at his cards. He throws in two blue chips. "Not mine."

His eyes flash with a challenge.

Bring. It. On.

From there, we play some damn poker. I do okay, holding my own. It's clear that the guys have been playing forever, though. They all know each other's tells, whereas I can only guess. Even though I'm making all the right moves, statistically, my stack of chips starts to dwindle before anyone else's.

Finally, we hit a hand where I have no choice. I've got the cards. "All in."

I shove in the last of my remaining stack. A chorus of ooohs goes up around the table.

It's just me and Cayden at that point. He nods. "I'll see you."

He adds in the requisite chips, and at that point, there's nothing to do but show my hand.

"Flush, jack high."

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His brows rise. Jackpot.

But before I can get too triumphant, he snaps out a hand to cover my own. "Not so fast."

Shit.

I cringe when he shows his own cards. Same damn flush, only he's got the king.

"Damn," Deandre says, respect in his voice, and yeah. The odds of that were vanishingly small.

I slump back in my seat, wiped out. I huff theatrically. "Guess I'm done for the night."

I'm pissed about it, too. That was fun. We're all drinking, but just enough to get loose—not enough to be stupid. The game is fast paced, and everyone is pretty good. It feels like I'm one of the guys, and I liked it.

But then Jax smirks. "Not necessarily. Just need another buy in."

Oh.

Oh.

I sit up straight again. They didn't make me pay upfront for my stake, but it's clear from the expression on his face that the house isn't extending any more lines of credit without a down payment.

"Is that so?"

"Sure is. You wanna go to the bank"—he points to himself—"or someone else?"

Cayden is right there, looking inviting, and after wiping me out, he does have an awfully big stack of chips.

I tilt my head to the side and bat my lashes at him. "What do you say?"

He pretends to deliberate, then grins, low and wide. "Why not?"

He opens his arms, but I do him one better. If I really want the fake money, I better earn it after all. With everyone watching, I climb into his lap, and oh. Wow.

He's half hard beneath me, just from the thought of a stolen kiss. His gaze connects with mine, then darts to the side.

Or maybe—maybe it's not the stolen kiss turning him on. Maybe it's the audience.

I flash back in my mind to the moment he walked in on me and Deandre fucking in the workshop. The lack of jealousy had bordered on hunger, and maybe he likes this. A bit of a voyeur, a bit of an exhibitionist.

Funny. My panties are a little wetter than they were when we started this. Maybe I kinda like it, too.

That may be part flies right out the window as I place my hands to either side of his face and bring my lips to his. The kiss is wet and sexy right off the bat, and it only gets moreso as a couple of appreciative whistles fire off around us. A thrill hums through me, and I grind down just once, rubbing myself across the bulge in his jeans and seeing sparks.

I have half a mind to keep going, but the night is still young. I pull away with regret, sucking on his lower lip, then letting go of it with a pop. My chest rises and falls with the force of my breath. Holy crap, I'm turned on.

I hide it the best I can, though. "So. That worth a couple of chips?"

Cayden's eyes smolder. "A couple."

"Good."

I spin myself off his lap, helping myself to two of his red ones—a tiny fraction of his stack but a sizable portion of his fortune.

Deandre laughs. "Girl's got balls."

"Eggs, actually," I quip. I hold my hard-earned chips out to Jax. "You mind making change?"

He swaps the chips out for smaller denominations, and then the game is back on.

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Only there's a different undercurrent to it now, a charged sexual energy. Anticipation sits heavy on the air.

It—and the hand Cayden places high on my thigh beneath the table—steal my focus, and it shows.

I'm still playing well, all told, but throw a little bad luck into the mix, along with the advantages of familiarity that the guys all have, and my stack doesn't last long.

This time, when I run out, I turn to Adam. "Can you spare a few?"

His throat bobs. "For you? Sure."

I rise from my chair again. Cayden lets me go, but not without a little slap to my rear that makes my pussy tingle. When I move to sit on Adam's lap, I do it side saddle, afraid things will get out of hand too quickly if I spread my legs for him already.

I'm not wrong. He hauls me in, exploring my mouth with his tongue, and it's not the easy familiarity of kissing Cayden, but it's still comfortable. Our connection from my first morning here sings in my heated blood.

When I pull away, I take another two chips, and I lose them nearly as fast.

Deandre slides his chair back the next time, opening his broad arms in invitation. "You need some sugar, little girl?"

Oh, hell. Apparently we're playing our game in front of everyone. My pussy clenches,

hot, around nothing, because, yeah. Some sugar sounds really, really good right now.

As coy as I can, I tease my bottom lip with my finger, looking down and eyeing him from beneath my lashes. "Yes, please, Daddy."

"Then you come right on over here."

I move to stand. He stops me. "I think my little girl can crawl."

Oh, hell. Oh fucking, shit-damn hell.

My heart races as I slink off my chair and onto my hands and knees. I don't require any additional clarification. I make my way under the table toward him, slipping past the others' feet. When I emerge on the other side, I place my hands on his knees and pull myself up his body. I let my lips graze over every inch of him I pass, almost but not quite kissing the line of his cock through his jeans, his abs, his hard, strong chest.

And then I'm there. His big hands dip to meet me, and he pulls me up, forcing me to sit astride him. Flashes of our first time in his workshop assault me, making me wetter and more desperate. I remember sitting on that huge, glorious cock—the way it split me open and made me feel so, so good.

It hard to keep it PG-13 as his mouth possesses mine. I'm not entirely sure why I try. His hot palms grip my hips, moving me against him, and we're still wearing our clothes, but we had might as well be fucking, right here at this table, right in front of his friends.

The only sound is the wet slide of our mouths and the little, panting noises I make every time he rocks me over that delicious bulge in his pants. He skims his hands higher, slipping them under my shirt. Their heat bleeds into my skin, and when he cups my breasts through my shirt, I groan, my nipples hardening.

Except then his hands retreat back down to my hips. His mouth pulls away, and I try to chase it, but he holds me in place. My eyelids flutter open to find his lips wet, his gaze dark.

From behind me, Sergio lets out a low whistle. Jax chimes in, "Pretty sure that was worth three."

"Damn straight," Deandre says.

Holy shit, I got so caught up in that kiss that I almost forgot that we were playing. I slide off Deandre's lap and take my money. He swats at my ass as I turn to head back to my seat—walking this time, thank you very much.

As I go, Sergio raises a brow at me. His words from a couple of nights ago ring out in my head.

If you wanted me to touch you, you would let me know.

He's still the only one in the house who basically hasn't had his hands on me, and it's definitely, definitely time for that to change.

The game has shifted now. I'm not trying as hard to win, and the guys are working harder to strip me of my earnings, and no one's really bothering to pretend otherwise.

Sergio is the one to take my last chip from me, and anticipation hums through me.

"Oops," I say, all false disappointment. "Looks like I'm out again." I gaze at him heatedly.

"You trying to tell me something?" he asks.

"Sure am." I take the most seductive walk of my life around the table, then stand in front of him.

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Except instead of letting me climb into his lap, he stands, holding his hand out. I place my palm in his, and he jerks me into him.

His mouth collides with mine, and yeah—oh, yeah. He tastes like the bitter beer he's been sipping and like sex and tightly coiled restraint. He's shorter than the other guys, but that doesn't matter. He bends me back with the force of his kiss. He takes a step into me, and the next thing I know, my ass hits the edge of the poker table.

Skating his hands up and down my sides, he lifts me up onto it, parting my legs to stand between them. He's hard as he slots himself in against me. We're flush, and all the desire that's been building inside me since the game changed from Texas holdem to 'Hold Haley Against Me' threatens to ignite. With a hand on my thigh, he hooks my leg over his hip and grinds in deep.

And oh—fuck, I'm going to come. Right here and now, without anyone even touching my pussy, from nothing more than a kiss and a little dry humping. I close my eyes, ready to give in to it.

Only to be left hanging.

Sergio pulls away, breathing ragged and lips wet. He puts a finger to my mouth, gently nudging it closed, and I swallow hard. Low and husky, he says, "You want to come? You're going to do it with my cock in you."

And damn. Just...damn.

I do want to come—desperately. But there's awkward shuffling around us. No matter

how bad I want it, I'm not quite ready to get fucked in front of all these people. Not yet.

I lick my lips and hop off the table, taking four chips for my trouble. "Can't wait."

It's a supreme effort to walk back around the table without my resolve crumbling. I'm achy and hot between my legs, and my nipples feel like they could cut glass. My skin feels like it's stretched too tight. I'm on a hair trigger. If anyone so much as touched my clit I'd fly into a million pieces, but for now I have to keep it together. I have to.

Because there's one person left who has yet to buy my kiss, and he's the one I have so many conflicted feelings about.

Before I can let anyone fuck me against a table, we have got to sort out our shit.

As Jax's hot, gray gaze connects with mine, it's clear. He's on the same page.

And we have about five more hands of poker before our time to make decisions runs out.

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The rules of poker are basically out the window. I play hands I shouldn't and call way too many raises. Jax keeps pushing the pot higher. The other guys fold one after another, casting glances around as they do, because clearly there's another game being played behind the cards.

Finally, we reach the inevitable conclusion. Only Jax and I are left, and I have exactly one cent left to my name.

Cayden deals the last card of the river. It's a mediocre hand—not impossible for me

to win, but unlikely. In a sane world, I would fold, but Jax is staring me down across the table. He flips a chip back and forth between his fingers.

Then, with a flourish, he tosses it into the pot. "I don't think you have the cards."

I don't. But this is pure me and Jax. He pushes and I push back. The tension sizzling between us across the table is the same one that had us fucking raw and dirty up against a wall in the middle of the hallway, and something has to give.

I can't date all these men while still harboring a grudge for something that happened a decade ago.

I can't take Sergio's word about all the good Jax has done—saving people's lives in the army and taking care of my grandmother when I was in a different state—and still be mad at this guy.

I put my finger on my last chip. I start to put it into the pot, only then I hold it back.

"You're going to have to do something to earn this chip."

He shakes his head. "That's not how the game works. You call or fold. You either have the cards or you don't." His throat bobs. "This is it, Haley. Place your bet or walk away."

Yeah. I don't think so.

"I'm changing the game." After all the ways it's shifted already, I think I have that right. "You want me to go all in? You answer me a couple of questions."

His eyes narrow. "Like what?"

"Like what were you doing checking in on my grandmother the past few years?"

Okay, that seems to take him aback. His smirking mask slips for an instant. "What?"

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"Why. Tell me why you did it."

He honestly seems confused. "What do you mean? She was a little old lady living alone on a mountain. What kind of asshole would I have to be not to help her out?"

The kind of asshole he's always pretended to be. But I can see through the act now. He isn't. He never was.

Even though it's the right answer, I'm unsatisfied. I shake my head. "That's not it. Why?"

"You want the truth?"

"That's all I've ever wanted."

I wanted him not to pretend to hate me all through middle school. I want him not to have lied about his crush on me.

I want him to stop hiding the fact that he's actually a decent guy.

The mask, already slipping, finally cracks.

"Because she was good to me." His gaze goes distant and soft. "You wouldn't know. After you left, my family life went to shit. My dad left. My mom kept getting laid off. But your grandma would come by where I was working after school and leave me stuff. Not take the right change. Accidentally overbuy and tell me to keep the extra. Things like that. She was a nice lady, okay?"

His eyes shine, and it strikes me. This is the second most vulnerable he's ever let himself be in front of me.

The first time was when he admitted that he liked me, and I didn't react well. I was certainly within my rights to be shocked, to need some time to process. But I left him hanging.

And this guy—this asshole—this man who taunted me when I was a child...

He's just a person. Broken and uncertain, scarred by combat and loyal to his friends.

It's time for me to forgive him.

There's just one last thing I need to know.

I nudge the chip a little closer to the middle of the table. But I don't quite put it in. "What's your buy in to this game?"

He refused to tell me earlier, and there's got to be a reason for it.

He looks me straight in the eyes. Quietly, he admits, "The fact that I saved every single person in this room's life. They won't take my money from me after that."

My heart swells. My throat feels too big, and my vision goes a little hazy.

This man.

Without another moment's hesitation, I push my chip into the pile.

But then, too gruffly, Jax says, "I fold."

He pushes the huge pile my way, and that's it. That's the end of the game. I have enough money and enough skill that I'm not going to need another buy in tonight.

Which means he's offering me a choice. I can go kiss him because I want to, or the game carries on exactly how it was.

It's really no choice at all.

Without a moment's hesitation, I shove the pile of chips aside and climb up onto the table.

Cards and chips go flying as I crawl over them. Applause and congratulations ring out and—if I'm not mistaken—there are actual, honest-to-god sighs or relief.

But they all fade into the background as I position myself in front of this guy whose smirk has wound me up from day one. I reach for his collar, and his smirk turns into the most charming, happy grin. When I haul him in, he goes willingly.

I pause with him an inch from my face. "My chips all fell on the floor," I say breathily. "Think you can spot me?"

"Take it all."

Finally—finally—our mouths collide. The kiss carries all the heat of our banter, but without the painfulness of the conflict. We're both smiling against each other's mouths.

For a few minutes, I get lost in the kiss. My need flares, and I pull him to me, but it's awkward as hell, with me on all fours on a table and him standing next to it. We need to get down, or I have to drag him up.

There's a clearing of a throat from someone else in the room. I break the kiss and lift my gaze.

It's Cayden. He raises a brow. "You guys want some privacy, or..."

The moment shifts. Changes.

Panting for breath and so turned on I could cry, I sweep the room. All the guys are standing around, watching us kiss. Hunger is written on every single face, and of course it is. I've made out with every guy in turn, but no one has found any actual relief. Suddenly, the intense sexual energy in the room catches up with me. It's a knot, tied so tight the string is set to snap.

And I wasn't ready to get fucked in front of a room full of guys a minute ago.

But they made me an offer. They suggested an arrangement. And just like that, I want it—bad.

I turn my gaze back to Jax. And I ask, voice cracking, "All I want is to know—who here has the biggest bed?"

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It's a mad scramble after that. Big hands pick me up off the table. I'm swept into a fireman's carry over Deandre's shoulder, squealing with both the thrill and the shock.

We're doing this. We're actually, honestly doing it.

I've had a decent amount of sex in my life. Not a ton or anything, but enough that I'm not easily scandalized. What I've never done is had a threesome. Or a foursome. Or a fivesome or a sixsome—basically, this is way outside my comfort zone, but I don't care.

I've been fantasizing about getting passed around from one of these men to the next since the day I arrived. When Jax told me they were all down to share, the possibility of a veritable orgy became this tantalizing, teasing thing, but deep down, I still never expected it to happen.

My expectations are being blown out of the water tonight.

The door to Deandre's room slams into the wall as he shoves it open. It's a good choice. The guy is so big, he has a California king. It's still not big enough for this many people, but it's probably our best shot.

Someone shoves the covers back, and then Deandre is setting me down onto cool sheets. He hovers over me, kissing me slow and deep, then pulls away.

"How do you want to do this, baby girl?"

How the hell am I supposed to answer that question? My body is on fire with the hungry stares of five sexy guys all waiting to have their way with me. I want everything, everyone, and I want them in every way imaginable. It's impossible to choose.

But then again, I do have a good idea of how to start.

Turning my head, I reach out in Sergio's direction. Deandre backs off without needing to be told, and Sergio stalks his way onto the bed, pulling at his shirt as he goes. It lands in a heap somewhere, and then he's on me.

His kiss is as delicious as it was out in the other room, only a hotter intent lies behind it. Yeah, we're doing this.

Neither of us wastes any time. I tear at my clothes. He helps, getting my shirt and bra off. Fuck, the hot expanse of his muscular chest pressed against me is heaven. A gold cross hangs from around his neck, and it grazes my skin as he kisses me hard and fast. The cool metal hits the hollow of my throat, and I don't know why that's so erotic, but it is.

I skate my hands down his sides, feeling the definition in his abdominals and the hollows of his hips. For all that he's ripped, he has a slighter build than some of the other guys. When I wrap my legs around his waist, it's a more comfortable fit. I like being able to hold onto him. To meet his strength with my own as we start a dirty, frantic grind.

That's not enough for long, though. He drifts his hands lower, over my hips and ass and thighs. When he hooks his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, I nod. He lifts his hips and shifts to the side, and—

Oh. That's a different set of hands tugging my pants away. Fuck. Right. Because

we're have a giant orgy, here.

I glance up to find Cayden shoving my jeans and panties down. Heat burns hot in his gaze, and my pussy clenches. I don't have time to pay much attention to him, though.

Sergio reclaims my mouth, and his hand cups my breast, the rough warmth of his palm rasping over my nipple and making me see sparks. He glides it down my body, over my navel and down to the scorching, swollen space between my legs. He fits his palm to my mound. Like the sniper he is, he shows pinpoint accuracy in finding my clit. I grunt at the sudden contact, almost too much.

I'm laid out on my back, in the center of one man's giant bed, being kissed and fingered by another, my legs spread, while a third man works my stupid fucking skinny jeans off my ankles. I try to help him, but I can't concentrate through the way Sergio is touching me. The pleasure is too sharp, the feeling too intense. A high whine builds in the back of my throat.

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Then two more hands settle on my thighs, pushing at them until I'm spread and open. I glance down to find that they belong to Adam.

"May I?" he asks, licking his lips.

I feel faint, but the dizziness only gets worse when no one waits for my response.

Instead, Sergio is the one to nod. "Go for it, man." His gaze connects with mine. "Wanna watch her face while you eat her out."

They're talking about me like I'm not even there—like I'm a thing to be enjoyed and shared, and it gets me so fucking hot, I can hardly stand it.

Thankfully, Adam wastes no time following Sergio's instructions and digging in. He licks a wet stripe up my slit, then fits his lips to my clit and sucks. My hips attempt to jackrabbit off the bed, but Adam and Sergio both have a good grip on me. They hold me down, and I'm helpless. I surrender to the pleasure, opening to Sergio's mouth on mine, to Adam's on my pussy.

To the sounds of other men as they appreciate the show we're putting on.

"Damn," Jax says.

"Right?" Cayden sounds like he's about to come in his pants. Sergio has tight command over my lips, but I flutter my eyes open to glance Cayden's way.

I twist and writhe, wishing I'd kept my fool eyes shut, because damn.

The other guys have taken some initiative. They're standing around in different states of undress. Adam, between my thighs, is the only one still wearing a shirt. Deandre's belt is unbuckled, and Cayden isn't even messing around. He has his cock out, and he's giving it a couple of slow strokes.

"Don't—" I groan.

Sergio and Adam both pull back suddenly.

Oh. And it's crazy, but that's maybe the sexiest thing to happen so far. I showed a tiny, half-signal of distress, and they stopped immediately. They may be treating me like a toy to be passed around, but I'm still in control here.

The hot, sexual need growing in me warps. Shifts. Power flows through me.

Only I use that power to get us back to precisely where we were three seconds ago.

"No." I fumble, pulling at them both, urging them to return to their tasks. "You. Cayden."

His head jerks up, lust-drunk gaze meeting mine. "Haley—"

"Save it." I gesture at his long, thick cock and the hand he has fisted tightly around the base. "Don't you dare come unless it's inside me."

He groans. "Yes, ma'am."

"None of you," I moan, sinking back into the mattress. Into the heat of Adam's lips on my clit and Sergio's on my throat. "I want it. Want your cocks. Need you to fuck me."

"Where, baby?" Sergio asks, and another hot thrill rips through me.

"Everywhere. Fuck. My pussy, my throat." I shiver, lifting my knee to give better access. "My ass."

Deandre groans. "Anyone ever been there before, baby girl?"

I shake my head. "No—never—"

"Fuck. Baby girl, you're incredible. So good. Can't wait."

And shit, what am I getting myself into? Could I even fit his monstrous cock in there?

Well, I'm damn near ready to die trying.

Sergio kisses his way back to my mouth. "And where do you want it first?"

"In me," I insist. "My cunt. Please. Please, Sergio. Fuck my hungry pussy, I need it—"

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"Fuck yes, baby."

He shucks his pants in the span of a breath. Adam retreats, and shit—I miss the wet heat of his mouth on my pussy immediately, but then I'm in motion. Sergio rolls onto his back, pulling me on top of him. He slips his fingers through my slick folds, then shoves two inside.

"He do a good job?" he asks. "Lick that pretty pussy nice and wet and open? He get you ready for me to fuck?"

I nod, out of my mind with how badly I need it.

"Good," Sergio says, and that's it. He pulls me down, sealing our lips together, and in the next instant, he lifts his dick, shoves it against me. One tug at my hips, and he's there.

I slide down on him with a groan, taking that hot, bare cock to the hilt in one stroke, and God, yes, that's what I needed.

"Fuck, Haley," he groans, kiss going sloppy. "Heaven, baby. So wet, so hot, love your pussy."

And I love his cock.

He's not quite as long as the other guys, but he makes up for it in girth. He fills me up so good, the head rubbing right along my G-spot as we start to move. At the end of every stroke, my clit grinds against his pubic bone, and it feels like lightning

crackling all along my spine.

The heat of it only intensifies when another body drapes itself over my back. I turn my head to find Jax there.

"Hey, baby," he murmurs. He's naked, his gaze still full of challenge for all that we've apparently made our peace. Kissing the shell of my ear, he drags his cock along the small of my back, and yeah, okay.

"Hey." I keep twisting until our mouths meet, never stopping in the slow rhythm I've set up, rocking over Sergio, taking him deep.

I still don't vary it up—not even when Jax's probing fingers delve between my ass cheeks. He's gentle—for him. None of the crazy fucking-against-a-wall stuff from the other day. But he doesn't mess around either, circling the rim of my back entrance without a hell of a lot of fanfare.

"Gonna let me in?" he asks.

Instinctively, I flick my gaze up to Deandre. He'd brought it up first after all. He has his arms crossed over his muscular chest, his jeans still on but the fly undone, his erection tenting the fabric obscenely. He nods.

"Go on, baby girl. You want him to open you up?"

Before I can answer, Sergio pushes up with his hips, hitting a particularly delicious spot. I moan, then nod, then shake my head.

"Yeah—but—" Jesus, this all feels too good. "Thought you wanted—"

Deandre chuckles, bending in close to touch my cheek. "Hell yeah, I do, but no way

I'm getting in that virgin ass first. I'd tear you up, girlie."

He's right. Jax is no slouch in that department, either, but it's at least conceivable that he could fit inside.

"So what do you want?" Deandre asks. "Gonna let him in? Let him slick the way for your daddy?"

Fuck. I nod wildly, beyond words, and that's all it takes. I don't know where the hell the lube came from, but in the next breath, Jax is circling my asshole with wet fingers. He nudges one inside, and it takes my breath away.

Before long, he's fucking his finger into my ass without resistance, and pleasure is barreling down on me. "I can't," I mumble. "I have to—"

Sergio grabs hold of my face tilting it back toward his. "Go on, baby. Come around my cock. Take what you want, do it, come on—"

I howl as I let the pleasure crest. It's different with something in both holes, fuller, sharper. As I come, Sergio pulls my mouth to his, kissing me sloppy.

"That's it, you feel so good. Love feeling you come on my cock, you ready? Ready for me to fill you up? Wanna feel my come?"

"Yes, yes," I babble.

I shriek as Jax adds another finger. It hurts, a little, but I'm still flying high on my orgasm, and then it all bleeds away as Sergio grabs my hips and pulls me down on him hard. He bounces me on his cock another half dozen times, punishingly hard, and then he holds there buried deep. He groans and pulses. Hot come fills me, and I shiver. His orgasm triggers another aftershock. I bite down on his lip, and he clutches

me tight. Jax stills.

For a moment, we lie there like that.

But it's only a moment.

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From my side, Cayden growls.

And then he says, "My turn."

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Dear God. Sergio lets me go with one last kiss. My body is still throbbing with the power of my climax as he pulls out. Jax retreats at the same time. Sergio's come drips down my thigh, hot and filthy. I lift my head to look around.

For a second, I have to appreciate the tableau. Sergio lies there naked, his cock spent and shining, while around me, four other men are waiting, hard and wanting, and they're all for me.

I lock eyes with Cayden, whose cock is straining, almost purple with need. An animal hunger takes over me. "Gimme."

"Hell, yeah."

He hauls me up into his arms, then sits on the edge of the bed. That puts me on top again, but I hardly care. Without preamble, he drags me right down onto his cock. I groan, hypersensitive, but loving it, loving being filled again. He slides in so easily despite his size. I'm wet and open, relaxed from coming hard; slick with my own fluids and Sergio's come.

Cayden groans low in his throat as he fits his hands to my sides. I fumble for a moment, trying to arrange myself. I get my knees under me, and that gives me the

leverage to start to ride him.

"Yeah." He grips my hips tighter, staring into my eyes. "Nice and easy. Just like that."

It's no surprise when Jax fits himself to my spine again. His fingers enter me from behind, and it's not exactly comfortable, but it's not bad, either. He keeps opening me up as I start a nice, slow fuck with Cayden, kissing the back of my neck as he goes.

"This is what we should have been doing in middle school," Cayden says, raspy with desire.

I laugh, throwing my head back. "You have got to be kidding me."

"What?" Jax asks. "You don't think we could have handled a threesome at thirteen?"

I can feel his smile against the nape of my neck as he brushes my hair to the side and kisses my skin.

"I don't think we could handle French homework," I pant. "Or French kissing."

"Fine, fine," Jax mumbles. "But you get the idea."

Cayden shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. No more jealousy. No more pushing anyone away." He shows he means it, too, pulling me closer, until our foreheads touch. "Just love."

And fuck me, or does Cayden reach a little too far back? I'm pretty sure he's touching Jax, and I never really saw the two of them like that. Hell, I'm not sure they're like that, at all, though isn't that a picture? The idea of the two of them doing dirty things to each other is sexy as hell.

Not as sexy as the two of them doing dirty things to me, though.

And that only ramps up as Jax stretches me harder. The third finger is a stretch to take, especially with Cayden filling my pussy nice and deep, but I do it. A sweat breaks out on my brow from the exertion. Within a few minutes, though, I'm ready.

I turn my head, locking eyes with Jax. "So? You gonna fuck my ass or what?"

He narrows his eyes, lips twisting up. "Say please."

"Fuck you."

"Nah. Think I'd rather fuck you."

I whine when he pulls his fingers out. Things happen behind me—I'm not sure what. But the next thing I know, he's got my hips in his hands. I brace myself, tilting backward, trying to give him better access to my ass. Cayden almost slips out, but he stops me, holds on to me.

"I got you, Haley," he murmurs. "I got you."

And oh, thank God. I didn't realize how much I needed steadying until Cayden does it. He holds on to me, keeping me still, keeping my hips flush with his when they want to buck. Holding me on his cock.

And I clutch back onto him as Jax lines himself up.

I close my eyes, burying my face in Cayden's neck, because holy fuck. I thought a few fingers was intense, but double penetration is insane. His cock is huge against my back door, and there's no way this is going to work. I whine and sweat, my fingernails clawing at Cayden's neck.

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He whispers gentle encouragement into my ear. "You're doing so well, Haley. God, you should see this. Should see his face. You feel so good. Doesn't she, Jax?"

"Tight as a fucking vice," Jax grunts, panting. His head pops through, and a noise I didn't know I could make erupts from me, tearing my lungs.

From there, it's easier, though. He drives in and in, and it feels like it'll never end. From around us, appreciative murmurs go up. I turn my head to the side to find Deandre watching on. Sergio looks exhausted, but admiration still gleams in his eyes.

And then Adam. He's almost close enough to touch, and suddenly, I want him to be.

I'm on overload. Everything is too much, and I want more. So much more.

"C'mere," I manage to grunt out.

Adam's eyes widen, but he follows instructions. As soon as he's close enough, I reach for his undone jeans, clawing at them, trying to get underneath.

"Baby—" Adam says.

But I'm wild. "Gimme."

"Oh, fuck," Jax groans from behind me. He bottoms out, his cock fully buried in my ass.

"You did it," Cayden says, voice full of awe. "You took us both."

"Looks like baby girl wants one more," Deandre says.

Maybe Cayden and Jax were too busy to notice Adam's approach, what with fucking my pussy and my ass and all, but they catch on now.

"You don't have to," Cayden says.

I shake him off. I lean to the side, relying on Cayden and Jax to keep me up, and they do, their hands on my hip, my ass, my tit, my shoulder. I don't even know. There are so many hands, so many bodies. So many cocks, and I'm drowning in it.

I'm alright. God, I've never felt so alive.

At my urging, Adam finally gets himself out. I salivate at the sight of this long cock curving toward me. I wrap a hand around him and draw him closer. He gets the hint and aims it at my mouth.

I moan at the taste of him. Jesus, I'm gone—I'm so fucking gone. Cayden and Jax groan as they start up a gentle rhythm, fucking my holes. One surges forward while one retreats, and I lick all along the delicious length of Adam. Bitter precome leaks onto my tongue, and I want it. I want all of it.

So I take it.

Opening my mouth, I suck him in. I have three cocks in me, my body stretched to the hilt, I'm such a slut, and I love it. They use me as one, each taking their pleasure while I'm in freefall. I'm beyond climax. Every touch is a revelation. My pussy throbs, my blood boiling with lust.

"Fuck," Sergio mutters. "God damn."

Deandre hums, appreciative, like he's a spectator viewing and approving of my performance.

Like he's another rock-hard man just waiting his turn.

My eyes roll back in my head, my hidden exhibitionist taking over. I moan around Adam's cock, and the pleasure threatens to consume me as I'm filled again and again and again. As these other men watch.

And then it deepens. Cayden mutters a curse, his rhythm going haywire. He fucks into me faster.

"Haley—"

He's the first to lose it inside me. Another hot load fills my pussy, and I clench down, milking him. Jax isn't far behind. His teeth sink themselves into the juncture of my shoulder and my neck, and then he pulses in my ass. I tug on Adam's hip. He takes my cue and fucks my mouth faster, faster. Finally, he nudges my throat, and I can't breathe. I can't take it.

The first pulse of hot come lands on my tongue, and I'm swept away. I orgasm harder than I've ever orgasmed before. The cocks in my ass and pussy throb. Cayden and Jax moan, and Adam shouts my name as he shoots another salty burst in my mouth. I come again, pulsing around all these perfect cocks.

Maybe I black out for a while.

The next thing I know, I'm draped over Cayden, a rag doll. Adam kisses my cheek. I have the taste of his come on my lips, streaks of it on my face, too. Jax pulls out, and I shudder. His come leaks from my ass, and then I'm lifted. Cayden slips free, too, and fuck. I'm so empty.

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But not for long.

Gentle hands turn me over and lay me down. They spread my legs wide, putting my used ass and pussy on display, and I love it. I love it when Deandre settles himself, naked, between my open thighs. He rubs my ankles, then drifts his hands up my legs. I shiver at the heat of his touch, reveling in it.

Right up until he parts the cheeks of my ass. He rubs his thumb over my sore, abused asshole and asks, "So, little girl. You think you can take one more?"

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Instantly, my mind rebels.

There is literally no physical, possible way. I've taken four men in the space of an hour, but this is the thing that pushes one step too far. Hell, I took three of them at the same time, got all my holes fucked at once and lived to tell the tale.

But Deandre is huge. He nearly tore me apart when he fucked my pussy the first time. The second left me euphoric and limping, and there's no way.

Only the instant I open my mouth to tell him I can't, my clit twitches, my traitorous body screaming that yes, yes we can.

His thumb rubs along that stretched-out rim, dipping inside. I'm embarrassingly wet back there, slick with lube and Jax's come. Deandre's thumb slips in easily, my ass eating him up, and I clench down deep inside.

"Yeah," he says, low and rumble. "You want it, don't you, little girl. Want my cock right here, stuffing you full. Say it."

I shake my head, panting. I can't ask for that.

He raises a brow, calling my bluff. "You want me to stop then? Leave you here, all fucked out but unfulfilled?"

And God, how does he know that? How can he sense that I'm still hungry? It's impossible, but I want more. I want him.

I want to be able to say I took them all.

"Yeah, you want it, baby girl." He leans in closer, bending me in half. "You want it so bad you're gagging for it. Tell me. Tell Daddy you want his big cock in your little asshole. Tell me. Beg for it."

"Please—" I choked, my throat closing on the truth of it.

"All of it. Tell me. Ask me for this fat dick. Beg me for my come." He pushes at the rim of my ass with his other thumb, stretching me wide, and I scream.

"Please." I thrash against the bed. "Please, Daddy. Please fuck my ass, please—"

"Shh, baby girl." His black eyes burn. "That's all you needed to say." He kisses my mouth then, soothing and sweet, but with an edge of absolute need that only stokes the fire in my body. "Daddy's gonna take such good care of you now. All you gotta do is let me."

I don't have the will or the strength left to do anything else. Going limp in his arms, I allow myself to be turned over onto my stomach.

Things get hazy again. Deandre arranges my loose limbs until I'm in a modified version of doggy style. My knees are under me, my ass in the air. I brace myself on my elbows, only my arms barely feel strong enough to keep me up.

Especially when I open my eyes, and realize that I'm facing the room like this. That all the other guys are assembled to watch. Sergio sits in the only available chair, his gaze intense. He's pulled on boxers since we fucked, but it looks like he's tenting them again. Even in my exhaustion, I lick my lips, and he raises his brows.

"You want another taste?"

I nod weakly, and he rises. Jax moves quickly to fill the vacant seat, while Adam and Cayden lean against the walls. They look as spent as I feel, but their gazes are intense.

Behind me, Deandre parts the cheeks of my ass. He chuckles. "Baby girl needs something to suck on?"

I cast a lazy glance over my shoulder at him. "Do you mind?"

"Hell, no. You go right ahead and entertain Daddy's guests."

Another shiver of arousal hums through me. I clench down, and come drips from my pussy, but Deandre is there, slicking his fingers between my lower lips. I sigh, my eyelids fluttering closed at a glancing brush of fingertips over my clit.

Except then his other hand settles in behind them. He slips two fingers into my ass right away, and I whine at the stretch. It's nothing I can't handle after taking Jax's thick cock, but it still reminds me how used and sore I am.

Fortunately, Sergio is there to ease the sting.

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"You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen," Sergio murmurs, smoothing my hair back from my face.

Then he shoves his boxers aside. His thick cock bobs free, and my mouth waters.

He's in control—both men are. I feel like a boneless mess, quivering with need. I'm fucked out and used and hungry for more, and they give it to me.

All I have to do is take it.

Mumbling filthy praise, Sergio rubs his cock on my face, while Deandre starts fucking my ass with his fingers in earnest. He's gentle—as gentle as a guy can be when he's trying to get a girl ready to take some serious heat. Before I know it, he's nudging in with a third finger. The stretch pulls a soft, hurt sound from my throat, but the sensation quickly shifts into pure pleasure.

The fourth is harder—Jesus, Deandre's fingers aren't small. But I take it. My body can do this.

I can do this.

"Damn," Jax says.

I open my eyes to view my audience again. They're rapt, and I feel gorgeous. Sexy. On display.

And the fingers in my ass withdraw.

"Nooo," I groan, resting my head against Sergio's naked hip.

"Shh, baby girl," Deandre murmurs. "I got you. Just go ahead and open up. Just let your daddy inside."

I don't even have the muscle control left to stiffen up.

The thick pressure against my ass can't be anything but his cock can cock. It's slick and hot, hard as steel and undeniable.

He pushes, and no. I was right. I can't—there's no way. It's impossible.

Except then it's happening.

A sob breaks free from my throat as his head breaches me. God, he's huge. But he's taking care of me even as he's taking me apart. The sharpness of the penetration is gentled by his voice in my ear, his grip on my hips. Sergio brushes my hair back from my face. Tears pour down my cheeks as Deandre keeps pushing deeper, but it's so good. It hurts, and it's real, and I love it.

I never, ever, ever want to stop being fucked like this.

After what feels like an eternity of Deandre slowly but firmly thrusting his way inside, his hips finally meet my ass. I sigh in relief and he moans. Muffled curses go up around us.

I did it. I took that giant cock. I'm taking it.

"That's right, little girl." Deandre strokes my back, giving me a moment to adjust. "You're doing so good baby. You're taking your daddy so well."

Fresh tears spill from my eyes, because that's what I needed to hear. I needed to meet his challenge and earn his praise, and how can this feel so good?

"You gonna see to Daddy's friend, too?"

I open my eyes to find Sergio's hard cock in front of me, and yeah. It's so easy. I part my lips and turn my head.

Sergio threads his fingers through my hair, cupping the back of my head. He slips inside, filling my mouth. I let him. He fucks in slowly, gently.

Thank God for that.

When Deandre pulls back, it's like being torn apart all over again. He withdraws almost the entire way, leaving me empty after being so insanely, impossibly full, only to drive forward again. My ass opens, welcoming him.

I lose time.

For what feels like ages, years, Deandre and Sergio take me from both ends. The cock in my mouth recedes, and the one in my ass fills me deep. I'm lost in pleasure as they use me. Colors burst across my eyes. Other hands run up and down my spine, and I move into the touch, happy to have my other lovers so close.

Everyone helps me, holds me up.

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And then fingers graze my clit.

And I'm gone.

"Mercy, fuck—" Deandre curses.

But I can't hear. Static fills my ears. Hot come explodes in my mouth, and the monster cock in my ass slams home. I feel the hot surge as Deandre shoots his release inside me, and I'm lost, overcome. Orgasm possesses me until I'm nothing but sex. Nothing but need.

And I'm fulfilled. Claimed.

Loved.

By not one but five incredible men.

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I come to in the shower. Adam is in there with me, holding me up, and it's a good thing, too. My legs are jello. Pretty much every single part of me is sore.

The soreness is worth it, though. I'm floating on a cloud. The mist from the shower throws up rainbows, and the colors look like my body feels. Euphoria dances along my skin.

Triumph does, too. I pushed myself to the limit tonight, and instead of breaking, I

emerged from the most intense sexual experience of my life whole and warm and loved.

And now this man—this beautiful, wonderful man is taking care of me as I come through the other side.

I lean into him, resting my head on his naked chest. He chuckles and wraps his arms more tightly around me. "You back with us, honey?"

I nod. "Did I leave?"

"Not exactly, but you were pretty checked out."

I must have been. The last few minutes only come back to me in distant impressions and fuzzy recollections. Sergio slipping out of my mouth and wiping a line of come off my slack, parted lips. Deandre holding me close as he pulled out. The gush of come from my used hole and the spasms, the emptiness.

And then the kindness. Warm arms supported me, cradled me. Laid me down on that mattress and held me tight.

I remember being cleaned up by gentle hands and kissed five times. I remember being helped to my feet, walking here to this bathroom on shaking legs.

And now here I am, standing under the warm spray, being held against a solid chest, and this man is the only thing keeping me upright.

Adam leans down and presses a kiss to my brow. "Can't say I blame you for spacing out a little. That was something else, just now."

Awe colors his tone, and I flash back to his voice, making commentary as he watched

me get fucked in both my ass and my mouth. I remember the towering lines of his muscular, wiry frame as he knelt over me, sliding his cock back and forth between my lips while Cayden and Jax pumped me full.

A shudder racks me, flashes of heat blending with the warm, safe, contentedness of my current position. So many images of naked bodies flutter through my head, intertwined in every possible position.

Only the images I see aren't only about sex. They're about the soft way Cayden looked at me as I sank down on him. The tender care Jax took in opening me up. Sergio's hand on my face, stroking my cheek while Deandre got me ready for his cock. The proud, possessive kiss Deandre gave me when I agreed to let him into my most vulnerable places.

The look on Adam's face right now, staring down at me as he literally keeps me from collapsing into a well-fucked, satiated heap.

I'm far too tired to do anything about it, but a creative urge stirs in me. There was so much beauty and tenderness in that room we all just occupied. In a hundred years, I don't know that I could capture it on a canvas, but inspiration sparks at my fingertips. I want to try.

Maybe, later, I will.

For now, though, I let myself relax.

My body remains loose and easy as Adam starts to wash the evidence of the evening from my body. The shampoo he rubs into my hair smells like the men—do they all use the same one? If it weren't enough that they all just pumped me full of their come, I feel branded by this new infusion of their scent.

"Lean back." He rinses the suds from my hair, then returns with conditioner. That takes me by surprise until I remember Sergio's shining locks. Jax has long-ish hair, too, so it must be worth their while to invest in the stuff.

Regardless, combined with the scalp massage, it feels like heaven. We repeat the process of rinsing it away. Then he grabs a bar of soap and lathers it between his hands.

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"Bar soap?" I slur. "Is that even a thing anymore?"

He laughs. "For a house full of guys, yeah."

"Whatever." I let my eyes slide shut in bliss as he rubs the bubbles into my skin. "I have proof that you all own conditioner. You're not as rugged as you seem."

"No," he admits, voice soft. "Not all the time, we aren't."

His touch on my body is sensual without being specifically arousing. With gentle hands, he cleans my face and breasts. My nipples hum with awareness when he strokes them with his palms. My hips are tender, fingerprint bruises rising on pale flesh, and I probably shouldn't be as pleased by that as I am.

"Here." He urges me to lean back against the wall.

I brace my head against the corner of the shower, too tired to bear its weight. Once I'm stable, he sinks to his knees, and I can't help it. My pussy gives a little throb at the image of him there. He spreads my legs and gently cleans me up. All the come the othermen left in me washes away. The warm air on my sensitive flesh sends another tremor through me.

He lifts his gaze and raises a brow. "You need anything?"

"Need? No." Definitely not. "Want?..."

He licks his lips and pauses, his hand right there, thumb inches from my clit. "Yeah?"

I nod. "Yeah."

So slowly, so gently, he parts my folds. His thumb traces a soft line through my lower lips. I tremble at the touch, everything raw, and yet it still manages to feel good.

It feels even better when he replaces his thumb with his tongue.

Humming, I drop my head back against the tile. I'm really glad he's the one perennially clean-shaven guy in the house, because I'm not sure I could take any beard burn right now.

With soft strokes of his tongue, he builds a low pleasure in me. I'm all used up and rung out, but I'm still capable of ascending. Moaning his name, I thread my fingers in his hair.

I don't even know how long he eats me out. He presses a single finger inside and crooks it, and yes, yes—that's just enough.

A slow, rolling orgasm pulses through me. He licks me through it.

When I find the strength to do so, I open my eyes. He's still kneeling on the ground, lips red and eyes lidded.

Between his legs, he's hard.

I motion in the general direction of his arousal and then my wet, blissed-out cunt. "You wanna?"

He frowns. "You've got to be sore."

"So be gentle with me." I beckon him up. He rises, and I take his cock in my hand,

giving it a long, languorous stroke. "Come on. It'll feel good. I want you to."

Apparently, that's too tempting of an offer to resist. He kisses me nice and slow, then puts his hands on my thighs.

A low shelf set into the wall of the shower ends up being the perfect height. He hoists me onto it, and I spread my legs.

He fits inside so easily. It's good to be full again, and yeah, I'm sore, but it doesn't matter. Kissing my mouth wetly, he thrusts in and out, slow and easy.

We fuck like that for the longest time. Every motion of his body feels good. When he starts to get close, he sneaks a hand in between us. The gentle pressure on my clit is more than enough.

"Come with me," I gasp, wet, into his ear.

We climax together. He moans my name, pushing in deep before finally going still.

Pressing his head to the tile behind us, he takes a moment to catch his breath. Then he peels away and kisses me again.

"I'm really glad you decided to stay with us," he says. His mouth curls up into a crooked grin. "And I'm really glad I got to have another turn."

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The words are gentle, teasing and flirty, even. They totally fit the tone of the evening. Hell, one of the sexiest moments tonight was when Cayden looked at me with lust in his eyes and basically called dibs on fucking me next.

But for some reason, right now, it doesn't sit with me quite right. In the moment, it's so incredibly sexy to be treated like an object that they all get to use and pass around.

Out of it, though...

My worries about my independence and my life swirl through my head.

With all the will I have, I force them down. It's not time for them.

It's time to rest. To recover. To enjoy one hell of a fucking afterglow.

But no matter how I try, I can't quite seem to silence them.

31

"But otherwise, things are good?"

It doesn't matter that my father can't hear me over the phone. I nod, then roll my eyes at myself and answer aloud. "Yeah. Pretty good."

Great, actually, but I can't say that. It would open up way too many cans of worms. As far as my father knows, I'm staying up here on this mountain out of a sense of duty, selflessly using the remaining month or so of my sabbatical to finalize my

grandmother's affairs and her get house ready to be put up for sale. I'm alone out here.

Basically, my father doesn't know anything.

A couple of weeks have passed since my first, epic orgy with my guys, and since then, we've settled into a routine. I help Deandre in the workshop most mornings, then head to my grandmother's house for the afternoon. I wake up in one man's bed and go to sleep in another's. While we haven't gotten quite so adventurous as that first experiment with group sex again, I've taken them in pairs, and even a trio once, and each time has somehow been better than the last. I feel like a queen, constantly being pleased and cared for by my harem of attendants.

And yes, my doubts still linger. Surely, jealousy has to rear its head at some point.

Surely I can't go on like this forever. I'm going to have to return to my job in another state. I need to make a living, stand on my own. I can't just keep getting passed around from guy to guy, earning my keep with my body.

After Richard discarded me, I can't bring myself to trust that anyone's really going to want to have me hanging around long-term.

It's a nice fantasy, though. And I'm going to enjoy it now, before it crumbles to the ground.

There's no way my father can know where my thoughts have strayed, but he chooses that moment to clear his throat. "Have you run into the boys who took over the old Tucker place at all?"

Right. He seemed reluctant as hell, but he did remind me before he left that Cayden was someone I could always turn to if I needed help.

Shit. I don't want to lie. But I'm conflicted enough about my new, intensely sexual relationship with the five mountain men of Lonely Peak. No way my straight-laced father would understand. If he knew how I revel in letting them have their ways with me, he'd be ashamed. Humiliated.

"Um, yeah, actually." I dig my nails into my palm to help keep my voice even and not give too much away. I search around for a half-truth that might satisfy him without forcing me to lie. "The power went out a while ago. Cayden came by and helped me out."

Lord, that is the most misleading truth I've ever told.

Strained, my father says, "Oh. That was nice of him."

"Yeah, it really was."

"Well, just be careful. They're a wild bunch up there."

"Believe me, I know." Shit, that was too telling.

"Oh?"

"I mean." I stutter, fumbling about. "You hear the stories."

And I have. Adam and I went down the mountain for some supplies just the other day. I overheard the clerks at the grocery store gossiping about those boys at the old Tucker place, how they looked positively wild.

If they only knew.

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My body pulses with heat, but there'll be time to remind myself exactly how wild they can be later.

Fortunately, my dad redirects the conversation onto safer topics. I mumble "uh-huh" at all the right intervals as we discuss a couple more issues related to settling my grandmother's estate.

For all that it was just the two of us for so much of my life, my father and I have never been close. That's painfully clear as we steer around difficult topics and stick to polite chatter over logistics.

When we ultimately run out of things to talk about, we say our goodbyes. I hang up and toss my phone aside, then drop my head into my hands.

I'm sitting on the guest bed that's nominally mine, for all that I have yet to sleep in it since my first night. It's nice to have a space of my own for moments like this.

When I'm talking to the one human being on this earth that I can legitimately call family, and that conversation only leaves me feeling lonelier than I was when I started.

I give myself a moment.

But the moment doesn't last. I drag myself up and finish what I nominally came in here to do—get dressed and ready for the day.

Life on the mountain is pretty casual, and I spend a lot of my day doing real work, so

making myself presentable doesn't exactly take me long. When I emerge, it's in leggings and a T-shirt, with a long, stolen flannel draped over it all. My hair is up in a messy bun, and my face is naked except for a swipe of lipgloss and concealer.

The guys still greet me as if I'm the most gorgeous thing they've ever seen.

I trade Adam a kiss for a plate of pancakes and Sergio a grope of my ass for coffee. I sit down to Cayden and Jax each placing a hand on one of my knees, while Deandre sits opposite me, his long leg extended so that his foot touches mine. And it's so easy to sink into this life I'm sharing with these men. I can almost forget the way talking to my dad made me feel.

Almost.

Putting on a brighter smile than I really, feel, I dig into my breakfast. "So," I say to Deandre, "think we can get that order finished up this morning?"

We've been making good progress, so it seems doable.

But he gives me a funny look. "Didn't I tell you? Me and Cayden finished it up last night. Nothing left to do except let these lugs"—he jerks his thumb at Jax and Sergio—"get it crated up and sent off."

"Oh." A mysterious unease settles in my abdomen.

"We made quick work of it. I got you and Cayden to thank for that. Couldn't have done it without you."

Cayden rolls his eyes. "We're a team, man. Of course I help out."

I nod along, but the comment didn't quite seem meant for me. I'm here, and I'm

helping. But part of the team? I'm not so sure.

"Sooo..." I trail off, waiting for him to let me know what they'll need me to do next.

"So nothing," Deandre says. "Workshop's closed for a couple of days. We earned it."

"Really?" Why does that make my throat feel tight?

"I worked out the schedule," Adam confirms. "Rejected a couple of requests and negotiated longer lead times on the rest. You guys deserve a little time off. I won't let you get so crunched again—not if I can help it."

"So you don't need me today?"

Deandre shines a wide, loping grin at me. "Always need you, baby girl. But nah, the workshop can get by without you for a while."

That should fill me with relief. Helping out in the shop for half my days has seriously delayed my work on my grandmother's house. I should be happy to get back over there.

Especially since work isn't the only thing I've been doing over there.

I let my mind wander for a moment to the other project that's been eating into my time.

Ever since I accepted that I loved—and was happy to be loved by—all these men, the creative urge has been prickling at the back of my mind. A couple of days after our group sex adventure, I gave up and dug through my old stuff, tucked away in a corner of Grandma's attic.

The paints hadn't been the newest or the highest quality, but they'd been there. A quick online order filled out my supply. I've cleared out a corner of an old parlor and turned it into my studio.

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For days now, I've been painting up a storm. It's been ages since I've been so inspired. The works are somewhat abstracted—attempts to capture a feeling more than a scene. But these men all feature in the images—prominently. Hints of musculature and chiseled jaws, dark eyes and high cheekbones. Rugged beards and corded forearms.

None of the paintings are probably worth much. But getting back to my passion, back to my art, has been exhilarating. Having more time to concentrate on it will be good for mysoul.

Only losing my time in the workshop feels like losing something way more important than that. A niggling, disappointed twinge fires off in my heart.

I don't have long to dwell on it, though. Deandre announces that he's using his day off to see to some other work around the property. Soon enough, Cayden, Jax and Sergio head off to start putting chairs in crates. I work alongside Adam for a minute, helping to clear the table and clean up, but before long, he shoos me.

"Go. You need some time at your grandmother's house. I got this"

"But I want to help." Jeez, I am way too close to pouting.

"I know you do." He kisses my forehead and strokes my shoulder. "But let me do this for you. You go focus on the things you need to do."

He's trying to be kind. I should be grateful. But it feels like Cayden's comment about being a team—like I'm something external to the cohesiveness of their unit, tending to my own affairs.

He won't be cajoled into letting me wash the dishes, though, so I'm left either wringing my hands and watching him or getting going.

Choosing the ladder, I gather my stuff and head out. The cool air is bracing, but the truck I'm driving heats up fast enough.

Everything at my grandmother's house is exactly as I left it. The stillness of the place haunts me nearly as much as Grandma's ghost. Suddenly I'm achingly reminded of why I let Cayden and Jax drag me back to their house in the first place—and it had very, very little to do with either the power outage or the storm.

In the end, I don't even bother to pretend I'm going to get any real work done right away. Instead, I head for my makeshift studio, where I pull out a brand new canvas. Its blankness stares at me. I feel as empty as it looks, like I, too, am made up of miles of nothing but flat, harsh white.

At least it's full of potential, though—unlike me. I grab my brush, loading it up with thick black pigment, then I pause.

The content of my internal monologue catches up with me, and I nearly drop the brush.

I finally put a word to the feeling gnawing at my chest.

Useless.

That's how I feel.

Like right now, here on this mountain, I have no real use at all.

The problem is that when things are good, they're so,so good.

It's pretty hard to worry about your independence or your usefulness when you're being shared by two guys in front of a roaring fire.

On my hands and knees, I rock between Sergio in my mouth and Cayden in my pussy. Cayden's grip on my hips is hard as iron, and his cock inside me feels like steel. Sergio holds my hair in his fist and uses it as leverage to pull me forward, forcing me to take him deeper, and God, all he has to do is ask. I'm happy to take it, happy to be used this way.

Especially when Cayden drops his hand to the place where our bodies are joined. He rubs my clit, and my eyes roll back in my head at the new well of pleasure opening up inside me.

I didn't exactly plan to end up like this today, but these things have a tendency to happen. I'd just walked in the door after another full day of cleaning and painting at my grandmother's house. If anyone looked too closely, they'd notice the flecks of blue on my wrist and the crimson stain embedded in the whorls of my thumb. My artwork has possessed me. I've had too many feelings to work out, too many beautiful images of the new men in my life floating around in my head. I've been pouring them onto canvas as catharsis and creation, and I was feeling exhausted. Drained.

Except Sergio had been there, freshly showered after a day spent hunched over a wood saw. With a look, he'd invited me to sit beside him for a quiet evening.

Instead, I'd decided to sit on his lap. He always has been a fan of me letting him know when I want his touch. I didn't mince words. Things progressed swiftly from rough kisses to the rocking motion of our bodies against one another. Clothes flew, leaving us bare to each other.

And then Cayden walked in. Desire burned in his eyes. Sergio didn't seem to mind.

Now here we are.

Sergio leans down, reaching to cup my breast. His touch there sends bolts of lightning through me. They're echoed by Cayden hammering my g-spot with his cock and my clit with his fingers. I groan, nearly choking on Sergio. His cockhead nudges up against my throat, his bitter taste slick on my tongue.

Cayden speeds up his pace, slamming into me.

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"Come on, baby," he murmurs. "Come for us."

I look up through hazy eyes to find Sergio looming over me. He's close, too, his gaze dark and desperate. He nods.

I close my eyes, focusing within.

It doesn't take long. Another few strokes of Cayden's cock against my inner walls and I'm done for. I grunt out my orgasm, my body rippling and pulsing. They keep fucking me at both ends throughout, and it's all I can do to hold myself up.

Just as my arms start to shake, Cayden slams home. He groans my name, gripping my hip hard. His release fills me, his cock pumping deep inside. Sergio pulls out a second later.

"Can I?" he asks, panting. "Wanna—"

"Yeah, do it—"

He strokes his spit-slick cock once, then twice. The first stripe of come lands on my cheek. I open my mouth to taste the next. He paints me one more time, then shoves back inside, finishing on my tongue, and I feel so dirty, so amazing. I come again, just like that, covered in come and filled with it and bracketed by two men.

They each pull out in turn. I collapse to the ground. Sergio disappears, then returns a minute later with a bunch of napkins.

"Sorry," he says. "I, uh..."

He came all over my face is what he did. I smile and wave him off. "It's fine. Sexy."

Normally, I wouldn't think so, but there's something about how quiet he is. His desire to mark me up speaks so many of the words he generally sees no need to. I'm listening.

Taking a few napkins from him, I clean myself up. Cayden helps me mop some of the stickiness from my thighs.

With a kiss, Sergio excuses himself.

Which leaves just Cayden and me.

"Ugh." I flop backward onto the rug. The fire is still going in the hearth, and normally I'd love the delicious heat, but I'm sweating after the workout I just had. I should put on my clothes, though. The other guys will be coming through soon, which isn't exactly an issue. If they wanted, they could take a turn.

Only...

The weird twist of embarrassment I've been fighting off ever since I entered into this arrangement curls painfully in my abdomen. I like getting fucked on the regular by all these guys. But sometimes it's too much.

Sometimes, I don't feel like I'm enough.

As if he senses my change in mood, Cayden drops down to sit beside my hip. He hands me my bra, and I rise to start to pull it on. He regards me for a minute in silence.

Then he asks, quietly, "Hey. Haley. You okay?"

Oh, hell. There's something to the way he poses the question, his voice tender and soft, and it makes the soft, tender parts of me pang. My eyes prickle. I look away, grabbing my shirt and pulling it over my head to buy myself a minute.

"Yeah," I finally say. "Of course."

I manage to make the answer sound bright, but I'm not sure who I think I'm fooling.

I get my underwear and pants pulled on, but that's it. Cayden puts a hand on my shoulder and tugs me around. His blue eyes are so clear, his brow furrowed. Behind the cover of his beard, he frowns.

"You sure? You've just seemed...off the past few days."

That's one word for it.

He isn't the only one to have noticed, either, for all that he's the first one to ask out loud. Everyone's been shooting me concerned or curious looks. I've brushed them each off with a smile, but maybe I haven't been as good at pretending to be okay as I think I have.

I shrug, still not quite ready to face how I'm feeling except with a paintbrush in my hand. "I don't know. There's just a lot going on, you know? Cleaning out my grandmother's house for one."

Relief spreads across his face, and I feel like shit. Yay, another half truth.

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"I'm sorry," he says, like he really believes that that's the only thing bothering me. "I hate that you're having to do so much of that alone. I can talk to the guys—we're pretty caught up with stuff right now. They can probably spare me for a bit if you want a hand...?"

That is definitely not what I want. The canvases I've been working on are too private, too intimate. They're a fucking therapy session done in blue and red and black, is what they are. I'm not ready to show them to anyone. Definitely not to one of the guys who's helped inspire them.

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. It's—It's stuff I have to do. Does that make sense?"

His face softens. "Yeah."

In a rush, I remember that part of why we're here, in this giant house, is because his parents passed a few years ago.

So, yeah. He knows.

He squeezes my shoulder, then pulls me in for a hug. "Just remember—the offer stands. Anything you need."

"Of course."

They've been clear about that to a fault. It's one of the reasons my current mood feels like a betrayal. They've all been so incredibly kind. How dare I be ungrateful?

How dare I not believe them?

How can I still be sitting on the edge of my seat, waiting for this to fall apart?

I close my eyes shut tight and cling to him. Then I force out the question that's been plaguing me all this while.

"What do I do when my sabbatical runs out?"

Cayden's breath stutters. For a second, I think it stops, but it's just gone shallow, his body stiff. "What do you want to happen?"

"I honestly have no idea."

"How long do you have left?"

"About a month."

He hugs me tighter. "That doesn't sound like even close to enough."

It really doesn't. Not to finish the work at my grandmother's house, or the body of work I've started as an artist. It's definitely not enough to time to explore the connection I've found with these men. We've barely scratched the surface on that.

When he speaks again, it's calculated, like he's considering every word. "You know you're welcome here as long as you want."

"I know. But my job..." My life, such as it was.

"We'd figure something out. We have plenty here—you wouldn't have to work at all, if you didn't want to. You could get back to painting, or...something."

I shake my head, burying it against his shoulder. "You can't mean that."

"How could I not?"

The idea of relying on other people for my living has never sat right with me. I've always wanted my own money, my own life. If I'd found the right partner, someday, maybe I could have imagined it. If we'd decided to have kids... The work of a wife and mother is real.

The work of an artist, being shared among five guys?

It sounds like an offer of freedom. But in my heart, it feels like a trap.

"Just." Cayden's throat bobs, the motion hot against my cheek. "Think about it. I know I speak for everyone here. We don't want to let you go."

Not yet, they don't.

But the last time I thought I'd found someone who wanted to keep me, I was sorely, sorely mistaken.

Tempting as it is, I just can't trust that this offer is real.

33

One week later, I'm pulling myself together after a sweaty, brilliant, orgasmic night in Deandre's bed. As he pulls on his jeans, covering up those thick, muscular thighs that supported me as I rode him through a low, rolling set of orgasms in the early morning light, I run my fingers through my sex-tousled hair.

My pussy throbs. He cleaned me up diligently, but I'm still slick with his come and my wetness. At least the soreness of my first few weeks has faded. I guess my lady parts are just like any other muscles—with enough exercise, they get toughened up and strong.

And they've been getting the workout of their life. My doubts about this arrangement and how long it can last persist, but the sex remains consistent and incredible. No one seems to be getting tired of it—or me—yet. For my part, I feel like I've barely begun to scrape the surface of how deep this well of desire could run. Of how many different ways a woman and five men can arrange their bodies.

But time is running out.

Satisfied that my hair isn't too bad of a rat's nest, I turn away from the mirror on Deandre's dresser. He pulls a shirt over his head, and I mournfully say a silent goodbye to all those beautiful muscles. He raises a brow, catching me in the act of checking him out, but I see no reason to hide that I'm kind of a perv when it comes to these guys.

"So," I say, hiding the hope in my voice. "You need any help in the workshop today?"

He shakes his head, and I have to fight to keep my disappointment concealed. "Nah, I got it, baby girl."

"Oh. You sure?"

Ever since we finished up that order, he's had no use for me. I've had nothing to do here. I've just been frittering away my time in front of an easel at my grandmother's place. I've made good progress with cleaning out her house, too, but the time has felt awfully selfish. My guilt at being so unproductive has been gnawing at me.

Over and over, I've offered to help the guys out, to learn more of Deandre's trade, or Adam's even. I'm not a tech wizard or chef, but I'm no slouch with a computer or a kitchen-aide. I could contribute. Hell, I've even tried to help out with the bills.

My offers keep getting gently pushed aside, though. I hardly eat a thing, compared with the five of them. I haven't so much as budged the needle on their grocery bill. And they claim that I'm warming their beds so well that they can't accept my contributions to the heating.

It's good for my bank account. But in the pit of my stomach, it feels wrong.

Like I'm a whore, fucking them all for my room and board.

Oblivious to my conflict, Deandre crosses the room to me. He puts his hands on my hips and ducks to look me in the eye.

"You questioning your daddy?"

Despite myself, I shiver, some of my anxiety instantly soothed over just by the

warmth of his voice. I shake my head.

"I told you. I got it. You take care of what you need to do at your nanna's place. And in the meantime, you let us take care of you. You hear?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He smiles and cups my face. "There's my good girl."

He captures my lips then, and God, how is it always so good? I sink into his arms, relying on him to keep me up when his kiss is so deep and so sweet it threatens to make me buckle at the knees.

We part ways then, joining the guys for breakfast. Everything is routine at this point. Comfortable, despite my growing discomfort with the entire arrangement.

And it strikes me, sitting there at the dining room table, surrounded by these gorgeous, strong, kind men...

By Deandre and his gentle but firm care-taking, his daddy persona that makes me throb...

By Adam and his quiet kindness, his open ears and gentle sweetness and incredible, delicious mouth...

By Sergio and his silent insight and easy presence through the lonely parts of the night...

By Jax and his heat, his fire that makes my own blood boil, his hips that pin me to the wall as he takes me hard...

By Cayden and his comfort, his assurances, his steady love-making that makes me feel cherished and adored...

I love them.

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I'm in love with them. With all of them.

Adam passes the butter, and my heart shivers. Deandre cracks a joke, and Sergio smirks, and Jax calls him an asshole, and Cayden strokes my knee beneath the table, and it's like a wall shattering.

This is a normal breakfast. Nothing out of the ordinary is happening at all.

But everything is changed.

Because I know that they like me. They sure as hell like fucking me. But I'm officially in too deep. My weak heart has latched on to all of these men. It's not strong enough to survive another break.

I finish my breakfast with my throat rebelling against each bite, my mouth dry and lungs tight. As soon as the rest of the guys seem done, I take my plates to the sink. I don't offer to help clean up, not ready to be rebuffed again.

Instead, I go. I fly up the road and into the shadowed solace of my grandmother's awful, creaky, dusty old house.

At the threshold to my impromptu painting studio, I come to a trembling halt.

My realization this morning struck me like an anvil dropped onto my head from fifty feet up. But how? How could I have been so blind?

How could I not have seen what was staring me in the face?

The canvases I've been pouring my heart out on for the last few weeks stare back at me, and God. My lovesick, stupid heart is written on them in pigment and ink, there for absolutely anyone to read.

Anyone but me, apparently.

The paintings span the colors of the rainbow, but they're dominated by colors of passion—rich crimson and purple, black and blue and gold. Glimpses and pieces of my five lovers appear in all sorts of different combinations, and love is etched into all of them. I stand back, observing the odes to them I've written with my paint brush, and I want to shred them all to bare wood and cloth.

I want to take them back to my men and show them how I feel. To ask them if they could ever love me in the same way. If they'll keep me.

But I can't ask that. I can't.

I can't survive another rejection.

What the hell am I going to do?

The first thing I can think of is to reach for my phone.

It's been virtually silent these past few months. I have friends back home, but none of them are terribly close—especially not after what happened with Richard. I was so new to the area when we started dating, fresh out of student teaching in another city. He swept me up and carried me along. Our friends were really his friends, and after he turned me away, I ended up with no one.

I squeeze my phone so hard I fear the screen will crack.

Jesus. I'm letting the exact same thing happen all over again. I'm incredibly isolated out here. Sure, I have five men to keep me company, but when they eventually turn their backs on me, I'll have even fewer places to turn. I basically live with them, for all intents and purposes. What will I do when it ends? Come back here? Will that even be an option at that point? The plan is to finish cleaning this place out and sell it off.

I'll be stranded, without a job or anyone to turn to.

Just like that, I feel like a fish at the end of a line, gasping and turning, flipping and stuck, unable to breathe in the too-thin air.

I have to break free.

With trembling hands, I unlock my phone and scroll through the contacts. I seize upon the first remotely promising entry I find. I press the button to make the call, then close my eyes and drop my head into my hand.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up," I mumble.

"Hey. Haley?"

Oh, thank God.

"Connie. Hey, hi." Crap. The connection to another person sings relief into my soul, but at the same time, I'm suddenly confronted with the fact that I have absolutely no idea what to say.

Connie teaches down the hall from me. She was a life saver after Richard and I broke up. Everyone at school knew about our affair; the rookie art teacher sleeping with the hot, older vice principal was big news. Insinuation had been thick on the air. Jobs like

mine were hard to come by. Did I land the position in a...differentposition?

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Forget that Richard and I never even met until after I started working there and didn't start seeing each other until a month or so after that.

Once things ended, I met judgmental stares at nearly every door. But not from Connie. She brought me into her classroom and closed the door and let me have a good old-fashioned cry on her shoulder, and damn if that hadn't been exactly what I'd needed in that moment. I've been in her debt ever since.

And yet here I am, reaching out again for a lifeline.

"Um," I start.

But she takes over. "How did you hear so fast?"

I lift my head from my hand, scrunching up my brow. "Hear what?"

"Oh, I just assumed. After last night's faculty meeting..."

"Connie, what's going on?"

"It's Richard."

Shit. Shit shit shit. I brace myself, rising to my feet. I picture car accidents or early strokes or hell, some weird karmic round of layoffs.

But I'm wrong. I'm so fucking wrong.

"Haley," Connie says, "Richard is trying to steal your job."

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Six hours later, I'm on a plane.

As I sit there, staring out a window at miles of empty plains passing away below me, I'm numb.

This morning's panic is starting to fade, leaving me exhausted and gray. I just felt so penned in. When Connie told me that my only possible route of escape was slamming shut in front of me, the panic crested over. I stopped by the guys' house just long enough to throw some clothes in a bag, thankful all the while that I didn't run into anyone.

If they had asked me to stay, I don't know what I would have done.

If they had let me go, I would have been even more lost.

It's better this way. I took my exit before they could get tired of me, while I still had some resources to make my own way out.

So why does my heart ache at the thought of them finding the note? I scribbled it on a random scrap of paper. I stuck to the facts, thanking them for everything and telling them there was an emergency and I had to get back before I lost my job. Everything I wrote was the truth, and every word was the very worst kind of lie.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head against the thick glass. I miss them already, is the thing. Adam would have teased me about calling to make my flights instead doing it online, then gently taken my phone from my hand. Sergio would have given me a look that told me in an instant that I had my head up my freaking ass. Jax might have

told me what an idiot I was being to my face.

And Deandre...he would have held me. He would have asked me why I didn't trust that my daddy would take care of his little girl.

Cayden would have kissed me softly and told me not to go.

Not that I gave them the chance.

What choice did I have, though? Even if all their promises were true, a girl can't shack up with five men. It's wrong. It's not done. People would talk. I could hardly stand the judging stares when I was sleeping with the vice principal at my school. How would people look at me if they knew I merrily spread my legs for all these guys? Would they call me a slut? Or a whore?

Maybe I was both. It felt right whenever I was in their arms, but I still can't banish the terrified voice in the back of my head that insists over and over that it's so, so wrong.

Through the rest of the flight, I flutter back and forth. I'm numb and sad and angry at myself, at society. Irrationally, I'm even angry at them, but it's not their fault they put me in an impossible situation.

By the time we land, I'm a wreck. I walk off the plane with my vision blurry and my heart sore.

It doesn't matter how I feel, though. Not anymore. I made my choice, and it was to try to salvage what was left of my old life. There's no going back now.

The ride back to my place costs a small fortune. I teach in a small town an hour away from the closest airport. I'm lucky anyone was even willing to take the fare at all.

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I tip the driver and send her on her way, and then there I am, standing in front of the small rented house where I live.

Inside, it's dark, and the air is stale. I've been gone for months. Thank god I gave my plants away, because they all would have died a long, long time ago.

Flipping on the light, I shiver. The heat's been off for months, too. The chill racks me to my bones.

Another, crushing pang of regret threatens to swamp me. I could be eating dinner around a big table, surrounded by the five mountain men that I love. I could be calling Lonely Peak my home, but instead I'm here.

There aren't as many ghosts kicking around this little house as there were at my grandmother's.

It's entirely my fault. But I don't think I've ever felt quite so alone.

35

The next day, after a fitful night, I comb through my closet for my best suit. This is the one I wore to my job interview five years ago. It's pale gray and fitted, with a skirt that goes to the knee. I almost reach for the plain white button down I usually wear it with, but then pause. I reach for a purple top with a low V neck instead, and yes. That's what I was going for.

Regarding myself in the mirror, I turn side to side. I look professional as hell like this,

but also sexy and savage. I don a pair of spiky black heels and tie my hair into a neat twist at the back of my head. Some concealer, mascara, and a dark smear of red lipstick, and I'm ready to take on the world.

Or so anyone on the outside would think. On the inside, I'm a quivering mess.

Connie didn't give me all the details about what was going on in our conversation yesterday. All I know is that Richard is trying to bring in a new art teacher—an older man, one with more experience and glowing recommendations.

Forget that he has to dick me over to do it. The leave I took to care for my grandmother and see to her affairs was completely legitimate. The guy screwed me over in an awful lot of ways. But threatening my livelihood? My career? This has got to be the worst stunt he's pulled so far. I'm not going to let him get away with it. I'm not.

The whole ride over to the school, I keep telling myself that. Exiting my car, I keep my head up and my gait steady. I pull open the front door and stride on through.

But instead of feeling at home, I immediately feel on edge.

Unintentionally, I've arrived during a class change. The hallways are full of teenagers, and yeah, this is a small school, but the crowd is unbelievably overwhelming.

I've spent the last few months on Lonely Peak, surrounded by silence. Sure, the guys could get rowdy sometimes. In his workshop, Deandre liked to listen to his sexy music awfully loud, and Jax never did turn down the volume on his video games. But it was still nothing like this.

The cacophony intensifies as murmur starts up in the midst of it all. A few kids wave

my way, and I wave back. More point in my direction, and I feel uncomfortable, being stared at like that. One of the teachers, an old vet who never liked me, narrows her eyes at me from her station in front of her classroom door.

I force a smile at her, but already my confidence is falling.

There's a reason I was the one to volunteer to close out my grandmother's affairs, and it's not just that my father made more money at his job. I was disillusioned with teaching, burnt out and uninspired, and this school had only made it worse. People like Connie helped, but the rest of the place felt like hostile territory where I never really belonged. No one trusted me, and I couldn't trust any of them.

All over again, I wonder what the hell I'm doing here. Yesterday, I didn't see any other options, but now it feels like of all the paths I could have picked, I planted myself on the very worst one.

But it's too late. I picked my fate. I left behind my best shot at happiness because I was afraid of losing it, but now it's gone all the same. What was I thinking? What am I going to do now?

I have half a mind to walk right back out the door. I have some savings. Being treated with kindness and adoration on Lonely Peak left me feeling useless and vulnerable, and maybe that's how I would always feel if I stayed there, but that doesn't mean I had to come here. I could pack up my things and go anywhere. To a new town or a big city. To my father's house.

Or back. I could go back. I could tell them how I feel and ask them if things can change.

The very idea shakes me to my core. That's not who I am. I don't rock the boat. I go along. I do what needs to be done.

But what if I did? What if I could?

I turn around, dizzy, my vision narrowing until the hallway before me dissolves into a distant speck of light at the end of a very, very long tunnel.

And then it expand. It blows up, and I blink against the explosions rocketing through my brain. Because when I face the door, it's not to find glass and metal and an inhospitable world beyond.

It's to five faces. Ten eyes gone dark with concern.

It's to find the five men that I love, and that I ran from, standing right there. Right here in this place that holds no home for me.

And all of them are looking at me as if I broke their fucking hearts.

This is the weirdest, most emotionally and sexually charged standoff to happen in a school lobby, probably ever. Hopefully ever. I should end it, say something, do something, but I'm frozen on the spot.

They came for me. In all my fretting and mapping out of ways that this could go, it's the only scenario I never imagined. It seemed too impossible. I'm uninteresting. Expendable. Easy to cast aside. My walking out should have hardly registered on their radars, and yet here they are.

My vision blurs. My hearing goes to static. Even I can detect the giant pile of bullshit clogging up my internal narrative. If any friend of mine described herself with the heartlessness I just used to describe myself, I would shake her, desperate to knock some sense into her. And yet the cruelty flows so easily through my mind.

My mother and my grandmother left me. Death took them away. But before that, my father whisked me from my grandmother's care, and I rarely heard from her again. My father abandoned me emotionally from an early age. He abandoned me literally, while the dirt was still fresh on my grandmother's grave.

My only long term relationship went up in flames, leaving me alone in a town I didn't know, open to the judgment and ridicule of people who knew nothing about me. Richard cast me aside, and I let him.

And these men. These gorgeous, huge, hardened, loving, kind men took me in. They insisted I come with them. They courted me and seduced me and told me time and

time again that they wanted me, wanted to take care of me. But I couldn't believe it. I refused to.

My throat cracks. It splits open and bleeds as I croak out, "You're here."

My disbelief poisons the air. Jax's nostrils flare, and Deandre curls his huge hands into fists at his sides. Cayden's gaze goes soft, broken, and Adam's empathy flows out to me in waves.

But it's Sergio, my silent sniper. The one who always hits his mark. He steps forward. "Of course we are."

"But. But." I'm sputtering, words forming and rising in my chest, only to pop and sink away. I search their gazes wildly. "But you never leave the mountain."

I mean, sure, they do supply runs into the closest town, and occasionally one of them grabs a pizza. But that's it. They stay put.

They sure as hell never leave the state. Not like this.

Cayden's throat bobs. His voice is soft. "We wouldn't. Not unless it was a matter of life and death."

I shake my head. I still can't believe that. I can't allow myself to hope.

Jax's gaze burns. "How did you think we could live without you, Haley?"

I want to laugh. I want to cry. "It was pretty easy, actually."

"Yeah." Adam nods. "It always is, when you've never been loved before."

Loved?Loved?No. They can't mean that.

"We love you, baby girl." Deandre holds his hands out toward me. "We love you with all our hearts."

"All of you?"

"Every fucking one," Jax insists.

Something inside me cracks open. Some hurt, wounded place inside me that I've never been willing to examine too closely before, but I can't push it aside any more.

They love me. They actually, honestly want me.

Hope floods my entire being, but I still have to ask. I have to be sure. "You want to keep me?"

"Forever," Sergio insists.

I open my mouth, my own declaration of love sitting hot and naked on my tongue.

But then a door slams shut behind me. And a voice I never, ever wanted to hear again calls out.

"What the hell is going on here?" Richard asks. I twist to look over my shoulder. Our gazes lock.

And his narrowed eyes burn holes of doubt into my wide, cracked-open heart.

"Haley," Richard says. For just a fraction of a second, he sounds the way he used to when it was just the two of us. Vulnerable. Taken aback, even. He regroups quickly, though, rising to his full height. "Ms. Cohen. We weren't expecting you today."

The guys all bristle at his tone, but I give a subtle shake of my head. Turning to face him fully, I put on a smile that's as sharp as my outfit. It's intended to draw blood. "I was under the impression that you weren't expecting me at all. Or have I misheard?"

Richard darts his gaze around. The bell rang at some point in the last few minutes, and the halls are now deserted except for our weird little crew. He glances at my entourage and all but squirms. Tipping his head toward the office, he holds out his hand. "Perhaps we should discuss this in private."

"Perhaps you should discuss it right here," Deandre says, firm and deep. Jeez, that tone of voice shouldn't make me wet, especially not when he's directing it at my ex-boyfriend, but damn if my body doesn't react.

It's only been twenty-four hours since the last time I had one of these guys inside me, and yet it feels like forever. It's probably the longest I've gone without getting fucked in a month. I thought I might never see them again, and my blood is flashing hot now.

I need to concentrate, though. I can't be running off into some sort of sexual frenzy just because I haven't had a cock in me yet today. I have to deal with Richard. I have to figure out what to do about my job, about my life.

Pushing my desires away, I cross my arms over my chest and stand my ground. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell you thought you were pulling trying to give my job to someone else."

And Richard...flinches.

Holy shit.

Power flows through me as my ex, who always intimidated me—who always, to some extent, controlled me and lorded his power over me—shows a flashing hint of weakness in the face of my standing strong.

My stomach flips. Have I really never done that before? Stood up to him? Refused to yield?

Maybe it was my time on Lonely Peak. Maybe it was burying my grandmother and getting back to my roots, picking myself up from my grief and returning to face the world in the aftermath.

Maybe it's the five ripped mountain men literally at my back.

But I feel strong. I feel powerful and confident in a way I never, ever have before.

I hold my head up higher. "So? What do you have to say for yourself?"

He glances behind me again, nervousness in his eyes. "Haley..."

"Ms. Cohen, please."

His gaze returns to me. "Ms. Cohen. Your job wasn't being given away. But your sabbatical cannot go on forever. Surely you don't expect us to leave our students

without a teacher—"

"Surely you don't intend to violate the terms of the Family Medical Leave Act." I know my rights, goddammit all.

"Many people who choose to take FMLA time don't return."

"And what gave you the impression that I was going to be one of them?"

He hesitates.

So I pounce. "You had no reason, other than the fact that you don't value me. Not as a professional, and not—" My voice breaks. Shit. I can't say it, not here. I stammer. "Not as anything else, either."

"That's not fair."

"That's more than fair." My throat threatens to close again, my eyes stinging. I thought I was over all of this, but apparently I wasn't. His betrayal haunted me. It made me doubt myself. It made me doubt the men I love. "You cast me aside. You let me think I was important and you took that away without a second thought. You treated me as disposable."

I'm supposed to be talking about my value to him as a teacher at this school right now, but I'm not.

I suck in a deep breath, fortifying myself. "You threw me to the wolves, Richard. Personally. And now you're ready to do it professionally, too, but you know what? You don't have to. You can take your new teacher and you can keep him. You can't steal my job, because I'm giving it to you. I quit. And you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I can do better. I'm doing better. I'm worth so much more than you ever, ever believed."

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"Damn right she is," comes Cayden's voice from behind me, and I could kiss him.

With any luck, soon, I will.

Richard flinches again but then flexes his jaw. "Well. If that's all. Thank you for delivering your resignation in person. I wish you well in your future endeavors."

I'll bet he does.

Before he can walk away from me, I turn and stalk away from him. That has me running all but full tilt into the cluster of my boys, arrayed around me. They part deferentially, and something about that treatment—they looking to me, following me—makes me want to cry.

I hold back the tears, though. The whirlwind of the last couple of days paired with the stress of confrontation has me on a hair trigger.

I meet Cayden's gaze. Voice low, I murmur, "I really, really hope you meant it about wanting to keep me."

"Always," he promises, eyes fierce.

"Oh, thank God." My hands tremble. "Because I think I just talked my way out of a job."

"I think you just quit a bullshit job," Jax says.

"And it's a damn good thing, too," Sergio adds, his tone downright dangerous. Another shiver buzzes through me, but it's the good kind, this time.

"Is he still watching?" I ask.

"Like a hawk," Adam says.

"Like a cowardly fucking hyena," Deandre corrects him.

"Okay. Okay." I reach out my hand. I hardly care who takes it. I just want to make a point.

In the end, it's Cayden who hooks his fingers in mine. He squeezes my palm, and that's exactly what I needed.

Without a backward glance, I march with my men clear out the door. We emerge into bright sunlight, the early morning clouds having parted, and for a moment I bask in it.

I'm trembling with exhaustion. I'm tired and relieved. My chest burns with a hope strong enough to crack my ribs.

But I'm not done yet. I'm not.

I turn to the guys. I take another breath to fill my chest, then let it out, nice and slow. "Come on. I think it's high time we had a nice, long talk."

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"Was that him?"

I glance over at Deandre, but he's staring straight ahead. His question lingers on the

air, the echo of his voice dark and just a little dangerous.

We're on our way back to my tiny house. The rest of the guys piled back into the shop van they apparently all drove in for eight hours straight last night to get to me—and that level of dedication is still bowling me over, for all that I don't have time to focus on it right now.

Deandre insisted on riding with me. At first, I figured it was to keep an eye on me and make sure I didn't run again.

But maybe it was for this. For follow up questions he didn't want to ask in front of everyone else.

There's no point pretending I don't know what he's asking about. All the same, I clarify, "Who?"

"Him," Deandre rumbles. "The guy whose ass you just handed to him on a silver platter back there." We pull to a stop at a light, and he turns his head to look me in the eyes. His jaw flexes, and the tendons stand out in his neck. "That was him, right? The one who made you so afraid of us."

Jesus. How does this man see straight through me like this?

"Yeah." I look away again, unable to meet his gaze.

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"What was his name?"

"Richard."

Deandre pauses for a moment. The deep swallowing of his throat is audible in the tight space. "What did he do to you, girlie?"

Fuck. We really shouldn't be having this conversation while I'm driving. I grip the wheel tighter, though, edging forward as the light changes to green.

"Nothing," I lie. "Everything. He—we dated. For a couple of years. I thought we had something, but we didn't. I was just arm candy for him." I lick my parched lips. "A way for him to get easy, on-tap sex. When I asked for a commitment, he laughed."

The echo of that laughter reverberates through my memory. God, how it hurt.

Deandre goes dangerously still. "There's a part of me that wants you to turn this car around right now."

I want to ask him why, but there's no need to. Slow-boiling rage is written all over his expression. He clenches and unclenches his fist, knuckles popping. Power ripples through him, and I swallow hard.

His willingness to commit violence to avenge my broken heart probably shouldn't make me feel warm and loved inside, but I can't help it. It does.

"That won't be necessary," I promise.

"I'll be the judge of that. What else did he do?"

"What? Nothing."

"Bullshit. That man did something."

I think it over, all the hundreds of little insults that stole my confidence. The power plays at school. The way he left me to the other teachers' judgment and scorn.

"It's hard to explain, just—he made me feel worthless. Helpless. Abandoned."

That last word is the key one. I've felt alone for so much of my life, but the aftermath of our breakup was a real low.

"So you thought we were going to leave you just as high and dry," Deandre grits out.

Shame floods me. I hate that I thought so poorly of them, but he's not wrong. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't you dare apologize. That man wounded you. Ain't your fault you were waiting for the next axe to fall. We should have been clearer."

"It's not your fault, either," I insist.

He hums, like his jury is still out on that one, but I know it's true.

This is no one's fault and everyone's. Arguing about it won't get us anywhere.

What really matters is making sure it never happens again.

We spend the short remainder of the ride back to my house in silence that's not quite

comfortable but not particularly awkward, either. We both just have a lot to think about, is all.

I pull into the driveway of my house. The guys' van arrives seconds later. They park right behind me, blocking me in. Cayden, Jax, Sergio and Adam pile out. Tension radiates off of them, and it's a match for the nervous energy vibrating through me.

I glance around, unable to stop myself. I have gossipy neighbors. They're going to have a field day with all of this—first my sudden return and then my colorful group of visitors.

"You looking around for someone in particular?" Jax takes me by surprise with his question.

I start, then shake it off. "No."

He doesn't look convinced, but he lets it go. I lead them to the side entrance and then inside.

And wow, I knew this was a tiny house when I rented it. The place was just for me, though. I didn't need a lot of space.

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With all five of these big men crowding it, though, the entryway feels positively claustrophobic.

It doesn't get any better as they pile into my living room. They drape themselves over my little couch and squeeze into a couple of armchairs. Deandre has to stand, and I swear his head nearly scrapes the ceiling.

The place is clearly too small for them, but my life suddenly feels too small, too. My confidence from my showdown with Richard is fading fast, leaving me there ringing my hands, apologies on my lips.

"I'm so sorry you guys felt like you had to come all the way out here," I start.

Cayden shakes his head. "Don't be."

"And we didn't feel like we needed to come here," Adam says. "Clearly we did."

I shake my head. "That doesn't make any sense."

Adam leans forward in his chair. "If you needed us to show you that we care enough to cross the globe—much less a couple of state lines—for you, then we're here. We did it."

"We'd do it again," Jax says, gaze hard.

A part of me wants to argue with them, tell them I'm not worth it. But one look from Deandre, his brows raised, and I shut my mouth up tight.

That's my past talking. This is my future, and I already came so close to fucking it up. I'm not going to chance losing it again.

"Thank you," I say instead. "I'm still sorry, but—thank you."

"You're welcome," Deandre says.

I feel caged in by all their stares, but not in a bad way, somehow. They have me surrounded, and it's like the time they all took me, one after another after another—some of them at the same time. I'm penned in by their bodies, but it's not a cage at all. It's a fortress. These guys are here for me. To make me feel good and supported and safe.

And I do. My knees sag with the relief.

I sink to sit on a little ottoman. I glance around at all of them. "How did you even find me. Coming to my school—?"

Sergio digs into the inner pocket of his leather jacket and pulls out a book. He turns it on its side, exposing the name of my school stamped along its edge. I recognize it then as one I took out of the library here. I'd been reading it this week. I must have left it on Deandre's nightstand.

"Wasn't hard from there," Adam says. "Quick Google search showed you were on the faculty. Couldn't find your home address, but we figured..."

Deandre nods. "Didn't know if much else from that note you left us was true. But figured if you really were worried about your job, you'd show up there eventually."

"And if I hadn't?" I'm testing, I know.

Jax says, "We would have waited."

"Or sweet talked the school secretary into giving us more of your information," Cayden says.

"Or stolen it," Jax adds.

Adam rolls his eyes. "Hacking is barely stealing."

"You know it is," Deandre says.

Their banter washes over me, only the meat of the discussion sinking in and taking root. They came for me, and they would have stayed. They would have done anything to find me.

Sparks fire off inside my chest.

Still, there are mysteries that need to be solved. "How did you know to come?"

Jax frowns. "You're still acting like we would've just let you go."

"Not that we wouldn't respect your choice to leave," Cayden says, shooting a glare.

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"But not without a fight." Deandre crosses his arms.

Then Sergio pipes up. "We saw your paintings."

Oh.Oh. I flash back to the previous morning and looking at the images I'd made through new eyes. I understand immediately what he's saying.

The canvases I filled while I was trying to sort through my emotions were filled with impossible love, but also with conflict. If someone I loved had painted them, I would have been hot on their heels in a minute.

Apparently, that's what happened here.

"Right." I rake my hair back from my eyes.

"They were beautiful," Adam says.

I shake my head. "They were things I was just playing with."

"They're amazing," Deandre insists.

After all this, I'm still having a hard time accepting the praise. I curl into myself.
"They were what I felt."

Sergio nods. "So then you know why we're here."

My silence is my acknowledgment.

Cayden rises from his seat, moving to kneel in front of me. "What I still don't understand, though, is why you ran. Why then?"

"I wasn't lying. Richard really was threatening to give away my job, and I suddenly felt so penned in. Like I wasn't going to have any options—"

Deandre's expression goes grim. "You mean after we kicked you to the curb."

The rest of the guys actually recoil. There are rumbles of dissent, but I look up to meet his eyes. He knows.

I nod. "Exactly."

Cayden's eyes burn. "That's not going to happen."

"I know. I mean—I'm trying to believe. But it's hard."

"Well," Cayden says, "we're going to do everything we can to make sure you do. We're going to love on you so hard..."

I don't doubt it. The way he's looking at me, there's no room for even the tiniest bit of skepticism. I don't need him—or any of them—to say it more explicitly. He loves me. Just like I love him.

A rosy glow in my heart bursts and blooms. I'm ready to throw myself into his arms and let him kiss away all the old wounds Richard left on me, all the history of being left behind by my family.

But I can't. It doesn't matter how good I feel right now. Our time together up on the mountain was great, but there were flaws. I can't let them go unspoken now. Staying quiet would be dooming us to repeat this whole cycle again a month, a year—maybe

two from now. I won't do that.

I sit up straighter. I look from Cayden to Deandre to Jax. To Sergio and Adam and back. "But it's—it's not about you"—my voice cracks—"loving me."

"We do, though," Cayden insists.

Deandre shushes him, and I glance at him appreciatively. It feels like hubris to say that they love me, even though Cayden just stated as much and received no dissent. Even though these men all rode eight hours through the night to get to me.

I've said it, though. It's out there, and there's no taking it back.

There's only forward.

"In fact..." I suck in a deep breath. "I think you've been loving on me too hard."

"What?" Cayden looks at me as if I've slapped him.

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"I can't—I can't be dependent on you guys. I won't be. If you really want me to come back with you—"

"We do," Jax says.

I nod at him and keep going. "It can't be like it was. I have to contribute, you know?"

Adam frowns. "Like...?"

"Paying bills." I look to Deandre. "Helping out in the workshop." Jax. "Or the mill." Back to Adam. "The fucking dishes, even."

"Baby girl." Deandre's brows furrow, his jaw dropping. "I didn't know you felt like that."

"Because I didn't say it. You were all being so nice to me, and I appreciate that." God, do I ever. In hindsight, Richard was never so kind. So accommodating. "But if we're going to do this, I want to build a life together. And that means I have to be a part of your household."

"We thought we were giving you room," Cayden explains. "Your grandmother's house..."

"Needs work," I supply. "And I'll do it. But it's not a full time job."

"What about your art?" Sergio asks.

"It's just a hobby."

Deandre crosses his arms. "Like hell."

Reaching out, Cayden places his palm on me knee. "What you made is beautiful. We want to support you to make more of it."

"It goes both ways," Sergio says. Everything gets quiet for a minute. Then he shrugs, going on. "You think you need to do more to be part of our family? Okay. Do more. But then you have to let us make room for you to do things that are for you. And that includes painting—or whatever else it is you need to do."

"Oh." I hadn't thought of it that way.

"We'll find a balance," Cayden promises. "You just have to tell us what you need."

My stomach twists. "That's hard for me."

"Then we'll help you work on it," Deandre says.

I swallow. A weight settles over the room, warm and comforting, like a blanket.

"Soooo... what?" I dart my gaze among the guys. "Is that it? We just go home now and live like a giant commune?"

"Damn right." Jax smirks, pumping his fist.

Only it's not that easy. Not for me.

And this is the final sticking point. I have to bring it up.

"But..." I wring my hands in my lap. "Won't people talk? Eventually? We can't stay hidden up on that mountain forever. My dad will want to visit someday, maybe. Probably. Once my grandmother's house sells, everyone will know that I'm not living there. What do we tell them? What will they think?"

I'm spiraling. Hard. I need to pull up on the stick, bring myself to rights again.

But in the end, Sergio is the one to do it.

"Why do you care?" he asks.

The question steals my breath away.

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Why do you care? It's such a simple question. It should be easy to answer—right?

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"Because," I start, but my mouth closes of its own volition. "I—Because—"

"He's right." Jax rises from his seat. "So what if this is weird?"

"It's more than weird. It's..."

"Amazing," Jax says.

"Fantastic," Adam agrees.

Bees hum under my skin. "It's wrong."

That's what everyone would say.

Deandre lets his arms fall to his sides, his palms open. "Well, I don't care if it is. This—you—us. It's the best damn thing that ever happened to me."

Cayden smiles. "What he said."

"It's right," Sergio says. "We know you feel the same."

God, how I want to believe him. "But..."

"But nothing." Sergio shakes his head. "No one else matters. Not your dad who left you alone on that mountain with your grandmother's ghost. Not random people in town you don't even know. Just you and us, and we're happy."

"We were..."

"We will be again," Sergio says.

"Can you accept happiness?" Cayden asks.

Deandre takes a step closer. "Will you trust us?"

And that's what it all boils down to, isn't it? I let doubt creep into my heart because I'd been burned before. Trust isn't easy for me to give.

But these men have earned it. They've taken me in and taken care of me. They want to give me what I need—be that a chore list or enough sex to make me blind...or all the love in their hearts.

They want to take me home and keep me. They don't care what the rest of society would think.

For a minute, my vision spins out.

As if from a long, long way away, I stare down at this motley crew squeezed into my tiny living room. They eat up every available inch, crowding the space with their burly frames.

It's not just that the place is too small for them, though.

It's that they don't fit. They don't match the plain white walls or the delicately patterned furniture, and Jesus—I can't imagine these guys using coasters or putting flowers in fussy little vases.

But does that matter? Do they need to fit in this space—the one I decorated based on

pictures out of magazines? Not because I truly loved the look, but because I thought it was how a house was supposed to be?

Did I ever fit in it, either?

Did I ever fit in the life I was so desperate to save?

Clarity dawns on me.

I was just going through the motions the entire time I lived here. I taught because it was the only thing I could think to do with my degree, and I loved my students, but I never had the fire for helping them with their decoupage. I dated Richard because he wanted me. I had fucking coasters and vases because you were supposed to, but none of it mattered to me.

My vision fuzzes out before returning, sharper than ever before. A new kind of focus settles over me.

I laugh out loud, hard enough to bring tears to my eyes.

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And it hits me. "We can do whatever we want."

Cayden looks like he's ready to either have me committed or hug the shit out of me. I'm not sure which is the better response. Rubbing my knee, he smiles. "We really can."

"You want to keep me."

Deandre nods. "Damn right we do, baby girl."

"And you don't care what anyone else thinks."

Sergio says, "Not a soul outside this room could talk us out of loving you."

Adam murmurs his agreement, while Jax rises from his chair and comes over to me. He slots himself in at Cayden's side, and once upon a time, I might have read his crooked smile for scorn.

Not now, though.

"So what do you say?" He runs his fingers through my hair. "Wanna shack up with all of us?"

Another laugh bubbles in my throat. Tears sting the corners of my eyes, but they're the very, very best kind.

I lean forward, Jax's hand still in my hair. I let my brow rest against Cayden's. I stare

into his eyes.

The other guys come to join us. I feel Deandre's strength and Adam's brightness and Sergio's quiet insight. I feel all of them.

And it's so easy. God, I don't know why I was making it so hard.

Edging forward, I press my lips once, softly, to Cayden's. Then I look up at all my men in turn.

"You know what? Yeah. Yeah, I think I do."

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EPILOGUE

Six months later....

"Okay, sign here, here and here."

My hand is cramping up, but I skim the miles of fine print in the contract, then go ahead and place my signature beside the little yellow flags my lawyer has placed on all the appropriate places. With clinical precision, he flips the page. I sigh.

Sensing my apprehension, he assures me, "Last ones."

They damn well better be. With another quick review of the text, I go ahead and sign.

Finally—finally—he takes the packet from me. He pages through it, then stacks all the seemingly thousands of documents we've just reviewed together.

"All right, Ms. Cohen, that's it. You're officially no longer a home owner."

"Thank God."

He smiles and stands, extending his hand. I take it and shake firmly, then withdraw.
"I'm sure you're glad to be done with all of that."

He has no idea. I nod, then gather my things. He escorts me to the front of his office and bids me farewell.

And yeah, maybe he lingers at the doorway a little too long, watching. Judging, maybe. But I don't care.

I step out into bright sunshine, soaking in the scent of spring. With the sale of my grandmother's house, a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I feel lighter than I can ever remember feeling before.

It shows, too, as I dance into Adam's waiting arms. He's waiting for me at the end of the path. When I reach him, he picks me up and twirls me, and I laugh, buoyant and carefree. The law office is at my back. People could be watching, but it doesn't bother me. I focus on the brilliant eyes in front of me, the soft lips just waiting to be kissed.

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I lean in, and it never gets old. His mouth touches mine, and heat runs up my spine. He clutches me close, licking forward with his tongue for just a moment before letting go. He sets me down and tucks me under his arm to walk me to the van waiting to take us home.

"So? Everything go smoothly?"

"Yup." I'm free and clear. A sizable deposit should be sitting in my account by the end of the week. It's a relief to have the whole matter of my grandmother's estate behind me.

Best of all, it makes things really official. Really settled.

I live down the road now, with my five partners.

These past six months, we've worked hard to find our balance. It's still a work in progress, but what we're doing works for us. I chip in toward the bills and help Deandre in the workshop. I cook once a week and do the dishes on weekends.

I work on my art. I tutor a few students in town on Tuesday afternoons. I have a life.

And I also have love. So, so much love.

I lean into Adam's side a little harder, soaking up his warmth. With a chuckle, he dips down to press a kiss to the top of my head, and I preen.

The guys' truck is idling in the parking lot across from the law office. Adam opens

the passenger side door for me, and I climb in.

"Hey, baby girl," Deandre says from the driver's seat. He clamps a big hand on my thigh, and there's promise there, in the way he strokes his fingertips across the seam of my jeans. I shiver.

We didn't exactly have a discussion about it, but it only stands to figure that the sale of my grandmother's house is reason for celebration. Tonight is going to be special—I can feel it.

Deandre sure seems up for it. As Adam climbs into the back seat behind me, Deandre swoops in, claiming my mouth, and I let him in happily. He tastes like coffee and desire. Even after all this time, he has the power to possess me. To make me weak in the knees.

Humming, he pulls away, and it's a good thing, too. His kiss makes me so wet, I'm half ready to climb right on and ride him here in the parking lot. But being open about my unconventional living arrangements is one thing; actually having sex in public is another.

Though maybe someday...

I clench down inside. In the rearview mirror, I meet Sergio's eyes. He raises a brow knowingly, and I flush hot.

Yeah. It's going to be a really, really good night.

I let my fantasies spin out as Deandre puts the van into gear. He puts on some of his sexy music, and man, that doesn't help matters, but I'm not exactly one to complain.

I do have some other things to think about besides the growing need between my

legs, though. Fighting to focus, I pullout my phone and text my dad, letting him know that the closing went smoothly. He replies with his thanks. We trade a couple more messages back and forth; it's about as much catching up as we ever do, but it's warm enough.

About a month after my return, once the guys and I started settling into a new equilibrium, I bit the bullet and admitted to my father that I had moved into the old Tucker place. He'd expressed some concern, but I'd promised him that I was happy and well cared for, and he had left it at that. He hadn't asked if I was there just as Cayden's friend or as something more. I hadn't volunteered. But when he does eventually probe deeper, I won't lie. I live the way I want to, and I have nothing to hide.

The small town at the base of the mountain slides away as we drive. Before I know it, we're climbing the twisting road up Lonely Peak. The 'SOLD' sign sits, bright and cheerful, at the bottom of the fork that would lead up to my grandmother's house—or, what used to be my grandmother's house until about ten minutes ago. It was bought by some reclusive rock star or something. I didn't ask for the details. All I know is that the guy intends to live there for at least a few months of the year, and that he doesn't plan to tear the place down entirely, and that was all I needed to know. Eventually, I'll meet my new neighbor.

For now, though, I'm focused on the house appearing in front of me.

The old Tucker place.

My home.

And it's exactly, exactly where I want to be.

While Deandre, Adam and Sergio unload the stuff from the supply run they carried

out while I was dealing with paperwork, I head on in.

The whole place has a slightly different vibe than it did when I first arrived. There might not be fussy coasters or vases, but one of my paintings hangs on the wall in the living room. The small guest room I was first installed in has become my studio, while I now have my own bedroom, decorated in precisely my taste, with a big king bed that I occasionally invite my lovers into—when I'm not sharing their beds, that is.

It's good. Perfect. Right.

"Uh-oh," Jax says, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "I know that smile."

"You do?" I unwind my scarf from around my neck and hang it up with my jacket. I leave my boots behind, too, padding over to him in my stocking feet.

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It puts us at a serious height disadvantage as he leans forward and tweaks my nose. "Sure do. Means you're being unbearably smug."

His tone is teasing, but I don't let it get to me anymore. It's never meant in any harm.

Instead, I lift a brow in a challenge of my own. "Think you can bear me anyway?"

"With pleasure."

With that, he puts his hands on my waist and lifts me up. I squeal happily, but the sound is cut off by the hot press of his mouth to mine. A second later, my spine hits the wall. My breath is punched out of me as he crushes me into the plaster, his big, strong body pressed up against every inch of mine.

Just like that, the lightness of our back and forth is gone. The air between us goes suddenly, shockingly hot. Electric desire shoot up my spine.

He plunges forward, fucking my mouth with his tongue and reaching between us to cup my pussy through my jeans. I moan, throbbing for it.

"Well, hello to you, too," I mumble against his mouth.

"Hi."

I slam my head back against the wall as he moves to attack my throat. Dammit, I'm going to have to wear another scarf tomorrow. He's sucking hot bruises all up and down my neck, and who am I kidding? I should just invest in a whole crate of

scarves, for how often I walk around covered in love bites from my possessive, sexy, enthusiastic men.

My eyes roll back in my head as he tongues at a particularly sensitive spot. My pussy drips, and my nipples pebble into aching hard nubs. God, I want it.

Before these guys, I'd only had a handful of sexual partners. I went more than a year after Richard and I broke up.

Now I get fucked daily—sometimes several times a day, sometimes by more than one man at a time, and it's never enough.

Beside me, a throat clears. I flutter my eyes open against the onslaught of pleasure Jax is wringing from my body to find Cayden standing there, looking entirely too pleased with himself. Paying no attention to the fact that his best friend is rubbing me off with the heel of his hand between my thighs, he tilts his head to the side.

"Stuff go okay in town?"

"Yeah." I suppress a groan, bucking into Jax's touch. "Signed—signed all the stuff."

"Good. And the guys got everything they needed?"

"Think so. They're—" My voice cracks as Jax cups my breast through my clothes. "They're bringing it all in now. I think."

"Roger that," comes Adam's voice from the doorway.

"Fucking hell, Jax, we need to get you fixed?" Deandre asks. "Hump every damn thing in sight, I swear."

"Nah," Jax says, panting. "Just this one."

Another shiver of need hums through me. I've made my peace with the fact that them treating me like an object when they're fucking me turns me on—just like they've learned where the line is and how not to cross it when we're not in the middle of epic sexy-times.

Which I can say we definitely are right now.

"Can't say I blame you there," Deandre says, much closer than he was a minute before.

I turn my head to the side to find him right there. I reach out, curling my fingers in the fabric of his shirt and hauling him in. He kisses me, as deep and heavy as he did in the car, but with the potential for it to really go somewhere this time.

He must taste my desperation on my tongue. He separates from my lips for a moment to check in with me. "You in a mood, baby girl?"

"Yeah." I nod. I don't have any shame around him—or any of them, really. Not anymore. "Want it bad."

"From who?"

I glance around. Adam and Sergio are here now, too, and my pussy clenches, soaked and achy. A fire burns within. "All of you." I snap my gaze back to Deandre. Hunger fills his eyes, and I swallow hard. Oh, yeah, this is happening. "That okay, Daddy?"

"You asking your daddy for permission to get fucked by all his friends?"

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"Yes, please, Daddy." My eyes flutter closed for a second as Jax pinches my nipple hard. "Please."

"Well, I guess you've been pretty good..."

That's all the go-ahead anyone needs.

Jax tears me off the wall and claims my mouth again. I strap in for the ride as he manhandles me over to the couch. He drops me down onto it and covers me with his body. I get lost in the heat of his mouth, so it takes me a moment to realize that his aren't the only hands on me. Adam tugs at my jeans. I let him, lifting my hips so he can get them off. My panties and socks go with them. Jax shoves his hands under the hem of my top, squeezing my breasts through my bra, and God, it feels so good.

We break the kiss just long enough for him to shove my shirt up over my head. He gets the clasp of my bra, and then I'm naked there on the couch.

The sounds of belt buckles being undone and clothes and shoes hitting the floor fill the room. I glance around, watching my men undress. Raw, primal desire floods me, but I don't have time to fixate on any particular element of the spectacle.

Especially not when Jax is turning us over. He sits himself in the center of the couch and pulls me to sit astride him.

"Touch yourself for me, baby," he murmurs. "Get yourself nice and wet."

I laugh, clutching at him. I couldn't be more wet if they slathered me in lube. Still, I

know a direct order when I hear one. Slipping my fingers through my folds, I groan, spreading my liquid around. As I play with my pussy, he undoes his belt and pulls himself out. The hot head of his cock skates against my inner thigh, and then he's dragging me closer, shoving my hand away. He lines himself up.

With one swift motion, I drop myself down on him. I howl at the sudden fullness. I was ready, but he's so thick. The stretch is intense.

The tightness of my hot cunt around him must be pretty intense, too. He throws his head back, moaning my name. I follow him, chasing his mouth as I start to rock over him. I know all these guys' bodies so well by now. I fuck myself on him hard and fast, and it's just right. My clit rubs against his pubic bone with every thrust, and he hits that perfect place inside me, making me see stars.

The stars get brighter when I feel hot lips on the back of my neck.

Cayden's hand on my cheek turns me toward him. I release Jax's mouth to let Cayden kiss me. His kiss is different, softer—less combative, if no less wanting or demanding.

It's not even a surprise when his slick fingers probe between my ass cheeks. Groaning, I arch into the contact, shoving my rear out to give him better access.

We don't do this all the time, but we've done it enough by now that the sharpness of having my ass opened up to be fucked brings me nothing but pure pleasure. He slips in one finger and then a second. By the time he thrusts forward with the third, my vision is blurring, all my focus on the hot places where my body is being filled.

Jax lets out a noise that makes me clench. He grips my waist hard, holding me steady while he thrusts up into me once, twice...

"Come on, Haley. Let me feel you come around my cock."

Fuck, that's all I need.

I shatter on command, pulsing around his thick shaft. Cayden plunges deep with his fingers, and Jax pulls me flush against him. He grunts out my name again, and then spasms, emptying himself into me. The hot slickness of his release coats my insides, and God, yeah, I needed that so bad.

For the span of a breath, I rest.

But then that's it. I'm in motion. Cayden hauls me off of Jax's lap. I hiss as Jax's cock slips out, but I don't have long to mourn the loss.

Cayden passes me off to Adam, who lays me on the ground. Sergio is with him, lifting and spreading my legs, and a hot flush of arousal and shame flows through me as he shoves a cushion under my hips. It puts my ass and pussy both on display, up for easy access, and these two men waste no time taking full advantage.

"You up for this?" Adam asks.

"Hell, yeah."

Adam climbs on top of me then, kissing my mouth hot and wet. His long cock drags against my abdomen, then lower. He glides through the needy place between my legs. My juices and Jax's come both slick the way. His head fits to my opening, then pushes in.

I'm practically bent in half like this, and God, it makes the penetration feel even deeper. I clench the walls of my pussy around him, and he groans. He doesn't move, though—doesn't start up the fast, shallow pace he prefers when it's just me and him.

I know why a second later. Sergio's hot hands fit to the undersides of my thighs, pushing them higher, spreading me wider. He slots himself in behind Adam, and damn if that isn't a sexy view. His dark eyes appear above Adam's shoulder, and then—there. He presses his thumb to the soft rim of my asshole. I'm already stretched, open and ready to be fucked, thanks to Cayden's attention earlier. Sergio's thumb slides in nice and easy, and he raises a brow. I nod, panting for it like a bitch in heat.

Seconds later, Sergio's thumb disappears only to be replaced by his cock. I throw my head back as he fucks me open, making space in my body for him. I'll never get used to the depths of this pleasure, the sharp ache of being stuffed so full.

Every inch Sergio nudges in takes me to another level of heaven. I rake my nails over Adam's spine, clinging to him. He rocks into me. We're wedged so close together in this position that every motion puts pressure on my clit. Relief dances through my bones.

And then Sergio's there. He bottoms out with a quiet curse in Spanish. I let go of Adam with one of my hands, reaching for Sergio. He intertwines our fingers, holding on tight, and it's so good.

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So unbelievably, incredibly good.

They set up a slow rhythm, fucking me in turn. As Adam pushes forward, Sergio retreats, so I'm always full in one hole or the other but never overwhelmed. I tilt my hips into it, but I'm at their mercy, theirs to take, theirs to fuck, theirs to love...

Adam is the first to lose it. His strokes lose their rhythm, and he shoves in deep. His whole face twists up as he comes inside of me. The wet heat in my pussy makes me clench with desire so sharp it's almost pain. I'm so close—so close—

Panting, Adam keeps up the pressure on my clit as he falls forward. I take his weight, barely able to breathe, while Sergio speeds the motion of his hips.

And just like that, I'm there. I come like a whiteout, my vision blanking and body tensing. Being filled in both my ass and my pussy makes the orgasm even more intense. Halfway through, Sergio groans, and the first spurt of his come fills my back channel. He pulls out, painting my skin with hot ropes of his release, and God, I love it, love being taken like this. Marked. Claimed.

I return to earth to find Adam kissing me gently, softly. I slide my lips over his as he withdraws. An aftershock rocks me as he pulls out. Come drips from my body, and I feel so dirty. So used.

I feel amazing.

Sergio leaves me with a more wicked press of lips to lips, his tongue flicking out. I let my arms fall to the sides. My feet slide on the hardwood as I stretch my legs.

Above me, Cayden and Deandre loom.

"Oh, fuck," I mumble. My pussy throbs.

Because it doesn't matter how satiated I am after taking three men in quick succession. Two orgasms are nothing to the heat in these two men's eyes. I reach my hands out for them weakly.

They each take one. Together, they help me to my feet.

I end up plastered against Cayden. He assaults my mouth, licking the seam of my lips before tasting my teeth. His hands roam my body, cupping my breasts and tweaking my nipples. He slips a hand down to test my cunt. I'm puffy and swollen, raw from use, but that doesn't stop my clit from twitching. Groaning, I pull him closer. His hard cock presses to my hip, and I reach for it, circling the base with my hand to give him a rough stroke. Slick precome coats his slit, and I spread it around, coaxing a low groan from him before he gently pushes my hand away.

Deandre's voice comes from somewhere in the vicinity of my ear, his hot body fitting itself to my spine. "What do you think, baby girl? Think you can take us both?"

I shiver head to toe, but I nod.

"Such a good girl," he moans, tugging at my hair to pull me around. He claims my mouth just as thoroughly as Cayden did.

As we're kissing, he walks me forward.

The next thing I know, Cayden is in front of me, his ass resting on the arm of the couch. Deandre picks me up and places me astride him. My knees settle to either side of him. His cock is sandwiched between our bodies, thick and hot. Deandre releases

my lips, only for Cayden to demand them again. I fall into his kiss, just as Deandre palms my thigh, opening me wide.

Together, they lift my body, and I'm a ragdoll, helpless. They drop me onto Cayden's cock. My head falls back on a wordless moan. He slides inside easily. I'm so wet, so open. Come and the liquid of my own need drip down my thighs, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that I'm a whore or a slut, that I'm giving myself to all these men wantonly.

This is what I want. It's who I am.

I can cede control of my body and still be in control of my life. I can be claimed and fucked and deliriously, deliciously satisfied. I can be passed from one man's arms to the next and filled with all these cocks, all this come.

And I'm still me.

I hold on to that as tightly as I hold on to Cayden's neck. He's fully seated inside me, thick and perfect, but I know there's more to come.

Deandre and I have played around in pretty much every way two people can, but it still takes my breath away the first time he pushes inside. I've never taken him like this before—in my ass with another man in my cunt. For a second, I can't breathe. It's too much, he's too big.

But then he's there, breaching me. I feel torn open, but I'm fine. He would never hurt me, I trust him.

I trust all of them, with my life.

He forces me open, and a scream forms in my throat. On and on and on he goes, one

long thrust that seems like it will never end. Only half way in, an orgasm takes hold of me. He and Cayden both groan as I pulse around their fat cocks, squeezing them hard. Appreciative voices sound out from around us. I look up to find the rest of the guys in various states of undress, watching. Heat rolls through me.

They love this. They think I'm so sexy.

Because I am. I'm everything they want, and they are everything to me.

Sweeping my eyes closed, I give in. My first orgasm rolls right into the next. By the time Deandre is fully seated, I'm wrecked, my thighs shaking, and my nails are buried so deep in Cayden's shoulders that they're probably about to draw blood.

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"Shh," Cayden says, gentling me. He kisses the side of my face.

Deandre brushes my hair back from my eyes. "That's it, little girl. You're taking us so well. Feel so good around your daddy's cock."

I whine, high in the back of my throat. My voice stutters as they start to move.

And I'm lost, floating away on pure sensation as they pound into me. Deandre whispers more soft, loving filth into my ear. Cayden gets his hand between us, nudging a finger up against my clit.

I come again just like that, and then again and again.

I've lost track of how many times my body has shattered by the time their paces speed up.

"One more," Deandre demands.

I shake my head, but Cayden rubs harder at my clit. He changes his angle slightly, thrusting his cock against my G-spot so directly, I almost can't help myself.

"Come on baby. Come for us."

I scream. Climax breaks me into pieces, sharp like glass, only there are hands. Mouths. Cayden and Deandre kiss me in turn, bringing me back to earth. Only as they each succumb, pumping their orgasms into my body, it drives me higher, because I do this to them. Me.

Jax and Adam and Sergio step forward to kiss my bitten lips. Deep inside my chest, I glow.

They chose me and I chose them. We've made a home, right here on Lonely Peak. Together.

Forever.

And none of us is lonely anymore.