



Baby for My Best Friend's Brother

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Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: A grumpy mountain man. A wedding in the wilds of Alaska. One night that changes everything...

I've always wanted a family. The kind I never had growing up. But with no Mr. Right in sight, I'm done waiting for a man to make it happen—I'm taking matters into my own hands.

Before I start my journey to single motherhood, I fly to Alaska for my best friend's wedding. It's supposed to be a carefree getaway, a last hurrah before my life changes forever.

Then I see him. Her brother: a gruff, broody mountain man. Watching him play with his honorary nieces and nephews—a tough brawny man who is actually a softy at heart—I swear I feel my ovaries explode.

Maybe it's the romance in the air. Maybe it's the way he looks at me when he thinks I don't notice. Maybe it's one too many wedding toasts.

One night. One perfect, reckless night.

But it's a night that will have lasting effects for both of us.

Will this surprise twist give me the family I've always longed for? Or am I setting myself up for heartbreak?

Did you love the set-up for "A Baby for the Mountain Man"? This is an alternate Sliding Doors-style version of the story, with the same heart-tugging premise but an entirely different journey. What if, instead of him coming to town, she went to him?

Dive into this fresh, steamy take on fate, love, and unexpected surprises!

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

ONE

SOPHIE

The plane has barely come to a stop at the gate when my phone chirps with a new message.

Sophie, please contact Dr. Bennet's office as soon as possible to discuss instructions for your upcoming appointment.

My heart skips a beat. Not because I'm scared or worried about this upcoming appointment. At least not in the way I used to be before an appointment.

Like a lot of plus-size girls, I usually dread going to the doctor's office. The discussions about my weight. The charts and graphs they'd show while throwing out phrases like "Body Mass Index" and "target weight." Meanwhile, I'd sit there numbly nodding and agreeing with everything they said. All the time I wondered when they'd tell me how we were going to treat my sinus infection.

Not this time.

Not only is Dr. Bennet super understanding of my past medical anxiety, but she's about to help me with the most important step I'll ever take in my life.

Swallowing hard past a lump that's suddenly lodged in my throat, I clutch my phone tightly in my hand as I disembark the plane and find a somewhat quiet corner in the airport. I glance over my shoulders and have to laugh at myself.

What am I doing acting like I'm protecting state secrets from spies all around me?

I've just landed in Alaska. The only people I know here are my best friend, Winter, and her soon-to-be husband. And I only met him once when he came to Seattle to help her move north.

Slate strikes me as a helpful man, but I doubt he's spying on me on Winter's behalf.

There might be some other wedding guests milling about, but if they are, I don't know them, and I doubt they know me. No one standing around here does. Just like no one cares about this call I'm about to make.

Well, no one besides me. I care. I care so much, my finger shakes as I pull up the doctor's number and click "CALL."

As the phone rings, I glance at the nearby window. Snow-capped mountains and thick green forests reach for the sky. It's not wholly unlike the view I see back home. There's just more of it. More trees. More mountains. More space.

And, at the moment, more privacy.

A cheerful voice cuts through the phone, interrupting my study. "Dr. Bennet's office. How can I help you?"

"Hi, uh... This is Sophie. Sophie Hart." My heart is pounding a mile a minute, making my voice pitch half an octave higher and my words come out a mile a minute. "I missed a call. From your office. Well, I suppose you would know it's from your office. Why would someone call about an appointment at someone else's office?"

I give a light laugh, even as I cringe inwardly. Seriously, what is my problem? You'd think I was back in middle school calling my crush. Good grief.

“Yes, Ms. Hart, we’ve been expecting your call.”

If the receptionist thinks I’m being ridiculous, she’s doing a good job of hiding it from me. Bless her.

“Is everything okay? Is my insurance company causing problems?” My voice pitches even higher. I’m bordering on sounding cartoonish. “Because if you need me to come by the office today, that might be a bit of a problem. I just landed in Alaska. My best friend is getting married this weekend, and I’m her maid of honor and?—”

“That’s perfectly fine,” the receptionist cuts in, somehow sounding commanding and polite all at once. “We just wanted to connect with you to go over a few things before your appointment next month.”

“Oh, good.” I release a heavy sigh of relief and press a hand to my pounding heart. “Great. I’m ready.”

Or, at least, as ready as I’ll ever be. For this call and what it involves.

“First, we want to encourage you to follow a balanced diet during the next few weeks,” she says. “Fruits, vegetables, complex grains, and lean proteins. If you like, I can send you some recipes the doctor recommends.”

“That would be great.” I toy with the zipper on my carry-on bag. “Thank you.”

“You’ll also want to take the vitamins the doctor sent you. It’s also a good idea to avoid stress as much as possible. So make time to relax and enjoy yourself.”

“Avoid stress.” Yeah, that’s going to be a tough order.

Even if I wasn’t going into a week of wedding festivities, everything about this

situation is stressful. Don't get me wrong. I'm excited for it. And for the wedding. But none of this is anywhere in the realm of relaxation.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

Maybe I should take up yoga. Granted, I've never done it before. So I have no idea what I'm doing. But I've heard it's relaxing. Surely, someone around here teaches yoga. If not, I can always find something on YouTube.

"Last, you'll need to avoid alcohol the week before your procedure," she says. "You mentioned you're at a wedding. Go ahead and have some champagne and cocktails. I say, enjoy it while you can."

"Okay, great." I take a deep breath. "Thank you so much. I'm pretty nervous about all of this. Excited, but... nervous."

"That's completely understandable. You're taking a huge step. But just think, once you're holding your baby in your arms, it will all be worth it."

I close my eyes tightly and picture myself holding a baby in my arms. The anxiety that has been pumping through my veins eases. Contentment warms my heart and flows through me.

"My baby will be worth it," I say softly.

"That's right." The receptionist offers me a few more words of encouragement and encourages me to call if I have any questions.

"Thank you," I say, feeling a million times better. "And please, thank Dr. Bennet."

The call ends, and I take one more breath before opening my eyes.

“Winter!” My eyes widen even more as my best friend pulls me into a bear hug.

Oh, crap. I wonder if she heard any of the conversation. I have no idea what I’ll tell her.

“Sophie!” She squeals, squeezing me even tighter. “You’re here! You’re here! I’m so happy you’re here.”

“So am I.” My momentary heart palpitations steady and I wrap my arms around her, my eyes starting to burn. I haven’t had many people I can count on in my life, but Winter is one of them. She’s been my best friend, a sister, and even a mom figure when I needed a little kick in the rear.

And now she’s getting married. “I’m so honored to celebrate this with you.”

“Are you kidding?” She pulls back to beam at me, her eyes every bit as teary as mine. “Now that you’re here, it feels like it’s finally happening.”

“Oh... I love you!” I pull her back in for another hug.

“I love you too.”

After a few more “I love yous” and “I love you mores”—and a couple of tears we pretended we weren’t shedding—Winter helps me pick my luggage off the conveyor belt. It’s no small task. One suitcase is almost completely packed with supplies for the bachelorette party, and another contains other odds and ends to help with the wedding decor.

Winter keeps up a steady stream of chatter as we walk to her Jeep, telling me about the relationship book she’s about to publish and the early buzz it’s getting.

We're talking about everything besides my phone call, so I'm pretty sure I'm in the clear.

As soon as we've loaded up the luggage and settled in the Jeep, she casts me a sly sidelong look. "I couldn't help but hear the last part of your phone conversation..."

So much for being in the clear.

"Oh, God." I clench my eyes shut.

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to," she rushes out. "But it sounded pretty serious. And, well, you mentioned... things. Things like doctors and babies. Are you... pregnant?"

That at least is a simple enough question to answer. "No, I'm not pregnant."

But then, I take a deep breath, and add, "Yet. I'm not pregnant yet."

"Yet?" Winter immediately pulls the Jeep to the side of the road and stops. She turns in her seat to face me. "I think you'd better start at the beginning."

"Okay. Here it goes." I fill my lungs again. "You're no stranger to the fact that my love life hasn't exactly been the greatest lately."

Instead of answering, she reaches for my hand.

"It's not just lately," I continue. "For years and years, I've gone out on dates and never really felt a connection to someone." I hesitate before making my next confession, and my cheeks flush bright red. "I haven't even had sex since college."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

Her jaw falls slack. “Really?”

There’s no judgment or pity in her voice. It only makes me love her that much more.

“I gave up on dating a few years ago. I figured if I was going to find the love of my life, it would happen on its own.” I stare down at our linked hands. “But it hasn’t. After doing a lot of thinking, I realized that just because I never found Mr. Right, it didn’t mean I had to give up on my dream of being a mom.”

“No, you absolutely don’t have to.”

“So, the call you overheard was with my OBGYN office. I have a date with a fertilized egg in a few weeks.”

“That makes sense.” She gives a sad smile.

I can see she wishes I would have told her, but she doesn’t say it. She’s too respectful of a person to ever judge another for wanting privacy for their life, choices, and body.

“I swear, I was going to tell you.” I squeeze her hand. “I just didn’t want to ruin your wedding plans by talking about babies.”

“My friend, nothing you say can ever ruin anything.” Her smile grows even bigger. “Oh wow. You’re going to be a mom!”

“And you’re going to be an aunt.”

“I am.” Her eyes go watery again. “Oh, Sophie. You’re going to be the best mom ever. I’m so happy for you. And so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” I give a shaky laugh. “I’ll admit that even though I’m excited, I’m terrified.”

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be the best.” She throws her arms around me for a hug. “And you know I’ll always have your back.”

“Thanks, Winter.” I hug her closer. “I can always count on you.”

“And you will always be able to.” She pulls back. “Well, shoot. This changes everything.”

“No,” I shake my head emphatically. “It changes nothing. I can still do everything I promised for the wedding. I can even drink until a week before the procedure. I can?—”

“That’s not what I meant.” She rolls her eyes good-naturedly. “I just meant that, in a way, we’re both leaving single life behind. We should celebrate you during the bachelorette party too.”

“No way.” I pull a face. “I don’t want anyone else to know.”

“Party pooper.” She leans back in her seat. “But, I suppose that’s only fair. My lips are sealed.”

Then she darts another mischievous look my way.

I groan. “Why do I have a bad feeling you’re working up something?”

“No, but I do think you should make every effort to enjoy yourself this next week. And I mean”—she wiggles her eyebrows—“really enjoy yourself.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just that you’re in Alaska. Men outnumber women here by a long shot.” She smirks. “Surely there’s a suitable man here to help you... itch a little scratch, one more time.”

I scoff. “I’m not having a vacation fling.”

“Oh, come on. Why not? There will be plenty of single guys at the wedding.” She starts listing off a variety of men and their qualifications as prospective lovers. My cheeks blush even more. “Then, of course, there is my brother.”

My brows knit together. “You’re seriously suggesting I hook up with your brother?”

“Why not?” She lifts a shoulder. “I’m pretty sure he’s had a bit of a dry spell too. And he’s... not bad.”

“You don’t sound so sure about that.”

“No, I swear. He’s a good guy. He’s just been a little... distant.” She shrugs again. “But that could just be because he’s still getting used to civilian life.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“Winter,” I release a heavy sigh. “I really appreciate what you’re doing, but can we talk about something—anything—else?”

“Oh, fine.” She turns the Jeep back on and merges onto the road. “I guess I’ll just have to tell you about the issues we’re having with the catering.”

I relax back in my seat. “That sounds perfect.”

TWO

CLIFF

The number of vehicles parked in front of Winter and Slate’s place gives me pause.

The loud music and even louder conversations and laughter nearly have me putting my truck in reverse.

I love my sister. In fact, there’s no one on Earth I love more than her. I’m even happy she’s found herself a man to marry. I’m even happier it’s a guy I actually like and respect.

That doesn’t mean I have to love or be happy about spending a night celebrating their upcoming nuptials with a bunch of strangers. Not to mention the acquaintances who I wish were strangers.

The things I do for my sister. With a groan, I jump out of my truck and grab a couple bags of ice from the passenger seat. Our grandma always told us we should never

show up to a party empty-handed. I'm all thumbs in the kitchen, but a party can always use more ice, right?

Tucking a bag under each arm and grabbing the rest, I make my way toward the house.

"Howdy, stranger."

I start, nearly dropping the bags. Slate, Winter's fiancé, appears from the shed carrying what appears to be more charcoal.

I clear my throat. "Hell of a part you've got going on."

"That's all your sister." He holds up his bags of charcoal. "I'm just here to grill."

"And I'm just here to bring ice."

"Good call on the ice. Your sister will be thrilled."

From the look he gives me, I can tell he doesn't just mean about the ice.

"Yeah, parties aren't usually my thing."

"Mine either." He still looks like he wants to say more.

Thankfully he doesn't. Neither of us has ever been big talkers. That's probably part of the reason I've always liked him.

I hope he doesn't change that now.

I catch a whiff of meat on the grill. My stomach growls. "Well, hell. I guess we'd

better do this.”

The fragrant barbecue mixed with the woodsy musk of the surrounding wilderness is too much to resist.

I missed both during my years of deployment and base-hopping. Though I’d rather chew off my own arm than go to a party, it’s hard to resist the pull of my roots.

Slate rolls his eyes. “That’s the spirit.”

“But I won’t promise to have fun.”

“I’d never ask you to do something as crazy as having fun.” He gives me a stern look.

“But don’t ruin Winter’s.”

I glare at him. “I’d never do that.”

“Yeah, sure.” He cuffs my shoulder in sympathy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“Look, I know we’d both rather come up against a bear in a forest than make small talk with anyone in there. But it means a lot to Winter.”

I sigh. “Hell. Why do you have to put it like that?”

“I’m just speaking the truth.”

“You’re speaking like a man in love.”

“You have me there.” His lips curve into a wry grin. “Just wait till it’s your turn to fall in love.”

“Oh, no.” I shake my head. “Just because you’re drinking the until-death-do-we-part Kool-Aid doesn’t mean I’m lining up to take a swig.”

“Famous last words.” He scoffs. “Who knows? Maybe the future missus is tapping the keg in there as we speak.”

“Right. My future wife is inside tapping a keg. And I’m going to have a blast being forced to make small talk.”

“You never know. Winter says saying what you want out loud is one way to make it come true.”

My eyes narrow. “Don’t tell me she has you buying into that manifesting bullshit.”

“Why not?” He slings an arm around my shoulders and ushers me inside through the

side door to the kitchen. “It worked for me.”

Before I can tell him that’s the sappiest shit I’ve ever heard, we’ve breached the door and stepped into the fray.

“Cliff!” My sister exclaims, abandoning the women huddled around her. “You came.”

“Bearing gifts.”

Her eyes widen. “Best. Brother. Ever.”

“I try.” I shift my hold on the ice. “Where should I park these?”

She fights me for one of the bags and then leads me toward a row of coolers and a baby pool filled with ice. I’m all too happy to let her chat away about the last-minute wedding plans as I help her replenish the ice.

She’s talking about the arrival of her best friend from Seattle when a curvy brunette catches my eye.

Her chestnut hair is lightly curled, framing one of the sweetest faces I’ve ever seen. Her dark blue eyes and even darker eyelashes stand out as she carefully watches the party.

Watches rather than participates. A woman after my own heart.

I don’t think she’s from around here. Then again, I haven’t exactly spent much time reacquainting myself with the locals since I retired from the service and moved back. But considering she’s wrapped up in a jacket on what would pass for a warm evening, I suspect she’s from the lower forty-eight.

Besides, I'm sure I'd remember seeing a woman like her around.

"Ahem." Winter clears her throat. "Earth to Cliff. Earth to Cliff, do you copy."

I blink in surprise and tear my stare away from the buxom brunette. "Sorry, I zoned out. What were you saying?"

She arches an eyebrow. "I asked if you'd like an introduction."

I groan. Oh, man. So it begins. "With who?"

"With Sophie. The woman you've been staring at for the past few minutes." An amused grin plays on her lips. "You know our grandma always said it was rude to stare."

"I wasn't staring."

"Sure you weren't." She takes me by the arm and pulls me away.

When I realize she's leading me to the woman I wasnotstaring at, I quit dragging my feet.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“Sophie,” Winter calls out, and her friend looks up. “I wanted to make sure you met my brother.”

Winter gives her a pointed look and Sophie’s cheeks flush pink. It makes her look even sweeter.

And even more tempting.

“Cliff.” She pinches my arm and I wince. “This is Sophie. Say hello, Sophie.”

“Hello, Sophie,” I reply gruffly, tugging my arm away from my sister. “Uh... welcome to Alaska.”

Great. My excellent communication skills are at work again.

“Hello, Cliff.” She offers a shy smile. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Good things?”

“Good things.” Her cheeks flush even darker, and I take an involuntary step toward her.

Winter looks between us and smirks. “Well, since the two of you have struck up such a conversation, I’ll make myself scarce.”

I don’t object. Hell, I’d tell her to scram—with love—if I didn’t suspect that would embarrass Sophie.

Sophie. Sophie. Sophie.

The name fits. It's sweet, just like her.

"So." I shove my hands in my pockets because I suddenly feel as awkward as a twelve-year-old at their first school dance. "How long will you be in town?"

"I leave on Sunday."

I nod. "You know, if you need anything while you're in town, I'd be happy to show you around."

Her eyes light up at that. I'd be willing to play tour guide for the whole time if it'll brighten her day just a little.

"Actually, there is something I was hoping to do."

My throat grows unexpectedly thick. "Name it."

"Can you recommend a good yoga studio?"

Well, shit. There goes my plans to squire her around town. I've barely scoped it out in the months I've been back. Even then, it's only been to find the basic provisions I need: groceries, fishing tackle, and ice.

Still, I'm not willing to give up defeat so easily. Where this woman is concerned, I'd move mountains. "I can ask around."

"Oh, you don't have to go to any trouble."

"It's no trouble," I insist. Besides, I bet Winter will know of a good yoga studio.

She's only been back for about a year now, and it's like she never went away.
"Anything else you'd like to do?"

"I don't know. I'm up for anything relaxing really." She nibbles on her bottom lip, and my pants grow tight imagining doing that for myself. "I'm supposed to be relaxing this week."

I frown at that remark. "Is everything? Because if anyone is giving you problems, I'll take care of it."

"No—no." She reaches for my arm, and my heart skips a beat. "It's nothing like that. I just... want to relax while I'm here."

"Oh, okay. Good."

We fall silent and when she realizes she's still holding my hand, she pulls it back quickly. Hell, I've probably messed this up already by going all He-Man on her.

I'd better tamp that down. I don't want to scare her off.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I clear my throat. “Look, I?—”

“Uncle Cliff! Uncle Cliff!”

We both turn and I drop to one knee in time to catch a little blur of pink before she can knock into me.”

“Annalise!” I release an oof as she throws her arms around me, knocking her knee into my gut in the process. “How are you doing, girly?”

“I’m good.” She plants a wet kiss on my cheek and pulls back to tell me all about a game she’s playing with a couple of the other kids in attendance.

I glance up at Sophie to apologize but catch the soft smile on her lips. Her eyes have gone all soft, making my gut clench.

“Friend of yours?” she asks, when Annalise pauses for breath.

“Something like that.” I make the introductions and explain that Annalise is my best friend from high school’s girl.

I mean it when I say I haven’t lit up the social scene, but I have caught up with a few friends. For some reason, Kyle’s kids have taken a shine to me.

Annalise curtsies to Sophie, earning another one of those heart-melting grins, then grabs my hands.

“Uncle Cliff, will you come play with us?”

“I...” I’m torn.

Ordinarily, I’d have no problem ditching small talk. Kids are easier to talk to than adults. They tell the truth and don’t want anything besides your company.

This is different.

There’s something about Sophie, something that has gripped me to the core. It makes me want to spend every second I can with her.

“Go on,” Sophie urges, ending my turmoil. “We can talk again later.”

“Yeah. We’ll talk later.” I slowly rise to my feet, holding her gaze steady with mine. “It’s a date.”

Annalise tugs my hand again, and I scoop her up in my arms. I toss her in the air, making her burst into giggles and earning another Sophie Smile.

“C’mon.” I settle her on my hip. “Let’s go get in trouble.”

Though, as I take a parting look at Sophie, I suspect I’m already in deep, deep trouble as far as she’s concerned.

THREE

SOPHIE

I try my best to follow the conversation Winter is having with one of her neighbors.

Really, I do. It's something about the best fruits and vegetables to grow in this terrain. I'm sure it's helpful, interesting even.

But every time I come remotely close to catching up with the topic, I get a fresh glimpse of the scene playing out across the yard. Winter's brother and his band of kiddos seem to be having the time of their life.

Cliff rears and nays as the little boy riding his broad shoulders pulls on his ears. The rest of the Cliff Fan Club erupts in a chorus of belly laughs.

I instinctively grin. It's impossible to ignore the way his dark eyes sparkle or the way his smile transforms his strong bearded jaw.

He's not what I expected. Of course, Winter described Cliff as a reclusive grump. I pictured a man who stood on the outskirts of a party grumbling and scowling at anyone who came close. I suppose that's kind of how he seemed when he first arrived. Yet, he's come nowhere close to fitting that description since she introduced us.

Not only did he show up to the party with ice—a truly thoughtful surprise delivery in the middle of a party—but he chatted me up and even offered to guide me around town during my stay.

That's to say nothing about the way he's immediately jumped into Uncle Cliff mode.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I swear, if my biological clock wasn't already ticking, it would have started as soon as he scooped up his pint-sized friend.

Now, watching him play pony to half a dozen children, my ovaries are in serious danger of exploding.

Winter nudges me in the ribs. "You should get in on that."

My brow furrows in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you should go play with Cliff and the kids." She lowers her voice. "I know you wish you were over there instead of making small talk here."

I pull a face. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me." She wraps an arm around my shoulder and gives me a light squeeze. "It'll be good practice. Future Mom."

My heart skips a beat at her new nickname for me. I turn my attention back to the play happening across the yard. She's right. I would love to be over there joining in the fun. But I feel like I should say no. I'm here for her, not to act out any fantasies.

I start to make my excuse, but Cliff looks up at that moment. His dark gaze locks with mine, and his breathtaking smile softens. He winks, and my heart races.

"You're right." I press a hand to my chest, as if it will steady my pulse. "It would be good practice."

“Exactly, and it looks like fun. Plus”—she wiggles her eyebrows at me—“if you decided to flirt with my brother in the process, that might be a good time too.”

I groan good-naturedly, but don’t make any argument, because she’s right. It would be fun to play with the kids.

And to flirt with her handsome brother.

“I’ll check in with you later,” I assure her.

“Just not too soon.”

I’m still shaking my head at my best friend’s blatant matchmaking efforts as I cross the yard. Cliff, who has moved on from being the kids’ horse to being their jungle gym gives me another one of those unexpected smiles of his.

“I was wondering when you’d finally get over here,” he says. His low, husky voice warms me from within. More loudly, he introduces me to his crew. “Alright, troops. At—ten—tion!”

Within seconds, the gaggle of children line up somewhat uniformly, from tallest to shortest. It’s almost like they’re doing their best impersonation of the Von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music*.

I stifle a laugh imagining each child marching forward and announcing their name at the call of a whistle.

It wouldn’t surprise me if they did. Cliff does kind of have a Daddy Captain Von Trapp way about him.

“This is Sophie,” Cliff announces. “She’s joining us on the mission. Be nice, or I’ll

make you do extra pushups.”

“Yes, Captain Cliff!” they chorus.

I catch his smirk. He’s definitely proud of himself. I shake my head again. Cliff and his sister really are something else.

A little girl with strawberry blonde curls steps forward. “Do you wanna play house with us?”

I blink. “House?”

She nods solemnly. “You can be the mommy.”

“And who gets to be the daddy?” Cliff asks.

“You,” says another kid, who’s missing their two front teeth. “Duh. You both look like the mommy and daddy.”

My cheeks flush, but the kids are already pulling us toward a cluster of lawn chairs and a plastic play kitchen someone has set up in the shade.

Before I know it, I’m “baking bread” and Cliff is holding a spatula flipping plastic burgers. All the while, I’m rocking a baby doll and Cliff is bouncing a six-year-old “baby” on his hip.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“I’m not cut out for this,” Cliff mutters under his breath as he pretends to eat a plastic hamburger.

“Actually you are.” I grin at him. “The kids love you.”

“That’s because I let them use me as a jungle gym.”

I watch as another one of the boys demands to be picked up. Once he’s hoisted up, he cuddles against Cliff’s chest, and sighs.

“That’s not the only reason.” I swallow past a lump in my throat. “It’s because they trust you.”

He glances at me, and something I can’t quite decipher flickers in his eyes. “Well, I try to be a safe person.”

I swear, I can practically feel my ovaries pinging. Forget IVF. I’m going to end up pregnant standing here watching Cliff in total Dad Mode. Not that I can say that.

One of the girls tugs on my arm, calling, “Mommy, mommy, mommy.”

“Yes, my darling?” I ask.

“Mommy, you and Daddy have to kiss now.”

My heart stutters. “What?”

“It’s the rules,” she insists. “Every mommy and daddy kisses when they play house.”

“Rules are rules,” Cliff says seriously. A twinkle in his eye gives away his real thoughts.

Fully committed now, the kids chant: “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

We exchange a look. He lifts an eyebrow in silent challenge. Daring me to chicken out.

“Okay.” I try to sound though my heart is hammering out of my chest. “I can give Daddy a kiss. For the game.”

“Right.” Cliff nods. “For the game.”

Setting down the children in his arms, he steps closer to me. He flattens his palm against my lower back, pulling me close. My body thrums at his touch. And delicious shivers run up and down my spine.

He leans in slowly. Giving me time to pull away. I don’t.

His lips brush mine. Softly. Gently. Barely there.

It’s chaste and completely G-rated.

But holy hell, my toes curl in my tennis shoes.

I feel it in my knees. My spine. My scalp. My soul.

Cliff pulls back slowly, eyes lingering on mine.

Half of the kids cheer. The others making gagging sounds.

“Daddy!” One of the kids wedges between us and tugs on Cliff’s flannel shirt. “I want another hamburger.”

Cliff clears his throat, suddenly very interested in the toy ketchup bottle.

I force a laugh and start pass out invisible juice boxes.

But my pulse is still racing.

Later, while the kids are off chasing bubbles, I take a moment beside him on the grass.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“They really do love you,” I muse aloud. “You’re a natural.”

Cliff shrugs. “They’re just kids. Kids are easy”

“You’re still good with them.”

“I guess,” he mutters. “They’re fun to be around.”

“Do you want kids someday?” The question is out before I can stop it.

Cliff stiffens slightly, then shrugs again.

“Sure. Someday,” he says. My heart hitches again as I imagine mini Cliffs running around a wooded backyard not unlike this one. “But not for a long time.”

The words hit me like a splash of cold water.

“Oh.” I try to keep my voice neutral, but something in me deflates.

“Why?” he asks. “You thinking about it?”

“Something like that.” I smile, but it’s small. “I’ve always wanted to be a mom. I guess lately it’s felt more... pressing.”

I don’t bother mentioning that even with medical advancements, women tend to have more of a ticking time bomb when it comes to making babies.

“Well, you’d be great at it,” he says. “I mean it.”

“Thanks.”

The kids call us back before I can say anything else.

We spend another hour playing with them—me pretending everything is fine, and Cliff pretending he didn’t just kiss me like it mattered.

When we finally return to the adults, I’m exhausted, grass-stained, and somewhere between sexually frustrated and emotionally torn.

It’s a really conflicting mixture of emotions .

Winter eyes me curiously as I approach. “Did you have fun?”

“I did.”

But I also have a lot to think about.

Because I came to Alaska for her and one last adventure before my greatest adventure of all.

I didn’t expect Cliff.

Or that kiss.

And how much I suddenly wish that our little game of playing house wasn’t pretend at all.

FOUR

CLIFF

“Remind me again why we're doing this?” I scowls as I kick at a loose floorboard.

Our town's community center has been turned into a makeshift ballroom. Or, as close to a ballroom as you can get in a place that also masquerades as a BINGO hall, VFW, and Elk's Lodge.

I'd rather be playing BINGO with the old ladies in town than taking this damn dance class. And they still pinch my cheeks, even though I'm well into my thirties.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I'd also like to find whoever put the idea of an impromptu dance class into Winter's head. I have a few choice words for them.

Slate smirks as he stretches his arms. "We're doing this because we love your sister very much."

"You're the one marrying her."

"And you're the one who made your parents think they should have another kid."

I grunt. "I'm pretty sure that had more to do with a Super Bowl win and a missing box of condoms."

Slate chokes on a laugh. "Don't let Winter hear you say that. She's convinced she was conceived to a Whitney Houston ballad."

"She probably was," I grumble. "Our mom was going through a Kevin Costner phase." God knows I saw *The Bodyguard* probably a hundred times as a small child.

"Which is still less humiliating than this." I gesture to the line-dancing instructions being scrawled across a whiteboard by a woman in cowboy boots who looks entirely too chipper for this situation.

Across the hall, couples are milling around awaiting direction. An upbeat and twangy song plays over the speakers. I crane my neck to see if there's any way for me to sneak out the back without alerting Winter after this thing gets started.

Then I see her.

Sophie is standing at the edge of the dance floor. The sundress she's wearing catches the light, hugging every one of her ample curves. Her hair falls in loose waves around her shoulders, and she's got this easy confidence that makes her glow.

She throws back her head and laughs at something one of the groomsmen says. My frown deepens.

He's standing a little too close to her for comfort.

My jaw tightens.

I watch them for another beat as two more men sidle up. All of them buddies Slate made during his military career.

Ice floods my veins.

"Excuse me," I mutter to Slate. "I gotta... take care of something."

He follows my glare and smirks. "I see that you do. Tell your girl I say, 'hey.'"

I ignore him as I stalk across the room. When one of the guys tries to brush a lock of hair back from Sophie's face, I step between them.

"If you'll excuse me"—I practically growl until he takes a giant step back—"I believe this dance is mine."

Sophie's lips part in surprise, but she doesn't protest as I lead her away.

"Sorry." I scrunch my nose. "I don't usually do that. But he was getting a little too

close for comfort.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Yours or mine?”

The instructor claps her hands and calls for us to turn toward us, saving me from having to answer. As she goes over the first steps, I place a hand at Sophie’s waist as directed. It’s supposed to be casual—for balance or leading or something.

But the second my palm meets the curve of her hip, I forget every instruction I heard.

“You okay?” Sophie asks when I don’t move as the others start.

“Yeah.” I shake my head. “I was just going over the directions again in my head.”

It’s about as dumb of an excuse as I could make. But Sophie doesn’t seem to find fault with it.

She steps forward, and—breaking the first of the instructor’s lessons—I follow her. I nearly step on her toes more times than I care to admit.

But, sooner than I would’ve expected, my feet fall into rhythm with hers. One-two, three. Her fingers rest lightly on my shoulder, heating the skin underneath my flannel. Her other hand is tucked in mine. Her fingers seem so soft, so delicate against my work-hardened palms.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

It's no wonder I feel clumsy around her.

"Step, together, step, touch!" the instructor calls out again.

Sophie's hips shift with the beat, her sundress sways, drawing my attention back to her curves. She brushes against me, and my jeans grow painfully taught around the groin.

This is torture. The sweetest, most tempting torture I've ever experienced.

When the instructor tells us to dip, I tighten my hold on Sophie and lean her over my arm.

"Look at you." she laughs. "You're a natural."

"I don't know about that." My voice is rough as I catch a hint of jasmine. "I'm just trying not to step on your toes."

"You're doing great."

I raise us back upright. We make another turn. Our hands separate, then rejoin as we circle back. She stumbles slightly, laughing as she does, and I catch her by the waist. My fingers linger before sliding back into place.

Our eyes meet.

And everything shifts.

I lean forward. She meets me halfway. Our lips brush. It's so light, it doesn't draw attention from anyone else.

But it isn't enough. Quickly looking over my shoulder, I dance her toward the corner and pull her behind a divider.

Our mouths come together in a crash. This kiss isn't for the kids. It's not for show. It's not even careful.

It's for me.

It's for her.

Her mouth opens under mine, and the kiss deepens. She moans into my mouth as her hands slide up my chest. Mine tighten around her waist, digging into those sweet curves that have been torturing me since I first saw her.

Our tongues tangle as the heat of her body presses into mine. I groan as she moves closer, my cock pushing against her belly.

Fuck me, this kiss is something else. But it still isn't enough. I want more. A lot more than I can take here behind this divider.

She presses against me, letting out the tiniest moan. My pulse rockets. Something dark and needy stirs below the surface. If I don't step back now, I'll take her right here. Right now.

We break apart slowly, our breaths coming in hard gasps.

Sophie's eyes are glazed. Her lips kiss-swollen. She's stunning.

“Cliff...” she breathes.

“Sophie,” I whisper.

Neither of us says anything more. But once we’ve caught our breaths, we return to the dance floor. I ignore the amused looks Winter and Slate send our way as we find our steps again.

By the time the instructor calls an end to the class, there isn’t a thought in my head or a feeling in my bones that doesn’t involve this woman.

“Wanna grab a drink?” I ask.

“I wish I could. Really,” she says, brushing a hand through her hair. “I have to organize all the bachelorette swag tonight. Every girl in the group sent something different, and I’m putting the gift bags together.”

I don’t want to leave her. Not yet.

“Need help?”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“You want to help with party prep?” Her tone is skeptical but amused.

“I want to help you.” I give her a lopsided smile. “Bath bombs and chocolates and whatever else you have in there.”

“Okay.” Her face lights up. “Okay. Yeah. That would be nice.”

I walk her to the door, our hands brushing as we go, both of us pretending not to notice.

Outside, the air is cooler. Crisp. The sun hangs low over the mountains, casting golden light across the gravel parking lot. Sophie tugs a cardigan around her shoulders and looks up at the sky like she’s trying to memorize it.

“Smells like woodsmoke and wildflowers out here,” she says softly.

I glance at her, at the soft curve of her smile, at the way her fingers toy with the hem of her sleeve. “Better than traffic and coffee breath?”

She laughs, and I swear I feel that sound somewhere in my chest. “You make a compelling argument.”

We linger on the front steps, neither of us ready to call it. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, and her hand brushes mine again.

I glance down at our fingers. “So, about these swag bags... what exactly goes in them?”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “You’ll just have to see.”

“Come on. Give a hint.”

“No way.” She shakes her head.

I lean in. “I have ways of making you talk.”

“I look forward to finding out how.” She steps away and toward Winter’s Jeep, her sundress swaying with every step. “See you soon, mountain man.”

I watch her until she drives around the corner and disappears.

And when I finally turn back toward my truck, my hands are clenched into fists and my chest is tight.

Because I’m in trouble.

And I’d like to get into a lot more of it if she’ll give me the chance.

FIVE

SOPHIE

Cliff unwraps a candle from butcher paper.

Squinting at the name on the bottom of the jar—English rose—he raises it to his nose. He makes a face and pulls it back.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He looks so horrified. Unfortunately, the little snort that slips out gives my amusement at his expense away.

He narrows his dark brown eyes. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Of course not.”

“Really? Because, to me, it sounded like you were laughing.”

A fresh urge to laugh bubbles inside of me, but I tamper it down. It would be rude of me to laugh at his struggle. Especially when he’s the one doing me a favor right now.

Part of me can’t believe he came. That he offered to help.

Winter has always spoken well of her brother. And my first impressions of him have been, well, better than I could have imagined. But that doesn’t mean I expected him to willingly sacrifice an evening of his life in the name of assembling welcome baskets for wedding guests.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

It's... nice. More than nice, actually.

The other part of me... The other part of me is having a hard time concentrating on the task at hand. I keep getting distracted watching the broad-shouldered, bearded man across from me at work.

He's exactly the kind of man I could see myself?—

Nope. I shake my head at myself. I'm not going down that road. I've already made my decision. I have a date with a vial of sperm. I don't need a date with a mountain man.

Especially a mountain man who happens to be my best friend's brooding big brother.

I catch my bottom lip before it can curve into a grin. "Why would I be laughing?"

"That's a good question." He studies me with that unblinking gaze of his. "I notice you haven't answered it."

"No." I bite the inside of my cheek even harder. "Of course, I'm not laughing at you."

"Right." He caps the candle and slips it into one of the baskets along with a bundle of wooden matches. "Somehow I find that hard to believe."

"Now you're saying you don't believe me?" I fake a gasp of shock and press a hand to my chest. "That isn't very gentlemanly of you."

“It’s a good thing no one has ever accused me of being a gentleman.”

The piercing look he offers with that statement could turn a woman into a puddle on the floor. Luckily, I’m made of sterner stuff.

He catches my stare and grins at me. I drop the candle I was holding.

Okay, so maybe I’m not quite so strong as I thought.

The jar rolls under the motel table and hits his foot. With a smirk, Cliff leans over and picks it up.

“Orange and bergamot,” he reads out loud. “What’s bergamot?”

“Something that might be more your flavor than roses.”

“I don’t have problems with roses,” he says.

“You didn’t look like you enjoyed the other candle.”

“That’s because it smells like baby powder.”

I almost tell him I picked that candle out myself, but keep the argument to myself. He’s not wrong. It does smell like a blend of roses and baby powder. That’s probably why I liked it. I do have babies on my brain.

Cliff opens the new candle and takes a whiff. He nods in approval. “You’re right. It is more my style.”

“Which is why we’re giving people the option between the two.”

“Makes sense.”

He hands the candle to me. Our fingers brush, his work-hardened finger sliding over the backs of mine.

My heart is still pounding as Cliff turns back to the basket in front of him. With a fresh frown, he attempts to wrap a ribbon around the basket handle.

I can't help but watch as his big fingers struggle with the dainty ribbon.

“If you'll just keep filling the baskets, I'll take care of the ribbons,” I say. “They're kind of tricky.”

“Thanks.” His gaze returns to mine, and it's impossible to ignore the smolder in his eyes. Or the way said smolder makes my pulse quicken even more. At long last, he takes a deep breath and tears his gaze from mine. “I guess we should see what we have here.”

He reaches for another package. I'm so stupefied by the lingering effect of his stare, it takes me a moment to realize he's grabbed something from the bachelorette party pile.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“Wait.” I shake my head, forcing myself to snap out of the stupor. “That one isn’t for the welcome baskets. It’s for?—”

I cut myself off and wince as Cliff removes a black box with “HER PLEASURE” printed in a bold, hot pink font across it.

“That isn’t mine,” I blurt out.

He arches an eyebrow. “Then whose is it?”

Something about the way his voice grows husky as he says the last word makes a pulse beat between my thighs. Instinctively, I press my thighs together more tightly and bite back a groan as a jolt of pleasure bursts through me.

“I’m pretty sure these were sent by a personal product program your sister works with.” I wince and can feel my cheeks flush hot. “You... you probably don’t want to hear any more about that.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to talk about my sister having a history of passing out... toys to her friends.” He flips the device over in his hand. “I’d rather talk about why you claim you aren’t interested in them.”

The smoldering gaze he gives nearly knocks the breath clear out of my lungs.

“I didn’t say—” Actually, I did. “I didn’t mean... What I meant to say is...”

“What did you mean to say?”

I open my mouth and nothing comes out. Crap. I swear, the blood has completely left my head, making it impossible for me to draw a clear thought.

Releasing a frustrated breath, I ball my hands into fists on my knees. “I just meant that those are for the bachelorette party bags, and I don’t know much else about them.”

“Right.” He pushes a button and a blue light appears.

“Oh God. I didn’t realize they would be charged already. Usually you have to plug it in for a couple of hours first or charge the...” I trail off as my cheeks flush again.

“There goes your story about not knowing anything about these guys.”

I lift my shoulders, because what else can I say or do.

“Of course I know how... those work.” I’m a single woman in her late twenties. “I still don’t know much about this particular device.”

“So you don’t know if it’s any good?”

“Nope.”

If the ground could just open up and swallow me whole, I’d be eternally grateful.

“Hmm.” He holds the button down again, and it buzzes to life. “Hold out your hand.”

My lips part in surprise. “What?”

“Your hand.” He stares into my eyes unblinking. “Hold out your hand.”

My pulse quickens as I do what he's ordered.

"Good girl." The corners of his lips twitch.

He lightly rubs the vibrating bulb against the palm of my hand. A shiver runs up my spine, and I gasp.

His smirk grows. "I'd say that's a good first result."

He slides it from my palm to the pulse on my wrist. It sends a throb through my veins and straight between my thighs.

I suck in a breath. "Oh."

"Do you like that?"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I nod as he continues to lightly press it against my wrist, trailing it lightly against the smooth skin

“Good.” He nods toward the bed. “Sit.”

Ordinarily, I’d take exception to someone ordering me around. But at the moment, I’d flap my arms and cluck like a chicken if he asked me.

Seated on the edge of the bed, I take shallow breaths as he settles beside me. He’s still moving the vibrator up and down my forearm, sending more ripples of delight through me.

He lowers his head toward mine. His mouth pauses an inch from my neck. His hot breath tickles the sensitive skin behind my ear.

“What do you think about this?”

Painfully slowly, he trails the device up my arm, pausing briefly at the inside of my elbow, before continuing its upward progress. At my shoulder, he veers to the side and brings it down to my breast.

My nipples tighten, and I gasp out loud.

He chuckles and lowers his lips to my neck. He presses wet, open-mouthed kisses on my skin. Sucking lightly as he presses the vibrator to my puckered nipple sending wave after wave of growing desire through me.

“Oh...” My eyelids flutter. “Oh my.”

“Mmm.” He nibbles my neck. “I think we can aim for a little more than ‘Oh my.’”

Before I can tell him ‘Oh my’ isn’t a bad thing, he suddenly presses the wand between my thighs. I buckle up, my eyes crossing as he pushes it harder and releases, harder and releases. Teasing my clit. Tempting me.

Taking the pleasure already building inside of me to heights I never imagined.

“Oh God. Oh God. Cliff.”

Suddenly, he shuts the vibrator off. I open my eyes as he tosses it aside. “If you liked what that could do, just wait until you see what I can do.”

Then, he drops to the floor, tugging my leggings down my hips. He presses his mouth to my pussy. His tongue slides across my seam and finds my clit.

And then... then, there are no words.

SIX

CLIFF

CLIFF

If Hell is saving a place just for me, I’m pretty sure it looks like this.

There’s fluorescent lighting. Tacky elevator music. A mirror that no one could look good in, showing just how ridiculous I look in a rented tuxedo.

“This tie is choking me,” I grumble, yanking at the collar. “Are you sure I have to wear this damn thing?”

“Try standing up straight,” the tailor says, tugging at my sleeve. “You’re slouching.”

“Feels about the same.”

He mutters something under his breath, probably about how I’m worse than the ring bearer, and disappears to get the next round of options.

I stare at my reflection. The tux is black, with a satin-trimmed lapel and a bowtie that’s choking the last of my will to live. I look like a penguin that wandered too far from the glacier and got stuck playing dress-up.

The door creaks open behind me. I glance up to catch a glimpse of Sophie entering the shop through the mirror.

My gut clenches.

She’s wearing a soft, clingy dress in a dusty blue that hugs her waist and flows around her legs like water. Her hair is twisted back, half up and half down. Tendrils fall around her face. And her lips... Those sweet, fuckable lips curve up into a sweet grin.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

The same way they do every time she sees me.

“Well, well.” She stops a few feet away and crosses her arms. “Look at you, Mr. Bond.”

“I feel like an idiot.”

“You look fucking hot.”

That shuts me up.

I moisten my lips as she steps closer. She cocks her head and studies me from different angles as if she’s inspecting Michelangelo’s David. I shift from one foot to the other—torn between liking her attention and wanting to hide from it.

“I thought you were running errands today,” I say, my voice croaking so badly, I wince inwardly.

“I was.” She lifts the bag she’s carrying. “I stopped by the bakery and ran into Winter, who told me you were getting your tux fit. I figured I’d drop by and, I don’t know...” She bites her bottom lip. “Offer some moral support.”

“Moral support?”

“Well.” She tips her head and lowers her voice. “Immoral, if you play your cards right.”

My breath catches.

I swallow and glance toward the hallway. “The tailor could be back any second.”

“Not for at least ten minutes,” she says. “I peeked at his clipboard on the way in. He’s got another guy in a fitting room trying on at least five different suits.”

“You have a lot of intel. Who’s a secret agent now?”

She takes a step closer. “I have many hidden talents.”

I know I shouldn’t let her in here. After the line we crossed last night... I can still bring her taste to mind.

But I should stop there. Before we cross another line.

But when she touches the lapel of my jacket and smooths it over my chest with slow, deliberate fingers, I stop pretending I want her to leave.

“Let me help you with the buttons,” she murmurs, slipping her fingers beneath the bowtie. “You look like you can’t breathe.”

“I can’t.”

Her eyes flick to mine, amused. “From the collar or from me?”

“Yes.”

That earns a soft laugh. The kind that builds in my stomach and heats my blood. She undoes the top button of my shirt slowly. Then the next, exposing the base of my throat. Her fingers brush over my skin.

Fiery lust shoots through me.

“You clean up well.” She runs a hand down my chest, and I suck in a breath. “But I think I prefer you a little rumpled.”

She tugs my shirt loose from the waistband, slipping a hand beneath the hem. Her touch is warm, electric. My breath comes faster as she leans in and presses a kiss just under my jaw.

“Sophie,” I manage, voice low and uneven. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

Her hands slide to my belt.

I catch her wrists gently, holding them for a second. She looks up at me, bold and soft at the same time.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I’ve been sure since the second you winked at me across the lawn party like a cocky bastard.”

I laugh, caught off guard, and that’s all it takes to loosen whatever thread of restraint I had left. I reach behind me and tug the curtain closed.

Sophie drops to her knees.

Her smooth fingers wrap around me, stroking up and down. I let out a low growl as she pump her fist slowly up and down.

Eyeing me through her thick lashes, she leans forward and wraps her lips around the head of my cock.

Closing my eyes, I throw my head back as she takes me into her mouth.

I don’t know if I’m in Heaven or Hell now. But either way, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

The bar is too loud. Too crowded. Too not-Sophie.

Slate shoves a beer into my hand as we squeeze between a pool table and a guy yelling into his phone. “Not bad, huh?”

I grunt. “It’s fine.”

He raises an eyebrow. “That the attitude you’re bringing to my bachelor party?”

“Just didn’t expect so many bodies. Or a twenty-first birthday party. Jesus.” I nod toward the swarm of tiara-clad women taking over the corner booth.

“Welcome to bustling Alaskan nightlife,” he says. “Can you imagine if we’d gone to Vegas.”

No. I fucking can’t. I’d rather sit bare ass on a frozen lake then go to a bachelor party in Las Vegas.

Thank God Slate isn’t the type. He’s been good about keeping things low-key for my sister’s sake, but even this version of a toned-down bachelor party—craft beer, dartboards, and a playlist from ten years ago—is overstimulating the hell out of me.

Mostly because I can’t stop thinking about Sophie.

The way she looked kneeling in front of me in the dressing moon. The heat in her eyes. That sweet, naughty little smile she wore when she wiped the corner of her mouth and said, “I think this makes us even, mountain man.”

I’ve never cum so hard.

And the memory of it has me harder than a mountain. Again.

I’m not exactly in the mood for small talk and cheap beer.

One of the groomsmen tosses an arm around Slate’s shoulder. “You ready to level up the party? A couple of the guys found a strip club thirty minutes from here. Real ‘authentic’ Alaskan experience.”

“Hard pass,” Slate says without hesitation. “Winter would kill me. Then, she’d bring me back to life just to kill me again.”

The guy laughs, already peeling away. “Suit yourself.”

I raise my brows at Slate. “Nice save.”

He shrugs. “I’m not trying to end up on a Reddit thread. You good if we duck out?”

“I was about to suggest it.”

We polish off our beers and slip out the back. The night air is cool and smells faintly of pine. My shoulders relax for the first time all evening.

“You heading home?” Slate asks, fiddling with his keys.

“Actually...” I hesitate. “I was thinking about stopping by the motel. Sophie was hosting the bachelorette party. Figured she could use a hand to clean up.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

He grins. “That’s one way to call it.”

I flip him off with a smirk and head for my truck.

The whole short drive to the motel, I think about Sophie’s sweet mouth. The taste of it. The feel of it wrapped around my cock.

By the time I pull up to the motel, I’m so hard, I wouldn’t be surprised if I passed out from lack of circulation to my brain.

The motel is quiet on the outside. But the closer I get to the door of Sophie’s room, the more I hear it. The sweet sound of Sophie’s giggle.

Grinning, I lift my hand and knock firmly on the door. There’s a little scuffle. A thud and a mumbled curse word before the door opens. Sophie, dressed in leggings and an oversized hoodie, gapes at me in surprise.

“You’re here.”

“I am.” I glance behind her. There are half-empty wine bottles, wrapping paper, and ribbons strewn around the room. “Are you alone?”

“I am.” Her cheeks are flushed. Her hair’s up in a messy bun and a sash that says “MAID OF HONOR” slipping from her shoulder.

My heart does something stupid at the sight.

“You look like you robbed a bachelorette supply store,” I say from the doorway.

She wiggles upright and teeters slightly before steadying herself against the door frame. “What are you doing here?”

“I was on my way home. Figured I’d stop by to see how your party went.”

“Oh... it was fun.” She looks around, blinking at the pile of glittery debris. She steps back and holds the door open wider, silently inviting me in. “The others left an hour ago. It’s kind of chaotic in here.”

“I see that.” I step over a bag of penis straws. “Need help cleaning?”

“Are you offering?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, yes please.”

She sways, and I instinctively reach out to grab hold of her. She’s flush against me, head resting briefly on my chest.

“You okay?” I murmur.

“Tipsy. Sleepy. Satisfied with a party well done.”

“You did good work.”

“I did,” she says, beaming. “And now I’m going to collapse. Come tuck me in?”

The question is innocent enough, but there’s a flicker of mischief in her eyes that has

my pulse kicking up again.

“You sure?”

She nods. “I’m not asking for round two. I’m asking for cuddles.”

“Cuddles, huh?” I let my hand skim lower on her back. “Just that?”

“Just that... unless I fall asleep halfway through kissing you.”

I groan under my breath and follow her toward the bed

Sophie’s room smells like coconut lotion and lavender. There are clothes piled on a chair, a stack of tissue on the nightstand, and a throw blanket crumpled at the foot of the bed.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

She crawls in first, flopping onto her back with a sigh of relief.

I toe off my boots, shrug off my flannel, and climb in beside her, still wearing my jeans and undershirt. I prop myself on one elbow and look down at her.

She's staring at the ceiling, lashes fanned, mouth soft.

"Thanks for coming," she whispers. "I didn't think I'd want company tonight, but..."

"But?"

She turns toward me slowly. Her palm finds my chest. "But I like how you make me feel. Like I can breathe a little easier."

That's all it takes. I lean in and kiss her. Soft at first. Her lips part beneath mine, and she pulls me closer.

We kiss like we've been waiting for this moment all night. Like the quiet and the moonlight and the leftovers of wine have created a bubble just for us.

Her fingers thread into my hair. My hand finds the curve of her hip. Our bodies align naturally, like we were made for this exact kind of slow burn.

I press kisses along her jaw, down her throat. She arches into me, breath hitching.

"You drive me crazy," I murmur against her skin.

“Good.”

We kiss until the heat simmers low, until our hands grow still and our breathing syncs.

She sighs and presses her forehead to mine. “You’re not what I expected.”

“Same.”

We fall asleep like that. Tangled. Warm. Unwilling to let go.

SEVEN

SOPHIE

The bridal suite smells like roses and champagne. There’s underlying current of nerves around us.

Winter sits tall in the makeup chair, her shoulders pulled back like she’s trying to channel calm. Her stylist carefully pins the last few strands of her soft updo, while the rest of us flutter around the room with lipstick tubes, steamers, and tiny bottles of Prosecco.

It’s chaos—but the perfectly wonderful, happy, beautiful kind.

“You good?” I ask, crouching beside Winter and gently squeezing her hand.

She meets my eyes in the mirror, her expression both radiant and overwhelmed. “I think so. Maybe? I don’t know. My stomach is doing weird somersaults.”

“That’s love,” I tease.

“That’s indigestion. I knew I shouldn’t have had that breakfast burrito,” she groans.

“You’re glowing.” I laugh and press a quick kiss to her temple. “Slate is going to cry the moment he sees you.”

“He better,” she mutters, but her lips curve into a grin.

Before I can answer, there’s a soft knock at the door.

A beat later, the door cracks open and Cliff steps inside—and the room goes still.

Or maybe that’s just me.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

Because holy hell.

He's wearing a dark tuxedo that hugs his broad chest and shoulders like it was custom-made for sin. His hair is neater than usual, though a few unruly strands still fall across his forehead.

And his beard—God help me—is freshly trimmed. But it's still scruffy enough to make my thighs clench with the memory of what that scruff felt like on my skin when he made me cum with his tongue.

“Wow,” he says, eyes fixed on Winter. “You look...”

“Like someone who might pass out?” Winter offers.

Cliff chuckles and crosses the room to her, completely ignoring the rest of us. “You look stunning, Baby Sis.”

Winter swallows hard and blinks fast.

He bends, whispering something just for her ears. Whatever it is, her eyes well up.

I look away, giving them a moment, but not before catching the way Cliff wraps her in a careful, protective hug—the kind that says I've got you. Always.

A man like this—gruff, quietly loyal, unexpectedly gentle—it's no wonder my brain keeps fantasizing about the big grand dream instead of the one I've mapped out for myself.

When Cliff pulls back, his gaze drifts to me.

“Sophie,” he says, his voice is low and rumbles in my chest.

“Hey.” I smile, trying to play it cool even though my knees are suddenly shaky. “You clean up well.”

He steps away from his sister and closes the distance between us, his eyes drinking me in like he’s trying to memorize every detail.

“You look...” He lets out a breath. “Fucking hell. You’re stunning.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. “Thank you. So you look well too.”

He leans in, voice dropping to that low gravelly register that gets me every time. “I’m gonna be hard all day thinking about you in this dress.”

My breath catches. “Cliff...”

“Will you save the first and last dance for me?” His thumb brushes mine, slow and teasing.

“Of course.” I can barely get the words out. “

His smile is wicked and warm all at once. “Good. Because I plan to remind you just how good we are together. Even with your clothes on.”

I can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of me. “You’re bad.”

He leans in and kisses my cheek, his lips lingering. “You like it.”

I do.

God help me, I really, really do.

I step out onto the grass with the other bridesmaids, the soft crunch of gravel under my heels quickly replaced by the lush whisper of grass.

The mountains rise behind the ceremony arch like silent witnesses. A light breeze stirs the ribbons tied to the chairs, and the whole thing feels magical.

Winter stands just out of sight, waiting for her cue. Slate is already at the altar, shifting from one foot to the other as the music starts. He looks handsome and terrified. Like a man who knows he's about to have everything he's ever wanted—and still can't quite believe it's real.

Cliff appears, offering his sister his arm.

There's something about the way he looks at her—so steady and full of pride—that makes my throat tighten. Winter loops her arm through his, blinking back tears as they take the first step together.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

He's walking her down the aisle. Their parents are no longer in the picture. So he's doing what he's done for her all her life. Being the one she could count on.

I press a hand to my heart.

Cliff's face is all fierce devotion as he leads her toward the altar. But then, halfway there, his eyes flick to me.

The air punches from my lungs.

He doesn't smile.

He doesn't wink.

But something passes between us. A current. A knowing. A promise.

I see you.

And somehow, it's more intimate than if he'd stripped me bare in front of everyone.

They reach the altar, and Cliff gently presses a kiss to Winter's temple before placing her hand in Slate's. The officiant says something about love and family and new beginnings, but I'm too busy watching Cliff move to stand beside Slate, taking his place as best man. He folds his hands in front of him, stoic and silent.

Except when he glances my way again.

I'm doomed.

I knew that already, but standing there in a borrowed dress with a bundle of flowers clutched to my chest, I can feel it in my bones. This isn't just a fling anymore. This isn't just hormones or the magic of a wedding weekend.

This is... more.

And it terrifies me.

Because I've already made my decision.

I'm going home.

I have appointments. Frozen eggs. A plan. A future that doesn't include waiting around for someone to maybe love me back.

But when he looks at me like that?

I want to forget all of it and imagine a life where this isn't just a fun fling but forever. A life where this is real.

Winter and Slate share a kiss that makes the whole crowd sigh—and then they're turning to walk back down the aisle, hand in hand, all glowing and giddy.

Cliff steps forward to offer me his arm. "Can I escort the most beautiful bridesmaid back down the aisle?"

My heart flutters like it's trying to make a break for it.

I slip my hand into the crook of his arm. "Only if you promise to behave."

He chuckles low in his throat. “Not a chance.”

We walk in sync, his arm solid beneath my fingers, his scent messing with my ability to think straight. When we reach the end of the aisle and round the edge of the seating rows, he tugs me slightly off course—toward a quiet corner behind the tent.

Before I can ask what he’s doing, he pulls me behind a tall hedge, out of view.

His hands are on me in a second—one firm palm sliding down to cup my ass.

He pulls me flush against him, and his hard cock presses squarely against me.

His mouth is on mine. My lips part, inviting his tongue.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I want him again. Last night and the night before were something else. But we didn't go far enough.

I know he was being a gentleman by not taking me too far.

But tonight? Tonight, I want to keep my wits about me. Because I don't want him to be a gentleman.

I want him to claim me. Completely.

I bite on his lower lip, and he groans into my mouth. He grinds against me. My hips move in response, instinctive and greedy. I'm seconds from asking him to find a broom closet or linen tent when the speakers crackle.

"Would the brother of the bride please report to the head table? It's time to begin our toasts."

We break apart, chests heaving. As if that's even possible—I've been breathless since the moment our paths crossed at the airport.

"Fuck." Cliff rests his forehead against mine, then lowers his arms to wrap around my waist.

The DJ repeats the call, louder this time. Cliff raises his head, his dark eyes lock on mine.

"I better go make my toast." He rubs his lips together like he's still savoring the taste

of me. “You’ll still save a dance for me?”

“Sure.” My voice is barely a whisper. Does he even have to ask?

“Which one?”

He brushes his lips against mine, and my body shivers.

“Would I be greedy if I said I wanted all of them?” He kisses my cheek and lowers his voice. “Especially the ones back in your room?”

My heart skips a beat.

It would be too easy to fall in love with this man.

It’s a good thing I’m leaving soon. Otherwise, I’d be starting out my pregnancy with a broken heart when things inevitably end.

But I have him now.

I might as well enjoy this for as long as I can.

I give him a light squeeze and step back. “They’re all yours.”

As he starts to turn away, he pauses. “Wait. Before I go...”

He gestures to the photographer, who’s herding the wedding party together for post-ceremony shots. “Would you mind taking a photo with me? Just us?”

Just us.

Something about those two words hits different. It's not just a snapshot he wants.

It's a moment.

It's something to keep.

"Okay," I say, a little breathless.

We step into the frame together. His arm curls around my waist. Mine loops up to rest lightly against his chest.

"Closer," the photographer says.

We already are.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

She snaps the photo. I already feel captured.

EIGHT

CLIFF

The hotel room is quiet except for the soft shuffle of our feet across the carpet and the low hum of music playing from Sophie's phone.

It's an acoustic cover of an old love song. It's slow and a little wistful. It fits.

Sophie's in my arms, her cheek against my chest, her hands looped loosely around my neck. She sways with me like we're still out on the dance floor instead of standing in the middle of a motel room in Alaska.

"This counts as our last dance, right?" she murmurs.

I tighten my hold on her waist. "It better not be our last."

She tilts her head to meet my eyes. "You know what I mean."

Yeah. I do. It's been hanging over us all day. The clock. The ticking down of her time here. It's made every smile feel more precious. Every touch more urgent.

I clear my throat and step back, just enough to reach for the bottle chilling in a metal ice bucket on the dresser. "Figured wedeserved a little send-off." I lift the champagne. "Swiped it from the reception."

Her eyes light up. “You stole booze from the wedding?”

“Borrowed. Slate owes me for letting him marry my sister.” I pop the cork and catch the foam with my thumb. “Besides, it seemed like the right way to end the night.”

She watches as I pour two glasses. There’s something softer in her expression now. Not tired, exactly. Just contemplating. Like she’s soaking this in and storing the memory away for later.

We sit on the edge of the bed, our knees bumping, champagne flutes in hand. She takes a sip, then sets her glass down with a quiet clink.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” she says.

I lean in. “Me too.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The only sound is the ice melting in the bucket and the faint music still playing in the background.

Then she turns to me, her voice lower now. “I don’t usually do this.”

“Steal champagne?”

She smirks. “No. I mean... this. Flings. With my best friend’s brother. Things that make me feel like I’m living in a romance novel.”

I laugh. “You think this feels like a romance novel?”

“A little.” She brushes her fingers along the edge of her glass. “Don’t you?”

“I haven’t read any romance novels, but.... yeah.” I nod slowly. “It’s kind of hard to

believe.”

I lower my forehead to rest against hers. “But novel or not, I’m not ready for this to end.”

Her smile falters slightly. Pulling back slightly, she takes another sip of champagne.

“I love my life in Seattle,” she says after a beat. “I really do. My work, my friends. I’ve built a life there.”

“I believe it.”

“But sometimes it feels like there’s no room for...”

“For what?”

“For a man like you.”

I don’t know what she sees when she looks at me. Maybe I’m a mountain man in scuffed boots who doesn’t do brunch or gallery walks. But I want to be more than that for her. Even if I don’t know how.

“You don’t owe me anything,” I tell her. “I just want to give you one night you’ll never forget.”

Her breath catches, and I swear something shifts in her eyes.

“Cliff,” she whispers.

I set my glass down. I reach for hers and set it down next to mine. Then I slide closer.

Moving closer, I pull Sophie. My tongue tangles with hers.

I let out a low groan as I move my hands up the curves of her hips. I need to feel her. All of her.

Pulling us both to our feet on the side of the bed, I tear my lips from hers long enough to pull her dress over her head. I greedily scan her body.

I could look at her forever and never get tired of it.

We may not have forever.

But we have tonight.

And I don't plan on letting a second of it go to waste. Tonight, I'll make her mine.

I have to get my fill of her while I can.

I take my time removing her clothes, stroking her bare skin as I do. Kissing her most sensitive spots with each bit of skin that I expose.

She sighs and leans into my touch, my lips. As if the feel of me against her is the best thing she's ever felt.

I get the feeling.

As I strip her bare, she reaches for my clothes. Her fingers trace the lines of my muscles as she exposes my chest, pushing the dress shirt from my shoulders.

With every layer of clothing we remove, we expose more of ourselves, body and soul.

Once we're both naked, I pull Sophie against my chest. I trace kisses over the side of her neck. My hands slowly rove over her breasts and hips. I trace her smooth skin up and down, savoring every whimper and quiver.

With one hand, I cup her breast. It overflows my hand. I rub it against my palm, listening to every noise she makes. Applying more and less pressure to her liking.

As she leans forward against my touch, I rub my thumb over her nipple, making it hard as she gasps.

I slide my other hand down her belly, lower until it reaches the junction of her thighs.

I slide one long along the seam. She squirms against me, teasing my throbbing cock with her sweet curves.

I clench my eyes tight. “Fuck, you’re so wet.”

She nods and spreads her legs allowing me to find her sensitive nub. I’ve tasted it before, but it wasn’t enough.

None of this will ever be enough.

She arches against me and cries out as my finger strokes her again and again. I listen and follow her lead as her breaths grow faster and more labored.

With every sigh she makes, I stroke her more. Lathering her up. Making her ready for me.

My dick grows harder pressed against her thigh. But as much as I crave my own release I push it aside.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I want more for her.

I want everything for her.

Her moans turn into gasps. The gasps turn into cries

The cries turn into chants of my name. She's close. She's so fucking close.

"Come for me," I growl into her ear. "Come for me like a good, good girl."

"Cliff, I—" Her body tenses and she cries out once more as her body shakes with pleasure.

I keep up the movement. I trail kisses along the side of her neck while the orgasm radiates through her.

The sweet, musky scent of her pleasure permeates my senses, driving me more wild.

She goes limp in my arms, and I carefully lower her to the bed.

"Fuck." I nuzzle the side of her neck. "I want you so badly."

She opens her eyes. "One second."

She turns to her side and reaches into a hot pink bag. She pulls out an equally pink foil wrapper. "A souvenir from the bachelorette party."

I shake my head. “Please tell me you aren’t going to pull out that dildo.”

“No, you don’t need to worry about that. I already know what you have is better than anything I’ll find in the vibrator aisle.”

Chuckling, I take the condom and rip the foil open.

Pumping my cock in my fist, I slide it on. Sophie watches me, a satisfied grin plays on her lips.

“Are you ready?”

She nods. “I’ve been ready for so long.”

“So have I.”

“I want you.”

“You have me.”

“Prove it.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Now and forever. I push into her and clench my eyes. Her tight warmth wraps around my cock, milking me for all I’m worth.

Fuck me. I had no idea she’d feel so good.

Pulling her hips up, I push myself in deeper, until I’m buried to the hilt.

“Yes.” She gasps and pushes her hips against mine. “Just like that.”

I grind against her. Taking long, deep strokes inside of her. With every thrust, I claim more of her.

With every stroke, I feel myself becoming more hers.

As I feel the walls of her clench around me and she cries out for me again, I use all my willpower to keep going. Waiting until she collapses against the bed to find my own release.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I empty myself into the condom with a roar.

Still panting, I collapse onto the bed next to her and pull her close to me. I link my fingers with hers, playing with them lightly.

“Fuck me.”

“I know.” She gasps for breath.

“It’s never been like...” I shake my head and press my lips to her neck.

Sophie lies curled on her side, her face nestled into the crook of my arm, one leg draped over mine. The sheets are twisted around us, her hair a soft tangle against my chest.

I’ve had sex before. Great sex, even.

But this—whateverthis—was something else entirely.

She didn’t just let me in. She gave me everything. Every breath, every touch, every shiver. Like she wanted to remember it for the rest of her life. Like sheknewthis was the last time.

And maybe it is.

I stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore the ache that’s settled deep in my chest. I should be satisfied—hell, I should be smug. I made her gasp. Laugh. Come apart in my arms

more than once. That was the goal, wasn't it? One night she'd never forget.

But I didn't expect it to wreck me.

She shifts slightly, her palm sliding across my chest. "You still awake?"

"Yeah." My voice comes out low and rough. "Did I wear you out?"

A sleepy smile tugs at her lips. "A little. But in the best way."

I chuckle softly. "Good."

We fall into silence again, the kind that feels full, not empty.

I want to ask her to stay. To push her flight back. Hell, cancel it altogether and move in with me in the woods. But I can't.

That's not who she is.

She has a life. A real one, built on talent and hard work and a vision that doesn't involve hiding out in a cabin or hanging flannel on a clothesline. She's got her sights set on something bigger. Something that doesn't include a man like me.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she asks suddenly, her voice barely audible.

"What?"

"About tonight. About... this."

I blink, turning my head to look at her. "Not for a damn second."

She lets out a breath I didn't realize she'd been holding and nods against my chest.
"Good. Me neither."

I run my fingers through her hair. "You don't have to explain anything, Sophie."

"I know. I just..." She lifts her head to meet my eyes. "I don't want to make this harder than it already is."

"Too late for that," I say, trying to smile.

Her eyes soften. She reaches up and brushes her fingers along my jaw. "You're a really good man, Cliff."

I swallow hard. "You don't have to say that."

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“I’m not saying it to be nice. I mean it.” She hesitates. “You could’ve made this feel like a fling. But you didn’t. You made it feel like something special.”

“Itwassomething special.”

Her gaze lingers on mine a beat longer before she lays her head back down, her breath warm against my skin.

I know I won’t sleep tonight. Not really.

I just want to hold her as long as she’ll let me.

Because tomorrow morning, she’s leaving.

And I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do after that.

NINE

SOPHIE

I wake to the scent of pine.

And him.

It’s on my skin. On the sheets. On the man slumbering next to me.

It’s the morning after. At least, I think it’s morning. There’s a hint of sunlight

streaming through the blinds. But if it's morning, then that means Cliff and I have spent most of the night engaged in foreplay, sex, or post-coital bliss.

Which means I've barely slept. Not that I'm complaining. I haven't felt this desired, aroused, or satisfied since... well, ever.

Cliff's chest rises and falls beneath my cheek, his skin warm against mine. We're tangled up in his hotel bed, the sheets askew, our limbs still wrapped around each other like we couldn't bear to let go in our sleep. Which, I suppose, is exactly what happened.

For a moment, I just listen to his steady breathing and try to freeze time. I don't want to move. I don't want to ruin the illusion that this could be more than a temporary escape. That maybe, just maybe, I could stay here in this quiet, wild place with this quiet, wild man.

But the light slipping through the window is too golden and insistent. And my suitcase is half-packed in the corner. And my flight back to Seattle is in a few hours.

I inhale a shaky breath and press a soft kiss to Cliff's shoulder before carefully sliding out of bed. He stirs slightly, reaching for me in his sleep, but doesn't wake.

In the bathroom, I brush my teeth and splash water on my face. My reflection looks different. Softer somehow. More open. Like I'm standing on the edge of something I never planned for.

I need to talk to him.

I need to tell him about the IVF. About why I came here. And about what changed.

I don't expect him to want to drop everything and follow me to Seattle. I don't even

expect him to want more than we've had this week. But I can't leave without telling him the truth.

He deserves that.

I finish dressing and walk back into the room just as Cliff is sitting up, rubbing his eyes. His hair is tousled, and the sleepy smile he gives me when he sees I'm still there nearly undoes me.

"Hey," he says, voice rough. "You trying to sneak out on me?"

"Nope." I sit next to him, my hip pressing against his. "But I do have to leave to catch my flight soon."

He frowns, like he'd forgotten that was even a possibility. Then he reaches for my hand and threads his fingers through mine.

"Can I take you to the airport?"

"Sure." I swallow hard. "But there's something I want to talk to you about first. Something I should've told you earlier, but... I didn't know how."

After what we've shared these past few days, I don't feel right leaving without telling him about what I have planned back in Seattle.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I don't feel right leaving without telling him that I'm having second thoughts. Because I'm falling for him.

His brows draw together. "Okay. What is it?"

Before I can choose my words, his phone buzzes on the nightstand.

He glances at the screen and groans. "Shit."

"Everything okay?"

He reads the message, then sighs and scrubs a hand over his face. "Fire call. I'm a volunteer with the unit. They need everyone on site—a structure fire about thirty minutes out."

My heart sinks. "You have to go."

"I don't want to."

I smile sadly. "But you have to. Because you're that kind of man."

He groans again and leans in to press a kiss to my forehead. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

He kisses me once more—slow and full of longing—then grabs his gear and heads

out the door.

I sit for a few minutes in the now-quiet room, my heart heavy.

There's no chance he'll be back before I have to leave. There's no chance I'll get to tell him what's on my heart.

So, I tear a page from the hotel stationery and start to write:

Cliff,

I wanted to tell you this in person, but life had other plans.

I came here to Alaska because I needed one last adventure before starting the next chapter of my life. I was going to become a single mom through IVF. I thought I knew what I wanted. What I needed.

And then I met you.

You made me laugh. You made me feel wanted. Seen. Cherished. Like maybe I wasn't as alone in this world as I thought.

I'm not asking for anything. I know your life is here, and mine is back in Seattle. But I wanted you to know that this meant something to me. That you mean something to me.

With all my heart,

Sophie

I fold the letter and leave it with a girl standing behind the motel's front desk to give

Cliff when he returns. Because I know he will.

Heart heavy, I gather my things and head to the airport.

I stir a spoonful of honey into a mug of peppermint tea and breathe in the steam, hoping it'll settle my stomach. So far, it's not working. Neither is the plain toast I'm slowly nibbling between sips. My nerves are too high for anything more substantial.

This was supposed to be a big day. An empowering day. One I've dreamed about and planned for a long time.

Yet, here I am. Curled up in my pajamas, second-guessing everything.

I glance at my phone. It's sitting face-up beside my empty plate, buzzing every now and then with notifications I refuse to check, because I know they aren't the one I want to see.

But it's been two weeks. I haven't heard from him in all that time. There's no reason to think I will now.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

After the fourth time my phone lights up, I turn it over, silencing the screen.

Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow back against it. I've already prayed to the porcelain goddess this morning. Twice. I don't want to do it again.

If I'm this sick now, I can't imagine what it'll be like when I'm actually pregnant.

Though, I suppose I won't be too upset about puking my guts out every morning if it means I'm finally on my way to having a family. The toast turns to paste in my mouth. I reach for my phone again and tap out a quick message.

ME: You home from your honeymoon yet?

WINTER: Got back last night. What's going on??

ME: I'm getting ready to leave for the clinic. It's happening today.

WINTER: And how do you feel?

ME: Torn.

My phone rings immediately. I answer on the first ring.

"I'm sorry," Winter says without preamble, her voice tight with guilt. "If I'd known you were going to fall for him, I never would've pushed you together."

"You never pretended it was supposed to be anything more than a fling." I give a

short, humorless laugh. “I’m the idiot who caught feelings.”

“You’re not an idiot.”

“I feel like an idiot. But...”

“But...” Winter prompts.

“I don’t regret it,” I say quietly. “Even if it hurts now. I just thought—hoped—there might be more. I left him a letter at the front desk. Told him everything. I haven’t heard a word.”

“You did what?” Winter’s voice sharpens.

“I left him a letter,” I repeat, pressing a hand to my fluttering stomach. “I poured my heart out. Told him how I felt. That I wanted to try IVF, but that I’d fallen for him anyway.”

“And he never responded?”

“Not even a text.”

There’s a tense silence on the other end before she growls, “Maybe he didn’t get it.”

“Maybe.” I swallow hard. “Or maybe he did and decided not to say anything.”

“Don’t,” Winter warns. “Don’t do that. Don’t assume the worst. Cliff might be an emotionally constipated mountain man, but he’s not cruel. If he’d read that letter—if he knew how you felt—he would’ve said something.”

“Please don’t go confronting him,” I say. “You know how stubborn he is. If he didn’t

reach out, he had his reasons.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re good reasons.”

“Maybe not. But it doesn’t matter. I was the one who said it was just a fling. I meant it—at the time. I told him not to get attached.”

“But you did.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I really did.”

Winter lets out a slow breath. “Do you still want to go through with it?”

I look around my quiet kitchen—the mug of tea, the uneaten toast, the half-packed tote with snacks and a book for the waiting room.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“I think so. I mean, I have to try. This was always the plan. I can’t change it just because...”

“Just because my brother is an asshole. And an idiot.” She huffs. “Then I’m here for you. Every step of the way. And so is Slate.”

A tear slips down my cheek. “I love you. Both.”

“And we love you. So much. And we’re going to love that little baby you’re going to have.”

“Thank you.” I wipe under my eyes and force a smile. “My baby is going to love their Auntie Winter and Uncle Slate.”

“I can’t wait to spoil them. Now.” She gives me a stern. “You should go do something to distract yourself. Go get a mani-pedi. Get a pumpkin spice latte. Take a walk.”

“Jeez bossy when you’re nervous.”

“Damn right.” Winter sighs gently. “But seriously, take care of yourself. And if you need me, promise to call me later. Hell, call me later even if you don’t need me.”

“I will.”

“Good. And... good luck. Even though you don’t need it.”

“Wish me some anyway.”

“I wish you all the good things,” Winter says, her voice warm and fierce with love.
“Always.”

After we hang up, I turn my phone off and tuck it in my bag. I want complete silence so I can be at peace as I take this huge step.

Even if my heart and tummy are anything but peaceful.

TEN

CLIFF

“Aw... fuck.”

My morning isn't off to the best start.

I got in late after another fire call.

I knocked over the pile of fire wood.

And now, I can't find a damn thing. Which is weird because my cabin is basically only two rooms plus the shitter.

I yank open the top drawer of my dresser and slam it shut with more force than necessary. I open the second, but don't find it. I try to shove it closed but it sticks, then pops open so hard it nearly takes out my kneecap.

I curse under my breath and reach for the third drawer. I misjudge the angle and catch my thumb in the edge.

“Fuck it all to fucking Hell,” I hiss, shaking out my hand and cradling it against my chest. “Whatever. Fuck it. Who gives a fuck if I don’t have a clean shirt?”

It’s not like I have anyone to impress.

“Fuck,” I blurt out again, for good measure.

I march over to the laundry basket and dig through the pile, desperate for a flannel shirt that doesn’t reek of smoke. Most are crumpled or stained with grease. I find one at the bottom that smells like pine and worn leather.

“Good e-fucking-nough.”

“Whoa. Are you on your period or what?”

I spin toward the sound of Winter’s voice. She’s standing in the doorway of my bedroom, eyebrows arched, a steaming mug of coffee in her hand, held out like it’s some sort of peace offering.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

“I thought you told me it wasn’t funny to make jokes about women and their cycles,” I growl.

“I said it wasn’t funny for me to make jokes about it. It’s totally fine for me to do it. Especially if it’s at my grumpy brother’s expense.”

I grunt and pull a plain T-shirt from the bottom of the drawer. It’s wrinkled. Whatever. I tug it on anyway, and slide the flannel shirt over my shoulders. Winter follows me into the kitchen, practically stepping on my heels.

“Jokes aside, you’re acting like a real pain-in-the-you-know-what.”

“I’m not acting like anything.” I scowl at her. “And just say the word. Say ass.”

“I’m not going to say ass. Even if you’re being one.”

I clench my jaw. “Did you want something?”

“I wanted to find out why you’re stomping around like a moose in heat.”

I stamp a foot down. “I’m not...”

I trail off as Winter cocks her head to the side in a very “see what I mean” way.

“You’re upset,” she says. “And you have been since I got back from my honeymoon.”

“You only got back yesterday. Isn’t a man allowed to have a bad day?”

“Cliff.” Her voice softens, but it only makes my jaw clench harder. “Talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Bullshit. You look like shit.”

I wince. “Gee thanks.”

“Fine. You look like someone whose soul is dying. Better?”

I sigh. Damn it all. If it was anyone else, I could tell them to fuck off. But not with Winter. She’d just laugh in my face and keep pestering me until I answer.

My shoulders slump. “It’s Sophie.”

With a nod, Winter takes a seat at the kitchen table and gestures for me to join her. “What about Sophie?”

Damn. How am I going to tell her what I’ve done. “We... hooked up.”

She arches an eyebrow.

Now that it’s out, the floodgates open. “At the wedding. Before it. After it. But we hooked up.”

Winter’s other eyebrow goes up. “And?”

“And?” I shake my head. “I just told you I hooked up with your best friend at your wedding and all you can say is ‘And’?”

“Well, yeah.” Her brow relaxes. “I already knew.”

“You did?”

“Everyone did.” She gives a short laugh. “It’s not like either of you were very good about keeping it a secret.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

I blink at her. “Don’t you have an opinion about it? God knows you have an opinion about every other couple that’s fucked in the area. You wrote a whole book about it.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I wrote a relationship book.”

“Semantics.” I huff. “You didn’t answer my question: Don’t you have some kind of thought or feeling about what I’ve just told you?”

“Oh, I have plenty of thoughts and feelings.” She leans back in her chair, eyeing me speculatively. “But I think the most important question is what your thoughts are about it. I already know it’s made you mad.”

“Hooking up with her didn’t make me mad. Her ghosting me did.”

“Ghosting?” She frowns. “Sophie didn’t ghost you. If anyone ghosted anyone, it was you.”

Her eyes narrow. “I have half a mind to kick your ass for doing that. Actually, that’s mostly why I came by.”

“It’s why you came...”

“That’s right. To find out what the hell possessed you to sleep with my

“The fu...” I shake my head. I seem to be having trouble finishing my sentences right now. “You seem to have a few wires crossed.”

“Really? To me it seems like you’re just being a man. Taking what he can get without a look back.”

“Are you kidding? She broke my heart.”

Now, Winter is the one to look confused. She opens and closes her mouth a few times. Her voice is strangled when she finally says, “Sophie broke your heart?”

“Yeah, she did.” I press the heel of my palm to my chest, where there’s been a dull ache the past two weeks. “I know she said she only wanted a little vacation fling, but I feel for her.”

“Did you tell her?”

I was going to. I was going to tell her the morning after your wedding, before she flew back home, but I got called away for that wildfire. When I got back, she was gone.”

“Without saying goodbye?”

“She left the motel. Left Alaska. Without so much as a note.”

Winter shakes her head slowly. “That doesn’t make sense. That’s not like Sophie.”

“Well, that’s what happened.”

“Plus, I have it on good authority she left you a note.”

“She... she didn’t leave me a note.” I clench and unclench my jaw. “Where did she leave it?”

“With the girl at the motel’s front desk.”

“The girl at the...” I groan. “The one who...”

“The one who is always making eyes at you even though she’s barely legal.” Winter clucks her tongue. “God damn.”

“Wha—what did the letter say?”

“Everything.” She gives a light laugh. “Said she poured her heart into it. She said she had caught feelings for you. She talked the IVF. She said she’d hold off if you wanted to try having a relationship.”

“IVF?”

Winter winces. “It’s definitely not my story to tell. Though... I guess she was going to tell you about it.”

She takes a deep breath. “Sophie is planning on having a baby. She’s... Oh my God. She has an appointment at the clinic. This afternoon.”

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

A dozen thoughts fly through my head at warp speed. Sophie is having a baby. With an anonymous donor. How do I feel about that?

How do I feel knowing the woman I love loves me? And right now, she's planning on having a family on her own. Because she thinks I don't love her."

I fumble around my counter until I find my phone. "What's her number?"

She gives it to me. I punch in the numbers. It rings and rings. But she doesn't answer. I leave a message, and hang up.

By the time I'm off the phone, Winter is grabbing the keys to my plane. "I've already booked you a direct ticket from Fairbanks to Seattle. Are you ready to go get your girl?"

I swallow past a lump in my throat and give a shaky nod. "I've been ready for her my whole life."

The receptionist barely gets out a "Sir, you can't go back there!" before I'm halfway down the hallway of the Seattle fertility clinic. I know I'm probably violating every policy in the book, but I don't care. I need to see Sophie.

I've left her dozens of messages.

I even called the damn clinic.

I've flown hours and paid a fortune in on an Express car service.

I've come way too damn far not to see my woman and be there for her as she takes one of the most important steps in her life.

A nurse steps into the hall, blocking my path. "Sir, patients are not allowed beyond this point without clearance."

"I just need to talk to Sophie. Please."

The nurse hesitates. "Are you the man who was trying to reach her earlier?"

I nod quickly. "Yes."

She disappears into a side room, and my heart thunders in my ears. After what feels like forever, she returns with Sophie behind her. She's in jeans and a sweatshirt, her hair up, face pale.

"Cliff?" she sighs. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here." I cross to her in three long strides. "I didn't get the letter. I didn't know. But I know now. And I'm here."

"I see that." She blinks at me. "Why didn't you call?"

"I didn't find the letter until this morning," I explain, out of breath. "I hopped on the first flight I could get."

"You still could've called today."

"I tried," I say. "It kept ringing out."

Her eyes widen. "I put my phone on silent earlier today. I just wanted to relax."

“It’s fine,” I say. “Besides, I wanted to come tell you in person.”

She stares at me, her eyes going as misty as mine feel. “Tell me what?”

“I’m saying I love you.” I take a deep breath and a smile slowly spreads across my lips. “And I want to be part of this. Of all of it. If this... goes the way you hope it does, I want to be there for you. Both of you. If it doesn’t, I want to be there to try again. With you.”

“You do?”

“Of course, I do. Because this isn’t just a fling for me. You matter, Sophie. You—you and this baby, if you’ll have me—are all I want in this world.”

A tear slides down her cheek. “Do you mean that?”

“More than anything.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

She lets out a soft laugh. “Good. Because I love you, too.”

Unable to stay away from her another second, I pull her into my arms. I rest my forehead against hers. The lump in my throat swells and I blink hard against my own damp eyes.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

She lifts her shoulders. “Good. Scared. Excited. Already sick to my stomach.”

I brush a thumb across her cheek. “You’re already sick?”

She nods. “I puked twice.”

“You poor thing.” I gently stroke her back. “Was it nerves?”

“Not exactly.”

I frown. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” She hesitates. Then her smile turns radiant. “Because I am pregnant.”

“You’re—?” I blink. “Already? Can they tell that fast?”

“They can when you’re already two weeks along.”

“Two weeks...” I suck in a breath as warmth spreads through my chest. “You’ve

been pregnant for two weeks?”

She nods. “We took a test an hour ago before I started the procedure. Apparently those condoms we used were just novelty.”

She pulls a face. “I should probably warn the other girls.”

“You’re having my baby—our baby?”

“I’m having our baby.”

I whoop and wrap her in my arms, spinning her around. She throws her head back and lets out a laugh—the most beautiful, melodious sound I’ve ever heard.

The woman I love.

The mother of my child.

That thought gives me pause.

“Oh shit.” I set her down carefully. “I have to be more careful. You’re carrying precious cargo.”

“It’s okay.” She beams at me. “I won’t break.”

“I know. You’re the strongest woman I know.” I her hair back away from her face. “But I plan to take care of you and this little one.”

She leans into me. “You better. I’m not doing this without snacks and back rubs.”

“Deal.” I grin, and go back to rubbing gentle circles around her back. “But promise

me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We are not getting a mini van.”

“Oh of course not.” Her eyes sparkle. “No self-respecting mountain man would ever drive one of those.”

EPILOGUE

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

ALMOST NINE MONTHS LATER

SOPHIE

A sharp pang jolts me awake.

Blinking, I'm vaguely aware of the moonlight streaming in through a gap in the curtains. I'm more keenly aware of the tightness seeming to grip my swollen belly.

Panic lances my heart, and turning onto my back, I clutch my stomach. Holding my breath, I wait with bated breath. Snoring softly next to me in bed, Cliff's strong arm drapes protectively over me.

Several minutes pass until another sharp pain clenches and spreads. This time I bolt upright, and Cliff's arm falls to the side.

With a soft snort, he turns to his other side and falls back asleep.

Protectively stroking my belly, I start counting the seconds between the pains. I count to one hundred several times over, losing my place as my heart thunders in my ears and my breath hitches.

When the pain rolls through me for a fifth time, I know this is nothing like the Braxton Hicks pains I've been experiencing for the past several weeks. My heart pounds. Equal parts of fear and excitement course through my veins.

"I'm having the baby."

“Hmm?” a sleepy Cliff asks.

“I’m having the baby,” I repeat more clearly, stifling a sudden urge to laugh.

“What was that?”

“Cliff, wake up.” I nudge him once. Twice. “I’m having the baby. We’re having the baby.”

His eyes fly open. “Did you say you’re having the baby?”

“Like, ten times.” I finally give in to the urge to laugh. “Honey, I think it’s time.”

“Okay.” He swallows hard. I can tell he’s trying really hard to keep his tone steady, though the wildness in his dark eyes gives him away. He rubs his face and blinks rapidly, still trying to wake up. “We’re going to have the baby. We’ll call the doctor. I’ll grab your suitcase. Then I’ll?—”

“Gah!” Another pain shoots through me. This one is more intense than any of the others. I instinctively grab his arm and squeeze while I ride out the wave. When it finally passes, I release my hold and give Cliff a sheepish grin. “Sorry about that. I?—”

“We need to get you to the hospital.” He jumps out of the bed. His eyes are wide open now, and all hint of sleepiness is gone. “You stay here.” He brushes the hair away from my face and kisses my forehead. “I’ll take care of everything. Just... relax. Or breathe. But don’t—DON’T—start pushing.”

I can’t help but grin in amusement as he runs back and forth across our bedroom. He opens his dresser, pulls a pair of gray sweatpants over his boxer briefs, and then races to the other side of the room to rummage through my dresser to grab one of my

loungewear sets.

He offers me the clothes, pausing to ask if I'm okay, and gives me another kiss, before running back to the other side of the room to dig through the items on top of his dresser.

While he mumbles something about never being able to find what he's looking for, I swing my feet over the edge and pull on my clothes.

My bottom lip sticks out. "I'm going to need help with my shoes."

Cliff continues digging through the top drawer. "What was that?"

"I need help with my shoes." My voice breaks with my confession.

I haven't seen my feet in weeks. There's no point crying about that now, but I'm in very real danger of doing just that.

"Hey." Cliff kneels in front of me, massaging my knees. "I've got you, honey."

A single tear slips down my cheek. "You're so good to me."

"Only because you're even better to me." Cliff's eyes soften and his lips curve up. "I love you."

He gives my knees one more squeeze then slides my shoes onto my feet. Holding my hand with one of his, he slides his other arm around my back and helps me stand.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:44 pm

Leaving me to lean against the door, Cliff once again looks around the room. He mutters to himself. “Where the fuck are my keys?”

I brace myself against the door. “They’re on the table by the front door,” I say through gritted teeth as another pain starts. “Next to the hospital bag.”

“Oh. Good.” Cliff sighs in relief. “That was smart of us.”

His panic is back as I start to groan. Cliff practically carries me to the front door, somehow managing to grab the keys and my bag. He’s so gentle and so supportive, it takes the edge off my pain.

I’m not aware of most of the drive to the hospital. I’m focusing on the breathing I learned in the yoga class I finally took and thinking about a calm, peaceful place. Cliff, for the most part, is an angel. However, a bit of a devilish side flashes up any time he comes across a driver who he thinks is going too slowly or driving too recklessly.

By the time we walk through the hotel doors, I’m about as close to Zen as I can get with the prospect of pushing a watermelon out of my body. Meanwhile, poor Cliff is nearly pale as a ghost with fear.

“My wife is having a baby,” he announces. “We called the doctor on our way. How fast can you assemble the rest of the team?”

The admissions nurse and I share a smirk. It’s as if he’s calling for the Avengers or Justice League. Or maybe both. I fell asleep when we watched all of those movies.

Just like I fell asleep during every other movie we'd put on in the evenings while we snuggled up together in front of the fireplace in the new home we built together on his land in Alaska.

In my defense, I was growing a human and building my business as a freelance graphic designer.

While Cliff would have been more than happy to move to Seattle to be with me, in the end, we decided we wanted to raise our kids close to Slate and Winter, who are also expecting their first in a few months.

It's crazy to think about how much all of our lives have changed this past year.

Cliff scowls our way into the delivery room, barking requests and orders even as he babies me with soothing words. Once I'm changed into my hospital gown and settled in the bed, he switches over completely to my cheerleader and coach as I battle through contraction after contraction.

I lose track of time. People come in and out of the room. But through it all, Cliff's steady gaze and comforting words cut through the haze. They're my compass until the doctor gives the command to push.

And, after what seems like an eternity, our baby is here.

She's here.

We watch in wide-eyed wonder as the doctor sets our daughter on my chest. I'm so awed by her—so in love with her—I can barely speak.

"Oh, Sophie," Cliff whispers, his voice gruff with emotion. "She's beautiful and sweet."

I glance up in time to see his eyes grow uncharacteristically misty. “She’s perfect. Just like her mama.”

“I love you,” I mouth to him, closing my eyes in contentment as he lowers his forehead to rest against mine.

As our baby's cries settle into coos, as the adrenaline of the final push wears away, I’m aware of how lucky I am.

I have a healthy baby. I have a wonderful husband. I have a life full of love and comfort. I have a family. It’s even better than I could have imagined.