



# Snowed Under

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Checklist for the holidays:

Pick sweater; the more hideous the better

Steer clear of flying snowballs

Do not fall for the resident bad boy...

When Ainsley lives next door to the town's bad boy Cole, she has no idea he's had a secret crush since the night of the disastrous (never to be repeated) speed-dating event.

For one Ainsley wasn't up for a date, she was hosting the event, but that didn't stop Cole marking her down as number one on his scorecard. Sweet. If only he'd do something about it, right?

Cole loves women, he's made that clear with his cheeky grin and award winning smile. He's notorious for charming the pants of every woman in Silver Pines and beyond. But when Ainsley needs a fake boyfriend to get her ex back, he takes the job a little too seriously. What follows is a hilarious disaster of a fake-date, sunshine vs sunshine, a snowball fight from hell and a snowed under predicament that neither expected.

Snowed Under – the third instalment from the Silver Pines series with rom-com vibes and hilarious banter, a bad boy (with a good heart), geeky heroine and a lovable cast of characters from the small-town of Silver Pines.

Snowed under is book 3 in the series but can be read completely stand-alone with a merrily happy ever after.

**Total Pages (Source):** 77

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

## CHAPTER 1

### COLE

Fudge greets me in the hallway when I walk in and dump my tool bag on the ground. He's a scruffy ginger cat that I was 'fostering' last Christmas, but we kinda grew on each other and he just never left.

"Hey, Fudgey." I scoop him up in my arms and he pushes his face into mine. He lets out a good ol' mowl, indicating he's not happy about the several hours I've been gone. He acts as if he doesn't sleep for twenty-three hours a day.

It's taken a good while for him to be affectionate with me, but after a few scratches to my money maker — and more than one close call with his razor-sharp teeth to the rest of my body — I think we're cool. It's not his fault he was abandoned as a kitten the day after Christmas and was left out in the cold. Poor little guy. He was lucky to survive.

Travis is my boss and his wife, Presley, is the local vet and owner of Piney Paws. She asked me to look after him since I've done the offhand favor of pet sitting for the good townsfolk of Silver Pines, Wyoming. Including their dog, Rigger and their cat Bronx. The rest is history.

My little guy is pretty cute, even if he is a scraggly thing. "How's your day been, Fudge?" Yep, I talk to my cat too. I mean, he's a good listener as far as four legged friends go. Aside from scowling, he never talks back. "Dad's been up in the rafters at the Town Hall again, yes he has, yes he has." I tickle his chin as he laps it up. If

anyone could hear me now, they'd think I was nuts.

If the rumors around town were true, you'd hear I'm a ladies man and can cozy up to any female this side of Wyoming. But that's not entirely true. Women are slim pickings in this tiny town, making most of the single guys excited for tourist season. I was too, until last year when a certain little librarian caught my attention.

I look down at my tabby like he's gonna answer me before I kiss him on the head and place him back on the floor. I move into the kitchen to get his food and grab myself something to eat. "Dad also has to do some shopping," I mutter, after examining the contents of the fridge and realizing I ain't got shit. Takeout tonight might just have to do.

I go in search of a snack. Finding and heating up a small container from last night's leftovers to see me through. I've been a bachelor for a couple of years now and while I can't say I'm Silver Pine's greatest chef, I can survive. That's the main thing, right?

I kick off my boots and shrug out of my jacket, grabbing Fudge's treats from under the counter as I fill up his bowl by the door.

He looks up at me with eyes that would say, 'is that it?' if he could talk. And if that were the case, I'm sure he'd have a lot to say.

"Fine." I chuckle and reach for the can of Fancy Feline and pull the lid back. Grabbing a fork, I empty the contents into the bowl adjoining the biscuits and break it up. Just how he likes it.

He immediately waddles over and sticks his head in the bowl, having a good sniff before he decides if it tickles his fancy or not.

I can never get it right with Fudge. Some days he just wants his dry food, other days

his Fancy Feline, and on those random days he'll have both, thank you very much.

While Fudge eats, I grab my leftovers and walk down the hallway of my small cottage. It was built over a hundred years ago but seems to have weathered every storm Silver Pines has thrown at it. The blizzards here can be a total disaster, especially around the holidays.

I scarf the food down and place the container on my bedside table. Stripping out of my clothes, I jump in the shower to wash away today's dirt and grime. I spent most of the day up in the rafters fixing the mezzanine section in the Town Hall. I've spent my life building and fixing things, it's what I know. Construction has always been my ultimate passion because I love to fix shit and see things transform. As a bonus, it pays the bills. Also, I get to work for my best friend, so that's a plus.

It's only when I'm drying off and shrugging into a fresh flannel button down that I hear a loud beeping noise from out front. It sounds suspiciously like a truck reversing.

The house next door has recently become available for rent. There was a showing about a week ago, but I haven't heard about the new tenant yet.

I go take a look because I'm a nosy bastard. Hopefully, it's a cute chick in need of a cup of sugar or something. Not that shit like that ever happens to me, knowing my luck it'll be some dear little old lady. I'm always the groomsman, never the groom.

"Back in a sec," I call out to Fudge, who's taken to laying in one of his many beds around the house. In this instance, he chose the hallway. He has an array of beds. I have meticulously placed them around different parts of the house, in all of his favorite places to lay. His decision is usually based on where the sun is shining on any given day, not that the sun is shining in Silver Pines with it being winter right now.

With my curiosity piqued, I step outside to see if someone is moving in. Normally, I hear everything that's going on around town. That's the beauty of living in a tiny place like Silver Pines. I've been so busy at work lately, I've not had time to follow the gossip mill.

My eyes land on a familiar sight, and my grin pulls from both sides of my face.

Well, well. If it isn't little Ainsley Parsons. My favorite librarian.

It seems I could be so lucky, after all. My heart rate accelerates.

Ainsley isn't just the adorable Little Miss Sunshine from the library, she's also a friend and the girl who's been starring in some of my late-night dreams.

She is on the Silver Pines welcoming committee, including the annual Christmas decorating team, and various other charitable roles through our town. A good ole' hometown girl.

I step outside. "Are my eyes deceiving me, or is that you Ains?" I make a show of rubbing my eyes with my palms as I flash her a grin. I've been told since I was a teenager that I have a baby face, and apparently my Grandpa told the entire family I'd be a heartbreaker. I'm not sure about that last part, because I've never settled down or had my heart broken. But baby face? I guess it's something to do with looking young and being able to get whatever I want. While not entirely untrue, I don't consider it a bad thing that my crinkly smile and cheeky comebacks don't make the best of them smile. My blonde ruffled hair and hazel eyes don't seem to hurt either.

Hey, that's what I'm here for. I don't just like making women smile, I like making hers smile.

Ainsley's eyes flick up toward me as the U-Haul maneuvers out front, parking in line

with the cottage next door.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

She smiles when she sees me. “Hey, Cole!” She waves me over.

Her extraordinary blue eyes seem even beautiful behind her large-framed pink glasses. I’ve always found her cute, no doubt about it. Is she slightly geeky? Sure, but I find it sexy.

Yet, under the glasses she’s so much more. Her wayward brown curly hair she can’t seem to tame. Her pretty skin with a small smattering of freckles across her nose that I’ve never seen before because, clearly, she covers them up. Plus, she’s wearing the office uniform I’m used to seeing her in; a white long sleeve blouse with a starched collar, her name embroidered on the front pocket, teamed with a navy pencil skirt sitting just below the knee. It’s hot. I lower my gaze to her matching blazer-style jacket that dwarfs her little frame even more. I think she’s beautiful.

She seems a little surprised to see me and, if I’m not mistaken, her cheeks are slightly flushed. She pushes her glasses up her nose.

That little movement is sweet as fuck.

I helped her out last Christmas when she had to step in for a friend to coordinate an evening of speed dating. I was there with my friend Jake, who went along only so he could have six minutes with his now girlfriend, Charlene. I helped Ainsley carry some boxes and set up the event. I’m the ‘go to’ guy for help, apparently.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” I cross my arms over my chest. I’m acting cocky, like she came here to see me, even though — by the way she chews on her lip — she clearly didn’t.

“I’m moving in,” she says, blinking up at me rapidly. Then she quickly adds; “Next door, I mean. I just signed a lease for the cottage.”

Well, this is news. Clearly I’m outta the game. “Damn, I wish I’d known. I could’ve helped you move and been all neighborly and shit.”

She glances over at the U-Haul a little sheepishly. “It’s totally fine. This is just the first load. The rest is coming tomorrow.”

I run a hand through my wavy hair, still damp from the shower, and nod. “I’m available for the heavy lifting. I can give you a hand now if you like?”

“Thanks, that would be great. My friend Emma is coming over to help, but there’s no sign of her yet. Work might have held her up.”

I notice her eyes wander down to my open shirt and quickly flick back up to my face.

I didn’t dress completely in my rush to see what was going on over here. I grin at her wide-eyed reaction as a faint sheen of pink hints at her cheeks. She quickly clears her throat. “I had no idea you lived here, actually.”

I grin. “You need to get out more.”

“Clearly.”

“Well, technically, it’s my parents’ place. They bought it a few years back and I rent it from them.”

“Nothing like keeping it in the family,” she laughs as the driver gets out of the U-Haul and makes his way toward us.



“Tell me about it.” I’m reveling in the fact that Ainsley is going to be my new neighbor. She’s a smart girl and I’m sure she won’t be a raging party person. Not that I mind the occasional party, but I get up so damned early that I can’t afford to be kept awake on work nights. Man, I sound like an old man. Even though I’m only twenty-four, sometimes it feels a lot like fifty.

“I’m gonna grab some takeout for dinner,” I say from nowhere. Sue me. I eat a lot. “Wanna join me? I mean, that’s if you don’t wanna go huntin’ for your pots’ n’ pans, Shorty.” I want to hit myself right now. What a fucking Casanova I’ll never make. I’m seriously off my game. If you don’t wanna go huntin’ for your pots and pans?

If she thinks I’m an ass, she doesn’t show it.

“Shorty?” She smiles.

I shrug. I like it; it suits her.

“Well, that’d be great, thanks Cole. I mean, I labeled all the boxes, but I’ve no idea how I’ll get it all unpacked before dinner to find my utensils.”

I don’t know why that makes one side of my mouth lift. “Consider it done.” I clap my hands together. “So, should we get started?”

??

If you’d told me this morning I’d be sitting on a crate eating Chinese food with Ainsley Parsons, who’s now moving in next door to me, I’d have said you were crazy, but here we are. There are boxes piled up around us and no couch arriving until tomorrow.

Her bedframe and mattress arrived at least, so I spent the last half hour putting it together for her. Ainsley's friend Emma just left after they made up the bed and she helped her get some of her essentials out.

“So, what made you move across town?” I ask idly as I dig into my beef chow mein.

I hear a faint sigh before she answers, which causes me to look up. I immediately get the impression I've said something wrong because she pauses, then her teeth snag her lip for a second before releasing it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I broke up with my boyfriend,” she whispers.

“Oh, shit. Sorry to hear that,” I say. Drake. I don’t know the guy well, we don’t exactly hang in the same circles. But I know she wasn’t with him during the whole speed-dating escapade. I’ve heard they’ve had an on and off relationship for a while.

She shrugs. “It’s not the first time. He broke it off last year, then we patched it up after Christmas and I moved in with him; that was short lived.”

“Ah.” I nod, like I’d really know. I’ve only ever had one serious girlfriend, and I’ve never lived with anyone.

I wait to see if she’s going to elaborate, but she’s staring down at her food.

“I’m sorry, “ I continue. “Breakups can be really shitty.”

I mean, when are they ever good? But I’m trying to make her feel better here.

“I needed a break,” she says with a sigh. “We’ve been on and off since high school, so I guess it’s all I’ve ever known.”

So he broke up with her last year, and now she broke up with him?

Seems like there’s some back and forth happening. Not that I’m judging in the slightest, but if he’s her high school boyfriend, she obviously doesn’t know anything else except him.

“A break can be just as good as a vacation,” I say playfully. “Or at least that’s what they tell me.”

She smiles. “Thanks, Cole. You’ve been really sweet tonight. And putting my bed together. That would have been impossible by myself.”

My eyebrows raise slightly in amusement. “Hey, don’t go broadcasting it, there could be a stampede on my hands for my handyman services. I’m already booked up till after Christmas.”

That evokes a laugh at least, and I can see behind her facade that she’s hurting. It’s all in the eyes and how they don’t sparkle like they usually do when I’ve seen her.

“Don’t I know it.” She winks. “If those speed dating scores were anything to go by.”

I glance up at her. That was ages ago. Wow, she still remembers that?

“Quite a hit, was I?”

“Did you even read the scores?”

I laugh and pop a shoulder. “Honestly, I was there to play cupid for Jake and Charli.”

Most of the girls there that night weren’t exactly ones I’d want to date. Charli’s friend Rory was there, and whilst I think Rory is good value, and always up for a laugh, we’re more like friends than potential partners.

“Well, it seems it worked out great. They’ve been happy ever since.”

“It was fun that night.” I don’t tell her I secretly thought she was the hottest girl there. Ever since she got back with her boyfriend, I’ve kept my crush on the DL.

“Anyone would think you were a pro.”

She laughs lightly, and it’s good to see. I’m sure she has a lot on her mind right now.

“I seriously doubt it, Cole. But thanks.”

“Any time.”

“And thanks for dinner and helping out.”

I shrug. “Hey, what are good neighbors for?”

“I think this move is really going to work out for the best.”

“See, there you go,” I say. “Things might seem a little shitty now, but it’s already working out for you.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I don't know how I became so damned philosophical, but maybe Ainsley brings it out in me. However, I don't think a few words of encouragement and positivity could harm her after her news.

One thing is for sure though, having Ains moving in next door is a welcome surprise. And for some reason, it has me grinning from ear to ear.

### CHAPTER 2

#### AINSLEY

It's clear I've had my head buried in the sand.

I should've known this was Cole's neighborhood. I've known him for a few years now, but I guess I've never had any reason to question where he lives.

I watch as he heads back to his house, and is it just at this very moment I've only noticed his swagger? I lift my eyes from his ass. I should not be looking.

Then again, why shouldn't I look? I wanted to break up with Drake. I initiated it. Moving in with him was a disaster, and even if I know it's a good thing that I left, it's still difficult when someone you thought you could trust breaks it.

I've never been the popular girl. I'm not tall, overtly pretty, nor do I have rich parents or the right last name. But I have wit and intelligence, and my skin can be clear and prettyish if my hair isn't giving me grief. Not that any of that matters. There's too much pressure on women, in my opinion, to look a certain way. And I'm okay with

not looking perfect. I try to be a good person and I always give my all — like with Drake. And where did that get me?

I'm too hard on myself, and being the product of an affair — and a father who's never really acknowledged me, except for that unsigned birthday card every year — I guess you could say I have issues. I don't blame my mom; she had no idea my sperm donor was married. He told a lot of lies and my mom raised me on her own. The only intelligible thing I'll say about him is he paid child support without a fuss. The only person he cares about is himself. I've met my half-sisters twice. One loathes me, the other was only nine at the time, and didn't really know who I was. Sperm donor's wife can't bear to look at me, which I get, it couldn't have been easy on her. But hey, it wasn't my fault my parents tangoed and the man I don't-call-Dad couldn't keep it in his pants. Maybe that's why I've always been a bit of a people pleaser. My therapist years ago told me not to fall into the trap of being good only for needy men. Apparently wanting your father's attention and acknowledgement affects you later in life, too. Double bonus. Way to go Dad.

Still, I don't think I have 'daddy' issues, and I definitely don't want a bad boy. Maybe that's exactly why I seem to attract the wrong kind of men. Not that there's been that many. Drake was my first real boyfriend.

I get ready for bed early, shower and watch some YouTube home decorating channels on my phone because my life really is that depressing and I don't have my TV hooked up yet.

I try not to think about Cole and how sweet he was. I'm not dumb enough to think he's into me. I've heard the stories; all seven inches of them. If those rumors are true, then good god. Not that I want to be thinking about Cole's member. As sweet as he is, he also has a reputation. Not that he isn't a nice guy. In fact, you'd be hard to find a woman who has a bad thing to say about Cole Garrison. If he wasn't such a ladie's man, he'd be quite the catch. He has a good job in construction, his own place, a nice

personality, smart,cute ass...I cuss under my breath. It's the break-up blues, that's what it is. Cole's been around for as long as I can remember, and while I've got eyes and can admire him from afar, he always seemed a little out of reach.

Aside from the obvious — nobody seems to be gung-ho for librarians like me in real life or take them seriously. Or maybe that's just my ex? There's the fanciful idea that Cole could be boyfriend material. That one makes me laugh. He can't be serious for five minutes, much less be in a long-term relationship with a woman who knows what she wants.

Then again, I'm not judging. To each their own and all of that.

I'm only twenty-five, but I've always loved living in a small town. Starting out at a small community college for my associate's degree, I then transferred to college to complete my four-year bachelor's degree through scholarships and grants. I worked two jobs, paid for housing my first year, and became a resident assistant for the rest of it. I'm proud of what I achieved with little debt, and when I landed the job back in Silver Pines, I jumped at the opportunity to come home. I'd been working for a year or so in Denver, and really enjoyed it. My missing home was a big thing, and never really thought a position would ever come up. Margaret Townsend is the longest serving librarian in Silver Pines and kept things orderly ever since I was a girl, and nobody saw her retirement coming; mainly because she literally transformed this place over the thirty years she worked here. I admire her a lot and we still message each other. She pops in all the time and keeps me on the straight and narrow, plus she's still heavily involved on the Silver Pines committee, so it's not like we're strangers. There's more to running a library than most people think. If it were just Dewey decimal systems and putting books on a shelf, I wouldn't have put myself through years of college, but honestly, it's the best job in the world.

When I arrive at work the next morning, I see the usual suspects waiting at the door.



Hank Langdon and his two kids. I watch them between seven forty-five and eight fifteen most weekdays until the school bus arrives, so Hank can get to work on time. Debbie meets the kids at the other end. She's a teacher's assistant and has the patience of a saint. Hank works between here and Alpine Falls; the neighboring town, which is an hour's drive away, so we all do what we can to help out. Being a single dad and doing the right thing for his kids, it's the least I can do while I'm setting up for the day. They're good kids, too, and never any bother.

"Morning!" I holler, waving my keys at them.

Hank turns and smiles. "Hello, Ainsley."

Molly runs up to me and gives me a hug. She's seven and adorable, and Oscar — who's a little more reserved being he's eight — waves his Batman figurine at me. "Hello."

"Guess what we did on the weekend?" Molly squeaks.

I don't even take a breath. "Skydiving?"

She laughs. "No!"

"Uh, you entered the Silver Pines Bake Off competition and won?"

She giggles. "No!"

"Unless you went fly-fishing and caught a smelly old Wellington boot and a bunch of tin cans, I have no clue."

She jumps up and down, clearly excited about the story. "Daddy took us camping!"

I cock a brow at Hank and he shrugs. “Is this true, Mr. Langdon? Did you subject your kids to the great outdoors again this weekend?” I put on my most stern voice and the kids fall about laughing.

“We pitched a tent and got eaten alive by mosquitoes,” Oscar finishes before Hank can say anything.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I'd never have thought Molly would be more outdoorsy than her big brother who prefers Nintendo and collecting Batman memorabilia.

I scruffle his hair as he ducks away from me. "That's all part of the fun, Oscie. You don't know country living until you've been bitten alive by giant bugs."

Hank chuckles.

"We got to toast marshmallows by the campfire," Molly goes on, taking my hand. "And then Daddy made hot chocolate."

"Sounds like you had an awesome weekend." I smile down at her.

They moved here a few years ago after Hank's divorce. He got custody of the kids and they had a hard time without their mom. She took off with another guy and doesn't even see them. Stories like that break my heart. Of course, when I heard that Hank was stuck in the morning with the kids, who can't be dropped off that early at school without supervision, I offered to have them come to the library. Margaret, who's still on the board, agreed wholeheartedly. That's what we do in Silver Pines, we help each other out.

I unlock the door, and, like clockwork, Molly takes my purse from my hand and carries it to my office. I remember as a child it was a privilege to carry the teacher's purse or her lunch ahead of class. While I'm not a teacher, it still feels nice.

Hank doesn't follow us in. "See you later!" he calls.

“Yeah, bye Dad!” Molly calls.

“See ya,” from Oscar.

“Thanks, Ainsley, see you tomorrow.”

I smile and wave behind me. “Bye, Hank. Have a good Monday.”

“Right back at ya.”

Oscar goes to his usual spot over by the couch to work on his homework before school, and Molly will usually go around with the feather duster, as she likes to feel helpful. I don’t condone child labor, but she usually stops halfway to look at the new picture books that I put out on Fridays.

“How are you doing with Charlotte’s web?” I call out to Molly, placing my lunch in the fridge in the staffroom.

The library is small but functional, and had a major renovation a few summers ago. I love it here. It’s like my sanctuary. The fresh, soft gray paint inside and ambient lighting make it look more like a cool coffee shop than an actual library. The only thing we don’t serve is food and drinks.

“Loved it. I’m moving onto Stick Dog.”

I smile. “I’ve also put Ivy and Bean away for you.”

I hear her squeal and when I glance at Oscar, he’s rolling his eyes as he sets his things on the table.

“How are you doing, Oscar? Anything I can help with?”

He shakes his head. "I'm good with Harry Potter and the Roald Dahl collection."

"Very good. I heard the new Gangsta Granny book was coming out. I can reserve it for you so you're the first to read it if you'd like?"

His head pops up and his eyes go wide. "You'd really do that?"

I purse my lips. "Why, am I really that scary?"

"No." He laughs. "I just meant those books are always so fast off the shelf."

I tap my nose. "It's not what you know around here, Oscie."

"Dad says that a lot, too."

"He does? Well then, great minds think alike."

I busy myself making a coffee and tidying up the desk before my second in charge, Alice, gets here in half an hour. There's just the two of us, plus our assistant Marcus on Saturday's, he also helps out sometimes after school. We're not usually run off our feet, though Monday mornings can be hectic and it breaks up the monotony that often comes with a routine job.

I also have to leave early today because the moving van is coming. That also reminds me that Cole wanted me to text him when the van arrives.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Moving across town is permanent. I remind myself. As if packing up most of my stuff from Drake's wasn't hard enough. I'm moving onto bigger and better things. That's what I keep telling myself, anyway. For one, Drake couldn't commit properly. When we were together, he always seemed to have one foot out the door. I don't even know why I moved in with him. In the end, it seemed like all he was after was an unpaid housemaid. And two, I found out he was cheating behind my back.

I sigh, switching on the computer out front. Molly high fives me on the way by with the duster. "Doing a good job, Moll."

"Someday I'm going to come and work here too." She beams.

I smile. "I should be so lucky."

She giggles, taking off to dust the kid's corner. Another fifteen minutes later and I'm helping the kids on the bus out front and waving them off.

As I head back inside, my phone dings in my back pocket. I pull it out and glance at the message, a slow smile spreading across my face.

Cole

So, did you hear about the truck?

Wow, I didn't know Cole cared so much. Now that's being neighborly.

Me

They haven't texted me yet, but they said around 4pm if all goes to plan

Cole

I would've borrowed Travis's trailer and done it for you if I'd known

That's so sweet of him. But at the time I didn't think to ask anyone, and I figured it was just easier getting someone to do it so I didn't have to stress. I could've moved back in with Mom for a while, but I really need this time to myself to figure out what it is I want. I love my mom, but she can be impulsive and scatterbrained at times. But she's very loving and has a big heart. She has been on her own for years, but has recently been talking about dating again, so I guess we will see. One thing I didn't want her doing is worrying about me and Drake, now she's finally dipping her toe back into the dating pool. I'm a big girl now and I can fight my own battles.

Me

It's really not much

Cole

I hope you're not gonna be this difficult when I need to borrow a cup of sugar

Me

Haven't you heard, sugar's really bad for you. Stevia maybe?

Cole

Uh oh, nobody told me the sugar police was moving in next door

Me

Cat's out of the bag

Cole

Text me, I'll be offended if you don't

Me

Bossy

Cole

You've no idea ??



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Me

Fine. Be all chivalrous. Who am I to stop you?

Cole

All part of being a good neighbor. See you at 4

I bite my lip. Do not read into it. I remind myself that Cole is the biggest flirt in Silver Pines. It's what he's good at. And hey, if he wants to assist me and I get to check out his buns again, who am I to argue? I smile to myself. I think today is going to be a very good Monday, after all.

## CHAPTER 3

COLE

I drive into town early to grab a coffee before work and run into Travis and Presley right outside the cafe. She holds their baby, April, against her chest, snuggled in a peaceful sleep.

“You buyin’ today, boss?”

Travis cocks a brow. The pair of them look pretty good, considering it's their first baby and I'm fairly certain the little sweetie keeps them up most of the night. “Did you join a comedy act since yesterday?”

I give Pres a playful nudge as I open the cafe door to let them in first. “Not that I recall.”

He shakes his head at me. He’s used to me by now. Nothing else is new.

They say never work for your friends, but Travis isn’t like that. He owns Cedar Construction and has been running it since the year before last, when he moved back here to settle down and renovate his own ranch. That’s when he met Presley, and after a brief battle of wills over a 40 foot blow-up-snowman and Christmas decorating from Hell, the two of them gave in and admitted their feelings for one another. Ain’t love grand?

“How about I’ll buy this round, if you can let me clock out early today?”

Trav lets out a laugh. “You’re kiddin’ right?”

I pop a shoulder. “Ainsley just moved in next door and the rest of her stuff is coming at four. I said I’d lend a hand as she has no helpers.” That slight little thing, Emma, isn’t exactly a heavy weight that can lift couches, a fridge, furniture and God knows what else. I know the moving guys will do most of the lifting, but I know those dudes and they’ll do a half-ass job if they can get away with it.

“And you didn’t know until now?” Trav asks as we all walk up to the counter.

“No, I didn’t know until the U-Haul came yesterday. I’m the Get It Done Guy.” I give Pres a wink.

“Why didn’t she tell any of us? We could have helped,” Pres chimes in, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I think she’s the kind of woman that doesn’t like to ask for help.” I shrug. “That’s

just my guess, anyway.”

“She only has her mom in town, and Emma,” says Pres. “And she’s a bit of a loner.”

“She works at the library, right?” Trav asks me as he tilts his cowboy hat to quickly browse the menu. I don’t know why he bothers, he always has the same thing.

“Yeah. She reinvented the place after Margaret left,” Presley goes on. “Everyone loves her, she’s like homemade sunshine.”

That description suits her perfectly. It’s widely known how generous she is because of what she does within the community. She’s always lending a hand somewhere. But I wouldn’t have a clue about books, libraries or otherwise. But it is kinda cute she’s a book nerd. I don’t have a type, but a hot librarian is definitely up there with the best of them.

A thought pops into my head about what Ainsley would be like out of her work uniform, because I hardly ever see her dressed in anything but that cute skirt and blouse of hers. Another smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. “Is that a yes, boss?”

He sighs. “For Ainsley, then yes. Provided we can finish up with the Town Hall on schedule.”

“Consider it done. I can work the weekend if I have to.” It ain’t like I got much else to do after this job, now that the winter has set in and the ski season is well and truly here.

“Me and the guys are having drinks Saturday night if you wanna join us?” Trav suggests. He’s talking about Rich and Justin, possibly even Jake.

“Sounds good. First night out since the baby?” I quirk my eyebrow at Presley. “You

letting the man loose, honey?”

“Just for a few hours.” She smiles as I fish my wallet out of my back pocket in between ordering coffees to pay for us all. Trav throws in a couple of muffins for good measure, since I’m paying. I would have done the same, too.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Well, if you two ever need a night off, I’m happy to watch Rigger, Bronx, and the Bub.”

I’ve watched their animals plenty of times, and Rig, the border collie, can more or less look after himself. He’s like a human.

That sentiment prompts Travis to look at me like I’ve got two heads. “You, babysit?” he balks.

I frown. “Now, why would that be so unbelievable?”

“Have you babysat before?” he asks, as we move out of the way for the customers behind us to order while we wait for our coffee. “Cause all I’m envisioning is my baby bein’ dropped on her head.”

“Well, I haven’t exactly... I mean, I’ve helped Hank here and there with his kids.”

I hear a faint laugh from Presley. “Aren’t they seven and eight?”

“Well, yeah,” I concede. “But, hey. I’m sure the mechanics are all the same.”

“You’re gonna change a dirty diaper?” Trav snorts. “My God, this I’ve gotta see.”

I screw up my nose at the idea. But it doesn’t escape me that Trav has worked damned hard for his family and getting the house ship-shape, plus taking on more work than ever to keep the dollars rolling in. Having kids ain’t cheap, apparently. And poor Presley probably hasn’t had a break in months. I take my hat off to moms.

They've got one hell of a job to do all day, every day.

"You know, I could just put a clip on my nose, or better yet, wear a mask." I chuckle.

Presley laughs next to me. "You'd really do that?"

"Yeah, I mean, at least I couldn't smell the?—"

"I mean the part about offering to babysit."

"Oh," I laugh. "Yeah, I mean, why not?"

"Why not!" Trav looks at his wife like she's gone nuts. "Are we really going to trust Cole to look after our first born? No offense, bro, but if anyone is going to drop the baby, it's you."

I balk at the notion. "Thanks a lot for the vote of confidence. But I'll have you know I'm excellent with kids." The baby stirs just as I'm saying it. "I'll prove it." I reach my arms towards Pres in a gesture to hand her over.

She smiles and carefully peels April from her chest and passes her to me. She's wrapped in a soft blanket.

"Put your hand under her head—" I give Trav a look as I scoop the baby in my arms, supporting her little head in the crook of my elbow.

"See, wasn't that hard was it, little April? You know that Uncle Cole wouldn't drop you, but your daddy doesn't trust me to look after you, no he doesn't."

Presley laughs as Trav struggles to keep a straight face. "Isn't that how you talk to your cat?"

“Same difference.” I shrug. “And I would treat your child just as good, if not better, than the pets. And that’s saying something.”

“Well, if I can bear to tear myself away from her anytime soon, I’ll let you know,” Pres says.

“All jokes aside, thanks for the offer,” Trav says. “But you’ll have to get behind both of our folks. They’re dying to take her.”

I coo at little April, rocking her back and forth and I’m starting to think I’m a natural by the time our coffee is made. That’s when I turn and see Emma and Ainsley walking in the door, mid-rock and they both halt their conversation to look over at us.

I distinctly see Emma giggle and raise her eyebrows at Ains. I wonder what that’s all about.

“Hey, ladies.” I keep rocking April as I take a few steps over toward them, like it’s no biggie. I hold babies all the time.

“Hi!” Emma over-enthuses.

That makes me grin because I have an inkling they may have been talking about me. Then my face splits wider as I look at Ainsley’s face and see that sweet little blush that sweeps up her cheeks. Not for the first time, my heart does a little jolt.

“Hi, Cole,” she says, finally. Maybe this holding the baby thing really does attract the chicks?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You’re both looking as lovely as ever.”

Emma giggles again as they stop to have a brief look at April.

“You look like you’ve got a real handle on the baby cuddles.” Ainsley says, as she tickles the baby’s face with such warmth, it’s hard to believe that she’s going through a relationship crisis as well as moving houses. Two of the most stressful things on earth, except for death and taxes, yet she still seems as calm and collected as ever.

That smile even reaches those big blue eyes and I start to think she might actually be Wonder Woman.

“Ah, it’s a piece of cake,” I say, like I’m an old pro. “And it’s like snuggling next to a hot water bottle. She’s so warm.”

Ainsley mollycoddles her, proving my theory that she’s amazing with kids, while Emma orders their coffee.

“I hear you’re moving?” Presley takes a sip of her latte as we all stand together.

Ainsley tucks a lock of curls behind her ear — which ultimately springs back again as I try not to smile. “Yes, the rest of my things should be coming this afternoon. I never realized how much stuff I had.”

At least we’re consistent.

“You should have said something,” Trav adds. “We all coulda helped.”



She waves it off with a delicate hand. “I don’t like to make a fuss. Plus, I have my mom and Emma to help me set everything up when we unpack.”

“It’s no trouble,” Presley says. “Let me know if you need anything at all. I can always rope Charli and the girls into helping, too.” By girls, she means her other two friends, Rory and Ali.

“Thanks,” Ainsley says. “Maybe over the weekend when I get sorted out a bit.”

April gurgles, then I look down at her adorable little face. She’s so darned cute and small, I never really knew how cool babies could be.

“To all the women of Silver Pines, be careful,” Trav croons next to me, slapping me on the back. “I think our friend Cole here is turning into a mother hen.”

I laugh heartily. He might not be wrong. I’ve never thought about being a dad. I mean, I just assumed some day it might happen, but I’m still young, so it hasn’t exactly been on my To Do list until I’m at least thirty.

Another little glow passes over Ainsley’s cheeks at that sentiment and she and Presley share a little giggle.

“Hey, never say never.” I shrug. “Babies are cool.”

“Let me hear you say that when she’s waking you up at all hours and demanding feeds.” Presley strokes her little cheek adoringly. “It’s all worth it, though.”

“I would say you’re never going to get any work done if you keep schmoozing the ladies here and hogging my child.” Trav reaches for his daughter and I pass her over carefully. At least she didn’t cry or spit up all over me. That’s gotta be a plus.

Pres passes me my coffee and I take a much needed swig. I have a new respect for Presley carrying her around all day because they sure get heavy after a while, even when they're small. No wonder all these mommas have arms made of steel.

"Duty calls, then." I give Ains and Emma a wink. "Ladies. I'll see you later."

"See you," the women chime.

"I'll be there within the hour," Trav assures me.

With that, I high-tail it to the Town Hall where I know I need to move my ass if I have any chance of finishing the project by the end of the week. I wasn't joking about working on the weekend. It'll be worth it to help Ainsley.

If there's one thing my parents drilled into me growing up, it's that work ethic is absolutely everything. I'm faultless to a tee and I've never rolled up to work and done a half-assed job, hungover or otherwise.

Mid-sip of my coffee, I turn back as I get to my truck and glance back at the cafe. Ainsley isn't looking my way. She's talking to the girls, but that smile lights up her entire face and it makes me happy she's not dwelling on her recent misfortune.

Or maybe she is, and she's just good at hiding it.

??

The pressure is on to have the Town Hall finished by Monday afternoon, because there's a council meeting and the town planning committee needs to finalize all the Christmas festivities. It's almost the last week in November and the giant Christmas tree in the square is due to be put up, along with the forty-foot blow up Frosty the snowman — Trav's personal favorite — plus the annual town light show, will all be

going up the following weekend. Presley and Travis take it pretty seriously, but since Pres is a little occupied with the baby now, she's passed the torch to Ainsley this year.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

The council had their first meeting in October, as everyone around here takes the holiday traditions like vows; each committing to one activity. I have to admit, magic happens in this town and the kids love it. Even us big kids.

I helped last year and the previous years with a treasure hunt we aptly call, The Hunger Games; which is where participants get to complete a mud map of tasks, and the first couple to finish all tasks wins donated prizes from local businesses.

Most years the prizes can be pretty phenomenal. The Silver Pines Resort, where Charli and Jake both work, always make a very sizeable cash contribution to the prize pool.

This year I will be taking part in the decoration committee, God help me.

Personally, I don't mind the holidays so much. I mean, we don't do the whole crazy thing at my parents' place, since it's just me and them and a few cousins, with my aunt and uncle usually dropping in from Jackson Hole. But there's a feast of turkey, potatoes, biscuits and all the trimmings, and I'm totally down for that. I'm not even opposed to a round of carols by candlelight either, but I really detest Christmas shopping because it's busy everywhere. The ski slopes here are booked out way in advance, so it's a crazy time of year. Last year the resort was snowed in when a terrible snowstorm hit and no one could leave their houses for three days.

I hope the same doesn't happen this year. Though you can never really predict these things, no matter what the forecast says.

They say it comes in threes, so to have a third snowstorm in a row over Christmas

would just be spiteful. Though, with my new neighbor next door, maybe this year Christmas will be looking up.

I'm fooling myself if I think I even have a shot with Ainsley Parsons. She's so far out of my league, she's in orbit. And since she's just broken up with what's-his-face, I don't want to be her rebound. No, no. Ainsley isn't the kind of woman who you bang once and just forget about or move on from. She's a woman with something to say. And when she talks, my ears can't get enough. I want more. As much as I try to deny it, I know I can't forever.

I have a crush on my hot neighbor.

But she deserves better than me, and that's the one thing that stops me from asking her out.

## CHAPTER 4

### AINSLEY

Many hands make light work, or so the saying goes. Between me, Emma, her husband, Eric, my mom, and Cole, we get everything moved around my new cottage quickly.

Cole made sure all the furniture went to the right rooms, and kinda bossed the two delivery guys around. I'm not sad about it. One was a kid who couldn't have been over seventeen, and his buddy looked like he had somewhere else better to be. Moving companies come at a price, and that price for me was convenience. Eric was helpful too, moving boxes and helping Cole until he had to get back to work.

Still. Everything is where it should be, and all I have to do now is unpack the boxes.

“Ainsley, honey, do you want me to start unpacking the kitchen things?” Mom calls from the next room.

The cottage is an older style, and it has a separate kitchen from the living and dining. I don’t mind it. It’s just me, so it’s not like I have room to be fussy. But as my things fill up the small space, I start to feel more at peace. I’ve needed this. I’ve never had my own place, and while the rent money was something to consider financially, I can afford it. For the first time in my life, I’m taking care of myself.

I also ignore the missed calls I’ve had from Drake today. He knew the moving people were coming to get my stuff. I stored most of my furniture at my mom’s place, including my bed and the matching drawers. But I took my couch from Drake’s, and the fridge and washing machine. Screw him if he thinks I’m going to be a doormat and just leave my stuff.

“That’d be great, Mom,” I holler back.

When I glance up from my phone, Cole’s staring at me. Concern laces his brow as he frowns.

He gives me a chin lift. “You good?”

I smile. “Yes. Of course. I can’t thank you enough for helping and bossing those men around.”

He chuckles. “Trust me, I know what they can be like, but you’ve got it under control.”

“Well, I owe you one.”

“I guess I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow night?”

Why does my heart do a little flutter at his words? It's the Christmas decorating committee meeting. Not a date. Not Cole being flirty — okay, maybe a little flirty. But this is what he does. He's a nice guy to boot.

“I guess you will.”

He cocks his head. “Should I bring weapons?”

I frown. “Weapons?”

“To duel with whoever's makin' you frown.” He notions to my phone as I self consciously slide it into the back of my jeans.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Uh, nope, no dueling. It’s nothing.” I panic a little. I don’t want Cole feeling sorry for me. I square my shoulders and put on my brave face. “I’m fine, honestly.”

His arched brow doesn’t retract, and I don’t think he believes me, even when he says, “You got any problems, just let me know. We’re neighbors now.”

“Does that mean I get to burden you with all my woes?” I tease playfully.

He doesn’t balk, not once. “Absolutely, if that’s what you need.” He grips my shoulder with one firm hand. “You with me, Shorty?”

I try not to swoon. He really is sweet, and I get he’s trying to make me feel better because he has some weird sixth sense.

“I’m with you if you stop calling me Shorty.”

“Why? It suits you.”

“Haha. I’m vertically challenged, but good things come in small packages, or so they say.”

“Like poison?” Emma snarks as she passes by.

I poke my tongue at her. “Like marshmallows.”

“And diamonds,” Cole hollers after her. “And pearls. Well, any gemstone, really. Also, those little chocolate-covered cherries and mini pretzels.”



His words don't help my fast developing crush. "See, that's my point."

"If you ask me, there's not enough little things in the world."

"Now you're just being silly."

He puts his hand over his heart. "I would never."

I roll my lips. "Seriously, Cole. You're the real gemstone." The words are out before I can stop them. I mean, what am I saying? I quickly add, "I mean, the way you helped today. That was really sweet of you."

He thumbs behind him. "I'm gonna head back to work if you're all good here."

I pale suddenly. "You're doing overtime because of me?"

"I'd hardly call it overtime. I just need to catch up so we can finish on time."

"I hope Trav didn't mind you taking off early?" Now I feel bad.

"Nah, besides, I basically tell him what to do." He pops a shoulder. "And he's too busy with Pres and the baby to care."

"Well, you were very good with April."

"She's very cute, though I'm pretty sure I won't be babysitting anytime soon."

"But you didn't drop her, and you didn't make her cry."

"That's true. Then again, I couldn't keep my egg baby alive for more than two hours," he confesses.

“What?” I snort. “Egg baby?”

“Yeah, you know, in school for sex education. They give you a paper mache egg to look after like it’s a baby, and you have to care for it over the weekend and make sure it stays ‘alive’ until Monday.”

“I’ve never heard of that. How did your egg baby fare?”

“I sat on him and he exploded.”

I burst out laughing, and he does too. “Oh, boy.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

He palms the back of his head. “I tried to bribe my way into buying another from one of the nerdy kids, who’d not only kept their baby alive, but also dressed it in little outfits. Nobody felt sorry for me.”

“I wish my schooling had been that adventurous.”

He gives me a chin lift. “What goes into bein’ a librarian?”

Nobody ever asks me about my job. It’s not interesting for most people.

“Actually, I went to community college for two years, then I did my degree in library science after that. I’m one of the lucky ones who knew what she wanted to do in life early on.”

“You know, I never knew libraries could be that interesting, but when you think about it, books are pretty freakin’ cool. You get to live a thousand different lives and each adventure is different to the next.” His eyes sparkle and it’s not the first time I notice how pretty they are. Hazel doesn’t just cut it. They’re more like honey before the bees even know what to do with it.

Really, Ainsley?

I take a slow breath, trying to keep myself calm.

“The best part of my day? Finding new books for the kids like Oscar and Molly, they’re so adorable. I got Oscar into reading more. He was hesitant at first, but since we’ve been reading together every morning, he’s even gone up a grade.”

His grin widens. “You really are a modern day saint.”

I blush and refrain from pressing my hands to my cheeks to cool them. “Hardly. I just like helping out.”

He nudges me. “You sure Hank isn’t lookin’ for a girlfriend?”

I never thought about it that way. Plus, Hank is way older than me and he’s never been flirty or suggested anything of the sort. “No.” I shake my head. “It’s not like that. He’s just a decent dad trying to do the best for his kids. I admire that, and the kids are great.”

His smile softens. “I’m glad he appreciates it.” He starts to back away. “I gotta run, but this has been fun.”

I roll my eyes. “Now I know you’re poking fun at me.”

“Call me if you need a cup of sugar.”

“Why is it always a cup of sugar?” I throw back. “You know, sugar is really bad for you.”

“Fine.” He grins. “If you need an apple, celery stick or a potato, you know where I am.”

I can’t help the smile that splits across my face. I know I’m still a little pink in the cheeks, but I can’t help it. Cole is doing things to me, and now I’m making it really freaking obvious.

“Bye, Cole.”

“Bye,Shorty.”He glances over his shoulder then hollers, “Bye, Mrs. P, Emma!”

“Bye, Cole!” they yell back in unison.

I turn, and when my eyes meet Emma’s, she gives me a knowing smirk. “Uh, huh. You know you’re the color of a beet, right?” She whispers so my mom won’t hear.

I finally pat my cheeks. “It’s not my fault. I blush easily.”

“What was he saying to make you blush?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. We were just telling each other funny stories.”

“Uh, huh.”

My eyes bug wide. “It isn’t like that!”

She waggles her eyebrows. “I mean, why not? He’s single. Hot. He’s also good with his hands.” She waves her fingers at me. “You know what else he’d be good with?”

I slap them away. “Shhhh!” I glance over her shoulder, but Mom’s singing away to herself as she puts my plates away.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I worry about you,” she goes on. “Drake was bad news. You deserve to have some fun and not be stressed out all the time like you were with him.”

When your best friend and your boyfriend don’t get along, red flags should not just be raised, they should be waving madly. Then again, I am known to be a people pleaser, and I really thought Drake would step up.

“I know. But maybe I’m fine being single for a while.”

“And that’s okay, too, but I don’t want Drake being mean to you.”

“I wouldn’t give him the chance. I haven’t forgotten how he treated me like a housemaid and then had the gall to cheat on me.”

“Urgh.” She screws up her face. “I don’t know who he thinks he is, but his actions are on him, not you. And a housemaid is something you’re not and never will be. You deserve the best, Ains.”

I smile gently. “Thank you. I told myself this year was about me, and what did I do? Jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. My resolutions for next year are going to look a heck of a lot different.”

“You know what? It’s okay. You fought for something and that’s not a bad thing,” she goes on. “But you deserve so much better. I know you don’t do random hook-ups, but if you were looking for some fun, Cole is the guy for that. Fun with a capital F.”

My eyes shoot up in surprise. “He’s known for being quite the ladies’ man, so I don’t

know if ‘having fun’ with someone like Cole is the way to go. Plus, I don’t think I’d be his type.”

She narrows her eyes. “And why not?”

I laugh. “I just don’t know if he seems like the librarian kind of guy.”

“Well, I beg to differ. He really is sweet underneath it all. I used to make mud pies with him when we’re little, and you said yourself, he was really cute last year at the speed dating thing.”

Cole may be known as the charming guy of Silver Pines, but at least he’s not the Love ‘em and Leave ‘em type.

“I admit, he was very sweet at speed dating, but I’m having a vision now of mud pie making.” I screw my nose up and she laughs.

Emma is always looking out for me, heaven help when she runs into Drake. I know she’s got a few things to say to his face that I never could. Eric doesn’t like him either. Frankly, I’m sick of thinking about him, and why was he calling me?

I sigh.

“Turn that frown upside down.” She taps my chin.

“He called.”

“Drake?”

I nod.

She shakes her head. “So ignore him. He’s just mad you followed through with moving out.”

“I guess...”

“You do not need to answer to him. He had the girl, and he let her go. Period.”

I wish I had her confidence with all of this. I don’t know how to be brave. I guess doing what I’m doing is brave enough, but I can’t help but wonder if this is all I’m capable of. I don’t mind the small town stuff, but this? Always being the giver. I read about these men that worship the ground you walk on — not that I’d feel comfortable with a man doing that necessarily — but the fleeting idea is nice. To have a man take care of me for once, what would that look like?

I hug myself. I guess I’ll hold out that the perfect guy really is out there. All jokes aside, I don’t know what love is. It’s not Drake, I know that much. But just because Cole is sweet, and cute, and has a sunshine personality, doesn’t mean we’d be good together. Like Emma said, I don’t do hook-ups. I never have. No shame to women that do, more power to them. But I have to feel a connection, and it’s unlikely I’d feel that over drinks or a coffee. If I did, then sure, I’d explore it.

“I know,” I say when Emma continues to stare at me. “I deserve better. Got it.”

“Don’t just say it because you think it’s what I want to hear. I want you to really believe it.”

“What are you girls talking about?” Mom pops her head around the corner.

Busy-body Emma turns her head and says, “Ainsley and her worth and how she deserves the moon and all the stars.”



Mom's eyes flick to mine, and her face softens. She pulls off her rubber gloves — yes, my mom is a germaphobe, bless her heart. “Oh, honey. Emma's right. This move will open up all kinds of doors for you. You're independent and beautiful, smart and funny?—”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You have to say that. You’re my mom.”

“But it’s true, even if you weren’t my daughter. So, how about Cole...”

“Mom!”

Emma giggles. “We sound like a broken record. Fine, we’ll leave you alone,for now.”

“I’m just saying, he’s your neighbor...” Mom prattles on.

I give her a pretend glare. “And I’d like it to stay that way.”

She raises her hands in surrender. “Fine. But don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. I think he likes you.”

“He does not,” I sigh. “Mom, I don’t need you playing matchmaker.”

Emma links her arm with hers and they giggle together like school kids, heading back into the kitchen.

I bang my forehead against the wall, muttering, “Sanctuary, Sanctuary...”

## CHAPTER 5

### COLE

I shouldn’t be noticingthat Ainsley is wearing the cutest sweater known to man.

It's knitted and has a giant pumpkin on the front. I know she's the fall queen, and though she's good at putting on a brave face for Christmas, I've always had the impression that she doesn't really like it. I'm sure if I dug deep enough, there would be a lot of things I'd find about Ainsley Parsons that I didn't know.

I sit here, pretending to read the meeting notes, but I'm secretly checking her out.

Those cute curls bobbing. Her glasses as they slip down to the end of her nose as she reads. Her skin is pale like it usually is, but she has this glow to her cheeks that — I'm sorry — makeup just doesn't give you. Not in this case, anyway. Okay, I've been crushing on her since last year when we worked together, and it's been eleven months of hell thinking about if I should ask her out. Then she got back with that dick face.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. I'd really like to rearrange his face. Anyone that causes Ainsley to frown deserves two black eyes.

"So, if there are no objections?" She scours the room.

Jessica Lockwood, the mayor, and Margaret, along with Keith from Presley's vet's office — who I secretly think she sent to spy — and Mrs. Henderson's seventeen-year-old grandkid Marley, who's using his detention time helping us, completes our group. Presley is the Chairperson of the committee, and Travis is usually in charge of the Christmas festivities, but they've handed the reins over this year to Ainsley and I, just so they can concentrate on baby April without all the Christmas drama. They'll still partake in everything, but they just can't be at every meeting.

"I think I missed the part where the town takes on the biggest snowball fight in Silver Pines history and breaks the Wyoming record," I muse. Marley chuckles next to me.

I glance up and sure enough, Ainsley's gaze meets mine. Her lips purse. I admit, I like ruffling her pretty little feathers just a little.

“Or the longest sled ride from the top of Silver Pine Falls to the bottom,” Marley pipes up, equally enthused as I am.

Jessica Lockwood is shaking her head in my periphery. “All we need is a kid to get hit in the eye with a flying snowball, or the break of a leg going down the slalom and we’ll get sued.”

“Still, think of the needy.” I shrug. “We could get more funding for Presley’s rescue, or the kids’ ward at the hospital. There’s always room for giving at Christmas time.”

“It’s true,” Keith chimes in. “There is always time for giving, and everyone loves a snowball fight. It’d put Silver Pines on the map. We’d do it safely, of course.”

Jessica narrows her eyes. Clearly we’re not encouraged to have ideas. The only time Jessica has ever smiled was when Travis came on the committee and blew all the decorating plans out of the water. I think she’s sulking because neither Travis nor Presley are here. “That may be so, but this is something I need to think about.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Ainsley adds. “It’s just what Silver Pines needs to stay in the news.”

I hold my smirk. I mean, we need a snowball fight. Travis might have his fancy blow up frosty and an ice skating rink, but new ideas are what keep tourists coming to Silver Pines instead of Alpine Falls or the busy, overpopulated Jackson Hole.

The Mayor isn’t convinced, and I know she’s a no-fun haver, but some of us think outside the box.

“While I have some reservations, something different to add to the treasure hunt might be what we need to spice things up a bit,” Margaret says.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Hmm, kinda looks like Jessica may be outvoted. “I’ll have to double check regulations,” Jessica says. “As well as get Travis and Presley’s vote, since they’re not here. We’d also have to have age limits so the little ones don’t get injured.”

“What about a snowman competition for the little guys?” Marley says. “Build your own frosty, and the winner gets a prize and their name in the Daily Pines.”

I turn and give him a nod of approval and tap my head. “Up there for thinkin’, Marles.” We high-five.

“Great idea,” Ainsley chimes. “As long as the big kids don’t ruin it for the others.” She eyes me and I can’t help but grin. I thumb my chest as if to say;me?

She nods in response, then shakes her head.

“Fine, but I’d like a detailed report on how we negate the risks for the snowball fight,” Jessica says, then adds, “Since it was Cole’s idea, he can help you, Ainsley.”

Fine by me. I lean back in my chair, trying not to act obvious that I think it’s the best idea she’s come up with so far. “I’m sure Ains and I can put our heads together on this one.” Little does anyone know, there’s a snowball in Hell’s chance I’m going to miss a one-on-one meeting with Ainsley. Heck, I’d watch paint drying if that’s what it took. In any case, Travis put his trust in me to take his place, and this is just the sort of idea that will get him all revved up.

“What did we have planned for the Hunger Games competition this year?” Keith looks down at his notes. “Ainsley mentioned a treasure hunt a little differently this

year.”

All our eyes flick to her, and I only just notice she has little pumpkins in her ears to match her sweater. Adorable. It may be the back end of fall, but Ains is making the most of it.

“Well, each year we have teams of two who work with one another, but this year I thought it’d be a hoot if the teams weren’t pre-selected. So it would be more challenging.”

I can see a whole world of problems with that idea, but I keep it to myself. It’s just like Ainsley to try and mix things up for the better and force people to get along for the good of giving. I’ve only just realized it’s another thing about her, aside from her adorable sweater/matching earrings combo, that I adore.

“Sounds like a game plan.” I sit up in my chair. “After all, they call Silver Pines the friendly ski town of Wyoming. If we can’t get along with our peers in a Christmas environment, then when can we?”

Ainsley claps her hands together. “Exactly! And the resort said they’d up their donation by double if we can get the locals on board. We put all the names of every competitor into a hat and shake it up, pairing them together.”

I roll my lips to save from laughing.

“What if I get stuck with someone really old?” Marley complains.

Margaret tsks and Jessica looks like she smells something bad.

“Watch your mouth,” Margaret warns. “I know your grandmother wouldn’t approve. Why not see it as an experience to learn and expand your horizons?”

“Stacy Lockheart may be competing,” I mutter under my breath.

Marley perks up suddenly. “I think I like the idea of expanding my horizons. Make Grandma proud.” He side eyes me.

Margaret smiles warmly and I try not to lose it laughing.

Ainsley narrows her eyes at me as I give her my best nonchalant shrug. So she can lip read. The girl is smart.

“Way to go, Marles. I think you’re gonna get a lot out of this detention.” I pat him on the back.

“So, if we’re done here, I’d like your ideas about the snowball fight on my desk by Friday,” Jessica says.

If you ask me, she is being harsher on this whole idea than she needs to be. I know this town is completely insane when it comes to Christmas and their damn near precious decorating, but let’s get real here. IT’S DECORATING. The snowball fight is just some added fun.

I mutter to Ainsley, once the meeting is dispersed, “Presley’s pioneering efforts have placed us all on the chopping block.”

She elbows me in the ribs. “Don’t let Pres hear you say that. She wants a copy of the meeting minutes.”

I chuckle. “I bet she does. She and Travis need to let go. I mean, they allow kids here, if they’re so worked up about it, they could’ve come along. She might not have officially handed the baton over, but I’d say it’s your baby now.”

She looks down at her shoes and I know I've said the wrong thing. "Ains? Did I say something wrong?"

She shakes her head. "No."

I get we're not close friends, but she can trust me. She knows that. We worked well together last year at the speed dating night. There's no reason why she can't tell me stuff, unless she doesn't want to. Which I get.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I mean, I can be Switzerland, right?”

She eyes me. “Switzerland?”

“Bella Swan. You’re a twilight fan, surely?” It’s not really a question, I already know. I’ve seen her Team Charlie t-shirts. Yep, Team Charlie.

“You — how’d you know about twilight?”

I give her a lopsidedduhlook. “Please.”

“Emma bought me that shirt,” she whispers, like someone will hear us.

I glance around at the empty hall as I whisper back. “Uh, huh. I mean, I don’t blame you. Charlie’s cool. I liked him the best in the movies. Personally, I’d trade Edward and Jacob in for one of Chief Swan.”

Finally she laughs. “Stop making fun.” She shoves me.

“I’m not!” I laugh. Sobering when I see the smile doesn’t reach her eyes. Something’s bugging her. “But in all seriousness, you can tell me if you want. Don’t feel you have to, but you just looked sad when we were talking about taking over from Pres.”

A deep breath pulls from her chest. “I’m gonna say it really fast, and it’s only because I had a little nip of butterscotch schnapps before I arrived and it’s given me some liquid courage.”

My eyes go wide. “Drinking on the job? Ainsley Parsons, I never?—”

Her hand connects with my shoulder as she gives me a playful shove. “I don’t really like Christmas all that much,” she sighs. “My dad and I don’t get along. He hasn’t made the holidays the most memorable over the years.”

“Shit, I’m sorry to hear that.”

She shrugs one shoulder. “We’ve tried over the years. But it wasn’t good growing up, he was a liar and didn’t treat my mom very respectfully.”

I stare at her. I was not expecting that. “Ains—” I don’t know what to say.

“So that’s my sad little story.” Her eyes find her feet again. “I prefer fall, truth be told, and I love Halloween.”

“You hate Christmas and yet you do all of this even though it brings you pain?” I feel a similar sensation knowing this information. It’s hitting my chest like a loaded freight train. Firing up the juices in my veins, it makes me wanna find her father and punch his lights out.

“I don’t hate it. It’s just always been a hard time for me.”

“But you never act like you hate it.”

She sighs. “I’m good at pretending, Cole. I’ve become really, really good at it. Maybe I should add it to my boring resume.”

The words hang and I don’t like them. I don’t like them one little bit. I lift her chin with my fingers so she’s forced to look at me. “You don’t have to pretend with me. Never. Do you hear me?”

She swallows hard, and I see it, the trepidation in her eyes. It makes me want to hurt anyone that ever put that look there, and I vow right here, right now, I never will.

“I’m sorry,” I go on. “About your dad. He sounds like a real jerk.”

“He is. And it’s not Christmas’s fault. We never had much growing up, and my mom made it as fun as she could. I mean, I didn’t know any different. But sometimes when she didn’t think I could hear, I caught her crying a lot around the holidays.”

“Your mom’s a good woman. She deserved better.”

She nods. “Funny, that’s what she keeps telling me. Earlier today you asked me what was wrong?” She glances up at me and I nod before she goes on. “I got a text from Drake. Asking when I’m coming back. Then I found out a few hours ago that he’s already been seen with another girl from out of town.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out. She really knows how to pick ‘em. Not that she picked her own jerk of a father, but Drake? What a fucking loser.

“Drake’s a dick,” I say. “He’s rebounding. He knows he’ll never get anyone as good as you. We both know it, so he’s retaliating. It can’t be good for his inflated ego that you left him the way you did.”

“Thanks Cole. One day he might get it into his head that I left because I deserve better.”

It’s like she’s telling herself and if she says it enough times, she might really believe it. “Yes, you do.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Now we have this stupid thing that I can’t get out of.”

“What stupid thing?”

She sighs. “Well, it’s not stupid. I signed up as a chaperone for the kids’ dance next weekend and so did Drake. We’re on the drinks station together.”

Over my dead body is that happening. He had his shot; he blew it. If he’s parading some floozy around to make her feelbad, then he’s gonna meet my knuckles pretty swiftly. He’s not that big a dude, I can take him.

“I’ll come,” I offer. “He can take a hike if he thinks he’s gonna try and rub it in your face.”

She places a hand on my arm and I feel it all the way to my balls. “Cole, you don’t have to rescue me every time I get in a mess.”

“I know that, but we could pretend we’re a thing. You know, make him back off for good if I’m the new guy.” What in the fuck?

Sometimes my mouth has a way of running away with itself before my brain catches up.

Now it’s her turn to hang her mouth open. “Are you serious?”

I shrug. I’m too far in now, I have to keep going. “Why not? You said he’s doing shit to make you jealous. Well, we fight fire with fire, Ainsley Parsons. That’s the only

way assholes like him learn. Play him at his own game.”

“We do?”

“Yes. You know that old saying about cutting down the dead wood?” I smile as she nods. “Well, that’s what we’re doing.”

“By fake dating?”

“Trust me, I’m a guy. If he thinks you’ve moved on, it’ll make him move on even faster. At the very least, I don’t think working the drinks station with him is a good idea. He knows what he lost and he’s gonna try his best to get you back.”

She shakes her head. “Never. He can swing like Tarzan across the jungle for all I care. I havesomeself worth.”

I cock a brow. “Tarzan?”

She shrugs. “Schnapps.”

Maybe this isn’t a good idea because my crush is even more apparent the more time I spend with her. But I’m not doing this to get into her pants or woo her. That ain’t me, despite popular opinion, I respect Ainsley, and I don’t want to see her hurt. If it means being her fake boyfriend for a night, then I’ll do it. I won’t touch her, or try to kiss her, or do anything stupid like that. But if he thinks I’m sniffing around, he’ll back off.

“You could always block his number,” I suggest. “Then you don’t have to see his name comin’ up on your screen all the time.”

Her brow furrows. “You know what? I have two degrees, a first responder certificate

and I'm the head of three committees in this town, plus I have an IQ of one sixty-five and I didn't even think of that."

"I'm full of good ideas, Shorty."

She takes out her phone and I watch as she pulls up his name and does just that; blocks the douchebag. Then continues on Facebook, Instagram and Messenger. "Asshole."

I've never in my life heard Ainsley swear or say anything other than 'jerk' or 'idiot'.

That makes me smile. "I'll give you a ride home. Didn't see your car out in the lot."

"I rode my bicycle."

I balk. "It's gonna snow soon, and you're riding around on your bike?"

"I didn't want to drink and drive."

I snicker, slapping my knees. "How much butterscotch did you have?" Knowing her, it was a sniff.

"A mouthful," she whines. "I'm a lightweight, sue me."

"Well, I'm all for you being safe, but how about from now on we ride together to the meetings?" I place my hand out. "Deal?"

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

She takes it tentatively at first, her delicate fingers wrap around mine, then she shakes with a little more vigor. “Deal. Plus, it’s freezing out there tonight.”

“I’ll put your bicycle in the back of my truck,” I say before she makes an excuse. “It’s not like you live far from me.”

The corners of her mouth turn up in a half-smile. “Wise ass.”

Oh, Ainsley Parsons. What am I gonna do with you?

I smile. “Let’s go home.”

## CHAPTER 6

### AINSLEY

That cocky grin.

His pretty hazel eyes.

Carved biceps.

Sweet, sweet buns of steel.

Those are the thoughts that jolt me out of my sleep, and when I realize it’s only just after five in the morning, I curse my attractive neighbor and then I rub my eyes. It’s not his fault. Well, maybe it is because he’s being super helpful as well as looking

cute while doing it. Now he's offered to stand in as my fake boyfriend to ward off evil spirits and men called Drake.

It's sweet of him buturgh. How is this my life? Why couldn't I just voice the words that I'm attracted to him, or at the very least, that fake dating is a good idea and see how that went?

I guess I'm afraid that admitting I feel a spark with Cole might make him think I'm looking for a rebound. Even though it's been months, me and Drake were done long before that. Then there's the other fear that Cole is just being a nice guy. I mean, he's flirty. He is that way with everyone, and I can't blame him for that. He's young and single. Why shouldn't he flirt? But now I'm picturing him flirting, I'm just not sure that I like the idea of him doing it to other women. Yep, he helped me unpack my unmentionables and moved some boxes and now I have some weird claim over him. In my dreams.

He's not interested in me. He was just being nice.

I yawn, throwing back the covers, then step into my pumpkin slippers. Everything is better with fall all around you. It may be the last few days for it, but that's not the point. In my opinion, fall should occur anytime after July 4th. There's only so many pumpkin spiced lattes one can drink in such a short space of time.

I use the bathroom, slipping into my comfy, orange waffle robe, and just as I walk into the kitchen, I yelp at the sight of something moving across the floor. It makes me rocket five feet in the air, and I quickly jump up on the nearby kitchen chair for refuge.

"Holy shit!" My hand presses over my heart as I stare down at the scruffy, ginger cat looking up at me.



His expression is one of blind nonchalance. Like it's his kitchen and I'm the one trespassing. What's even more bizarre is how the heck he got in here, unless... I glance over to the door that backs onto the kitchen and sure enough, there's the culprit. A cat door. Maybe the previous renter was used to his comings and goings, but he doesn't look very friendly. A worse idea hits me; did they leave it behind?

I don't know if I should shoo him — or her — away, or to try to make friends. I go with the latter.

“Here, kitty kitty,” I say, stepping down gingerly from the chair. I realize I'm being a tad dramatic, but I wasn't expecting to see a cat in the middle of my kitchen.

I realize I probably need treats or something to lure it in. Sadly, I don't have any catnip, but I probably have some tuna in the cupboard. I stop. Do cats really eat fish? Or am I imagining that?

I walk around the cat. His head moves and his eyes follow me. All the while, the furry beast doesn't budge. This tough little talker really thinks he owns the place.

I reach to the top cupboard and hunt around. Damn it. I didn't do grocery shopping, but surely I've got something in this godforsaken pantry aside from mothballs.

Corn flakes. A box of cookies. Spaghettios.

I turn. The cat hasn't moved, but he's still watching me with big, wary brown eyes. Maybe I should've tried to shoo it away. Hmm. Do cats drink milk? I have that at least.

I move to the fridge, then hunt around for a dish. Settling on a saucer that matches my teacup, I pour some milk and set it down. He looks at it, then back at me, then back down again.

“I’m sorry, your majesty.” I fake a bow. “But there are no royal biscuits to go with your milk this morning.”

I snort, and the cat hisses at me. Literally hisses, baring his teeth.

“Okay, so we’re not gonna be friends, then? Maybe the last person who lived here let you boss them around with your beady little eyes and cold demeanor, but that was then, buster. This is now.” I reach over toward the broom tucked between the sink and the fridge, just in case the furry critter decides to attack, and I grip the handle. You can’t be too careful where cats are concerned. I’ve heard they’re a different breed, and this one is proving that theory correct.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I didn't know cats could be so obstinate, but this little character really does look peeved off just at my existing. That and giving him crappy cold milk in a gold-rimmed saucer.

"I'll have you know that's Royal Doulton," I tell him. "And you should feel privileged to have your milk in it. I don't just give my saucer to any old body." I realize I'm talking to a cat and a flash of me thirty years from now, in this very house with a slew of kitties running around, causes me to grip the handle even tighter. "Shoo."

If cats could do the Damon Salvatore eyebrow raise, this cat wins first prize. He really isn't afraid of me.

"Okay, I give up. You came here to torture me, what is it you want? Cause' I haven't got anything suitable for a cat to eat." I contemplate trying cornflakes, but that wouldn't be very neighborly of me, even if it is my house, knowingly giving him something I'm certain he shouldn't be eating.

He raises his butt off the ground and moves his little legs closer to me. Uh, oh. I imagine the 911 call right now. "Excuse me officer, but this cat broke into my house and just attacked me out of nowhere, and now he's trying to eat my arm..."

It's because I haven't had my coffee yet, that's what it is. I'm delusional before the caffeine hits.

As politely as I can, I try to shoo him back with the broom, but like Clint Eastwood in a Fistful of Dollars, the damn cat is not deterred. Yes, I'm intimidated by a freaking

animal!

“Shoo!” I say again, but his eyes narrow and before I can do anything, it leans back on its haunches and suddenly leaps up onto the counter, making me shriek as I run out the back door and slam it behind me.

I’m too scared to glance back to see if the damned thing made it out, and like a horror film, he’s right behind me, waiting to pounce... but when I peek back through the glass with my hands, he’s up on the counter, laying in the morning sun that streams through the blinds. He watches me like I’m a complete idiot, and I feel that right down to my toes.

I straighten my back, ignore the thudding of my beating heart, and begin to march back in to show him who’s boss when I hear, “Morning, Ainsley.”

I stare at the cat before turning to the voice. It’s as if the fur ball on wheels knows my sudden discomfort and dread of being caught outside in my robe by my neighbor, and is secretly satisfied. I know that voice. I know that tone. And I know the way he says my name.

And no, for the record, I did not plan on running into Cole wearing pumpkin pajamas, wooly socks pulled up over the top, along with oversized novelty slippers and my matching pumpkin colored robe. Not to mention, my hair is slung in a knot on the top of my head containing my curls from last night, but now Leo Sayer would be rattled by the frizz. It’s also slipped sideways in a way that was fashionable in the 1980s when leg warmers were a thing. I should be grateful that I didn’t have my sleep mask on, usually, it’s stuck to the top of my head. I reach for my forehead and realize that my nightmare is now complete. My pumpkin sleep mask is sitting on my forehead, completing the look.

I slowly turn, and it feels like it takes eons to do that simple little act. And there he is,

over the timber fence line between us.

I clear my throat. "Hello, Cole."

He's looking scrumdiddily-dumptuous, of course, at stupid o'clock in the morning, and he's already dressed for work, even though it's barely light out.

"You okay?"

Why, do I not look okay? And why is he out in the garden at this time of the morning?

It's then I realize he has a hose in his hand. Is he watering a... veggie patch?

"Um, yes, I just had a fright, actually."

If he notices I'm wearing weird stuff to bed, he doesn't show it, but his brow furrows. "What was it?"

"A cat," I say, looking back over to my back window. The critter has now rolled onto his back, paws in the air like he's in the south of France, not my kitchen bench. "It hissed at me and then jumped up on my bench, and I ran away like the giant child I am."

"Oh, no." He turns the hose off. "Is it ginger and scowls, as if you trod on his ancestors' graves and did a rain dance on them?"

I nod slowly.

"That's just Fudge," he says like that's meant to mean something to me, then adds, "He's my cat."

I stare at him for a few moments while I comprehend his words. “You have a cat?”

“Yep.”

I don’t know why I’m surprised. I mean, people have cats all the time. But something about Cole being a cat dad is...hot.

“Oh.”

“You’re not allergic, are you?”

“Uh, no.” I try to snatch my eyepatch off, but he’s watching, so it just ends up higher on top of my bun.Flattering, Ainsley. Way to go.“He just startled me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

He runs a hand over his hair, and I follow the movement. It's shorter than last year, but still shaggy. His light, almost curly locks spring back and I feel a jolt in my lower belly. I did just have a dream about McSteamy over here, so it's not entirely my fault.

"I'm really sorry. He's a little, uh, particular."

"You don't say? I gave him a saucer of milk and he looked at me like Darth Vader about to shoot down Battlestar Galactica."

He chuckles. "He's all bark and no bite. Honestly. Mr. and Mrs. Carruthers just moved into the retirement home in town. They used to feed him, so he's probably just wondering who you are and when you'll be handing out the treats."

"I'm not usually a betting woman, but I'm guessing he only likes a certain brand?"

"Got it in one. Don't blame the little guy, it's his owner's fault." He jabs a finger into his chest. "Foster fail. His owner dumped him at Presley's clinic a few weeks after the 'Christmas spirit' wore off last year. He was in a cardboard box with no blanket or anything. Poor thing could've frozen to death."

My heart softens. "Oh, that's awful! People are asswipes. No wonder he's wary."

"Well, he wandered into your house without permission. You're allowed to be a little shaken up, especially with those judgy eyes of his."

Why does he have to be so freaking cute in the mornings? Or anytime? But especially in the mornings when I look like I just barely survived a wild night wrestling a

typhoon.

“Oh, he’s got that stare down pat. At the moment, he’s sunning himself on my counter top, wondering where the good snacks are.” We both look over and sure enough, he’s still watching us from his upside down position, his eyes closing every now and again. I can imagine him purring and I melt a little more. I’ve never had a pet before because my mom is allergic, but I love animals. I just don’t know how to handle them or what they need, but I don’t think it could be that hard.

“I can go get him,” Cole offers. “He shouldn’t be just barging his way into your place unannounced. Even if he does think it’s his second home.”

“While I tend to agree, a simple meow would have sufficed.” We both laugh.

Gosh, he’s so easy to talk to. My cheeks burn when I think about the spicy dream I was having and Cole was on top. Holy crap!

I clear my throat for what feels like the thousandth time. “But really, he’s fine, now that I know he’s yours.” He piques an eyebrow and I realize how that sounded. “Not a stray,” I amend, quickly adding, “Not that there’s anything wrong with strays, of course. It isn’t their fault for the situations they find themselves in; it’s dumb humans who are selfish and shouldn’t get a pet if they don’t take the responsibility seriously.” I also babble when I’m under pressure.

He gives me that cute as sin lopsided grin. “As long as you’re sure.”

I start to walk backward. Who’d have thought the safety of my kitchen with the killer cat inside would be a refuge away from the cute boy next door? I mean, it’s too late, he’s seen me in my pj’s for heaven’s sake. And now I want to crawl under my duvet and never come out.



“I’m sure.” I wave behind me. “Anyway, coffee’s calling. I’ll see you soon.”

I’ll see you soon?

He gives me a chin lift. “Countin’ on it.”

I try not to scurry, but that’s probably the only word I can use to describe my movements as I flee back to the safety of the house. I shut the door behind me and lean against it, sighing. When I open my eyes, Fudge hasn’t moved.

“Fudge?” I breathe. “Is that your name?” It could just be me, but I’m sure I hear him purring. “You scared me at first, okay, but now I know Cole is your, uh...Daddy...” My heart rate accelerates. Being a cat Dad is so hot. “We have to learn to co-exist because it’s clear to me that Cole cares a lot about you. And I’m sorry that your selfish humans before him did what they did. Ever heard of karma, Fudge? Well, I believe in it, and when they’re old and gray, I hope they get left out in the cold, too.”

He paws toward me, and my heart softens like gooey caramel. I move toward him and I know it’s a risk, but I slowly reach to him and tickle his tummy. He purrs louder, watching me carefully, but allowing the touch. “You’re a good boy, deep down, aren’t you, bud? Just a little bossy, huh?” Then I lower my voice like I’m a conspirator. “Don’t tellDaddy,but I’ll get you some treats. Only the good kind. It’ll be our little secret, okay?” Then I realize the residents before me used to feed him, and Cole already mentioned Fudge only likes the good treats. I guess that meansDaddyprobably doesn’t care what he gets up to over here.

He’s so soft, and I get the feeling he is kinda sweet in his own way. I think I might have misjudged him, but in my defense, he stalked me into a corner in my own kitchen and hissed at me. I know I’m technically inmyhouse, but Fudge thinks it’shissecond home, and who am I to argue? It’s obvious I need to respect that if we’re going to co-exist.

He rubs his head against my wrist and I think he's forgiven me for not being Mrs. Curruthers.

I smile. "I think we're gonna get along just fine." He stretches out, his body long as he yawns. "And on that note, I'm making coffee. From now on, I'm only sleeping in silk negligees, you know, in case I have to run outside again and have a conversation over the fence with your hot daddy." I laugh, shaking my head. I don't know, but I'm sure Fudge purrs even harder. "Just kidding."

## CHAPTER 7

### COLE

A few days later

I press against the kid's hand with the admission stamp and look around for Ainsley. I got roped into the door entry before I could protest. The damn women of Silver Pines are bossy little things, but it's not like I can argue. I'd get a clip around the ear from Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Stuber, the principal.

I know Ainsley's been worried about seeing her ex for the first time, and if he's any kind of gentleman, which we know he's not, he'd do well to fuck the hell off and leave her alone. I know guys like him. They don't know what they've got till it's gone. And once he sees her free and living her life on her own terms, I'll bet my bottom dollar he's gonna want back in. I don't think Ainsley is that down on herself that she'd take a dick like him back after what he did to her, but I wouldn't put it past the asshole to try. No matter my past history, and it's been colorful, I've never ever cheated and I never would. I've never promised a woman anything that I couldn't live up to, and that's the truth.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

The more I think about it, the more I think the fake dating thing is dumb. I mean, we don't owe him shit. It shouldn't take another man to pretend to be anything to get this waste of space to back off. Unfortunately, I know how most of these guys work, which is the only reason I suggested it to Ainsley. She's her own woman, but I still don't want to see her get hurt more than she already has.

"Hey, Cole." I turn to see Charli behind me. The cavalry has arrived.

"Tell me you're takin' over," I plead. "I've got a drink station to man."

She gives me a look. "I smell trouble."

"No trouble. I said I'd give Ainsley a hand."

Her eyes narrow. "Spill, jockstrap."

My eyes go wide. "Jockstrap?"

She shrugs. "I was in the moment. I distinctly remember you having a bit of a thing for Ainsley last year?"

"A bit of a thing?" I cock a brow. "If I recall, I was busy tryin' to match-make you and Jake together. You're welcome, by the way."

She rolls her eyes. "And you remind me every chance you get."

"If it weren't for me, you two would still be dancing around your feelings and playin'

footsie under the table.”

She folds her arms over her chest. “Thank you, Cole. You’re the best. Now tell me the truth, are you jonesing for our cute little librarian? Or more to the point, are you gonna do anything about it?”

“She just broke up with her boyfriend. Give it a minute.”

Charli scoffs. “That was months ago. I’m just saying. You waited last time, and you let her slip away.”

I palm the back of my neck, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “It wasn’t like that. We’re just friends.”

“Oh, come on. You’ve been moping around here like a lovesick puppy for months.”

“I’d hardly say?—”

“What’s more, you gave me such a hard time when I wouldn’t admit my feelings for Jacob.” She does that one eyebrow lift I thought only I had mastered. But no, she’s proving by each passing second, with the dressing down in progress and hands on hips, that she is alive and well. “And if you hadn’t pushed me into being brave, who knows what would’ve happened?”

I shrug, exaggerating. “We’d still be waiting for Jake to grow a set?”

She throws a ticket stub at my head. It bounces off and I feign hurt. “Ouch. That’s no way to treat the man you owe your future children to.”

She rolls her eyes again. “Stop avoiding the subject. Make a move or I’ll intervene.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “What if I’m holding back from asking her out because I don’t think she’s over her ex?”

Charli’s eyebrows raise some more. “Is she not over him?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not gonna be a rebound guy. That’s not my style, and I’d never take advantage of her, of anyone. Ainsley’s —different.”

“Nobody’s asking you to do that, and I get it. I’m just saying. Ainsley is the sweetest. I always just saw you two getting together. It probably feels different because you care about her, she’s not just another notch on your bedpost.”

“Of course I care about her, and I’m not the fuck boy everyone thinks I am. I’ve changed. She’d never be another notch on my bedpost.” I lower my voice. “I guess I kinda stuck my head in the sand. Now we’re neighbors. It’s like the universe is giving me a sign. Plus, Fudge took up residence on her kitchen counter and made himself right at home, and she didn’t even mind.” I smile when I think about her in her cute pumpkin pj’s and her hair all messy from sleep.

Charli smiles. “It’s definitely a sign. A sign for you to pull your finger out of your ass and buck up.”

“Since when did you get so bossy?”

“Since one of my best friends — that’s you, by the way — never gave up hope on me when I was being a whiny baby.”

“Least you can admit it.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Ha-ha.” She shoves me in the shoulder. “Go get ‘em tiger.”

“You’re gonna cover for me?”

“Yup. Last thing we want is Drake wrangling his way back in. Not that I think he has a chance in Hell after the stunt he pulled.”

“He will wish he opted out tonight.” I rub my chin. My knuckles don’t disagree that I could use his face as a punching bag if the timing was right. I don’t usually resort to violence, but sometimes a good punch in the face might be good for both parties.

I glance at Charli who’s assessing me with a smirk I know only too well spells trouble. “Or else what?”

“Or else me and him are gonna have a chat, man to man.”

She shoves me again. “So go already! I have a bunch of kids heading this way and you’re cluttering up the place!”

I chuckle. “Remind me to tell Jakey-boy to give your ass a whoopin’ next time I see him.”

“Jacob whoops my ass any chance he gets!” she hollers after me.

I chuckle as I turn and quickly scan across the room. The school gymnasium brings back a flurry of memories, not all of them good, but not all bad, either. I wasn’t quite the jock, or the popular kid, but somewhere in between. Indie meets clown jester. Or

something like that. I didn't like school all that much. I've always been good at making stuff, so woodwork and metal shop were my favorite subjects, I knew from early on that I wanted to build houses, or whatever I could get my hands on.

I also love gardening and have a decent vegetable patch growing in the back at home.

As I glance around the busy space milling with kids, it takes me back to when I was in school. I'm pretty sure this is the same floor that Cassie Simmerton dumped me on because she thought I was seeing another girl at the same time. God, to be eight years old again and going to my first dance. It's kinda cute to see the little kids getting into it. Some dressed up as their favorite superhero, and some in formal attire that makes me smile.

The kids all helped with decorating, too. So it looks like a cross between a frat house and a flamingo throwing up in here. Streamers hang down from every available space, along with balloons, hand made posters with stickers and glitter, plus paper mache pinatas that I really hope the kids aren't going to beat to death later.

When I spot the drinks station, I see Ainsley by herself. With a racing heart and sweaty palms sweating, I head her way. She's wearing a black button up blouse and a hot pink tutu that just grazes her knees. I roll my lips. I didn't expect that. Her hair is also straight, which throws me for a half a second because I've only ever seen her with curly hair. She's also wearing a little makeup and her eyes are different. I think she outlined them. When her blue eyes find mine, her face softens and shoulders relax. That action alone makes me feel good. I don't need to be a genius to work out she's on the lookout for that dickhead ex.

"Well hello, little lady." I tip my non-existent cowboy hat and stop in front of her table. "You on the heavy stuff?"

She laughs. "If you can call pink lemonade and Shirley Temple's the heavy stuff,

then yes.”

There’s a large punch bowl with fruit floating around in it, along with little umbrellas that sit around the edges. There’s probably enough sugar in there to sink a battleship. That’s probably why most of the kids here tonight are bouncing off the walls.

“Need a hand?”

“Sure.”

I make my way around the back of the table as Ainsley restocks the little plastic cups. Two kids approach, and she smiles, asking what they’d like. Pouring a cup each of the pink punch, they skip off happily.

“You look nice,” I tell her. “Though I didn’t pick you for a pink tutu kinda girl.”

She glances down at herself, her hands rising to her cheeks. “You can blame Molly. She insisted I come as a fairy princess. So I had no choice but to roll the tutu over my leggings.”

“Ah, the good old-fashioned guilt trip, huh? Well, I was gonna wear mine, but I thought it’d be too much.”

A little laugh bubbles from her throat and I like the sound. I like it a lot when Ainsley’s smiling and happy. “Darn it. We could’ve been twinsies.”

I grin at the thought, stacking some more cups and stirring the punch bowl so the fruit floats back up to the top. “How’s my cat been treatin’ you?”

“Good. He’s warmed up to me ever since I got the catnip he likes.”



“Told ya.”

“Though, I will say, demanding I get out of bed early in the morning to feed him is getting a little rude.”

I wince. “I’m sorry about that, he’s always been an early riser. Cats are nocturnal by nature, but I never let him out at night because of the birds and other little animals. I’ve no doubt he’d bring home a prize. Now he thinks as soon as I open the cat flap, he’s free to do whatever he pleases, like annoy my neighbors.”

“He’s really no trouble. I’m just teasing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Lucky fucking cat. He gets to snuggle up with her, and she's not even mad about it. She's a keeper. "Nobody has the heart to turn him away. I think he uses it to his advantage."

"Like his owner?" Her lips press together as she fails to hide her amusement.

I pique an eyebrow. Well, well. Hello heart palpitations. "Which part, turning me away, or playing on my neighbor's heartstrings?"

"Both."

I lean closer. "Are you flirting with me, Ainsley Parsons?"

She's so cute when she's in a playful mood. "No. I'm just trying to have a little fun. Apparently, my mom and Emma say I'm too serious."

"You? Serious? Never. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that. If you ask me, there's not enough serious librarians out there."

She elbows me in the ribs. "Very funny."

I hold my hands up. "Careful, tiger, almost cracked a rib. It's always the cute ones that give the most hell."

"I studied taekwondo as a child. I have some moves."

"I have a black belt in origami, so you better watch it."

She bursts out laughing and I can't help but join in, too.

"A black belt in paper folding, huh? Sounds serious."

Before I can respond, a kid comes over and takes a Shirley Temple as we clown around. I forgot how much fun we have when we do stuff together. It reminds me of the speed dating last year and how seriously Ainsley took all of it with her timer and clipboard. When she puts herself into something, she gives it her all.

I clap my hands together. "What do you need me to do?"

"Right now?"

I glance up. "Yeah."

"Find me irresistible."

I frown, and it's not because I dislike the idea. She just takes me off guard. I'm about to follow that with a 'Huh?' when I glance up and I see Drake the snake headed this way. Fucking perfect. I don't even have time to respond because he's looming over the table, and he doesn't look happy.

"You haven't returned any of my calls," he mutters. His tone has all the sharp edges of accusation. All that's missing is a pointy finger and the drop of his bottom lip. Yep, I can see his teeth being rearranged across the other side of his mouth in the very near future.

Ainsley glances at me, but I'm glaring at Drake, who's choosing to ignore me. "Uh, I've been busy, and last time I checked, I didn't owe you a phone call," she says.

"Right, but the movers came and took all the stuff out of the garage."

“Yep, because it’s mystuff and you agreed I could keep it there until I got a place.”

For the first time since he walked up, he notices me. His eyes briefly flick to mine, his face balled into a scowl, and I put my hands on my hips. “Cole.”

“Drake.”

His head moved back to glaring at Ainsley. “So? What gives? We can’t even talk now?”

“Why don’t you take a hike?” I suggest, before he can get another word in, thumbing behind me. “Or you and I can talk about this somewhere where there’s no little kids present.”

Ainsley moves closer to me and by some miracle I resist the urge to put my arm around her shoulders, only because I don’t know how far she wants to take this fake dating thing.

“This is between me and Ains,” he seethes.

My hands bawl into fists at my sides. My restraint for this asshole is wearing thin.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Actually, it’s not.” Ainsley stands up a little straighter, pulling the hem of her shirt as she rolls her shoulders back. “Me and Cole are dating, actually, so it is his business.”

Drake’s eyes dart back to mine. “Dating?” he sputters, like it’s the most unbelievable thing he’s ever heard. “You two?” He has the audacity to point between us both.

“That’s right,” I bristle, deciding to swing an arm around her shoulders after all, pulling her to my side. She looks up at me and smiles, a little bewildered, but she’s doing well to keep up the pretense and her composure.

“Ains? You’re dating already?” He’s insistent and still can’t seem to believe it.

“It’s been two months!” She fires back at him, pointing her finger, her body jostling at the movement next to my side. “And if I remember correctly, it was you who had had your penis in another woman’s vagina for how long before I found out?”

He pales just a little, the words he was about to shout back halt on his lips. He lowers his voice. “I told you I was sorry about that.”

“She doesn’t care,” I butt in. “So why don’t you kindly fuck off and leave her alone before things get ugly.”

Drake’s eyes are murderous, but I don’t back down. I can take him without breaking a sweat. I’d rather not have the hundred kids currently in the gymnasium or their teachers and parents witness it, but that’s out of my control.

“You gonna make me?”

I lean toward him. “Have you been drinking?”

“This is a party, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, for little kids.” I shake my head in disgust. “Time to leave, bud. You can do it voluntarily or I can remove you myself, take your pick.” I pull Ainsley closer to my side. She blinks up at me and my heart almost bursts out of my chest. There’s so much trust in her face.

“I moved on, and you should do the same,” Ainsley says. “Stop calling me and saying you’re sorry. If you were truly sorry, you wouldn’t have done anything to be sorry for in the first place. I’m happy, and if you were any decent kind of human being, you’d be happy for me, too.”

He snorts. “Oh, yeah, I’m so happy my girlfriend is already screwing some new guy who, by the way, will only parade you around town and then break your heart in the worst possible way. Think about it, Ains. He’s just sliding in because you’re fresh meat on the block and easy for the taking.”

I don’t hesitate. I release my arm from Ainsley and jerk forwards, swinging before he even gets the last words out. He’s forced back by the impact and a couple of the cups wobble and tip as I refrain from leaping over the table to finish him off. I round the table as Ainsley calls my name and tells me to stop. I yank him by the back of the hoodie and make him face Ainsley. “Now say you’re sorry.”

He holds his hands over his nose, which is now bleeding. “And how you didn’t mean it, and you’ll never bother her again.” I continue.

“I... I... You broke my nose!”

I look up at Ainsley. Her eyes are wide and she's backing away. "You're an asshole!" She glares at Drake, and thank God she's not mad at me. I admit I did just act on impulse, punching the guy out of nowhere.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Peterson jogs up, along with Coach Hallaway.

"He's drunk, and he just insulted my girlfriend," I tell them. "He shouldn't be around kids, and certainly not around women when he's so unstable."

They tug on Drake's arms. "We'll get him outside. I'll call the Sheriff. Making a public nuisance of yourself is against the law," Mr. Peterson's tone is firm, his mouth drawing into a hard line.

Coach looks up at me with disapproval written all over his hard face. "Need I remind you there are children present, Cole?"

"Yeah, which is why I had to shut him up." I shrug. "We can't have him getting mad at the kids next and taking his frustrations out on them, can we?"

"He started this!" Drake whines like a little girl, and I laugh.

"Right? Tell that to the Sheriff." I smirk as they drag him away.

I turn back to see Ainsley still staring after them. I palm the back of my head. My knuckles are throbbing just a little bit, fucker had a hard face.

"Ainsley? Are you okay?" I start.

She's like a wildcat with her eyes wide and her mouth open in shock and I'm not sure what she plans on doing next. But when she looks up at me and steps into my space, she surprises me by throwing her arms around my neck, holding her body close to

mine in a tight hug. We stand there for a few moments, our bodies pressed close. There's no way I expected that, or the hum of appreciation that shoots through my body, and definitely not what happens next...

## CHAPTER 8

AINSLEY



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I don't know what possesses me, but I don't just throw my arms around Cole and press my body to his like a woman possessed, but I kiss him, too. Maybe it's the adrenaline. Or the fact Drake got what he deserved, especially after basically calling me a skank. I don't condone violence, but having Drake in my face, drunk, and yelling at me — well, I refuse to feel bad about it.

When Cole's lips connect to mine, they're surprisingly soft. And I almost die when his hand reaches up and cups my face, his large warm fingers holding it in place for a moment as he moves his lips.

My heart is beating so damned loud that I'm not sure it can keep up with what's happening. I pull back after a moment, gasping, as our lips disconnect and he stares down at me. His honey-colored eyes burning like molten lava.

"I'm sorry," I pant, touching my fingers to my lips where his mouth just was. Savoring the moment.

"For what?"

"Kissing you without asking."

"You never have to ask to do that, trust me."

"It was the adrenaline," I try to explain. "What you did to Drake was so?—"

"Terrible of me?"

“No, I was going to say, so manly of you.”

His lips quirk, and my eyes flick down to look at them. The pink gloss looks good on him. “Manly? I’ve been called a few things in my time, but manly? I kinda like it.”

I pull at his arm so I can see if there’s damage to his hand, palming over his fist as I examine his knuckles. There’s no skin broken, but they look a little swollen. “We should put some ice on this.”

“You’re just trying to get me to the infirmary and play Nurse Nancy, aren’t you?”

I try not to laugh, despite the situation and his swollen hand. “No, but this is going to swell.”

“I don’t care, it was worth it.”

“He’s such a jerk. I don’t know what I ever saw in him.” I mean that with all my heart. To turn up here at a kids dance smelling like alcohol and yelling like that? This’ll be the talk of the town for quite some time.

“Don’t beat yourself up. He had his chance, he blew it.”

“Are you okay?” I don’t like the idea of Cole being hurt on my account, not that he couldn’t take Drake easily. He’s lucky the teachers got there when they did.

“I’m fine. Probably good that they stepped in, for his sake.”

I blink up at him and take in his gorgeous face. I know it’s probably wrong, but a bigger part of my heart swells with the fact he stuck up for me the way he did. It’s not something I’m used to. “Thanks, Cole. You didn’t have to, but the fact he turned up here like that, what was he expecting?”

“He’s not worth two more seconds of your time, or a second thought.”

I look over Cole’s shoulder; Charli and Rory are both headed this way.

“Cole, are you okay? Ainsley?” Charli calls across the distance.

I nod as they get closer and stop in front of us. “I’m fine. Drake stepped outta line, Cole punched him.”

“We saw. Nice job, Cole!” Rory chimes, giving him a high five. There’s no love lost with any of my friends and Drake, that’s for sure.

“Would you guys mind taking over so I can ice Cole’s hand?” I wave my hand in Cole’s direction.

“Of course.” Rory smiles. “But way to go, Cole. That asshole had it coming.”

Lucky for us, nobody else seemed to notice because the drinks stand is located at the back of the room. The last thing we need is parents or kids complaining about Cole when they don’t know the full story. I know word will get around, but that’ll be for tomorrow to worry about.

He rubs his chin. “Tell me about it. He’s also drunk.”

“What a dick,” Charli agrees. “You guys go, we’ve got this.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Appreciate it,” he says as I reach out to grab his wrist and proceed to drag him by the arm across the gym toward the infirmary.

The halls are exactly how I remember them as we pass the lockers and classrooms. Not much changes around here, and a blast of nostalgia washes over me.

“Did you hang out here much as a kid?” Cole asks. When I open the door to the infirmary and we walk in, he immediately plants his ass on the cot with a thud.

“Hardly ever. I wasn’t a crybaby like some of the kids in my class.”

“Know the feeling.”

I open the first aid cabinet and pull out the box. I don’t know what I’m doing, but being alone with him after what we just did, it’s making me dizzy. I head over to the fridge and pull out an ice pack from the freezer. I wrap the pack in a hand towel and walk back to him, then press it against his hand. “This’ll help with the swelling.”

“He isn’t made of steel.”

“No, but you hit him pretty damn hard.”

“Trust me, if there weren’t kids present, I would’ve given him two black eyes to go with his new nose.”

I shake my head. “You didn’t have to do that. But thanks, fake boyfriend.”

He laughs. “You’re welcome, but for the record, I like the fact you kissed me. And there wasn’t anything fake about that, not from my side, anyway.”

“Not from mine, either.” My eyes flick up and he thumbs across my cheek. I still can’t believe I did what I did, and he liked it. “You’ve got glitter on your face.”

He nods as his lips quirk. “I can only imagine. Molly has a glitter wand.” Did he only just get this adorable or have I been too blind to see it?

“I shouldn’t have done that without your consent.” I stare at him.

“You have my consent anytime where those pretty little lips are concerned.”

I look down at my feet. I don’t know why it’s hard to accept compliments from him. Ever since the breakup, my confidence has been shot. “It was nice.”

“Nice? I don’t think I was doin’ my best if it was just nice.”

I can’t disguise my smile, even when I’m hiding from him... and why would I want to? It may have been brief and our lips only touched for a few seconds, but it was the sweetest kiss I’ve ever had in my life.

??

Cole

As I glance at her angelic face and her peachy skin, it looks like she’s struggling with something. Her forehead holds a frown, her eyebrows furrow, and her cheeks are slightly pink. When she finally meets my gaze, she sweeps me away when she says, “It was epic. And since we’re supposed to be faking it, I don’t think I’m much of an actress after all.”

I pull her by the hips as she shuffles forward, her body coming to a halt between my legs. I settle my hands on either side of her waist, my eyes never leaving her. “We could practice. I mean, there’s a lot that goes into faking anything. Practice makes perfect, or so I’m told.” I cup her face with one hand. Fuck. She’s so sweet. “Would you kiss me again?”

Her sweet pink lips part, and my eyes dip. I want to suck that pouty bottom lip into my mouth, tug on it and make her whimper. But this has to be her call.

Again, she stuns me when she says. “Yes. I like your lips on me, your hands, too.”

I swallow hard. My throat feels like sandpaper, I only just manage to croak out, “I do, too.” I brush my thumbs back and forth over her hip bones. My dick isn’t just standing to attention, he’s begging for me to make a move. But he will have to wait.

It’s early days and I want Ainsley to feel comfortable. I’m not a rebound guy...

She leans up on her tiptoes, and I close the gap. Our lips meet again and I do exactly what I promised myself; I tug on her bottom lip and a moan escapes her lips. I’m so hard, I feel things getting a little tight in my boxer briefs. I want her. I want this sweet little librarian to climb aboard and ride the shit out of me. But I also know as much as I wanna grab her throat and talk dirty to her, she may not quite be ready for that yet. If Drake was her last lover, it leaves little to be desired. Not that I wanna think about her with another man.

“I think I might love a man taking charge and looking out for me,” she breathes, shocking the crap out of me.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “You...you do?”

“Uh, huh.” She pulls on the lapels of my shirt as my body hums in appreciation of her

touch. “Does that shock you?”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Uh, no, well, actually, a little. Then again, they always say it’s the quiet ones you gotta watch out for, right?”

“Maybe us quiet girls wanna be grabbed by the hair and backed up against a wall, ya know?”

I stare at her like she just fell from heaven. “Grabbed by the hair?”

“I mean, not hard, so it hurts. But firm, like that neck grab you did just now?—”

I drown her words with a kiss, and this time I give it my all; my lips press more firmly, my breath ragged. And when her mouth parts, my tongue finds hers and we swirl in tandem on a collision course that I’m no longer in control of. The second I taste her, I know I’m hooked. I don’t care that the ice pack falls to the floor. The moan that escapes her lips matches the desire that’s coursing through my veins. My blood pumping, my heart hammering, my body heat burning that little bit hotter.

She may be vanilla on the outside, but I know there’s a little hot sauce buried under her sweet little librarian act.

The kiss goes on and on. Tasting. Teasing. I’ve kissed a lot of girls before, but this feels different. This feels like heaven on a stick. Her lips, soft and plush, explore just as greedily as mine. Except, it’s so much sweeter when the girl of your dreams just declared she’s a bit of a bad girl in disguise.

I pull back and press my forehead to hers. “You’ve no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”



She's just as breathless as me. "Really?"

"Since last year," I admit. "I thought you were cute at speed dating. I only went there to get the numbers up and coerce Charli and Jake to finally give it up and admit their feelings for one another. Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about you and how you took charge with that foghorn."

She burst into laughter, and so do I. I wipe away a tear because the memory was hilarious. How she took her job so seriously, and everyone jumping ten feet in the air everytime that blasted horn sounded.

"One thing I've learned about having a lot of horny people in a room together, you need to keep them under control with a loud buzzer," she says.

"Touché."

"And I liked having you there that night. It was fun. Even if I took things a little too seriously keeping everyone in line."

"Maybe a little." I snicker.

"At the time, I was too caught up in my on again, off again thing with Drake."

I shake my head. "It's okay." I pause. "But what did you mean before when you said you might love a man taking charge and looking out for you? Has no one done that before?"

She bites her lip and I watch the sweet little indent it makes. "Nope. I haven't had a guy do that."

I've no doubt that's true if Drake is anything to go by.

“I’ll always look out for you,” I say. “But if you ever wanna take the lead again and kiss me first, fine by me.”

She laughs, albeit a little shyly. “You know. I thought you’d be totally put off when you saw me outside the other morning,” she admits after a few beads of silence.

I frown. “What? Why?”

“I was in my bathrobe!” Her hands hold her face for a moment as she shakes her head. When she pulls them away, her cheeks are deliciously flushed. “I had pumpkins on my robe.”

I chuckle. “You know, I have a pair of pumpkin slippers similar to yours. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“And my matching onesie pj’s? Not a good look when you’re trying to impress your cute neighbor.”

I wet my bottom lip. Trying to impress your cute neighbor? My hands snake down her arms and rest on her hips again. I love how it feels with my hands on her. “You think I’m cute?” I tilt my head, aware of my boyish grin, the one I can’t wipe off my face.

“The whole of Silver Pines knows you’re cute.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Now I know that’s not true, but I like that you think so. It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing. For the record, I thought it was adorable, just like the rest of you.”

“Well, you’re very sweet. I should tell you that I usually wear silky negligees.” She flutters her eyelashes. “But I think we both know I’m never gonna pull that off.”

I kiss her forehead. “What really turns me on in a woman, is her being comfortable in her own skin, pumpkin onesies or silk negligees. It’s all the same.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Now you’re just being kind. I know I had a sleep mask stuck to my head.”

I chuckle. “I wear one myself, and a snuggler in the winter months.”

She slaps my arm as she giggles.

“What’s going on here?” A voice booms from the doorway. We both jump in unison and Ainsley springs apart from between my legs.

Principal Stuber hovers with her hands on her hips, like she caught us doing something bad.

“Um, nothing... I mean, I was just helping Cole with his hand...” Ainsley reaches down and picks the ice pack from off the floor and places it back on my hand. “He hurt it and we didn’t want it to swell, so I put some ice on it.”

She’s so cute when she’s fumbling with her words.

It doesn’t appear that the old bird believes us. I mean, her bullshit radar is legendary.

I wave my good hand at her, but she doesn’t even look at me. It seems my charms don’t stretch as far as grouchy old women who seriously need a makeover, or a vacation. She’s had the same scraped-back-hair-in-a-tight-bun for as long as I’ve been alive, and she barely ever smiles. You’d think an 80’s themed dance with streamers, glitter and happy kids would be enough for her to crack a smile, but it ain’t our lucky night.

“Mmhm, well, best get back to your stations.” Her tone is dismissive as she turns and stalks off.

I wait a few moments, then we both burst out laughing. I don’t think I’ve laughed so much in my entire life. “I guess we better get back before the bitch comes back.”

“I guess we better.”

“We could grab some burgers or something after?” I suggest, hopeful.

“I’d love to, but I promised the girls I’d hang out with them. I’m sure they won’t mind me canceling?”

I squeeze her chin. “Rain check? Don’t wanna piss off the girls with your fake boyfriend takin’ up girl time.”

She presses her lips together, and I resist the urge to kiss her again. “Well, I’m holding you to that fake date. It’ll get the town’s tongues wagging after what you did to Drake.”

I can’t help but feel a little smug about that now. Knowing his nose is rearranged gives me temporary satisfaction. “Well, he should choose his words more wisely. I regret nothing.”

I slide off the bench, taking the ice pack with me. It’s not that it really hurts, but if it makes Ainsley feel better that I keep it on, then that’s what I’ll do. We walk in silence back toward the gym.

“I’m just glad he’s gone.” She wraps her arms around herself, and I can’t help but notice she does that a lot. “We don’t need him ruining the night for everyone else.”

“I’m sorry he hurt you the way he did.”

She pops a shoulder, and her eyes drop. “It’s okay.”

“If I forget to say it later, I had a nice time tonight,” I say.

She looks back up at me. “I did too, thanks Cole. I don’t think I’ve laughed as hard as when I do when I’m with you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should. Making people laugh is a gift, and it’s underrated.”

“Couldn’t agree more. There should be way more laughing in the world. Everything is so serious.”

“Well, just so you know, I appreciate your humor.”

My fingers tingle to touch her, to shove her up against the lockers and show her what she’s been missing all his time. But my inner schoolboy better just behave himself. That last thing we need is Coach or Principal Stuber barking at either one of us.

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me.”

Our eyes meet, and she’s smiling. “I certainly hope not. I meant it when I said you were manly earlier, I think that definitely tops humor.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I brush her fingers with mine, unable to refrain from touching her for another second. “I think it does, Shorty. Just let me know if he bugs you again.”

“I don’t think he will, but I’ve got this. I appreciate what you did, but one thing I’ve learned over the past few months, is I’m a tough little cookie when I need to be.”

Little does she know, I already love that about her. “I could always set my killer cat on him if all else fails.”

She bursts into laughter again. “Fudge? Oh, brother. What will he do, flop on his back and purr him to death?”

I laugh too. “Hey, I’ll have you know Fudge had you headin’ for the hills with just one roar.”

“In my defense, he startled me.”

“I rest my case.”

Really, truly. Tonight has already been the best, and we’ve still got a few more hours of pouring punch and pink lemonade. Life couldn’t be better.

## CHAPTER 9

### COLE

The next day passes in a blur and I’m scrambling to get to the council meeting after

work. That's gotta be a first. But last night's dance events have left me wanting more from Ainsley than I first realized. My little crush has quickly bloomed into a full throttle head on collision. One I didn't plan for.

I texted her today to see if she was okay and to see if she'd be at the meeting. And we exchanged a few messages back and forth;

Me:

Hey Ains, hope you're having a good day & you're okay after last night.

Ains:

Hey, I'm good just doing my laundry. How are you?

Me:

I'm great. Are you coming to the meeting tonight?

Ains:

I can't even try to back out because Presley will be on my case

Me:

Me too with Travis

Ains:

So I guess I'll see you tonight?



Me:

Yep, I have an idea to rev up the festivities this year. Lockwood is gonna hate it

Ains:

I can't wait to hear about it

Me:

See you tonight

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Ains:

Will do ??

My friends might call me crazy given the fact I now live next door to the girl of my dreams, but I still want to trundle across town after finishing up a long day just to see her. The dance the other night was a profound moment for us. And I can't deny I didn't mind her patching me up and sharing a hot kiss or two. When she told me she'd love a man to take charge because it's never happened before, it changed things for me.

Seeing her reaction when dickface arrived definitely sealed the deal that she's over him, and I don't regret punching him in the face one bit. Perhaps the part where I didn't wait until I could get the guy outside was an oversight, but since no one really saw there's no harm, no foul. The last thing I would ever want to do is upset Ainsley, but it's clear the only person she was upset with was him.

Ains and that sexy tutu. I purse my lips as I drive across town, thinking about it.

She had contact lenses in that night, not that I don't dig the glasses, but she looked so different. She also straightened her hair, not that I don't love those bouncing curls, either. It was nice to see how pretty she is under there, when she's not hiding in her shell.

My sexy little librarian.

Oh, the fun we could have playing that out. I wonder if she's as adventurous as I am

when things get a little sexy. I hope I get to find out one day soon.

Sure, girls in the past have jumped as fast as I have to get naked and have a good time, but I like getting to know Ainsley. And I'm digging the fact she's right next door. Maybe it is fate, or whatever Charli was going on about.

Fudge has practically taken up residence over at her place, only returning when it's bedtime, so it's not like I need an excuse to go over to her place. I need to retrieve my cat at some point. It's cute she doesn't mind him visiting, and she's kept the cat flap accessible to him, which was kind. I also dig the fact he's made friends with her easily, that's not like him.

Swinging into the lot, I quickly smooth out my hair and grab my can of 'oceanic mist' scented body spray because I didn't have time to change. I know I don't smell bad or anything, but I may as well not tempt fate when I'm trying to impress the girl next door.

I tend to think she's okay with the rugged contractor type, anyway. She knows what I do since I'm always dressed like this: in work pants, boots and usually a tank, or a flannel if it's cooler, and she doesn't seem to mind.

I'm half an hour late, but it couldn't be helped. I smooth my shirt out as I walk hastily toward the hall and swing the door open.

"... So if you can get Cole on board with the snowball details, get back to me by Wednesday if it's a green light. I need to have everything printed and dispersed around town by Friday." Mayor Jessica Lockwood is in full swing when I enter.

I attempt to sneak in inconspicuously, but the door slams behind me by accident. All heads turn my way. Awesome. I scan the room and my eyes find Ainsley's quickly and she immediately brightens, sitting up a little straighter. There's a little smile forming

on her lips as she quickly looks away. I smile, too.

“Sorry—I only just got off work,” I start as I make my way over to the table. “I hope I didn’t miss too much.”

“Just the details for this crazy notion of a snowball fight contest,” Jessica sighs, looking down her glasses at me. Disapproval of my tardiness and the disgruntlement written all over her face; the tight frown and pursed lips give it away.

“Ah, fantastic.” My smile is probably annoying her even more as I rub my hands together. “I came up with a bit of a plan over the weekend. And I’m sure we can put this plan to action swiftly.” I catch Ainsley in my peripheral; she has a little chuckle behind her hand. She’s looking cute and I think she may be wearing a skirt, and dare I say it... a tight fitting bodysuit?

Her blazer is draped over her seat, and I can’t help but smile at the pumpkin-shaped pen resting on top of her ear, disappearing into her high ponytail. One I wouldn’t mind wrapping around my fist and....

“Let’s hope you two can come up with something viable we can work with in the next two days,” Margaret says, looking from me to Ainsley as I pull out the chair opposite my girl and plonk down. “Silver Pines is counting on you.”

“Look, I’m happy for Ains to take charge with this,” I immediately jump in. “I’ve no problem working under her with our collaboration. We all know she has one of the best minds and organization skills this side of Wyoming.” I flatten out my palms to the committee and give Ainsley a Boy Scout smile, barely disguising my grin. Pun intended all the way through my speel. “I’m compliant and ready to work.”

Her cheeks flush a light crimson, and her eyes are a little wide. I love shocking her, and clearly my working under her comment hit home.

I probably shouldn't be saying shit like that in front of Pastor Rick, who's made an appearance tonight, but what the heck. I'm sure no one caught my innuendo but her.

"Are you happy with that arrangement, Ainsley?" Keith asks. "Cole makes quite a few good points there we can all agree on. You're more than capable of doing the job. Presley left the management in your hands this year, after all."

She clears her throat after a moment, which makes me smirk. "Thank you," she says. "That sounds good. I'm sure we can both get on top of things fairly quickly. And having Cole working under me means that we can get more work done in less time. He's very capable as well."

I try not to burst out with laughter. Well, fuck me sideways. Way to go, Baby Girl. I didn't know she had it in her, but I'm pleased to see she does and she's having a jibe back at me in front of everyone. She's so fucking perfect.

Oh, I'm happy to work in, under and all over her. I'm a willing participant on all accounts.

"Sounds like a plan." I clap my hands together and everyone looks at me.

Pastor Rick definitely has his brow furrowed. I guess he wasn't born yesterday. I meet Ainsley's eyes across the table and I see the intensity burning there, though I think she's trying to distract herself by reaching for her pen and scribbling down some notes. I wonder what she's writing. "We should catch up, Ains, for a coffee and a chat to go over our ideas. I think getting to the bottom of the rules early is going to be key to prepare for the holidays." Oh, for fuck's sake. I didn't even plan that one.

Her eyes twinkle and the crimson on her cheeks grows a little deeper.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Shit. I don't need a boner in front of everyone else at the committee table because that would be weird. But I can't stop thinking about what it would be like to crawl across that table and pull her up onto it so she's straddling my lap. Her in that sexy tight bodysuit is making me want to drop to my knees. And I would, just to get a taste of her.

I cough into my palm and shift in my seat. Like that'll help.

"Well, I need you both on top of things and a plan of attack by close of business Wednesday," Jessica chimes in. "You've already gotten an extension because I can appreciate you're both busy. The more time the good people of Silver Pines have to get used to this year's proceedings and changes, the better. Christmas is just around the corner."

I tilt my head towards Ains. "You good with that, neighbor?"

Her lips part and my eyes flick down to her mouth. I stop myself from going further, even though I've already seen the faint outline of her nipples in that purple bodysuit. Is she turned on by me? It's definitely not cold in here.

"I'm good," she pipes up. "Happy to work hard on this one."

I save from laughing by leaning over and grabbing a glass from the center of the table. I pour myself some water from the pitcher before I fucking choke on her sexy words.

"Good. Be sure to fill Cole in on what we discussed." Margaret nods to Ainsley. "She

has the minutes all written down.”

Of course she does. My good little girl.

As everyone gets up to leave, I gulp the rest of my water and sidle up beside Ainsley as she scoops up her papers and grabs her jacket off the back of the chair.

We head toward the door together. “You got all that, Shorty?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m fully versed on what to get under and on top of,” she giggles when we’re out of earshot.

“You’re welcome. Those stuffy old timers need to loosen up a little.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I hope they didn’t put you to sleep before I got here.”

“Almost.”

We walk to our vehicles and once we get there, I lean on the edge of her car with my arms folded across my chest. I know I texted her after the dance, but I wanted to hear it from her mouth. “How are you feeling after the other night?”

She laughs softly in the moonlight and I’ve never seen a woman look so sweetly pretty. “Do you mean before or after you punched my ex’s lights out?”

I chuckle and press my lips firmly closed for a moment while my mind flicks back to Drake’s shocked face. It’s too bad for him he insulted Ainsley. He has no class. “The guy’s a dick, as we know. So I’d say after; that’s when you kissed me.”

She looks up at me from under her glasses. “I’m pretty sure you kissed me back.”

“Guilty as charged.”

She laughs under her breath and glances to her feet. I find myself tilting her chin back up with my finger so she has to look at me.

“Why do you laugh like that and get all shy when I give you a compliment?”

“I didn’t realize I did.”

I pop a shoulder. “It’s just sometimes you seem surprised or uncomfortable with it.”

“I like it.” It’s almost a whisper. It’s a part of her that — I’m slowly learning — is her vulnerability. I like it when she doesn’t look away. I also dig the fact she only comes up to my chest and I tower over her.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Without sounding like a Mary Jane; it’s just not a usual thing for me, that’s all.”

“Your stupid ass ex didn’t tell you how gorgeous you are all the time?”

She swallows and breaks our connection by fumbling around in her purse for her keys.



“Ains?”

She halts the key hunt and looks up to meet my gaze. “No, Cole, he didn’t. Guys aren’t like you. Well, not the ones I’ve known. It probably won’t surprise you to hear that Drake spent more time looking at himself in the mirror than looking at me. I don’t get compliments that often...”

I scrunch my brow as I scrutinize her face. “Are you for real?”

“I’m a librarian, after all. Guys think that’s boring, especially when you’re more on the conservative side and on the committee for the town Christmas decorating committee. I guess being sexy hasn’t really been at the forefront of my mind, or my motive to finding a man who doesn’t cheat.”

I feel disgusted that any man could do that, especially to her. “I’m sorry he did that. He’s a jerk. He’s just sorry he got caught. And sorry to burst your bubble, Shorty, I’m on the committee too. Does that make me boring?”

She punches me playfully on the arm. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re boring at all. And yes, I kissed you back. In fact, that’s all I’ve been thinking about.” A quiet little sigh leaves her gorgeous lips as I slide my hand to her hip and tug her gently forward. “May I?” I reach for her glasses and she nods. I push them up onto the top of her head and waste no time in bending down to brush my lips against hers.

Her warmth pulls me into an intoxicating rumble of our lips touching; it’s slow,

sweet, passionate... I'm a second away from brushing my tongue past hers while wanting to reach to those pebbled nipples and give them a tug, even though I know I can't, when we hear voices behind us. The rest of the committee members exit the building and we quickly pull apart.

"Shit," she giggles, as she looks from Jessica Lockwood walking to her car across the lot, then back to me.

"Wanna grab some dinner so we can pour over our findings for the snowball fight and iron out the creases of this faking dating thing?" I murmur. Yeah, my voice is hoarse just from one kiss in the parking lot and seeing the outline of her sweet little peaks tonight.

"I'd love to," she murmurs back.

I chuckle and run a hand through my hair. "Sounds like a date."

## CHAPTER 10

### AINSLEY

I had no idea I was going to be having dinner with Cole tonight. He is anything, if not unexpected. All day I've been reveling about everything that took place last night at the dance. I can't wrap my head around most of it. I don't know which part is the most unfathomable; the fact Drake turned up intoxicated and Cole punched him in the face, or the part that happened afterward; before and after the infirmary.

I mean, I initiated it — I kissed him first. It was reckless and irresponsible, definitely unexpected, but I can't deny it felt right. And he kissed me back. He didn't freeze and pull away and ask me what the hell I thought I was doing. He reciprocated. And I can't get my mind off his soft, warm lips and his expert touch.

Could it really be true that he's into me? I mean, we kissed the second time when no one was around, so he didn't have to keep up the pretense to Drake, who was long gone, anyway. If my mind serves me correctly, he also admitted to liking me since last year at the speed dating thing.

What really turns me on in a woman is her being comfortable in her own skin, pumpkin onesies or silk negligees, it's all the same.

I can't stop running the conversation over in my mind as we divert to the local noodle bar to grab some food.

As we walk, I know the lines are getting a little blurred between us — even now, is this an actual date? Or are we still faking it? Maybe that kiss in the infirmary was just a practice run until Drake finally got the message. Which, I'm pretty sure he would have by now, if his broken nose is anything to go by.

Could it really be possible that it's true what Cole says; that he actually likes me for me? That he digs me being a boring librarian? I mean, I don't for one minute think he's lying about it, he's not like that. But he was the resident fuck boy for a while there.

But me believing that it's true is more about my confidence than anything else.

I straighten myself out as I walk up to the doors of the restaurant. Cole reaches out to the handle and pulls it open for me.

"Ladies first." He gestures with his hand.

I smile and step inside to the warm noodle bar where the delectable smells of mixed spices and lemongrass in the air overtake my senses and my stomach rumbles in response. The food is always good here, and it's always busy.

Cole glances around as we wait to be seated. The server greets us after a moment and takes us over to a long wooden bar by the window with swivel stools. She leaves us two menus and a pitcher of water with two glasses. “It’s busy tonight,” Cole says as we take a seat.

“Sure is. I think half of Silver Pines is here.” I smile when he slides a menu over to me. “Us being seen having dinner together should set some tongues wagging.”

He chuckles. “I’m sure it’ll be all over town in no time. But that’s not why I asked you to dinner.”

I look at him over the top of the menu. “It’s not?”

“Nope. I enjoy your company. And we have fun, but my stomach is sore from laughing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I adjust my glasses and glance down briefly. “We do laugh a lot. And for the record, I enjoy your company, too.”

“Phew.” He grins. “Glad we got that settled.”

“You know we should talk about the Drake thing,” I blurt. Not that I want to talk about him, but it was kind of a big deal last night.

His eye gaze lifts from the menu as well as one eyebrow. “What’s to talk about?”

Clearly he doesn’t share that same big deal sentiment as me.

“What if he presses charges?” I whisper.

Cole shakes his head with confidence. “I don’t think so, Shorty. You worry too much.”

“Maybe.” I tug on my lower lip with my teeth. “Should we talk about the umm?—”

“Snowball fight?” he asks when I cut off my own sentence because I don’t know how to articulate what I’m trying to say.

I stifle a small laugh. “No, I was going to say the kiss thing,” I whisper.

That seems to pull a favorable smile to his lips. “Ah, the kiss thing.”

My throat suddenly feels dry at the intense way he’s looking at me. He doesn’t appear to be interested in the menu anymore. “It was pretty intense,” I manage. My eyes are

busy studying nothing in particular on the menu. I can't concentrate on anything with his heated stare.

"Which one?" his lips quirk, "they seem to be stacking up now."

"I meant the dance situation, and when I kissed you suddenly. Then we kissed again in the—" Oh god, am I babbling?

"What about the parking lot just now?" he muses, then adds, "maybe you just can't stay away from me."

My eyes flick up at him and I can't help the heat that rises in my face as we stare at one another. "There is that. You might just be right."

He studies me intently for a moment. "Did you like it?"

I press my lips together, and little does he know, I'm clenching my thighs too, under the table. "Yes." It leaves my lips in almost a whisper.

"I did too. So, what's the problem? Are you still worried about your ex?"

"No. But he was so mad. Do you think us playing at dating was really believable?"

"I think our little display behind the lemonade stand did the trick, baby girl, and if he bothers you again, you need to let me know."

"You can't go punching people every time I have a problem."

He thinks for a moment, then pops a shoulder, closing the menu. "Not everyone, just that asswipe."

The words are on my lips. I want to ask him if we've gone beyond the fake dating pretense — does he want more? And if he does, why isn't he saying so? But before I can ask him anything else, the server interrupts us for our order.

“Hey, Cole,” she purrs. When I glance up, I see it's not the first server who seated us. It's Cassie Middleton, a pretty little blonde with a wide-eyed smile for him, a knockout body and bejeweling blue eyes. She's tapping her pen on the order pad, never taking her ultra long eyelashes off him.

“Hey,” he replies, but I notice he's not even looking at her. In fact, his eyes are on me again. “You ready to order, babe?”

Babe?

At the same time my heart flutters with Cole calling me that in front of her, Cassie's eyebrows raise in obvious surprise. It's only then that she glances at me with an equal amount of shock and interest on her face. Her mouth even parts with a silent ‘O’ that's nothing short of gaping. Rude. Her pen immediately stops tapping, and I don't know why that makes me feel both smug and satisfied. It's like he just kissed me in front of the whole cafe. It seems Cassie is having a harder time than me believing he's into me.

“Ainsley,” she says under her breath. I'm not sure if it's by way of greeting, acknowledging I'm sitting here with him, or if it's a question she can't quite fathom.

Don't worry, Cassie, I can't quite fathom it either.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Even as I think that, her reaction still stings a little.

The question is on her lips. She wants to ask if we're a thing, but Cole answers her unspoken words by reaching over and placing his hand over mine and giving it a squeeze. His touch almost jolts me back into my body and his question about being ready to order.

He's just doing this to reinforce the message around town, so it'll get back to Drake. I tell myself. Because I know for sure it will get back to him if Cassie has anything to do with it.

"I'll have the chicken and vegetable wok box," I say quickly, closing the menu and placing it back on the counter.

"I'll have the beef wok charred noodles," Cole adds.

"Anything to drink?" she asks him, notably looking down at his hand still on mine, not even bothering to acknowledge me any further.

"I'll take a root beer." He glances at me. "What about you, babe?"

There it is again. "I'll have the same," I croak out, loving way too much the feel of his warm hand on mine. I'm loving even more that he doesn't remove it. My heart is stupidly soaring that he's making our 'fake dating' thing known to Cassie Middleton and whoever else might happen to spot us.

"Perfect." She hastily grabs the menus, not sparing me another glance, and walks off



with a huff back to the counter.

“Geez.” I grab my glass of water, needing to seriously lubricate my dry throat. “She looked like someone told her there was no Santa this year.”

Cole’s deep chuckle has me looking up. He still hasn’t removed his hand, and those eyes... they’re more than pools of liquid honey... there’s something else — heat?

“That’s Cassie for you.” He finally leans back and slides his hand away, and I hate to say that I miss his touch the instant it leaves me, but I do.

??

Cole

Warmth radiates through every fiber just being here with her, and it’s not just the steam from the wok bar that’s getting me into a spin. It’s pure Ainsley. And she seems to have no idea how stunning I think she is.

“Why did you... um ... call me that?”

I raise my eyebrow as our root beers are delivered, not by Cassie. “Call you what?”

She gives me a look that tells me I should know. “Babe,” she murmurs.

A wry smile pulls from my lips. “Because I wanted to. And I like touching you in case you wondered that, too.”

She leans forward to pick up her drink. I watch as her lips find the rim of the glass and she takes a sip. “I think Cassie is into you,” she says, placing her drink back down.

I wave it off. “The feeling isn’t mutual,” I say simply. And it’s the truth. I don’t know why Ainsley beguiles me so much, maybe because she’s genuinely a nice person. I find that very attractive in a woman. Kindness is sexy. Maybe it isn’t something I’ve always thought about in the past, but you kinda get bored with the same type of girls that don’t have much substance or common goals. “There’s no one else I want to be here with, Ains.”

She looks up at me under her lashes and smiles, genuinely smiles. So much so, it makes me smile too.

“In saying that, we have a bunch of shit to get down on paper by Wednesday if we don’t want the Mayor on our backs.”

She glances at her watch. “I mean, it’s not late, so maybe we could go over things at home later... I mean... your place... or my place...shit?—”

I chuckle, loving the way she blunders, the way her cheeks pinken. “Are you inviting me over later?”

“Well, I have a new coffee maker if you want to come try it out?”

“I’d love to. I don’t think we’re going to get much committee stuff sorted out here. It’s way too loud. And I’m sure Fudge will have made himself at home somewhere in your house.”

She laughs. “Like only he knows how.”

We get our food pretty quick and whilst I’m hungry; I don’t end up eating it all. Neither does she, so we get the rest to go and walk back to the Town Hall where everything has been locked up for the night. I lean against her open door, holding the takeout bag in my hand. “I guess I’ll see you at home,” I say, as she slides in and

starts up the engine. The way that sounds stirs in my chest. At home. Even though we live in different houses.

“See you there.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I wait until she pulls out of the lot first, then follow behind as the snow lightly falls. It's not enough to blanket the ground, but the forecast is showing it's only going to increase in the next couple of weeks.

I like the fact that I'm not going home yet and the idea that she wanted to have coffee after dinner. I shake my head thinking about when I got up to pay the check and Cassie was still trying to make flirty small talk with me and not seeming to care I was there with Ainsley. That kind of pissed me off, actually.

Ains took it all in her stride, of course. I don't think she has a mean bone in her body.

I enjoyed eating out with her, and I like hearing what she has to say. She's like a breath of fresh fucking air. Fresher than anything I've ever known. I didn't like what she said earlier about never getting many compliments from men and the fact she saw herself as boring. It's just a stereotypical thing because she's smart, dresses sophisticated and she works in a library. But she's so much more than that and a big part of me thinks she doesn't see it. At least, if today's reaction is anything to go by.

I mean, we both know we're attracted to one another. That whole fake dating thing at the dance got us both going, but more importantly, I'm glad I could be there for her when that idiot ex showed up. Aside from the broken nose, it sure gave him something to think about. What gets me the most is how the dumb-fuck thought she was just going to roll over and drool because he wanted her back. What a loser.

Well, he's not having her. Not on my watch. And I don't think he could wangle his way back in on Ainsley's watch, either.

I want to tell her it wasn't all for show. First, I did what I did to help her out. Second, I like her and I'm sure our kiss in the infirmary cemented that fact.

But it still lingers in my mind that she doesn't have much confidence and she thinks she's too boring for me. I know my reputation for being a ladies man doesn't help, but I've never been into anyone the way I'm into her. I can't explain it.

I like the fact there's a little resistance there, even though she's attracted to me. I like the fact she isn't just letting me slide my way into her bed as much as I'd love her to.

She's making me work for it, and I dig that. I'm here for it.

When I park my truck, I quickly duck over to my place to shower and use the bathroom. I check out my reflection in the mirror, messing up my damp hair a little and decide it'll do.

I glance over at Fudge, who's kindly graced me with his presence. I'm surprised he's even here, but there he lies on his bed near the window, stretched out like he's God's gift to mankind.

"Fancy a cat-nip over at Ainsley's?" I chortle at my own joke. "If you do, little guy, you know where I'll be." I head off in the direction of Ainsley's place and I swear to God I hear him meow behind me.

## CHAPTER 11

### AINSLEY

I'm glad I spent the day doing laundry and tidying the house. My hard work of unpacking and getting everything sorted out is now paying off with Cole coming over. Not that I'm a messy person, but it takes time when you've just moved to get

everything in its place. I fling my meeting notes on the kitchen table and quickly check my appearance in the hall mirror, smoothing my hair out before pottering around the kitchen. I grab out my nice pottery coffee mugs. It's like my version of breaking out the good China when someone important comes over. And Cole is someone special.

My fingers absently find my lips again, tracing them over while I think back to that kiss under the moonlight earlier before dinner — my golly, his lips are spectacular. And the way he kept looking at me with those intense, liquid honey eyes over the table at the meeting. I'm sure Pastor Rick cottoned on to what we were up to, but I can't be certain. I can't help my reaction to him; accelerated breathing, pebbled nipples and heat pooling between my thighs. I had to clench them together under the table.

There's nothing that this man can't do. I can't even imagine what it would be like to be with him for real... in bed. I mean, I can because I've been thinking about it, but it's also an intimidating thought. I haven't had much experience, and things weren't exactly passionate with my ex. In fact, I'm not even sure I like sex. Which is pretty dumb, sex is pretty basic, right?

It takes a while for me to get to know a guy and feel comfortable. Cole just seems so wise in the ways of the world, and so experienced. I don't know if I'd even measure up to his expectations — or even what those expectations are?

I mean, I know now that he's into me, that much seems certain. He was certainly acting like it in the restaurant, and he didn't have to touch me or call me babe.

I just never thought I'd be his type... I'm still struggling with that part.

A knock at the back door has my body stupidly jumping, sending my wayward thoughts on their way. I know it's him, but that firm rap on the wood seems to jolt me

out of my reverie and back to the present moment. My heart flutters and the butterflies dance in my stomach. I smooth out the top of my hair again, still tied up in a high pony, and I move to the door to let him in.

My pulse continues to strum when he's standing in front of me with that cheeky smile playing around his lips. He leans against the doorjamb.

"Any chance of a cup of sugar from my sexy little neighbor? I seem to have run out."

I laugh and hold a palm up to my face to hide my embarrassment. I don't know if this will get any easier with him. "Always with the sugar, huh?"

He laughs too, as I invite him in with a flick of my wrist. "I bet you don't even have any, do you?" he says.

"Some would say I'm sweet enough."

His eyes dance with amusement as he glances around when I welcome him inside. "I like what you've done with the place." My kitchen is compact, with a round pine dining table over to one side and white timber cabinets lining the walls. There's an old-fashioned dresser next to the table storing all my pottery and special things.

"I'm trying to make it my own." I feel comfortable in this space. It's cozy. It's even cozier with Cole in my home, taking up all the space. All six feet of him in his dark jeans and navy blue flannel shirt. He's so damned sexy and smells like a dream.

"You've achieved that. Mr. and Mrs. Curruthers liked clutter, and those little porcelain dolls from the home shopping channel. Used to scare the heck out of Fudge."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I laugh. "Help yourself to a seat. How do you like it?" I gesture to the coffee machine.

When he doesn't respond, I turn and look over my shoulder at him as he leans back on the table with a grin, holding my notes. "How do I like it?"

I feel the heat in my body rising again, spreading to not just my face, but everywhere. Jesus, will the blush ever stop returning around him? "Your coffee," I say, meekly.

"I like it strong and in your face, with a little hint of sweetness."

Trying not to balk at his words seems like an impossible task right now. This man! "Milk or cream?" I ask, trying desperately to concentrate on the coffee making.

"Cream."

I gulp as he smiles lazily. I see him glancing down at my notes from the meeting. "What about foam?" I ask. "I can whip milk into a frenzy." I'm also wondering how he makes coffee sound like the sexiest thing in the universe.

He chuckles. "I'll bet."

I lose grip of the milk carton as it drops onto the counter, spilling all over the place. "Shoot." I quickly grab a dishcloth, my back to him. "Did I mention I'm a klutz?" I turn and he's already behind me.

"Allow me." He grabs the cloth and wipes up the milk on the countertop. "It's my



fault for tryin' to make you flustered."

I smile when I say, "You never fail to do that." All it took was innuendo around dairy products to get me all fired up. My body's reaction to Cole is palpable. It's no secret he sets my heart racing at the smallest things.

I grab the milk jug and start frothing, thankful for a moment's distraction.

"I think Pastor Rick is onto us," Cole says out of nowhere.

"I was trying so hard not to laugh at the meeting," I admit. "Though if we are fake dating, then it'll corroborate the story."

He leans on the counter when he's done cleaning my mess. "I'm not so sure we can call it that anymore, can we, babe?"

I press my lips firmly together, afraid of any words coming out in a squeak. Why do I love it when he calls me that? "I admit, the lines are getting a little blurred."

"The blurrier, the better sometimes."

I can't help but laugh at his nonchalant attitude. He just has this easy way about him that I think is starting to rub off on me.

"I'm glad I make you laugh. Life can be way too serious."

"There's no fear of that with you around."

He walks back over to the table where I left my notes and pulls out a chair. What was it he liked? Strong, bold and in your face? Something about a hint of sweetness... The gauntlet has been set as I do my best to make our drinks without any further

fumbling.

“I think you definitely shocked the hell out of Cassie,” I say as I busy myself.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I have no words. But despite that, I enjoyed myself tonight.”

“Me too.”

“And it’s clear your note taking is top tier,” he says, his eyes lifting from the pages when I place his coffee in front of him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I didn’t want you to miss out on any itty bitty details. I’m surprised Mayor Lockwood is even considering the snowball fight. Though, she’s outvoted, and even she can’t deny the money we’d raise with the entry fee. It’d be hard to pass up.”

“Oh, I know. I love how she sits there all smiles for Pres and Trav, but looks down her nose at us. Like it isn’t the best idea in a long time. Okay, it’s not a forty-foot snowman or an ice skating rink, but it won’t cost much, just some free snow.”

My shoulders shake with a little laugh as I pour my latte. “She’s going through a divorce. She’s usually a pussycat.”

He takes a sip as I slide into the seat next to him. “Mmmm,” he hums appreciatively. “This is good,Shorty.”

My insides cave in at his words; they reverberate deeply from his throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Has his voice always been that deep? I know it has, but it's all that more confronting in the tiny space of my kitchen. He waves my notes in front of me as I settle in.

"I see they proposed the snowball fight in the main park, next to the Rockefeller Center ice skating rink. Nice."

"Travis made me pull out all stops to make sure his vote was in for a similar theme to last year, given its popularity."

"I'm one of the suckers that helps build the thing," he announces. "As well as put up that giant Frosty. It's a pain in the ass to assemble, not to mention, having to take it down and store it away for the other eleven months of the year."

"Oh my, it caused such a stir that first year when he waltzed in with his fancy ideas. He really gave Pres a run for her money, schmoozing the council and Mayor Lockwood."

"Yeah, come to think of it, they seemed fine about all those changes that year. Remember when all we had was decorating the town Christmas tree?"

"Trav definitely changed things up," I agree. "I think Jessica is just worried about public liability, but I mean, it's just snow. How much trouble could one really get in?" When I glance at him over my coffee cup, he smiles and gives me a wink.

"You'd be surprised."

I laugh a little nervously. I hear it in my own voice.

“You know I wasn’t kidding the night at the dance,” he says, taking another appreciative sip of his coffee. I don’t mean to watch his lips linger at the rim of his mug, or how when he pulls them away and sets his mug down, he licks his bottom lip.

“Which part?” I ask on a shaky breath.

“All the parts.”

“I thought you were just acting like you are into me for my ex’s sake, but tonight in the parking lot... and then in the restaurant.”

He laughs quietly under his breath. “None of it was acting, trust me. I like you, Ainsley. Really like you. I’m just sorry that I took this long to do something about it.”

I blink a few times and focus on the top of my mug...since when did that get so damned interesting? I open my mouth but no words come out.

“You’re doing it again,” he says softly.

I raise my eyebrows in question.

“Going all quiet when I say something nice to you.”

“Occupational hazard,” I joke.

“I get it, if you’re not ready?—”

“No!” I start. “It’s like what I was saying before, I’m not used to it. And you’re you and I’m me. I’m fine with who I am, really. But I know I’m never gonna be tall, blonde or curvy.”

“You don’t have to be. I like you just how you are.” He sighs and sits back in his chair. “I’m not putting any pressure on you, Ainsley. I would never do that. All I know is I’ve liked you a lot since the speed dating thing last year.”

That was almost a year ago and now I think about it, he has been quiet on the dating scene for a while. I mean, has he not seen anyone since then? “I liked the way you jumped in to help at the last minute and kept the crowd under control. You took control and I find that really admirable. Smart is sexy to me, always has been,” he goes on.

I adjust my glasses, trying to structure my next words. “Well, when I have my mind set on something, I kinda just go for it.”

“What about when it comes to men?”

I try not to choke on the hot liquid as I sip. Holy heck. Nope, definitely not with men. “Not exactly.” I pause, it’s like my brain is running in slow motion. “Wait. You’ve really liked me since nearly a year ago?”

He pops a shoulder. “I enjoyed myself that night, and not because of the other speed daters.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Well, like you said, you were on and off with Drake at the time, and I didn’t know if you were into me. That’s the thing, usually I can tell with women, but you’re a little harder to figure out.”

I press my lips together. “I am?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Yes, and I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.”

“I just didn’t think I’d be your type,” I say honestly.

He bites his lip and my eyes watch the indent it makes as he releases it. “You’re forgetting one crucial thing about me, Ains. I don’t have a type.”

If that isn’t music to my ears, then I don’t know what is. I also don’t want to act like I’m some dowdy nerd with no chance in Hell with a guy like Cole. I’m pretty around the edges, I can appreciate that. I’m small and keep myself fit and healthy enough with a decent-ish body underneath. I’ve learned to tame my wild hair; to the best of my ability, anyway.

He also likes the strong, bold type. I tell myself. I just don’t know if I am at that point. He’s giving me compliments left, right and center and it’s taking everything in me to accept them.

“Do you?” he asks. “Have a type?”

“No, not really. Though, my past taste in men leaves little to be desired, as you now know. I don’t run to the bad boys, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He chuckles. “Hey, I don’t think that. People pretend to be good all the time. They put their best foot forward, but it’s all fake once you’re past the honeymoon period. Dating is about putting the effort in, regardless of how long it’s been.”

“That’s so true. And, I don’t mean to bring it up, but you have quite the reputation

with the ladies of Silver Pines and beyond,” I say.

He folds his arms across his chest, settling into his seat like I’m about to tell him some interesting good night story. “Is that so?” He piques a brow.

“Yes, it is so.” My lips quirk. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. But a bad-boy construction worker doesn’t exactly pair with a small town librarian. Some would say.”

He laughs heartily, so much so, I put my mug down and glare at him. “Cole! Are you laughing at me?”

He waves his arms in front of him. “Not at you, baby girl; at the situation. And for the record, I don’t care what other people say or think. Contrary to popular belief, I’m no bad boy — I mean, I can be as bad as the next guy if it means protecting a woman’s honor.”

The way he says baby girl. Oh my, that sounds hot. And I can be as bad as the next guy... “I’m grateful for you saying that, and for what you did. I was contemplating kneeing Drake in the nuts as a Plan B.”

“That I’d pay money to see.”

“I like the way you say, baby girl,” I whisper.

He glances up at me and our eyes lock. The chemistry dances around us again, touching the edges and making me feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside... and tingly on the outside. The rush of blood pounds in my ears, and the heat between my legs is making me dizzy.

“It suits you.”

“Better than Shorty.”

He chuckles. “Don’t touch Shorty, that one’s mine.”

Is it just me, or is he leaning closer as I inadvertently move toward him? He’s like a magnet pulling me in.

“Yeah,” I whisper as his fingers touch me on the arm. Light strokes dance along my skin, causing gooseflesh all over me. I cinch closer still, our faces an inch apart, but he doesn’t kiss me. He leans right in, pulling his chair toward me and breathes into my neck.

I sigh, feeling his warm breath skating along my heated flesh, his nose brushing over my jaw.

“You smell good,” he whispers against my neck. “Good enough to eat.”

Thank God for my marshmallow fragrance. It’s a sweet scent, which skirts around a sugar magnolia, vanilla and rose combination, with top notes of marshmallow.

My heart rate skips a beat at hearing his words and my body floods with warmth. “Cole,” I murmur. “You’re so sexy.” Other than his mouth ghosting my neck, he’s still not touching me and my insides are literally humming with anticipation.

“You’re sexy.” His lips brush against my pulse point as he plants soft, sweet kisses down my neck. He lights up the fire inside me that I’m struggling to contain. I squeeze my thighs together, hoping that might help.

“This bodysuit is driving me crazy.”

“You like it?” I murmur back, wanting to grab him and pull him closer to me, but I



keep my palms firmly pressed together in my lap where they're safe.

“Oh, I love it, baby girl.”

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

He lifts his mouth to just under my ear lobe, making a noise that shoots straight to my core, and I can no longer keep my paws off him. I slide my hands up his arms and squeeze his biceps as he trails kisses all the way along my jaw. Then he finds my lips, pressing his to mine.

He kisses me with slow intention, like his mouth is making love to mine. It's sensual, sexy and oh, so Cole.

Everything about him is like this.

I move my mouth against his as he switches sides without losing connection. I slide my body closer to his, realizing I'm almost in his lap as our thighs touch and my hands continue to slide up to his shoulders.

I love kissing him. A whole other world awaits where his lips are concerned. As for the rest of him? My God.

I pull back to look at him after a moment. The heat rushing to my face, my body is practically on fire.

"You okay?" He raises one hand to smooth back a flyaway piece of hair from my ponytail.

"Perfect," I murmur. "But I need you to touch me, Cole."

"Yeah?" He tilts his head. "Is that what you need?"

“Mmm hmm.” I’m lost again as he leans back in, the same time his hands run over my shoulders and then down my sides. The light touch of his fingers grazes my hips, then travels back up and finally he moves his hands to the front, cupping my breasts. My nipples are taut and needy.

I nearly buck off the seat when I feel his warmth against them. His palms rubbing over and over, then he gently tugs on both peaks with his thumbs and forefingers.

I moan out incoherently and I’m about to crawl into his lap when a loud crash behind us, followed by a loud meow, makes us both jump about ten feet in the air. He releases his touch and we pull apart, glancing over to the cat flap.

Neither of us can contain our amusement as we burst into laughter, seeing Fudge standing there looking at us pointedly. I don’t know why he came crashing in like that, but here he stands.

Perfect timing, Fudgey.

## CHAPTER 12

### COLE

I glancedown at my cat with a look that saysthis better be good, mister.

Fudge clearly knows the best way to get both of our attention at once by crashing through the cat flap, even though he usually just steps or jumps through without any fuss at all. It’s like he knows.

Two seconds before, I was caressing her beautiful breasts and feeling those pretty little buds that have been teasing me for most of the night and I’m ready to explode. I want them in my mouth. Her sweet scent alone has me all hot and bothered, and the

fact she has no idea what she does to me is an even bigger turn on.

“Nice timing,” I muse, looking down at Fudge. He sits upright instead of flopping down like he normally does, and meows loudly.

Ainsley giggles, clearly embarrassed and caught off guard by both Fudge jumping through the flap so loudly, and me caressing her neck and feeling her up. “Way to go, Fudge. Maybe he’s hungry?” she suggests.

Not as hungry as his daddy. I want to say, but I don’t want to scare the girl.

“Hungry?” I raise my eyebrows at him instead. “He has a bowl full of dry food he hasn’t touched where he just came from. Your home, Fudgey, to be precise.”

He ignores me and sidles up to his newfound best friend’s leg, and tries his best purr routine for good measure. She turns to look down at him adoringly. This cat, a few days ago, scared her half to death, so much so, she ran outside in her pajamas. Now she’s looking at him like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. But that’s Fudge for you.

“Aunty Ainsley has some dry food,” she coos, getting up from her seat.

I watch in astonishment as she walks on over to the kitchen cupboard and pulls down a little bag of Feline Fancy and pours some onto a little saucer for him. Well, well. We’ll make a cat mama out of her yet.

She bought those especially? She doesn’t actually have a cat of her own, obviously, so she must’ve gone out and bought them at some point just for Fudge. The Casanova.

“Aunty Ainsley?” I chuckle, watching her. I think she needs the distraction. She’s hot and bothered too. Her face is flushed, and she’s breathing heavily. I take a swig of my

coffee as Fudgey saunters over and has a sniff of the saucer. Ainsley is on her way back to me as he starts his little munchathon.

“I thought it was a nice touch,” she says. “I think your cat finally likes me.”

“It’s no wonder when you’re feeding him Feline Fancy and letting him sleep on your countertop.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

She's about to sit back down when I rise out of my seat and grab her around the middle. She squeals as I pull her into me. "Before Fudge rudely interrupted, where were we?" I nuzzle into her neck, enjoying her little mewl. Spinning her around so she's pressed against the table, I smile down at her. She clutches onto me tightly, her fingers curling around my shirt. It's like she's hanging on for dear life and it makes my cock jerk as I bring my lips to her again. "Hope you don't mind my coffee mouth."

She giggles and shakes her head. "Hope you don't mind mine?"

"Never." I kiss her again, with a little more vigor this time. Hoisting her onto the kitchen table, pages of her meeting notes scatter to the floor. The remaining pages on the table become crumpled when she sits on them.

I move in between her legs as our kisses come in thicker and faster. I can no longer hide my erection when I pull her body close to mine with our hips now level.

She gasps and briefly looks down. I tilt my head to the side as I follow her gaze. There's no disguising what I've got going on down there, so there's no point trying. "You think this sexy little body and those delicious lips aren't doing things to me?"

"Cole—I?—"

My hands stroke circles over her hips again as I press my forehead to hers. "You what?"

"I didn't know just kissing could be this sexy."

“Did you hear the part where I said you’re sexy? This whole librarian thing is fuckin’ hot.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, much like she did at the dance and I’m here for it, one hundred percent. “I’m glad you approve. You’re not so bad yourself.”

My hands inch their way back to their resting posts before we got the shock of our lives with Fudge’s grand entrance. My fingers brush the edges of where my mouth wants to be; her tits. I can’t help but smirk. Looking down at her sweet, flustered face to gauge her reaction, only spurs me on. “You like that,Shorty?”

She giggles. “Yes, Cole. I like it a lot.” I tug a little more and then run a palm over and over each tight peak as she sighs. Then I alternate with a pinch and a palm over and over. “Oh, God,” she moans, pushing her hips into mine. My cock is making himself known and quite at home as it prods against her stomach. She grinds against me as I shift my knee so she has friction.

“That’s it,baby girl,take what you need.” My hands lift to the rim of her bodysuit and she pushes her chest out toward me farther.Fuck this bodysuit.

I cup her tits, then slide one hand down her front. She gasps when my fingers find her bare nipple. “Fuck.”I circle the hard peak as her moans grow louder. She rocks against my knee and I feel my dick leaking with so much want. And I want her more than anything I’ve ever wanted before.

“Cole! I love that!” Her pants come thick and fast.

I lick my lips. Oh boy, does that make me feel good knowing I’m pleasing her. I flick her nipple, one hand inside her top, the other outside, and she rocks against me. Her cheeks dark as she seeks her pleasure.

“Oh, baby.” I want to shoot my load all over her and then start this all again. It’s been so long since I’ve been with a woman, and just thinking about her in my bed is enough to send me over the edge.

“Cole—”

Her tits aren’t big, nor small, they’re somewhere in between, and fucking perfect from where I’m standing. “Need to see them,” I groan.

She nods and I pull one side of her bodysuit away from her shoulder and her breast pops out in all its glory. I stare down at her pink, puckered nipple like I’ve never seen one and make a strangled noise in my throat. “Geez,baby.”

She holds onto me so tight as I stare down at her chest.

“Can I have a taste, Ains?”

“Yes, please,hurry!” she garbles back.

I dip my head with a chuckle and lean down to her tit, our bodies so close. She leans back a little and rests her hands behind her to watch me. I cup it as my mouth finds its way onto her sweet little bud, my lips puckering around it. If there’s one thing I love to do, it’s this. With her, I could do it all day long and not come up for air. And looking at her exposed breast jiggle from my mouth as we dry hump, makes me want to rut into her like a wild beast on this very table.

She calls out loudly as I caress and suck. My tongue can’t resist the urge to twirl as I squeeze her tit, pushing it further into my mouth. I kiss, lick, suckle, and pull with my teeth until she’s a withering mess. “COLE!” she cries in a desperate plea.

I know in her voice she’s close, and I’m about to make her go off like a firecracker



without even getting her clothes off. I pull back the material on the other side, meaning I have to tuck the other tit away because it's too tight to let both out without her taking the whole damned bodysuit off. There's no time for that.

As soon as I touch her other nipple and give it the same attention, she bucks harder against me, and I know I'm hitting her in the right spot when she tells me. "I'm gonna — Oh, Cole, I'm gonna—" I latch on as she jerks against me, her breathing coming out in a wild gasp as she moans my name over and over again, along with "Oh, God!" And "That's it, right there." Plus other garbled sounds that have me seriously wanting to blow. Seeing her ride this out is beyond anything I ever expected. And I love the fact she's getting more and more comfortable with me. Enough to let me give her an orgasm, at least.

When she comes down from her high, I reluctantly release her and glance down at her body. It's sexy as fuck seeing her all trussed up against me, with one exposed tit and a pink, flushed face. Half of her ponytail has come out, which I was tempted to tug during this whole exchange, and she's staring up at me in wonder.

"Oh. My. God," she breathes.

I chuckle and make no attempt to help put her back together. I like looking at her like this.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You can say that again. Beautiful, by the way.”

“Cole, I had no idea this was gonna happ—” I place a finger over her mouth and lean down to replace it with my lips.

“You’re sexy as fuck,” I tell her. “Best not wear that bodysuit in public anymore, honey, if you want me to be a good boy.”

She tugs on her lip with her teeth as she unfortunately tucks herself back in. “What if I want you to be a bad boy, after all?”

A grin dominates my face, and my balls tug at her words. “You sure you’re ready for that, sweetheart?”

Her cell chimes from somewhere on the table, but she ignores it. “Yes,” she murmurs, reaching for my shirt as I look down at her. “I’m ready.”

Fudge is long gone, at least he knows some cues. I swallow and reach down to kiss her again, our lips locking and our coffee meeting all but forgotten.

“Sorry about your notes.” I motion to the papers scattered all over the floor and the crumpled mess around her.

“I’m sure Mayor Lockwood wouldn’t approve,” she giggles, blinking up at me as her phone chimes again.

“You should answer it,” I say.

She shakes her head. “It can wait.”

I grin and lean back in, our kisses becoming more intense. Her warmth is like a fast spreading wildfire, and I’m all lit up inside and out. I’m patient, but this is testing my willpower.

“This was some coffee date,” I murmur, my hands cupping the back of her head.

Then, for the third time, her phone sounds again. “Ains, someone is really trying to get hold of you.” And I know it can’t be asshole Drake because she blocked the fucker.

“Alright,” she agrees. “But don’t go anywhere.”

I hold my hands up in surrender as I step back and help her slide off the table. She quickly straightens out and finds her feet, albeit a little wobbly, and then reaches for her cell. When she finally finds it, under page one of the minutes of meeting, I snicker at the irony of it.

My dick is rock hard, so bending isn’t the best thing I could do right now, but I need to do something for a moment to distract me.

“It’s Emma,” she whispers as she swipes her phone.

I nod and keep giving Fudge a ruffle under the chin.

“Hey, Em—” the long pause has me looking up. “Wait, what? She’s where?” Her eyes dart to me and all traces of lust and passion-filled kisses fade from her face. It’s replaced with pure panic. “IN HOSPITAL?” she gasps, one hand over her mouth.

I stand up quickly and walk toward her. Emma is a local nurse in town — is she

talking about her mom, perhaps?

“Okay, I’m here with Cole... yes, alright. I’ll be there soon.” She quickly hangs up and holds her hands to her face. “It’s my mom,” she says after a long pause while she catches her breath. “She had a fall — Heavens, this is just like my mom. Climbing up ladders and doing dumb shit instead of hiring someone or asking me?—”

“Is she okay?” Hearing Ainsley’s mom is hurt and seeing the worry on her face immediately puts me on edge.

“Emma said she hit her head pretty hard, luckily the neighbor heard the commotion outside and ran around to help.”

“Jesus. And she’s at the hospital?”

“She’s having some tests. Emma said she’s okay, but has a possible concussion.”

“Let’s go,” I say, resting my hands on her shoulders. “I’ll drive you.”

She presses her lips together. “I’m so sorry, Cole. To end tonight like this?—”

I shake my head. “Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault. Let’s get to your mom, okay?”

“Okay.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Grab a sweater, it’s cold outside. We can leave a light on for Fudge. I’ll take him back to my place for the night and we can go in my truck.”

“Thank you,” she says, touching her hand softly to my forearm. “Are you sure you don’t mind driving me there?”

“Button it, Shorty. Of course I don’t mind.”

She nods and makes haste down the hall to grab a sweater and her scarf while I scoop up Fudge and we head over to my place. I realize she hasn’t been inside my house yet, but there’s no time for introductions or to show her around. I’m glad it’s not too messy, considering I haven’t had much time to clean this week.

I’m a simple kinda guy without too much fluff. “She’s gonna be okay,” I assure her as I grab a jacket and my truck keys and turn on some lights for Fudge. He snuggles into his fluffy bed in the den as I turn the lights on for him.

“I hope so, Cole. I wish she’d have just asked for help.”

“The main thing is, she’s okay. Don’t be hard on yourself. I can help her with whatever it was she was trying to do with the ladder.”

Her face falls, and I can see how upset she is. “Thank you. I’m sure when I’m done yelling at her, she’ll really appreciate it.”

We climb in and I start the truck.

I reach and squeeze her knee before I back out of my driveway. I can feel the reserved part of her has returned and the walls seem to have gone back up, just a little. “Sit tight, baby girl, let’s get you to your mom.”

## CHAPTER 13

### AINSLEY

Cole pulls up to the hospital in record time, Emma greets us in the waiting area and gives us a quick rundown as she takes us to Mom’s room. The doctors are still running tests, but so far, it appears that Mom has some nasty bruises and a sprain. They’re not ruling out a possible stroke, which makes my heart sink even further.

My hands fly up to my face as Cole wraps a reassuring arm around me. Emma notices and her lips twitch ever so slightly.

“She’s going to be okay,” Emma says with a warm smile. “Just no more ladders for your mom.”

“A stroke?” I’m still stuck on that part.

Emma puts her hands on my shoulders. “The tests are a precaution. There’s no history of heart issues in your family, but the doctor wants to rule it out, okay?”

We walk into Mom’s room where she’s half sitting in the hospital bed. “Mom!” I rush over, not liking the sight of the bandages wrapped around her head.

“Honey!” Mom rasps. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“Oh, Mom! What the heck happened?” I know what happened, but it’s a natural reaction to blurt it out, anyway.

“Me being a klutz. I’m sorry to make everyone come out so late because of silly old me.”

I sit on the edge of her bed. “Don’t ever say that. I’m just glad you’re okay. Emma said you hit your head pretty hard. Did you feel funny before you fell off the ladder?”

“You don’t have to worry about me?—”

“Mom!”

“I knew you were going to yell at me.”

I try my best to keep my voice calm. “I’m not yelling. I’m just worried about you.”

“I didn’t have a stroke, I know that much.”

“These things can happen out of the blue. How do you know for sure?”

She pats my hand. “I know. Just like I knew I was in labor and everyone kept telling me it was too soon.”

“Mom, not this story again.” I facepalm myself.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

She smiles, then looks over my shoulder. “Cole? Is that you?”

I turn to see Cole loitering in the doorway as he casts a little wave.

“Uh, Cole drove me,” I explain quickly.

“Well, that was awfully nice of him. Come in, don’t be shy.”

Cole walks in, hands in his pockets, as he looks up at my mom with those golden brown eyes. “I’m sorry you hurt yourself, Mrs. P?—”

My mom waves a hand. “It’s Valerie. Please, you make me sound like an old woman.”

Cole smiles softly. “Glad to see you haven’t lost your sense of humor.”

“Never. It’ll take more than a knock to the head to keep me down.”

I take in my dear, sweet mom. She’s literally the dearest woman and didn’t deserve a life where she’s had to struggle. Not to mention, meet that asshole sperm donor who lied to her.

I try not to think about my mom dating, as she’s new to the dating scene, but she also deserves to be happy. Times have changed, and I worry about her getting duped, scammed or hurt even more. She’s too trusting, but I won’t let anything bad happen to her.



As if sensing my inner thoughts, Cole gives me a small smile. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “I’m fine. I’m just, you know, it’s my mom?—”

“She’s overprotective of me,” Mom finishes. “Always has been.”

“I’m no such thing,” I protest.

Mom ignores me. “So, you two are really dating?”

I frown. “What?”

“I heard from Mrs. Singer at the crochet club that you two were a thing. Not that I’m surprised,” Mom goes on. “All I’ve been hearing about for a little while now is Cole this, Cole that.”

My cheeks instantly flame. “Ma!” Kill me now. “Please don’t embarrass me!”

Cole’s shoulders shake with laughter. “Oh, please, don’t stop on my account. I’m all ears.”

I throw him a glare, then turn it back on my mom. She’s laughing too. It’s good to see her smile, but it’s also just like her to embarrass the shit out of me.

“I’d better not, but know this: my daughter is the most decent, loving, unselfish person I’ve ever known. If you were to date her, you’d be the luckiest man in the world.”

Tears well up in my eyes. “Mom, stop it.” I wipe one stray tear with my sleeve and she clutches my hand.

“You’ve always been a good girl, Ainsley. You were a blessing. If anything were to happen to me?—”

“It’s not, Mom. They said you’re fine. Don’t talk like that, it’s pessimistic.”

Cole squeezes my shoulder. “You’re right, Valerie, in all that you said. We’re just gettin’ to know each other, but from what I’ve seen so far, it would be an honor to date your daughter, if that’s okay?”

Mom’s eyes brighten. “Of course it’s okay. It’s not my decision, it’s up to Ainsley. But I can see she cares an awful lot about you. Just don’t do anything to hurt her like the last one. I heard about his broken nose.” She doesn’t even hide her smile. “I owe you for that.”

I shake my head. “Ma, nobody owes anyone for anything. Drake showed up at a kids dance intoxicated, and said some pretty mean things about me.”

“I’m agreeing. He deserved it.” My mom’s always been a big believer in doing unto others as you would do to yourself. She’d have absolutely no issue with Cole punching Drake in the face. She never liked him very much.

“I wish I could say I regret what I did,” Cole says. “But I’d be lying.”

Mom chuckles, then starts to cough. I rush to help her sit up and Cole pours a glass of water from the pitcher close by. “Stop fussing, Ainsley Marie.”

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Marie?” Cole snickers. “You never told me your middle name.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t think we’d gotten to the middle names part quite yet.”

“It’s after her grandmother,” Mom says, then, “What’s your middle name, Cole?”

I turn to look over my shoulder, this should be good. Most middle names are usually embarrassing.

“Clarence,” he admits.

I burst out laughing.

“Ainsley!” Mom chastises. “It’s rude to laugh.”

“I’m sorry!” I can’t stop the giggles and Cole laughs, too.

“I’ll let my parents know you like the name just as much as they do. In their defense, I think they were worried that if they didn’t name me after an ancestor, we’d be shunned out of the family fortune,” Coles says. “Which doesn’t exist, by the way, because it turns out my good ol’ great grandfather had a gambling problem and swindled some peddlers and got himself into a bit of trouble back in the day.”

Me and Mom laugh. Cole’s so easy to talk to and I can tell right away Mom likes him.

Mom’s eyes start to close. “Well, I think it’s a fine name.”

I look to Cole. “I think we need to let her rest.”

He nods. “I’ll go make myself useful while you say goodnight.”

“Thanks, Cole.”

“Goodnight,” Mom says. “Thank you for bringing Ainsley.”

Cole smiles. “Of course, it helps that we’re neighbors now.”

I smile as he leaves the room.

I give Mom another hug. “Stay out of trouble, okay?”

She smiles softly. “I will.”

“I’ll come and see you tomorrow.”

“That’d be nice.”

I kiss her on the cheek as she closes her eyes. I let myself out of the room and Cole waits with open arms.

I hate hospitals. I mean, who doesn’t? But it’s a comfort having him here. As he embraces me, I take in his scent; the earthy and oceanic tone of his faded cologne, and all things Cole that make my insides flutter. He wraps his warm arms around me and just holds me also something I’ve never experienced before. There’s some kind of quiet comfort in a hug that lasts. Something that’s heartfelt and sincere. It makes my eyes fill with tears.

I pull back. “Let’s get out of here.”

He takes my hand as we go and say goodbye to Emma and head back to his truck. His thumb skates over my knuckles as we walk, and he tells me that he'll come back with me tomorrow if I want him to.

This man.

My bottom lip trembles. I know I'm not cut out for these kinds of emergencies, but Cole has no idea. I have moments when I'm made of tough stuff, but I'm mush underneath.

He helps me into the truck and I take a moment to gather myself while he jogs around to his side. "You know, I was thinking—" he begins as he climbs in.

I don't think, I just act. I practically jump him, climbing almost into his lap as he holds me steady halfway across the console for balance and I kiss him with all I've got.

Our kisses become hot and heavy. My hands slide their way up his arms as my fingers dig into his biceps, he makes a growling sound in the back of his throat that has me whimpering. I want him. I want him here and now.

“Wow, what was that for?”

When I pull back, we’re both panting and I want to tell him exactly what I’m feeling, but self doubt is creeping in just as fast as my eagerness to jump him just was. Does a guy like Cole really want me?

“Ains?” he prompts when I don’t answer. “What is it you want?”

“I want to—” I breathe. “It’s just that—” I can’t even say it. I rest my forehead on his shoulder for a moment while I gather myself.

“It’s just that what?”

“I don’t know how to say it.”

“You can say anything to me. I want you to always be open and honest about how you’re feeling.”

“I’m feeling like I want you, Cole. I want you so bad.”

“I want you too,” he says right back, without hesitation.

I lift my head from my hiding spot on his shoulder. “I need you right now.”

He makes a show of turning his neck, glancing around the almost deserted parking lot and says, “Right here and now?”

I nod.

He grins, pulling me back in. His tongue finds mine, and I lay my hand flat against his chest, feeling the strong wall of muscle underneath my hand. When I glide my hand south and cup him through his jeans, he almost chokes.

“Holy shit, Ains.” I take great pride in the fact he’s breathing so heavily. “I like a wild adventure, but I’m not sure how your mom’s gonna feel if we get caught foolin’ around in the hospital parking lot.”

“You’re probably right.” There’s no two ways about it, which proves I’ve temporarily gone insane. “Drive fast and we’ll get to your place or mine—” I can’t even believe I’m saying the words.

He kisses me again, his mouth warm and his touch gentle, then reaches around to start the engine as I press my palm against his erection and squeeze. It feels very hard and intimidatingly large. “Fuck,Shorty.”

“You are the sexiest man I’ve ever met, Cole Garrison. I need you. I need to feel you inside me,” I whisper the words in his ear, too embarrassed for him to see my face. My cheeks are beet red and practically on fire, but I don’t care. He needs to know.

“I can make it to mine in three minutes, without breakin’ the law,” he tells me. His hands cup my face as we stare at one another. “I want you, too, baby girl. The fact you jumped me in my own truck is so...”

“Forward? Unwanted?”

He burst into laughter. “I forgot how articulate you are. But unwanted? He presses his hand against mine between his legs. “This has been rock hard for you since last year. I haven’t been with anyone else since before the night of speed dating.”

My eyes go wide. “What the hell?”

“Yeah, the boys give me shit about it, but I blame bein’ too busy at work.” He pinches my chin. “That wasn’t the case. It felt disloyal.”

I frown. “You waited that long?”

“Yup.”

“Even when I went back to Drake?” I swallow my guilt around why I even did that. I wanted it to work, or so I thought, but I had no clue what I was in for. Certainly not a cheater or a liar. I also had no idea Cole was interested in me that way.

“Even then. I knew it wouldn’t last, and trust me, if I knew he was a cheatin’, lyin’ asshole, I would’ve been the first one to tell you. I knew you deserved better, and that I could be a better boyfriend than him.”

Boyfriend. Holy shit, that sounded good. “A better boyfr?—”

That sexy grin tugs on his gorgeous face at my surprise. “You heard it.”

“Say it again.”

He doesn’t hesitate. “I’ll make a better boyfriend than him.”



## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You definitely will.” Shit! Does he mean he wants to be? He did tell my mom it would be an honor to date me just before. I’m too chicken to ask, so I squeeze his dick harder instead.

He groans into my touch. “Baby, I need to get you home now.”

I bite my lip, knowing that drives him wild. “So, drive, big shot.”

He grins, kissing me chastely as I reluctantly remove my hand and slide back into my seat.

Granted, Cole makes it back in three minutes, without breaking any rules, and when he slides into his garage and the automatic door comes down, we don’t even get out of the truck. He slides his chair back and I crawl into his lap and our mouths meet again. Cole grips my ass and I rock into his body, enjoying how solid he feels beneath me. His body is so damned sexy and strong.

My heart pounds and my pulse races at our closeness and the fact he’s really turned on. We’re really going to do this here?

“I wanted you in my bed,” he breathes. “But I can’t wait.”

I don’t mind that. I grind against him as he squeezes my ass tighter. I tug at his jacket, shoving it off, then, I find the hem of his shirt and my hands run up the underside, feeling his hard abs and chest. He groans at my touch, my fingers taking in every stroke of his body.

“You feel so good,” I murmur.

“So do you.”

He tugs his shirt over his head, tossing it onto the passenger seat as I reach between us, under my skirt, to undo my bodysuit and lift it up over my head.

Our mouths collide again and I’m lost. My senses have literally left the vehicle, but I need him more than I need the air in my lungs. With Cole, the adrenaline running through me is like a current, sweeping me away with the tide. And I want it to go on and on, tossing and turning us, taking us under and over in every way possible. I’ve never had this sensory overload with a man before, feeling such a connection, or as giddy as I’m feeling with Cole right now. I’m so hot for him. His caring, understanding nature appeals to a side of me that I didn’t even know existed.

And I’m here for it. Every single second I’m with him, I feel like I can’t breathe until we’re touching.

His eyes drop to my breasts, my bra barely hanging on for the ride because I’m breathing so heavily. My nipples are protruding into the material, forming hard peaks begging to be touched. He pulls both cups down roughly as I lift so his mouth can reach me. He holds my breasts and dips his head, sucking one nipple into his mouth with a groan. The minute his lips touch me, I cry out, reveling in his warmth and how good his skin feels under my palms. My whole body is burning, and my heart thuds against the cavity of my chest.

I need him naked, and the very idea that it’s about to happen has me tingling all over. I clutch his head, watching him suckle me as he laps at my breast, then does the same to the other one. His tongue licks the end of my nipple, then flicks it back and forth. Oh god, his hot mouth, his lips... it’s too much.

I moan at everything I'm seeing and feeling. "I need you, Cole."

Our eyes meet and when he says, "Touch me, I'm gonna die if you don't touch me." I know that this is going to be a night I'm never going to forget.

## CHAPTER 14

### COLE

Ainsley thrusts her perfect tits in my face for the second time tonight, and while I'd love to take my time and savor her, we're both pretty heady with want. She's just as desperate as I am to get closer, but getting my jeans down is gonna be a challenge.

"I can't even tell you how glad I am that you wore a skirt tonight." I cup one side of her face and press my lips to hers chastely.

Her lips curl into a smile against mine. "Here, let me help you get out of your jeans." She reaches for my buckle, and I'm salivating as I watch her eyes dip below. She tentatively undresses me bit by bit with those sweet little fingers that handle a million books every day, never believing we'd get this chance and she'd be the one handling me.

Ripping that bodysuit off was sheer perfection. I'd pay money to see her do that all over again. Her sexy tits almost coming out of her bra before she unfastened it made me want to come in my pants. It's like they were begging to be let out for me to play with.

My sexy little librarian.

It's adorable when she fumbles with my belt because she keeps bumping my cock with her fingers. Then, as she reaches for the button and zipper, she brushes her

knuckles over it and I can't help but hiss. Her eyes dart up immediately.

"Touch it," I whisper. "Get my dick out and touch it, baby."

She spreads her knees wider as her skirt bunches up, leaning back slightly as I lift my hips. She yanks my jeans and boxer briefs down in one swoop and my dick jerks. I'm so hard that he bounces against my stomach with a slap and settles there, pointing upwards with need.

Her eyes go wide as she stares down at it. I wouldn't say I'm a monster, but I'm decent. She bites her lip tentatively, and I place my hand on hers and guide her to my length. I love how flustered I've gotten her. I love how the color rises in her cheeks so quickly at the sight of my dick, and more than anything, I love how sweet she looks just before I'm about to take what's mine. Make no mistake, she is mine.

"Jesus, Cole." She licks her lips, her tongue gliding across her mouth as her palm kneads me and I hiss. Having her hands on me is like a gift sent from Heaven. I let go of her hand as she fondles me while I move both my hands to pluck her nipples. They're so delicate, so sweet that I want to taste them again. Everything about her is so delectable. She raises higher on her knees, clearly wanting me to suck on her tits. And I'm here to please.

I cup one tit and bob my head to suck hard on her peak as she continues to stroke my cock. I groan and suck harder as she grinds against me.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You taste fuckin’ amazing.” I move my mouth to her other peak and pay it the same attention. “My naughty little librarian.” I squeeze them both together and suckle one then the other in tandem.

She’s breathy, moaning, and sexy as hell. “Are you sure I’m not just some fantasy of yours?” she pants. “Because I can tell you right now, I’ve always had a thing for men who work with their hands.”

I grin around her breasts. “Is that right?”

She nods triumphantly as I slide one hand down her torso and quickly find my way into her panties. I hook my fingers around the edge of the material and glide them under. I can feel immediately that she’s soaking. My fingers are instantly slick with her sweet juices. “You feel so good. I need you inside me.”

“Is my naughty Little Librarian hot for my dick?” I pinch her clit and she cries out. I know she’s close. One more flick, and I know she’ll go over the edge. Fuck it, I want to see her face when she comes.

“Y—yes.”

“Say it.”

“Cole.”

“Say it and I’ll let you come.”

She bites down on her lip again, and I try not to blow my load as she squeezes my dick harder. “I’m hot for your dick.”

I rub my fingers in a circle over her hard little nub, planting my mouth over her nipple again as she rocks against my hand and rides my fingers to orgasm.

She’s so perfect with her labored pants and cries and her ‘Oh, Cole’ in that sexy, soft voice of hers. I don’t hesitate in nudging the tip of my finger to her entrance. It makes me moan to feel how wet she is and how easily it slides inside her. Then, because I’m a greedy fucker and need to get her ready for me, I slowly circle and add another, fingering her hot little hole, pulling them back and forth as she moans in pleasure. “I’ve never, oh God...” I feel her walls clench around my fingers and a second later she comes again. This time, my dick is most definitely leaking from the tip with anticipation. I need to be inside her.

“You’ve never?” I nip her bottom lip, urging her to finish that sentence.

“Umm, come twice in a row like that.”

“Hey, I’m a giver, Shorty. I want to make sure you’re well and truly ready before you ride me.”

She hitches her skirt up higher, urgent for more pleasure.

“Condom,” I breathe, my spare hand feeling in the direction of my discarded jeans. “I think I have one in my wallet. I’ve always used them.”

Then she says something that shocks me. “I know it’s irresponsible not to, but I’m on birth control. I want you bare, Cole. Just like this.”

I almost shoot my load as I press my lips to hers, my tongue opening her up and

invading her mouth as my dick almost screams at me for release. He's been begging a while now, so I can hardly blame him.

I hold her panties aside as she takes my dick at the base and guides it to her entrance, coating it for a second in her juices as she rubs him back and forth, then slides on down. Just. Like. That. The air escapes my lungs in a loud, needy gasp. She's much the same. She's so goddamn tight.

"Holy shit." My breathing is labored and my hands on her hips help guide her down. My naughty little minx is more than eager. Rising again as she presses her palms to my shoulders and slides back down to the hilt of me.

"Oh. My. God. You're big," she says, squeezing her eyes closed for a moment.

"Not too big."

"Very big."

"But we fit perfectly. Ride it. Ride my cum out of me, baby."

I know I'm filling her so full, and when I glance down and see myself buried inside her tight little hole, I think I can die a happy man. In fact, I know it.

Her tits jostle as she slowly glides up and down the length of me in a rhythmic bounce. I take her in. Her pretty skin. Her shining blue eyes. The way she's riding me with absolute abandon. She leans back, her tits in my face as I hold her hip with one hand, the other rubbing her clit between us. "I'm coming, Cole, I'm — I'm coming..."

There's that tug again as her impending orgasm takes hold and nearly pulls me to mine when she explodes. I bounce her harder. Her silent scream is a vision I'll keep

in my spank bank for the rest of time. I want to mark her so fucking bad, but I also don't wanna come in two minutes.

“You're takin' my cock so well, baby,” I murmur, nipping her ear when she comes down from her high and her breathing regulates. I love the way her fingernails dig into my skin. I hope they mark me.

“You feel so good. So, so good...”



## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I kiss her cheeks. Her nose. Her chin. Her eyes. I love every single inch of her. “I want you in my bed, but I need to come.”

She opens her eyes as I nibble against her bottom lip. “I’m ready for you.”

A slow grin spreads across my face. “You sure?”

Her soft, electric smile beguiles me. “I’m sure.”

I grip her hips with both hands and force her down roughly, taking all of me. She cries out and I lift her, then at the same time I thrust up. The small confines of the truck means we’ve got nowhere to move around, but this won’t take long. Then I’m gonna fuck her in my bed. “Yes!” she cries.

I bounce her harder as the tempo increases, up down, up down. “Come on my cock again,” I rasp. “Come now, baby.”

She throws her head back and grinds down, screaming my name as I suckle her nipple into my mouth, my load shooting out of me in ripples. I shudder. My orgasm goes on and on. My groan fills the cab, matching the call of her name on my lips as I fill her up. Then she stills. She sags into my arms, her breathing just as heavy as mine. “Holy shit,” she mutters.

“No kidding. You mean to tell me this is what we’ve been missing out on?”

She giggles against my chest as she holds me tight. I wrap my arms around her waist to keep us connected for a little longer. “Good things come to those who wait.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Yep. And I’ve waited long enough. Let’s get to bed.”

??

I slide in and out of her. She’s flat on her back, her legs wrapped around me, and I’m fucking her nice and slow. Okay, the truck was a little hectic. We were both needy and needed a quick release. But now she’s in my bed for the entire night, we don’t have that issue. I pin her arms above her head and work my hips. She’s so soft beneath me, so responsive; she loves it when I talk dirty to her. I think I shocked her, and that turns me on even more.

“Such a tight little pussy.” I can barely get the words out because she’s squeezing me so hard. “It feels like it was made for me.”

“Faster, Cole,” she breathes.

I shake my head, placing one finger over her lips. “I want you to feel every inch of me. This body is mine, Ainsley Parsons. You got me? All of it is mine.”

“So possessive.” She doesn’t hold back her groan when I jolt my hips a little harder.

“Yep, and you’re gonna be feelin’ me for days. Every time you walk or even sit down, you’re gonna know where I’ve been.”

“Oh.”

I pump my hips, edging her to the brink, and this time, when she comes, she grips my ass and tries to get me to quicken. I don’t. I drag out her pleasure until she’s squeezing my butt cheeks for dear life, her whole body tense as she cries out. There’s no way I could ever get sick of seeing her beneath me like this.

“This is torture,” she breathes.

“But good torture?” I grin against her neck.

“Oh, yes.”

I move up onto my knees, my hands pressing into the mattress next to her head. It’s so much deeper like this. I move one arm, lifting her ass slightly as I go deeper still, and she moves her hands to her breasts and plays with them. Seeing her do this and really open up to me makes me feel like a king. She’s so quiet and demure in her real life, but I’m thrilled to find out she’s a little dirty in the bedroom. I love making her tell me what she wants, and her dirty talk.

“Push up onto your hands. Look at what I’m doin’ to you.”

She does as I say, sitting up slightly to watch my dick sink in and out of her. Our eyes meet. “This pussy is mine.”

“Okay.”

“Say it.”

She squeezes her eyes shut for a moment. “I can’t say that.”

I don’t want to deny her anything, but hearing her talk dirty is something I’d beg for.

“Yes, you can.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

Her eyes flick down to watch us as I continue to pump in and out. My dick thinks he's on an all-night bender, and maybe he's right. We've been at it for most of the night, neither one of us able to keep our hands off one another.

"This pussy is yours," she whispers.

I grin. "Next time we fuck, I want you in that sexy uniform."

She laughs out loud. "My work uniform?"

"Yep. I've always had a fantasy about doin' you on your desk."

She giggles. "Oh, God. Well, unless it's in my house, that might not happen because we have cameras at work."

I move my hips a little faster, thrusting when I hit the end of her, ignoring her comment about cameras. "You like the idea of me taking you over your desk, don't you?"

She flops down on her back. "Yes."

"It's gonna happen, my sexy girl."

"Cole, I'm—Oh!" Her orgasm takes hold and I watch in sheer delight as she unravels again. I've lost count, but she's come at least six times.

I pump her harder, drilling her pert little body into the mattress. I squeeze my eyes

closed and my dick explodes; my cum spurting as I groan some indecipherable version of her name. When I'm spent, I flop down on top of her as she wraps her arms around me. We're both panting and out of breath. "It's your fault," I tell her.

"What's my fault?" She's breathing just as heavy.

"That we're in this mess. You tried to jump me in the parking lot."

She laughs, oh so quietly. "You got me all worked up from before."

"Oh, you mean when you sat on the meeting notes?"

We both laugh. "Did that get you going?" she taunts.

"That and when you fucked me in my truck."

Her gaze diverts as I grip her chin and pull her face back to me. "Don't hide, baby. I love it when you tell me what you want and how good my dick feels inside you."

"You're so hot, Cole. I've never had anyone talk dirty to me before."

"Clearly you've only dated losers." I'm still inside her as I lean up onto one hand.

"I'm bettin' nobody has treated your body like this before?"

"You'd be right. I've never umm?—"

There she goes again, stopping herself when I know she wants to say something. I need to get to the bottom of this. "You've never what?"

She blows out a breath. "You know how I said I've never come twice before while having sex?"

“Yeah...”

“Well, the truth is, that’s never happened at all during sex.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Never?”

She shakes her head. “Nope.”

“Fuck, Ains. Not that I want to talk about your ex, especially while I’m still inside you. But man, that’s a fucking joke.”

“He wasn’t exactly the tender type. You’re so different. You make me feel beautiful.”

“You are beautiful, Ainsley. And I bet I don’t need to even ask to know that he never told you that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“He never really made me feel beautiful or like a woman, and when he cheated, I sorta believed it had something to do with me.”

“What!” I balk. “You have to be joking?”

She presses her lips together as I stare down at her. I sort of like the fact I have her pinned and that she can’t go anywhere. She can’t hide this time. “It’s not exactly a compliment when someone does that to you.”

“That’s fucking on him, not you. Let me tell you, everything about you is perfect.”

She blinks up at me like she’s trying to believe it. “I’m hardly that, but thank you. It was just a shot to my confidence. But you make me feel like it’s okay to be how I am and say what I feel.”

“I always want you to do that. And for the record, he’s a first class asshole. I wish I’d punched him more than once that night.”

“I don’t think you needed to. He got the message.”

“Good.”

“You know what else?” she murmurs.

I stroke the hair from her forehead with my fingers. “What, angel?”

“I didn’t realize I was such a wildcat in bed. I mean, I don’t think I have ever been

like this before. You must bring it out in me.”

I chuckle, not being able to help my smug smile hearing her words. “I fucking love that.”

“It’s true.”

I kiss her on the nose. “What do you say we have a shower, and if you think that means I’m gonna fuck you from behind in my stall, you’d be right.”

“You really can go all night, can’t you?” she giggles.

I grin. Even though her confessions have left me reeling even more about her ex, I don’t want him to ruin our night. “You’ve no idea.”

She slaps me on the ass. “I guess getting some shut eye is out of the question tonight?” Her teasing tone makes me want to put her over my knee. I can imagine her in those sexy glasses, her hair up in a bun as I pull it and spank her naughty ass at the same time.

“Sleep is overrated.”

She leans up to kiss me. “I’ve never agreed with anything so much in my life.”

## CHAPTER 15

### AINSLEY

The snowfall is light in its wake as I wrap my warm scarf around my neck, ready to head out for the annual Silver Pines’ tree decorating show. Frosty the snowman is making his yearly grand appearance in the town square. Travis will be beside himself.



I'm looking forward to seeing Presley and little April again.

After last night's romp in the hay with Cole, one could say I'm a little bleary-eyed. I made my way back to my own home, reluctantly, this morning and haven't stopped thinking about him since.

Fudge was all snuggly and even made his way into the bed between us.

All I can say is, Cole is a freaking stallion. He didn't just live up to every promise he made; he exceeded them. The man sure knows how to pump those hips, and my skin flushes thinking back to the things we got up to all night. Thank God for concealer.

Emma picks me up with a little toot out front and I make my way out to her car. Cole is working late, so we agreed to meet at the festivities later on. To be honest, I have jitters and butterflies in my stomach thinking about seeing him again after last night.

I'm not sure I will ever see Cole Garrison in the same light ever again.

"You look cute." She smiles as I slide into the passenger seat. It's lovely and warm inside her SUV.

"Thanks, Em, so do you." She has on a red woolen sweater with a giant snowman on the front, along with dangly Santa earrings. It's a fun, traditional thing to dress up a little Christmassy for the annual town decorating festival. Everyone gets really into it.

I'm not much better when it comes to the Santa stakes myself. I wore jeans tonight with my snow boots, a white cable-knit sweater with a large glittery Christmas bauble sequined into the wool, and my Christmas scarf with matching gloves.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I also tamed my curls and put my contact lenses in. I don't wear them very often, but I think I look more grown up. A pop of red lipstick and some blush bring everything together.

"How's your mom since this morning?" Emma got off the night shift early this morning. "I heard they're keeping her in for another night."

"She's doing good. I went to see her earlier and we're hoping to collect her tomorrow. They wanted to keep her in for another night. Her blood pressure was really high." Thank God it wasn't a stroke, and she hasn't damaged her head from the fall.

"She'll be okay. You know she will."

I smile. "She's a tough cookie. It'll be nice to get her home so we can decorate the tree together."

"I'm surprised your more than friendly neighbor isn't escorting you to town tonight. You two seem to have grown close in a short space of time."

I press my lips together and try to not let out too big of a sigh. But my best friend needs to know what's happened over the last couple of days, especially last night. I just didn't get time to text her today. "He's going to be down there later," I say.

"Are you two still pretending you're dating, for asshole Drake's sake?"

I shudder at the thought of my ex. Funnily enough, I haven't heard a peep out of him

since the dance. I mean, I blocked him and all, but it's still a small town after all and it wouldn't be hard to find anyone. Emma knows all about it because I told her the day after the incident, which only amplified her dislike for Drake and her approval for Cole. "Well, sort of. I think."

She pauses before she pulls back out onto the street. "Sort of, you think?"

"I don't really know exactly what we are," I sigh. "But last night..." My cheeks instantly burn at the mere mention of it.

She glances at me briefly before making her way down my quiet street toward the main road to town. "Did something happen with you and Cole?"

I press my lips together again, a dead giveaway with me. Emma is also super perceptive and doesn't miss much.

"It did, didn't it!" She bounces up and down in her seat enthusiastically.

"Yes, but you can't let the cat out of the bag," I say in a hushed whisper, like someone is gonna hear us in the confines of the car.

"Oh My GOD!" she practically yelps. "You hot dawg! I don't believe it."

I can't help but laugh. Even the mere thought of someone like Cole being into little ole me still blows my mind. When I think about the fact that he's been known to be quite the ladies man around town in recent years and ever the charming, cute, hazel-eyed Casanova, I know that it's all an act. He hasn't been with anyone since last year. I feel that little flutter in my chest deepening when I think about him. Mine. The butterflies in my stomach won't let up.

I really, really like Cole. I want us to be exclusive. Not pretending just to annoy my

ex. I'm pretty sure our little display at the dance did the trick, so I won't be hearing from Drake anytime soon. Cole also said something about being boyfriend material, but we never got to discussing that before I jumped him.

It may be soon after my breakup, but being in a relationship with someone like Cole gives me a fever. He's sweet, kind and funny and other than my ex, never has a bad word to say about anyone. And he's as sexy as sin. My heart flutters at that part, too.

"Something may have happened," I say eventually. "He's just the sweetest."

Emma glances at me again and I know my best friend enough to know she's gung-ho for me to spill. "Tell me everything."

My heart races thinking about some of the things we did before we've even been on a proper date. Not something normal for me. "I don't know about everything, but I can say that Cole Garrison knows how to make a woman smile."

"And scream at the same time!"

"Em!"

"Or him screaming your name?"

"Let's just say he knows his way around the female body in ways I've never experienced."

"So, you had sex?" she quizzes giddily.

I bite back a smile. "Um, yes, we had sex."

"Oh my God, Ains!" she squeals. "I knew something was cooking with you two last

night!”

“You did?” I bite my lip, thinking about how I initially got off on my kitchen table. The way he played with my body and made me feel so sexy still rocks me to my core. I also hope it wasn’t that obvious when we went to visit my mom. And what happened right after we left the hospital... facepalm.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Sparks fly whenever you and him are near each other.”

I laugh and settle back in the seat for the ride. “Well, we made out that night before you called me about Mom. He already had me seeing stars by that point without even getting me naked. And one thing lead to another later in his truck...” I think the relief of seeing that Mom was okay, combined with the intoxication of Cole’s presence, overtook me.

Emma gasps this time, probably because I’ve never really talked like this before. Or had a one-night stand, not that it was one, but I’m pretty sure we’re dating.

“Ains!—”

“I know. I’ve kept it quiet from you and I’m sorry. There’s just been a lot going on today, and it all happened so fast. He came over to discuss the snowball fight we’re collaborating on, and one thing led to another.”

“This is fantastic, you know that. Actually fantastic!”

“You think so?”

“Cole is hot.”

“I know. And I really like him. I was worried I might not be the usual type he goes for. We don’t exactly hang out in the same circles, nor have I ever seen him in the library. He tells me I’m beautiful and sexy, and I know it’s just words, but it’s nice. He also said he’s had his eye on me since last year at the speeddating night, but it’s

not just that, it's in his actions. His thoughtfulness. The way he's protective and sweet at the same time."

I see Emma visibly clutch the steering wheel with glee. "Ohhhh I knew it!"

"You did?"

"I've always thought he had his eye on you. Eric thought so, too."

"Well, it seems I was the last to know." I laugh. "Better late than never."

"This is so cool, Ains. Cole is such a catch."

"Aren't you going to warn me that he's a bad boy that's dated half the town?"

A little giggle escapes her mouth. "Well, he's kind of the resident bad boy that's good on the inside, ya know? And who cares if he's dated half the town? He's had his eye on you for the past year, that's what counts."

"Yeah, I was on and off with Drake at the time. Stupid me."

"Well, now you're not and Cole has swooped in." She's giddy in her seat and it makes me laugh. Em has always been the one to give it to me straight, so if she thinks it's a good idea, then its gotta be. "You've gotta give me more, Ains. You're keeping your cards very close to your chest and you know I like details." She's already pulling up at a vacant parking space in front of the Town Hall, so there's no time to give her any deets. The other thing is, I don't know exactly what Cole and I are yet, which is something I need to get to the bottom of as soon as tonight. Yes, he said that thing to my mom about dating me, but we got so carried away afterward, we didn't officially discuss it.

“Later,” I tell her.

“Bet you’re dying to see him, right?”

“Chomping at the bit!” I giggle back. I don’t know if it will get any easier being around someone as big and strong as Cole. He is so sweet and attentive, it would be pretty tough for anyone else to measure up, and I’m here for it. So, if he wants more, I’m here for that, too.

We unbuckle and make our way out of the car toward the festivities. It’s six-thirty, so things should kick off soon.

We link arms and walk up the pathway of the Main Street, just up from the town square. You can’t miss the giant inflatable Frosty, or Travis and his posse strategizing before the big reveal soon. Boys will be boys.

I immediately see Presley holding April and standing next to her sister, Parker, with her husband Chris, and their kids, Celeste and Gray, who are running around with Molly and Oscar. Plus, two other mutual friends in the group, Rory and Ali.

“Hey!” I wave as we both walk up to greet them all. The snow is only lightly falling, and the excitement in town of everyone gathering for the tree decorating and the yearly traditions of eggnog and the light supper at the Town Hall, is palpable.

Everyone turns around to look at us. “Hey!” Parker gushes as she greets me with a big hug. She’s always been super friendly and a barrel of laughs.

“Great to see you both,” Chris says, while trying to contain the kids who are running around, all chasing each other with laser beams.

I scruff Oscar’s hair as he dashes past. “Hey, Ainsley!” Molly waves on her way by. I



can see Hank over by the enormous Christmas tree with some of the committee members.

Presley gives me and Emma a hug while jostling the little one.

Everyone immediately asks about my mom and I give them a quick rundown on what happened and that she's going to be fine. It's really sweet of them all to be concerned.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Aw, April looks so cute, all snuggled up,” I say, giving her cheeks a little tickle and she smiles up at me with a little gurgle.

“I think she likes the festivities already,” Presley laughs. “She’s all chirpy and happy.”

“That might be for other reasons,” Ali chimes in, giving us all a knowing wink. “But Pres will fill you in later.”

“Sounds ominous.” Emma wiggles her eyebrows in Presley’s direction. The kids run after Chris as he excuses himself to go over and help the guys. I quickly glance over to see if I can see Cole amongst the crowd, but there’s no sign of him yet.

“Everything will be revealed soon,” Presley assures us. “Do you guys wanna grab a hot chocolate in the meantime? The coffee van has just pulled up.”

“Sounds great,” I chime in with a few nods from the girls.

We walk towards Tim’s Coffee Perk as Rory sidles up on the other side of me.

“So, Ains. Word is you’ve tamed the wild beast of Silver Pines? If the other night at the dance was anything to go by.”

I laugh nervously. Wow, good news travels fast, but I guess she was there right after the altercation with Drake. “Which wild beast would that be?” I feign a very non-believable nonchalance.

“Cole Garrison,” Parker chimes. “Don’t get all coy with us now, Ainsley Parsons. You’ve been keeping him a secret, haven’t you!”

“Oh, now, I wouldn’t say that.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, trying to think fast. “But we’ve been getting to know each other since I moved next door to him.”

“How handy,” Ali giggles. “Way to go, Ainsley.”

“He’s apparently very sweet,” Emma adds her two cents’ worth, with an air of sarcasm to her voice.

“I bet he’s also good with his hands,” Rory chimes, giving me a nudge with her elbow.

I’m too embarrassed for words, and even if they’re egging me on, I know they mean well. They’re a wonderful group of women and I’ve known them forever.

“I’m not at liberty to answer that,” I joke. I mean, what am I supposed to say?

It comes to mind again that I should have clarified things with Cole, but I was a little busy jumping him when we got back to his truck last night and then going at it until the wee hours at his place. Stupidly, I wasn’t prepared to answer questions about us to our actual friends. Silly me.

“Well, someone who could answer it is walking right this way.” Pres nods toward Frosty, who’s causing a few headaches from the looks of all the guys gathered around it, scratching their heads.

My heart skips a beat when I glance over to see Cole walking with Jake and Charlene toward Frosty. Looks like they must’ve just arrived. Charlene spots us and waves, walking right over, leaving Jake with the guys but tugging on Cole’s arm. When he

looks over and sees me, I notice a big, bright smile spread across his face. Is he ever in a bad mood?

“And he’s got a big old smile for you,” Parker chimes in, giving me a wink.

I can’t deny that fact; his eyes are directly on me and I don’t know where to look.

There’s something cheeky behind those deep pupils of liquid silk, and I know exactly what it is.

Charlene gives me a good old eyebrow wiggle as she approaches. Clearly she’s privy, as is the rest of the town, that Cole and I are apparently not as conspicuous as we thought.

I really need to talk to him.

Luckily, I don’t have to wait too long. After everyone says hi and the formalities are out of the way, Cole tugs at my hand while the others wait in line to order hot chocolate.

“Hey, beautiful,” he whispers in my ear. His smile stretches wide.

“Hey yourself,” I murmur shyly. We obviously haven’t seen each other since I left his bed this morning, and now we’re looking at one another, I feel a little jittery.

He glances down at my giant bauble Christmas sweater briefly and tugs at the hem. “Nice touch.”

I laugh. He’s in his usual jeans and plaid shirt with a jacket over the top. His hair is tousled, and he exudes a sexy mix of earthy sandalwood and the ocean. “Where’s your knitted sweater?” I joke.

“Oh, don’t worry, my mom is probably knitting one for me and my dad as we speak.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I can't help but giggle. It's so damned easy with him. Effortless.

And being with him so intimately last night was effortless, too.

"I'm sure you don't want to see it," he goes on.

"Oh, I would love to. We could do a matchy-matchy for the snowball fight—uh, as coordinators, I didn't mean?—"

His crinkly smile could win some kind of award, and I practically melt. "What did you mean?" He tilts his head.

Uh, oh. "I just mean, we're the organizers of this crazy snowball idea of yours."

He glances toward Tim's coffee van where my friends are hovering, waiting for their order. "Is that all, Ains?"

I swallow and look down at my boots for a second, it's all I can do to reign in my composure. Looking at him will just muddle my thoughts even further.

But when I glance up, my eyes trail down to his succulent lips... lips that were unapologetically all over me. And they're just as divine as they were last night.

"Do you want to be more than that?" His voice is quiet, leaning in so I get an extra whiff of his sexy fragrance. I open my mouth to answer, but my words are stunted by Cole's friends, namely Travis and Jake, walking up to us. Jake slaps Cole on the back, calling him a slacker, and tells him they need an extra pair of hands to put up

Frosty. I glance over to the massive snowman and try to contain my laughter. Jessica Lockwood is hovering close by with some of the other committee members and Cole's other friends, Rich and Justin.

"I'll be right there," Cole assures them.

"Nice sweater." Travis gives me a wink.

"Thank you." I smile as I glance back at Cole.

A twitch of a smirk hints at Cole's mouth. "Later,Shorty."

"Later." It's like our own personal, dirty little secret, but judging by the way everyone keeps smiling at us both, I'm not sure it is so secret anymore.

## CHAPTER 16

### COLE

When we finally inflate Frosty,I stand back with Travis and the boys to inspect it.

"Now that's a giant snowman," Rich says, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

It's still a pretty funny sight, even though this is the third year running that it's been a thing. Travis now thinks it's a Silver Pines National Treasure, since it was his idea and all.

The giant town Christmas tree sits at the other side of the Town Hall where Mayor Lockwood has some of the guys already on a ladder, putting up fairy lights.

"If you think that's good, wait until the Rockefeller Center takes shape with the ice

skating rink,” Travis chuckles, rubbing his hands together; the cold is setting in. The giant snowman wasn’t the only thing he outdid himself with. People far and wide know about the make-shift Rockefeller Center, and come all the way here just to check it out.

“Well, at least none of us have to worry about being Santa again this year, since Jake has it covered.” I give Jake a harder than necessary pat on the back next to me. Both he and Charlene volunteered to be part of Santa’s grotto last year right before Christmas, just after the snowstorm hit. Charli was not only his helper, but dressed up as an elf. I’m not sure I want to know what went on in that grotto, truth be told.

He laughs. “All for the kids.”

“Better you than me,” Justin says. “How about you, Cole? Word is you and Ainsley are setting up some snowball fight competition this year right after the Hunger Games treasure hunt?”

“Yeah, Mayor Lockwood had no choice but to approve the idea after it got passed by the council.”

“She seems a bit more reluctant to it than she was to my Rockefeller Center,” Travis mocks, not being able to contain his laughter. “Guess you can’t win ‘em all.”

I side eye him. “Lucky for us, the majority ruled. It’ll be fun, as long as nobody gets a snowball to the eye. That means all of you have to go gentle if we ever wanna pull this off again.”

“Us, gentle?” Justin pats his chest. “It’s gonna cost you if you think we’re not gonna be the champions.”

“It’s for the kids.” I roll my eyes.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“How does the snowball fight work exactly?” Travis asks.

I smirk. “Well. Ains and I are currently ironing out the details. My initial idea was having teams of two with a field of bunkers set up through the park, maybe hay bales, and you get a set amount of snowballs to grenade out against your opponent before the timer runs out.”

The guys laugh.

“No wonder Lockwood is less than excited about it.” Justin shakes his head.

“So, you and Ainsley a thing?” Rich tilts his head, switching tact.

I’m surprised by his question, even if I shouldn’t be. The dance thing is all over town with what happened with Drake, and being seen again together at the Noodle Bowl the other night was sure to get tongues wagging.

But I pop a shoulder anyway, because I’m not too sure what we are, even if I know what I wanna be. I need to talk to her first. I know things were electric between us even before we got in the sack, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since this morning. It was so hot the way she tackled me in the car and when she straddled me in my parked truck in the garage. I’m practically salivating when I think about all those tight spaces.

The sex was hot. And then all night in my bed, Lord have mercy.

I want more. Boy oh boy, do I want more. “You know me, a gentleman never tells,” I

finally say, as the guys all look to me for an answer.

Travis is the only one not showing any surprise. I'm pretty sure he already knows.

"So this is new?" Justin asks. "Or am I just late to the game?"

"It's new," I say. "She's a cool chick and we're just getting to know each other."

"Didn't she move in next door?" he goes on.

"Yup. She sure did. And my cat has taken a shine to her. I can't get him to leave her house when he wanders over there."

"He's not the only one by the sound of it." Rich laughs just as we see Jessica Lockwood eyeing us from across the way. Now that Frosty is in place, the street lights are about to be turned on. Then we can finally retreat into the hall for some food. Thank God, because I'm starving. "Goin' for the hot librarian, huh?" Rich nudges me.

I palm the back of my head. It's fine when I'm thinking or saying it, but not other dudes. "Something like that," I grit out.

"She's pretty cute," Justin joins in, giving me a devilish grin. "That whole librarian thing is pretty smokin'."

I scowl in his direction, bristling from his words. He holds his hands up, chuckling in some kind of defense. "Hey, man. Just sayin'"

"Fuck, you've got it bad." Travis slaps me on the back good-naturedly. "Happens to the best of us, bro. If you find a good woman, I say go for it. They don't come around every day."

“Now this is true,” Jake agrees with a nod. “Take my word for it. It’s worth it.”

“Well, I gotta talk to Ains first,” I say. There’s a few things we need to clarify before I get anywhere near her kitchen table, my truck or my bed again. In fact, talking to her is exactly what I’m gonna do before I get bombarded by Jessica Lockwood and the committee. I’m already on the outs with her over getting our snowball fight approved, and some decisions going over her head a little. Maybe buttering her up with some eggnog in the Town Hall could be in my best interest to ensure things go smoothly.

But first. Ainsley.

??

I’m half an eggnog in before I find her in the hall with the girls. She’s chatting away to Hank as his kids still run around outside with Parker and Chris’s tribe. I see Marley across the way with some of his friends. I need to catch up with him and make sure he’s on board for the snowball fight arrangements.

I sidle up beside her with a glass of the good stuff. “Need to talk to you,” I whisper, giving her a friendly bump with my shoulder. I nod toward Hank as he starts talking to Marley’s folks next to him.

She turns quickly and holds her hand to her chest. “Shit, you scared the life out of me!” Her surprise quickly turns into a smile as she looks at the glass I’m holding out. “Is that for me?”

“Sorry about that. Consider this a peace offering.”

She quirks a brow. “A peace offering for what?”

I move closer to her ear. “Doin’ what I did to you in the early hours of morning. I feel bad for not letting you sleep.”

I love the way her cheeks darken. It’s delicious.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Don’t ever feel bad for keeping me awake,” she says.

I clear my throat. We need to get off this subject, even if I started it. “Lovely evening.”

She rolls her lips. She knows I’m trying to keep it light, and not touching her is proving difficult. “It sure is. I love how they do the whole eggnog and banquet thing before Christmas. I think it’s a nice way for the town to get together.”

“Makes me wonder what they’ll break out for Carols by Candlelight this year,” I muse.

She laughs as she takes the glass and holds it up to her pretty lips, taking a small sip.

“Who knows.”

“Ains, I really need to?”

“There you are, honey.” I whirl around to a familiar voice; Mom, with Dad close behind her, waving a glass of eggnog our way.

“Hey, Mom.” I smile as I take a gulp, wondering if we’re ever gonna get a second alone. “Dad.”

“Hi, son.” He pats me on the back as Mom pulls me in for a hug.

“Ainsley, honey,” Mom coos, extending her arms out to my girl as they hug. “Cole

tells us you and him have been coming up with some new activities for the Christmas show this year.”

Ainsley’s eyes momentarily round as she glances up at me and I try to hide my smirk behind my eggnog glass. “Apparently a good old-fashioned snowball fight never hurt anyone,” she says, looking back at my mom when she’s recovered.

“The snow may as well be good for something,” Dad chimes in. “And we’re going to have a heck of a snowfall this weekend. Not sure if you’ve been watching the weather lately.”

“As long as it’s not as bad as last year.” I grimace. Let’s hope we’re not all stuck indoors for days on end again.

“Well, I have my pantry stocked up, just in case.” Ainsley never ceases to amaze me. Of course she’s organized in case there’s another freak blizzard.

My mouth pulls up in a smile. One thing I wouldn’t mind is being locked in anywhere with her for a few days while the snow settled. Could be wishful thinking, but being snowed under isn’t a totally horrible idea.

“Have you tried the eggnog yet?” Mom asks Ainsley.

“I have.” Ains holds up her glass. “And they’ve put on a wonderful spread at the buffet.”

“I made those little love heart cookies with the sprinkles on.” Mom winks. “You two should try one.”

I want to facepalm myself. Could Mom be any more obvious? It’s not as if they know I’m sweet on Ainsley, or that we’ve hooked up. They know she moved in next door

and that we've been spending time together on all the Christmas committee stuff. Maybe Mom is just putting two and two together and coming up with whatever she likes. She may be correct on this one, but I don't need her coming on too heavy.

"They sound delicious. I might go and try one," Ainsley says. "How about you, Mr. Garrison? Can I get you anything from the buffet?"

Dad smiles but shakes his head. "I'm fine, sweetheart. But thank you."

"Well, me and Ainsley better go grab some cookies before they're all gone," I say, after a moment with a notion of my head in Ainsley's direction.

Hopefully she can get out of Mom's clutches sooner rather than later so we can have that chat. I guess the town Christmas get together probably isn't the best time to be thinking about a deep and meaningful conversation.

"You two enjoy!" Mom hollers as I gently tug at Ainsley's arm and lead her over toward the said cookies.

"Your parents are so sweet," she giggles.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, they are, but Mom likes to meddle."

"My mom's the same."

"I'm sorry she couldn't be here tonight."

"I'm going to see her again in the morning. She should be out of hospital soon, fingers crossed."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

We pass Emma and the posse of girls who all look over at us.

“Do you kinda get the feeling we’re the talk of the town right now?” I say out of the side of my mouth.

Ainsley laughs. “Kinda.”

My eyes wander over her pretty face and down to her Christmas sweater. “We really need to talk. Why don’t we grab a Christmas cookie or three? I know without looking that my mom still has her eyes on us, then we can find somewhere quiet?”

“That sounds good.”

She’s so damned cute. I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of looking into those big, soulful eyes, the color of the ocean.

“Finally caught you two,” Jessica Lockwood drawls behind us the second we hit the buffet dessert table. Fucking fantastic.

Ainsley and I both share a look and turn simultaneously.

“I have to say, the two of you sure worked hard on the new festivities this year. Regardless of my feelings about the snowball fight and potential insurance claims, I think it’s going to all work out,” she says. Maybe she’s had too many glasses of eggnog, or maybe she really is coming around to the idea.

If only she knew just how hard we had been working on and under the festivities for



this year. My mind drifts to Ainsley's ass planted on the kitchen table while I suckled on her nipples and brought her to orgasm. If only Jessica knew where those paperwork minutes had been.

"I think so, too," Ainsley says. "Everyone is so cheery and pumped for everything to begin."

I grin. "You never know, Mayor Lockwood, you might even enjoy it."

Her lips purse like she's fighting a smile. "I wouldn't bet on that, Cole Garrison. And I'm sorry to hear about your mom, Ainsley. Is she okay?"

"Thank you," Ainsley says, her eyes flicking down to the ground. "She's doing much better. I think it's safe to say she's out of the woods and she should be coming home in a few days."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I grab another cookie because Mom was right, these are seriously good. Mom's always been an excellent baker, but she's kept these a secret. "Well, Ainsley and I were just going to check out Frosty." I gulp down the last of my drink, hoping I won't get spots on my tongue for lying.

"I'll see you both later." We say goodbye and watch as she waves across the room to stalk somebody else.

"She scares me a bit," Ainsley says.

"Me too," I agree. "We'll never hear the end of it if the snowballs get out of hand."

Ainsley laughs but quickly sobers, so much so, I glance down at her.

“You okay?”

“I’m good, just — last night was a lot.”

“It was. That’s why we need to talk. Should we try and find a quiet place while everyone else gets sloshed?”

She nods and I take her hand, lacing my fingers around in hers. I lead her to the side exit but as soon as we get outside the snowfall has well and truly started, and there’s no way we can stay out here too long. Frosty or no Frosty.

“My truck?” I suggest, as I look up to the sky.

“Yeah, it’s warm and quiet,” she says, tugging at my hand, making me avert my eyes from the rapid succession of snowflakes tumbling down on us.

I lead her around the corner from the back of the hall out to the parking lot. “I missed you today,” I breathe as we walk briskly. My breath coming out in a puff, making a fog of its own in the air from the cold.

“I missed you, too.” Her hand squeezes mine.

When we reach my truck, I lean into her before I unlock the doors with my fob. She turns and presses her face into my chest and we have a quick cuddle. I tilt her chin up with one finger and bend my head to place a quick kiss on her lips. The only reason I don’t linger or grab her by the waist is because I don’t want the girl to freeze out here. “I’ve been wanting to do that all day. Since you left my bed this morning,” I say, licking my bottom lip, tasting her cherry lip gloss, then I dip my head for another.

She blinks up at me. “Me too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

My body isn't just humming, it's on fire, despite the cold. But I have to get us into warmth, so I pull her door open and turn my head slightly when I see someone in my periphery.

I hear the sharp gasp of Ainsley next to me as we both see fuckface Drake scowling over at us from where he must have just parked a few doors up.

"Oh, shit," I hear Ainsley whisper.

"Just keep walking," I mutter in his direction. I don't want to cause a scene here, but lucky for him he drops his eyes to the ground, scurrying toward the Town Hall with his hands shoved in his pockets. I'm happy to see that he still has bruises on his face from that pesky broken nose. Must be a bummer being a douchebag.

"Thank God." Ainsley palms her chest. "The last thing we need is another confrontation."

"He got the message." I smirk as she climbs up into my truck and I jog around to my side and climb in.

"So, we're really not playing at this?" she asks as soon as I turn to her in the seat.

"Babe, I think after last night, we can both agree that this is real. It was never about fake dating for me."

"You want to date for real?" she asks, like it's still so hard to believe. And I'm willing to drill it home to her if that's what it takes.

I lean over; the seat crunching from my weight as it shifts. My hand finds her chin, where I lift it with my fingers, tilting her head to look up at me.

“Don’t hide that pretty face. Yes, I want to date for real. Last night was hot. You’re hot, and sweet and adorable. But it’s not just because of that. I want more, Ainsley, more than just sex. I want to know everything about you, if you want that too?”

Her eyes are big and round, her face all flushed as she gazes at me. Perfection.

I wanna rip that Christmas sweater off her and take her in my backseat, but that also wouldn’t be a good idea given where we are tonight.

“I want that, Cole. More than anything.”

Her words are like magic on my heart, and I lean in for another kiss.

## CHAPTER 17

### AINSLEY

Cole’s words both surprise and thrill me. It still blows my mind that someone like Cole Garrison is interested in me. I consider myself pretty ordinary, sometimes even boring. I don’t get out all that much, but so what if I’m not a raging party goer, or prefer books more than I prefer people. Living in the shadows feels pretty normal to me, and I’m only just now realizing it.

Maybe we’re both a little giddy from the eggnog, but I have been humming and pining for him these past few hours, and it’s felt like a lifetime.

“You know, that’s like music to my ears hearing you say you wanna be more,” he

says. "I was hoping like heck you'd say that, but I thought I'd have a snowball in Hell's chance."

"Snowballs? Really?" I try not to laugh.

He shrugs and it's adorable. "Seemed fitting."

My smile softens. "Are you sure, though?"

"I'm very sure."

"My friends are working it out, by the way. Parker claims I've tamed the wild beast."

He sputters a laugh. "Tamed the wild beast? Is that whatthey think of me?"

"I know, right." I shake my head and can't help the little laugh in my throat.

"I don't know howwildyour friends really think I am. But I'm a pussycat once you get to know me."

I can't hold in my laughter. "You're a cat guy, not an actual pussy cat."

"Maybe I can be both."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I’m sure Fudge would beg to differ.” My phone buzzes from my bag as we sit facing each other. I reach to grab it as Cole rubs his hands together from the cold while the heater kicks in.

“I could be really crude about pussies if I wasn’t such a gentleman.”

“Cole!” I whack him on the arm, but it’s all in jest. It’s truly magical having this much fun with him, even when we’re not rolling around getting hot and heavy. I like this side of us, too. My smile drops though when I glance down to my phone and see my dad is trying to call me. I quickly reject the call and drop it back into my bag like it’s a poisonous snake that will bite me.

“You know, I should really do the honorable thing and take you out on a proper date, Miss Parsons?—”

Shit. I wish I hadn’t picked up my damned phone! I’m sure the expression on my face, even in the dim light of the cab, tells him something’s wrong. I can’t help it when tears spring to my eyes.

“Ains?” He reaches over, his muscular body shifting as he turns. He cups my chin with his hand, his thumb caressing my cheek. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. Hoping that will be enough; I don’t want to put a damper on our evening by dredging up my past.

“It wasn’t Drake, was it? Jesus, if it was?—”

“No.” I quickly touch his arm before he gets worked up about my ex. I can see how he might think it was Drake, he’s probably forgotten the fact I blocked the guy. “It’s just my dad,” I sigh, not meaning it to. It screamswoah is meand I don’t want him to pity me.

I’ve also told him nothing about this so far. It’s too awkward and embarrassing. And we haven’t exactly had the chance to delve into my screwed up relationship with my sperm donor Dad.

“You mentioned you didn’t get along. Do you want to talk about it?”

I shrug. “He’s not exactly ‘Dad of the year’, and he barely ever calls me.”

That leads me to wonder what he wants. Maybe it’s some lame attempt at a Christmas family reunion, where I’m made to feel unwelcome or unwanted again. I already know I’ll be spending it here with Mom. She loves me and doesn’t spend her life resenting me and treating me like a nuisance. Hopefully Cole will want to hang out over Christmas. It may have always been a hard time for me, but I don’t intend on bringing anyone else down with my misery.

“I’m sorry. I hate to see that look on your face.”

I take another breath, knowing I may have implied I didn’t want to talk about it, but also realizing that if Cole and I want to start something between us, then we have to be open and honest with one another. It’s hard for me to let people in, not just from my upbringing, but Drake didn’t exactly leave me with a sense of faith in men when he cheated.

I know Cole is different. I feel like I’m safe letting him in and confiding the things I keep buried. Him knowing these things about me doesn’t send me into a tailspin like it normally would. I never told Drake a damn thing, not that he cared enough to

listen.

“You can tell me,” he says softly. “Nothing you ever say could be bad, Ains.”

“Well, you might not mean that if you knew my dad.”

“I do mean it,” he keeps on. “No matter what.”

A ragged breath escapes me. Maybe if I say it fast, it’ll be like it never happened.

“My dad and I don’t exactly see eye to eye,” I start. “In fact, we never have. He’s been in and out of my life over the years. He has another family.”

“Oh. And he lives out of town?”

“Yeah, in Jackson.”

There’s a sharp edge of silence between us in the stark darkness of the cab. Just the moonlight casting a subtle glow across Cole’s face. He looks like an angel. A soft and sexy angel sent here just for me.

“I’m the product of an affair,” I blurt. “So, yeah.” I fold my hands into my lap, feeling tears prick at my eyes. This is all unraveling because my dad tried to call me. If only I hadn’t looked at my phone until I got home.

“An affair?” The shock in his voice is unmistakable.

My cheeks heat at my confession, and it’s not because I’m embarrassed for my mom, or even our situation. It just feels like a lifetime of being unwanted and unloved by him. Why did he tell so many lies? “Yeah. My mom didn’t know he was married. He already had a wife and kids, but clearly he wanted a mistress on the side, and I’m a



product of that.”

“Fuck, Ains. I’m so sorry.”

“My mom was in love with him,” I say on a shaky breath, one that feels so different from my usual one. “Maybe he was different then, I don’t know. Things changed when she got pregnant with me and he confessed that he already had a family. Mom was so shocked and hurt, I’m not really sure if she ever got over it. He only acknowledged me when he could no longer deny it through a paternity test.”

“That’s terrible. What an asshole.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I know. My poor mom. She was so heartbroken, and the years that followed were really difficult. He could no longer deny it to his own family. I guess that’s why my dad always singled me out, my siblings hate us and at times I wonder if he does, too.”

“He couldn’t hate you, baby. It’s not possible, nobody could.”

I bite back tears, my words getting caught in my throat, and it comes out in a sob. I had no idea I was going to be confessing this tonight.

I feel his arm reach out and snake around my waist, pulling me toward him. “I’m so sorry, Ains. I really am.”

“You don’t need to be,” I say. “It’s stupid. I’m being stupid.” I still let him pull me into an embrace, and I can’t help but wrap my arms around his colossal body. He’s so firm, and warm, and all things magical. But he’s here. He’s real.

He pulls back for a moment and tilts my chin again in that way he does so often. “Don’t ever say that. Nothing you say is stupid. You have a right to be upset and feel the way you feel.”

“You’re being very sweet,” I say, feeling foolish that tears have escaped me; they run silently down my cheeks. He pulls me back in and I rest my chin on his shoulder. It feels so comfortable and so natural being enveloped in his arms. “You don’t need to be this nice.”

“I want to know all the things about you, the good and the bad. Not that anything could be bad, but this thing that happened to you and your mom is not your fault.”

I sniff as I swiftly wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. “Thank you, Cole. You’re an incredibly decent man.”

“I mean it. For him to do that and then make you feel like an inconvenience? It’s inexcusable.”

“Try telling him that. He just has this way of getting away with everything. I don’t know why he even invites me to have Christmas with him sometimes. He never wants me there. As a kid, he never really acknowledged me, nor did he make Christmases very enjoyable the couple of times I saw him. He made me open my presents in the car that was parked in the lot a few doors from his house, away from everyone else. He didn’t want his other kids to get upset.”

I see his Adam’s apple bob at my confession. “Fuck, Ains.”

I pull back to look at him and see that his intense eyes are fierce and not moving from mine. I can see and feel from the heat radiating off him that he doesn’t like me being upset, or the people or person who may have caused it. Is it bad that his reaction, and him cursing like that, actually makes me feel better somehow? Is it terrible that it sparks something within me that makes me feel like I matter, and that I’m important? The fact he’s being so damned protective over me lights me up brighter than the town Christmas tree, standing boldly in front of the Town Hall.

How can I feel this ignited from telling him something so shameful and awful?

But this is the kind of guy Cole is. He always has that ability to make me feel better.

It couldn’t come at a more welcome time. “He’s not a good guy,” I finally say. “He’s probably calling in a half assed attempt to see what my Christmas plans are.”

“You can say no to him, you know.” Cole tilts his head and rubs his hand over my

shoulders. “You know that, right?”

“It’s always hard saying no to my dad. He kinda has that ability to make me feel obligated, despite everything I know about him.”

“Then make a change right now,” he says. “Put a stop to it if it makes you feel this bad, it clearly stresses you out. Say no to Christmas with him if that’s not what you want to do.”

I blink up at him and swallow hard. Say no to my dad? I mean, I could, I guess.

But do I have the courage to do that? I know I’m an adult and all, but he makes me feel like I’m still that little girl all over again, opening her presents in the car and keeping them there until I went home later.

“Do you want to see him this Christmas?” he asks, even though we both already know the answer.

I shake my head vehemently. “I hate it. I feel stupid for putting myself through it to please a man who clearly doesn’t care if I exist or not. I’ve avoided it some years, but I go out of obligation because my dad is getting older and all that stuff.”

“So you go out of guilt? You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” he says softly, calmly. And God, I want to believe him so badly. I know it deep down. I’ve just never stood up to him.

I feel his lips press into my forehead in a soft kiss. The wash of relief that comes over me that my secret is out of the bag, and he’s okay with it, makes my shoulders relax, as well as my nerves. Again, it shows me what a man Cole really is. This is how men should be. Not a coward hiding like my father, and making my mom and I feel worthless. “I’ll tell him no if that’s what his call was about,” I whisper. “It’s high

time I took control.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” He pauses, and after a moment, he continues. “You know, you could write it all down in a letter.”

I look up at him again. “A letter?”

“Yeah, I saw something on one of those talk shows and it said you can help release pent-up emotions and get stuff off your chest by writing a letter to the person. You jot down everything you want to say, leaving nothing out. You don’t even have to send it, or say it out loud, in fact, in the show they burned the letter. It’s more for you than it is for the other person.”

My heart thrums at his words. I could do that. Maybe I do have pent-up emotions that I haven’t released. I know I have things I need to get out, but don’t necessarily feel the need to tell them to my dad. He’ll never change. Cole could be onto something. “That doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” I sniff.

His head dips a little further, and he kisses my nose. I lift my face upward so our lips meet and he kisses me soft and slow, as though I’m going to break.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“You don’t have to be careful with me. I won’t shatter into a million pieces,” I say between kisses.

He traces along my jawline, pressing into my neck where I feel his warm breath and soft lips circle over my tender flesh. “I know you won’t shatter,” he whispers, the words softly caressing my skin as he speaks. “You’re strong, Ainsley, to get through what you have in the past. I love savoring every kiss with you. I want to savor every inch of you, if you’ll let me.”

My mouth drops open as he nuzzles into my neck. My body is alight with the heat of his words and his careful but sexy movements. Every touch sends a shiver down my spine. I never knew a man could be like this. That you could tell him all your secrets and he could make it better with a soft touch and a few words. I could burn the letter. I like the idea.

Somehow, he’s put everything into perspective while we’ve been sitting here in his truck.

I lean in to appreciate him further. His scent fills my nostrils; every pulsing heartbeat is yearning for him. Every nerve ending inside me wants him, and my body is humming to whatever tune he’s playing.

“I’ll let you,” I whisper. “I’ll let you do whatever you want.”

He pulls back to kiss me again on the lips. It’s still soft and slow, but his grip on my waist tells me he’s fighting the urge to not take things further right here and now. “Music to my ears,” he says with a dark, rumble chuckle that doesn’t just soften the

edges of my heart and my very being. It actually melts them.

## CHAPTER 18

### COLE

I take everything in about what she just told me as I drive us home. Ains texts Emma on the way to let her know we bailed earlier than expected since they both arrived together, and she didn't want her to be worried.

I've enjoyed tonight, but now I need to get my girl home and to bed. The thing I didn't enjoy was hearing how someone so close to her could hurt her so badly; Ainsley and her mom. Then to make them feel as though they were guilty of something, when he was the one cheating and lying? It's unfathomable to me. I've always respected my folks and felt lucky to have two wonderful parents. It makes me appreciate them more when I hear stories like Ainsley's. I know it couldn't have been easy, but it hasn't made her a bitter and twisted person in the slightest.

She's sweet and soft, but also strong and independent, despite a lifetime of being unaccepted by her dad. The guy sounds like a complete asshole

When we park, I jostle the keys and ask her, "My place or yours?"

"Should we see where Fudge is?" The smile I love and adore has returned to her face. "He's the deciding factor?" My shoulders shake with laughter. Fudge would approve.

"He makes most of the decisions around here," Ains points out.

"Unbelievable, but true." The first place we first check is my place, but there's no sign of him. He's usually a good boy and doesn't venture very far from home, so I trust he's over at Ainsley's house waiting for her arrival. Nice going, Fudgey.

When we walk in her back door straight into the kitchen, I look down at the fluffy bed she bought for him and have to laugh at the sight. There he lays, snuggled up in front of the tiny wood fireplace Ainsley left going to keep the place warm. Its embers still burn and my cat seems to love it; his legs splayed out and his eyes squeezed shut.

“I see where his loyalty lies,” I tut, but I’m far from upset. I love that he loves her.

And maybe I do, too. My heart buzzes at the thought. I’ve never been in love before.

“I’m sure he knew you were coming over here,” she says.

I stalk toward her as she puts her purse down on the table and grabs the kettle in one hand. Oh baby, the last thing we’re going to be doing is drinking tea.

She catches sight of me right behind her as she puts the kettle down and turns her head. I grab her around the waist and she lets out a little squeal. “Cole!”

“You makin’ tea, baby girl?” I nuzzle into her neck, my hard length pressing into the top of her ass as she tries and fails to light the burner.

“Just busying myself.” Her voice is a pant that doesn’t help the throbbing in my pants. “I think this is broken.”

“You can busy yourself by getting naked,” I murmur, bumping my hips into her.

She shudders as I breathe into her neck, spreading soft kisses along her creamy skin. Skin I want to dive into and get lost in. Skin I want all over mine. “Ohhh.” She wiggles her ass into my crotch, which in turn makes me groan. That is so damned sexy.

I only let go of her to shrug my jacket off and let it fall to the floor.



“Which way is the bedroom?” I continue to kiss her neck as she forgets about the stove and presses her hands into the kitchen bench top, rocking my hips against her ass in a slow, seductive rhythm.

“Just down the hall.” She flails her arm toward the left and I chuckle, stepping back.

She turns and looks up at me, her face flushed and her eyes ablaze. Thank fuck she’s smiling again.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Show me,” I mouth, my lips widening to a grin as she yanks me by the arm in that direction and we tumble up the hallway, stripping off layers as we go.

We stop by her door and don’t even bother with the lights. She’s down to her bra and panties by the time I spin her around to face me. I’m not much better; I unzipped my jeans and all I need to do is shrug them off. “You’re beautiful, Ainsley, inside and out. Never let anyone tell you any different.”

“I won’t,” she says with full conviction. There’s a fire in her eyes that only makes me love her more. There’s that word again, but I can’t help what’s happening and the way I feel about her. It’s all unraveling on its own, in perfect timing, just as it should be.

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“You have such a sexy body, myLittle Librarian,has anyone ever told you that?”

We both flop down onto her mattress after what started out as sensuous lovemaking, turned into me plundering her from behind hard and fast, while holding onto her glorious breasts. She sure knows how to move and grind that sexy ass, and watching my cock disappear inside her over and over again was just too much for me to take.

“Funnily enough, no one has,” she pants, holding her arm over her eyes while we both labor our breathing.

“Are the men around these parts totally fuckin’ stupid?” I shake my head in wonder. “But hey, I’m not saying I want them to be telling you. Only I can do that.”

“There is only you,” she assures me as I hold her to my side and kiss her hair.

“Glad to hear it.” I prop my head up on my elbow. “You have a really comfy bed,” I say. Her room is neat and tidy and she doesn’t have too much stuff adorning the walls or the shelves. Not that it would bother me if she did. Her bed is a queen size and has the comfiest mattress topper and pillows that feel like clouds under my head. “I may just never leave.”

She giggles, and it’s like a lullaby to my ears. Especially after the night she had with the confessions over her father. I still feel terrible about that. “I think they’d find us, eventually.”

I kiss her nose and bump my hips into hers again. “Not for a few days, at least.”

“Then we can go on that proper date you were talking about?” She laughs.

A grin tugs at my mouth. That was right before her dad called. “Yes, we will as soon as this snow clears up. I’ll take you for dinner somewhere fancier than the Noodle Bowl.”

“I’d like that.”

“Do you think we’re doing things backwards?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

I bump her with my hips and she giggles, then she rolls on her side to face me.

“I don’t think we are. It’s just how it happened. I’ve never jumped in this fast before, but this feels right. We fit.”

I smile. “We do fit. Sometimes you can’t deny it, and I wouldn’t want to. I love our connection, and the fact I can talk to you about anything.”

“You definitely can,” she says. “And I love that I can tell you anything, too. It might not have been a big deal to most people, a phone call from their dad, but you never make me feel like I’m overthinking things or overreacting. It feels safe.”

I pull her to my chest and wrap my arms around her. “Youaresafe. I’ll never hurt you.”

“I love that.”

“I love y—,” I say on a breath. Then I want to slap myself.

Fuck.Double fuck.

It’s too soon for me to be saying that. I know it, but then again, I’ve worn my heart on my sleeve a lot with Ainsley.

But the sigh I hear and feel all the way down to my toes, and the way she holds me tighter, tells me that maybe, just maybe, I got away with it. “You love me?” she murmurs.

Then again, maybe not. “I’m falling hard,” I say, wanting to be honest, even if it might have her running for the hills. Though, I’m pretty sure her feelings for me are just as strong. She even said so. But does she love me back? “I know it’s fast, but we’ve known each other for a while now, and like I said before, it’s been brewing for me for the past year. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

She presses a kiss to my lips, and my cock jumps to life again.He’s always ignited by the littlest touch from her. “I love you too, Cole.”

My heart thuds, and it feels thick and heavy in my throat. “You... you do?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“I know it’s fast for me to be saying it, and for us to be declaring our love, but I’m falling for you too, and I’m helpless to stop it. I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to either.”

“You sure I’m not too boring—” I cut her off with a kiss, deepening it, thrusting my tongue into her mouth.

“Don’t even,” I tell her, pulling back to look at her face.

“Cole!” she giggles, slapping my arm away, then gestures to my excited cock beneath the comforter. “You’re ready to go again?”

“Oh, babe, I’m always ready with you.”

“What about that tea and the pilot light? I think it’s out.”

“Fuck the tea. I’ll fix the pilot light later.”

She laughs and I nudge my hips toward her, sliding her gently onto her back as I lift myself over the top, pinning her to the mattress. “What’s so funny, My Little Librarian?”

“You Cole, everything about you.” She wraps her arms around me and pulls me down so our chests press together.

“Everything about you,” I correct, reaching between us to grab my cock by the base

and position it at her entrance, ready to slide in. “I wanna take you hard and fast this time. Are you good with that?”

She smiles up at me in the moonlight. “I’m more than good with that.” She sounds breathy and needy. With that, I thrust into her once more, unable to keep from moaning.

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We’re ready for that nightcap of tea and some chocolate cake after another romp in Ainsley’s bed. The snowfall is really coming down now, my dad wasn’t wrong about that. I glance out the window while Ainsley cuts the cake from the bakery. That’s a happy surprise. It’s coming down in sheets against the window, the wind howling around the house. My first thought flicks to Frosty and the town Christmas tree. The entire townsfolk spent the better part of the night getting it all ready, and I hope it wasn’t in vain. Still, it is the middle of winter. “It’s really coming down out there,” I say as I turn back and Ainsley hands me a plate. She looks so adorable; her hair still a little wild from rolling around with me for hours, plus she’s wearing her sweats and some fluffy socks. I love that she can be herself around me.

“I think the snowstorm is coming in faster than any of us thought,” she says. I follow my gaze outside the kitchen where there’s already a blanket of snow covering the hedge between our houses.

“We should really hunker down in bed,” I say. “Right after we finish this.”

“Agreed.” We eat our cake while she tries again to light the stove to make tea, but there’s not so much as a flicker.

“I’m gonna go check the pilot light.” I should’ve done that sooner.

We venture down to the basement so I can check the furnace. She flicks the light on, opening the basement door as I step down first.

Fudge has finally woken up from his slumber and decided to grace us with his presence. He follows us downstairs with his little bell jingling as he jumps down, the basement door closing behind us.

“I never knew there was a fully redone basement down here,” I marvel as I step down onto the concrete floor and cast my eyes around. There’s practically another den down here with a couch and a small laundry area in the corner with a sink and a washer/dryer stacked next to it.

“Yup. An added bonus. It sort of acts as a spare room,” she says. “The couch was already here, the small flat screen was just a spare I had from years ago. I don’t think the Carruthers’ used this space much.”

“It’s like a cozy little hideaway,” I muse as I find the furnace tucked in the back and crouch down to the pilot light opening. I see straight away it’s out.

“I wouldn’t mind being snowed under with you,” Ainsley says, picking up Fudge and giving him a scratch while she watches me. “The snow could encase us entirely for all I care.”

I laugh as I glance back at her. “Snowed under, huh?”

“As opposed to being snowed in or out?”

“I don’t mind being any of those things, Shorty. As long as I get to spend it with you.” I bob back down to the furnace, thankful the lightbulb dangling from the ceiling here is adequate enough to see what I’m doing. I didn’t bring my cell down for a torch and I’m not even sure Ainsley has one down here. It should be simple enough to press



and hold the reset button, otherwise I'll have to ignite the lighter.

"Is it a simple fix?" she asks, hovering behind me.

"Should be," I say as I hit the reset and release the button after a couple of seconds. Sure enough, it lights back up. "There we go." I dust my hands off like I've saved the world. "Who says I'm not a handy guy to have around?"

"Thank you, Cole. You can be my handy man any day."

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Oh, I’m handy, babe. Especially when it comes to you.”

She pokes me in the ribs. “Not in front of Fudgey.”

I snort, getting back on my feet. “Like he cares.”

She’s still cuddling him to her chest, and it makes my heart swell. I sure am really turning into a gooey mess with this woman. I don’t know how she brings it out in me, but she does.

We make our way back up the stairs and I push the door to open it, but nothing moves.

I try again with a little more force this time, but the door doesn’t budge. “Fuck.”

“Oh shit,” Ainsley says. “I forgot! The agent told me the door sticks sometimes. They were getting someone over to fix it...”

I run a hand over my hair. “I don’t think you were kidding about being snowed under, baby girl.”

“Shit, is there no way out?”

“I have to find some tools. Do you have any?”

”Ummm.” She bites her lip. It’s so adorable. “Not exactly.”

“Hmm.”

“What are we gonna do?”

“Well, we have a TV and a couch.” I shrug. “Until I figure out how to get us out of here, we should check the forecast on the news, see if there’s any update.”

“Okay,” Ainsley says, but she’s nervous. I can tell by her wobbly tone and her wariness.

“Hey,” I say, tugging at her sweatshirt. “Don’t worry, I’m here. I’ll keep you and Fudgey safe. I’ll hunt around and see if I can get us out once we’ve checked the forecast.”

We walk over to the couch and I flick on the TV resting on a set of drawers, quickly finding the channel.

The late news bulletin flashes on the screen. There’s a severe weather warning for Silver Pines and the surrounding areas flashing across the bottom of the screen, urging people to stock up on supplies over the next twenty-four hours. After that, nobody is to venture out until the heavy snowfall subsides after the weekend. My dad was right, after all.

“Shit,” Ainsley and I both say together.

“I think we spoke too soon about being snowed under.” I plop down into the seat as I glance down to Fudgey sitting comfortably in her lap.

## CHAPTER 19

### AINSLEY

Cole doesn't seem to panic about being stuck down in the basement with a jammed door and no food supplies, nor the fact that Silver Pines and the surrounding areas are going to have a crazy influx of snow starting in the next twenty-four hours; no one will be able to get out of their homes soon. Panic overtakes the joke I just made about us finding something to do down here. I think about Mom coming home. I need to be there for her.

"You worrying again?" Cole asks, obviously picking up on my tenseness. I know he will keep me and Fudge safe. I'm not worried about that.

"Just my mom," I say. "She was coming home tomorrow. I need to be there for her."

"She's in the best place," he tells me, rubbing a soothing palm over my arm. "They won't be letting your mama out with an impending snowstorm."

"But I need to contact her by morning. She won't know we're stuck."

"I'll get us out," he says. "I promise."

I snuggle to his side and revel in his warmth, even though it's not overly warm down here at all. Luckily, I have a spare throw rug on the end of the couch, so we don't freeze to death. "What if you don't find any tools?"

He flails his hand over toward the laundry area. "I'm sure I'll find something, no need to panic." I'm sure his acting like it's no big deal is for my sake.

“Such as?” I press.

“Leave it to me.” He bops me on the nose lightly with his finger. “Let’s just stay calm, at least until we get hungry.”

I swipe him on the arm in jest. “Not funny, Cole. We could starve down here.”

“No way. I’ll keep you warm, as well as fed.”

“Oh, yeah, how and with what?”

He wiggles his eyebrows, which earns him another swipe on the arm. “I see you’re already resorting to violence, Shorty.”

“I would never.” I bat my eyelids. “But you didn’t answer the question.”

“I’m sure if you feel around, there’s something you can eat.”

I can’t help but giggle. “Is your mind always running rampant?”

“Not always. Sometimes I’m asleep.”

“Cole!”

He laughs cheekily, that boyish grin lighting up his face. “But it’s always running rampant around you, I can’t help it.”

“This quiet little librarian?”

“Yup.” Then he squeezes me around the middle and lowers his mouth to my ear.

“And I hate to break it to you, Ains, but you ain’t that quiet.”

My hands fly to my face in embarrassment. I can feel the heat of my cheeks that I can never keep under control around him. “You!”

“Hey, I dig it. It’s never felt this good.”

My heart literally flutters at his words. “To hear you say that feels like a dream.”

“It’s no dream, baby. This is very real. I didn’t think I was looking for a girlfr?—”

“Girlfriend?” I finish for him.

“Why not?” He shrugs. “I like it. I wanna be your boyfriend. Plus, we already said I love you. Can’t take that back now.” He gives me a lopsided grin.

“That we did.”

“And we will have that second date as soon as we’re not snowed under.”

“Did your friends say anything tonight?” I ask curiously. “I’m sure Travis knows something.”

“I didn’t confirm or deny anything until I talked to you first. I just said we were getting to know each other, and Trav was most definitely not surprised. Rich was a little shocked.”

“What did he say?”

He pauses, and that only makes me encourage him to spill.

“Tell me,” I urge.

He pops a shoulder. “He said he didn’t know you were my type.”

I press my lips together. This has always been a fear of mine from the get go. That someone prettier, bustier, and just better in general might come along. Guys like Cole don’t usually go for gals like me; good little librarians that never do anything wrong.

“What did you say?” I dare ask.

He wastes no time in continuing, “I said I didn’t have a type, words to that effect. Then Justin said it was pretty hot, the whole librarian thing, and the fact you’re clearly gorgeous. I told him if he said any more, I’d have to rearrange his face.”

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

I laugh quietly. “There’s that stigma floating around still, huh? About the office geek?—”

“The hot librarian office geek,” he finishes.

“I’m not hot,” I gush. “There’s so many more prettier?—”

He cuts me off with a sharp look. “Don’t even say it, babe. You might not be aware of this, but you are, in fact, a hottie. You’re way prettier than you give yourself credit for. Not only that, you’re smart and you’re genuinely a nice, kind person. I’m sick of meaningless hookups. It feels different with you. I knew it last year and I should’ve grown some balls and asked you out then.”

“It feels different with you, too. Not that I’ve had any meaningless hookups.”

He smiles and pulls me to his side, kissing the top of my head as I revel in his warmth once more. I can feel the heat building between us again. It’s like a palpable energy that neither of us can deny. And from what we’ve said tonight, it seems neither of us wants to. “Glad to hear it.”

My hand glides across his rock hard abs, my fingers trailing under his shirt touching his hot skin underneath. He hisses just from that touch and I can already see the bulge in his gray sweatpants. My throat runs dry and my heart constricts; I have an overwhelming urge to slide down the couch and pull out that hard bulge and wrap my mouth around it. My fingertips graze his waistband and as I lean into him, he turns his face toward me and captures my mouth with his. He presses his hot lips to mine the same moment I slide my hand down over his hard length.



“Fuck, Ains.” His voice is so hoarse, it makes my sweet spot throb even more. My nipples pebble under my top as we kiss deep and slow, his tongue sliding overmine. I squeeze his dick, and he looks down to watch me massage him with my palm. I know we should be trying to bust out of here so we can escape to safety, but when he says; “Get it out, babe.” I waste no time in hooking my fingers under the waistband and sliding his sweats down. He lifts his ass slightly to pull them past his hips, tugging his shirt up to his armpits. I watch his dick jump out ready for action and I lick my lips in anticipation of what he tastes like.

My hand grips around his sizable girth, now that it’s freed of his pants, and I massage him up and down, loving the feel of him in my palm and the way his eyes fall closed for a moment.

“That’s it,” he groans, moving his hand over mine and setting the pace to jerk him off.

“I need to taste you,” I dare murmur.

His eyes spring open. “Fuck.”

A little laugh escapes me as I move over his lap and slide down between his legs until my knees find the floor and I lean forward. He slides a little further down on the couch and looks down at me. “You look so god-damned beautiful,” he whispers.

I smile and lean into his crotch, my tongue quickly finding him as I swirl it around his large tip.

He hisses again as soon as my mouth is on him and I can feel that he’s watching my every move, and that turns me on even more. My teeth gently graze over him, then I sheath his base and lave my tongue down his underside as I feel him jolt.

“Fuck, yeah.”

Just those two words tell me everything I need to know and it gives me all the encouragement I need to keep going. He starts to slowly move his hips as I move my lips back over him as he slides into my mouth. I suck up and down, gripping his base at the same time.

“That’s it,” he says as my eyes flick up to meet his. “Just like that, babe.”

And we quickly find our rhythm as my head bobs up and down and I reign in my gag reflex as much as I can. He feels so full and big in my mouth, and I feel myself dripping between my thighs. Heat pools all over me at how much he’s enjoying this; his soft moans only egging me on.

“So beautiful,” he leans up a little to touch my breasts over my top. He runs his thumbs over my hardened peaks, sparking a new fire in my core hotter than the furnace he just lit.

“Oh, Cole—ohh—” I could orgasm just from this alone, but I’m greedy and need to keep tasting him.

His sexy gaze on me is half-lidded and his mouth slightly open. Watching me suck him off as he plays with my nipples, his eyes grazing my hardening peaks as I slide up and down his length. We move faster and faster and I feel his breathing change. He’s gotta be close.

“Fuck, babe, I’m gonna come—” He jerks his hips back, ready to pull out of my mouth, but I keep my lips wrapped tightly around him and push my head further down. I want to taste him, every last drop. “Ains — oh, fuck—” and on a long groan he stills and then convulses, his release pulsing as I feel his warm juices hit the back of my throat. He lets go of my breasts and pushes his back into the couch. His hands

run through his hair as he rides his orgasm out in long waves of pleasure. It makes my heart soar like a thunderbolt, and my insides melt watching him. When I've milked every last drop from him, successfully swallowing, his eyes open and he reaches down for me, pulling me up onto his lap. "Baby, that was amazing. Watching you take me like that, takin' all of me?—"

"You taste so good." I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and I straddle over his thighs, his cock resting against his ripped stomach between us.

"To hear you say that," he breathes. "That dirty little mouth. Man, that makes me feel good."

He pulls me to him and we hold each other close for a good few minutes as we calm our breathing, the silence between us not at all bothersome. Neither is Fudge, who lays at the end of the couch, balled up asleep. I'd almost forgotten he was there.

My body is still on fire and I know I need some friction before we try to get out of the basement. But I'm nowhere near ready to go yet, and knowing all that waits for us is a building snowstorm outside, means we don't have to be anywhere anytime soon. Not until morning, then we can go and get supplies. I'm quite confident that Cole will get us out of here. "I loved doing that," I breathe, pushing my body into his.

His hands slide to my butt and he squeezes, pulling me further onto him. One hand breaks free and glides up to my breast, hooking under my top, cupping me, then tugging on my sensitive nipple. "And I love these," he says. "Next time I want to come all over them."

My sweet spot tingles at the thought of that, and I push my hips into him. "That's so sexy."

"You're sexy." He lifts my shirt from the hem and leans forward, pulling my bra

down, taking my nipple into his mouth as his other hand slides off my butt and meets my other nipple. Tugging on it with his thumb and forefinger, I murmur something incoherent and rock against him.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

He's hard again. I can feel him against my pussy. He moves his mouth to the other side and pays it the same attention, his tongue flicking back and forth as I glance down and watch his mouth move in expert motion. He's so good at this.

Every move goes straight to my clit.

"Need to be in you when you come," he grunts. His voice has deepened to a spine tingling octave, and it sends my senses into overload.

"You're ready again?" I marvel at his stamina, wasting no time in pushing my sweats down and maneuvering them past my legs as I kick them off. I slide back over his muscular body, holding his dick at the base as I lift my hips, his mouth reaching for my nips again as I sink straight down onto him. We both cry out and the fullness I feel right now is enough for me to be satisfied for the rest of my life. "Ohh, babe."

"Yeah, you like that, Shorty?"

"I don't just like it, I love it."

His hands grip my hips and he holds me in place as he looks up at me with heat and lust. He looks at me like I mean something to him, like all his words from earlier collide into one hot, awe inspiring look. "I love it too. I love being like this with you."

"Even stranded and potentially snowed under down here with me?"

"Especially then."

Warmth pools in my chest, and I forget all about being locked down here with the possibility we may be stranded a while. I just want to enjoy the moment and worry about the rest later.

I slide up his length as he keeps his hands on my hips and I glide back down again, guiding me with a firm grip, his fingers searing into my skin. When he leans forward and grabs both breasts, feeding them to his mouth, I groan out loud, tipping my head back.

“Right there,” I pant as his shaft rubs against my already throbbing bud, and I feel my release building quicker than ever before. He just has the knack of touching me the right way and at the right pace. A few more tilted bounces on my part, with a lick over my nipples on his, and I’m there, ready to explode. “Oh, Cole... ohhhh.” I squeeze my eyes closed as I let the ripple effect take over. My release sets free, and I enjoy every single sensation running through my veins as I grind down. And it’s like a sweet nectar overtaking my body and all of my senses, maybe even a piece of my soul. “You’re perfect,” I whisper as I ride out the wave, which goes on forever, and I know he’s close from the way his breathing changes.

“And so are you,” he whispers back, spilling inside me, gently biting down on my neck, rumbling the most beautiful noise which I feel all the way down to my toes.

## CHAPTER 20

### COLE

My girl stirs in my arms from under the throw blanket I draped across us. Cuddling has never felt so goddamn perfect. It’s so quiet down here and we have no idea what’s going on outside, but I know I need to get her up to bed so we can get some rest and head out first thing tomorrow to get supplies.

“You okay?” I ask huskily, as she wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands and tilts her head to check on Fudge; he’s in the same spot next to us on the couch.

“I’m good,” she says sleepily.

I grin. “I gotta see if I can find some tools.” I kiss the top of her head. “Not that I mind about being trapped down here with you, but we may need to eat at some stage.”

She laughs quietly in the stillness surrounding us as I pad over toward the back cupboard to fish around. Somewhere between our sexy romp the power went out.

“You got a torch?” I should’ve looked for it before now, but we were kinda distracted.

“Uh, yeah, there’s an old tool box next to the washing machine.”

I rummage around in the dark, then I find it. Luckily, it comes on and I shine the light in the back of the cupboard. First, I see some gardening tools and an old hammer. Behind that, I see a wrench. It’s small and looks kind of old, but it might just do the trick. “Found something,” I announce.

“It must be bad if the power’s out.” She sounds worried.

“It’ll be okay,” I reassure her. “The power usually goes out when a storm is bad.”

“Have you done this before?” she asks.

“I’m not exactly known around here for breaking and entering,” I joke, giving her a devilish grin as she appears beside me. Fudge finally stirs, shaking himself out and having a stretch at our feet.

“I guess not.”

I nip her chin. “Come hold the torch for me.” We mount the stairs and spend a few minutes wiggling the wrench and fiddling with the lock until I finally hear the much anticipated click. My hand grabs the handle and I turn the knob to open it. I even surprise myself with how quick that was.

“Yay!” Ainsley gives me a little clap, and I laugh again.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“See, babe, I told ya I’m not without skills.”

She steps to safety cradling Fudge, and I follow behind them. “You did good. I’ll check again with the realtor when it will be fixed,” she says as I walk over to the kitchen window and glance outside. I can’t see much, but we can certainly hear the wind whipping around the house and who knows how much snowfall we’ve already gotten. There’s a good chance the ground is going to be absolutely covered by morning. “It’s thick out there,” I say.

“I hope my mom’s okay.” She snuggles Fudge closer, nuzzling her face into his fur.

“As soon as we can leave before the storm gets any worse, we will. She’s safe at the hospital. We can try to stock up on supplies.” I tap the torch as it flickers. It’s tiny, she needs better equipment than this. “We’ll stop at the hardware first.”

She nods and smiles. “We should get some sleep. A nice warm body to cuddle up to sounds nice.”

My grin is a mile wide and despite the snowstorm rapidly increasing, my life feels fucking perfect right now. “Let’s cuddle.” She passes over Fudge and we head to bed for some much needed rest.

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I wake up early in the morning, the power came back on overnight. Dawn is just breaking, but from the moment I look out the window, I see how dull and dreary it is out there. I know today is gonna be crazy.

I also know that town is going to be busy with everyone stocking up for the weekend. According to the early morning news on my phone, last night was just a mere taste of what's to come.

Rolling my body over to Ainsley, I check my girl. A glance over her still little body and I hear the even stillness of her breath as she lays sleeping. As tempting as it is, I decide not to wake her. I throw on my sweater and sweatpants and head out to her kitchen to put some coffee on, instead.

As I walk around, I notice Fudge isn't anywhere in sight. He was curled up on the bed with us last night. The cat bed in the kitchen is empty, too. I call out to him the way I always do, and he usually comes running in, his little bell alerting me to his presence. I pull out a bag of his favorite treats and jiggle them, but there's nothing.

I figure he must've gone outside.

I switch the kettle on and quickly check the weather again on my phone while I find my socks and shoes. Nothing has changed with the snowfall coming in. In fact, we've gotten even more snow overnight. We weren't even joking about being snowed under because it's only going to get worse.

When Fudge still hasn't emerged, I decide to go over to my place quickly and see if he's gone over there. He's not an outdoor cat, and we both forgot to lock the cat flap last night, so he could've gotten out on his own.

I assume he's gone outside to do his business, or to my place to use his litter box, but with the conditions outside, a mild panic rises in my chest. I don't see why else he would have gone over to my place, or why he wouldn't be here.

I run a hand over my face as I step outside into the freezing morning air, rubbing my hands together as I curse. "Fudge," I call out as I walk. "You out here, Fudgey?"

I cup my hands over my mouth and call out for him all the way back to my place. But he's nowhere to be found there, either. I check all of his hiding spots. Where the fuck is he?

I run around to the front and see if I can see anything. The snowfall is covering any footprints that he would have left imprinted if he came out early this morning.

Fuck. Double fuck.

"Fudge!" I call louder. "Where are you?"

I decide to quickly make my way back to Ainsley's to let her know I need to search the street when I hear the faint meow by the side of the house, right where our fences separate. Stopping in my tracks, I listen hard to where the noise is coming from, and edge closer to the bushes. I've still no idea what he's doing out here. Fudge isn't the type to stray, especially with snow like this, he hates the cold.

It's between the bushes that line the length of the fence line that I see a ginger tail moving. My heart jolts into my throat as Fudge comes padding out of the thin covering of snow on the path. His little bell tinkering, his coat wet and dark. "There you are!" I bend to scoop him up and pull him into my arms. He's cold and very wet, but instead of snuggling into my body like he usually does, he meows and tries to wriggle free. I almost lose my footing as he practically springs out of my grasp and meows again, looking up at me, then turns his head in the direction of the bushes. Something other than me has clearly caught his attention. Hopefully not a dead rodent. I follow him back over to the fence, as he seems quite insistent on whatever he's trying to tell me. I'm about to pick him up again and get back inside before we both freeze to death, when I hear another faint noise from behind the shrub. Another meow? Huh?

I bend down onto one knee as Fudge paws at the area, flicking up the snow with his

front legs. Something I've never seen him do, other than on his scratching post. "Alright, Dad's checking," I tell him, patting him on the head as I look between the bushes to where the tiny little murmur is coming from.

It's then I see something shift, a ball of fluff disguised as a little animal that appears to be stuck. I peer closely as the snow continues to fall relentlessly on both me and Fudge. Pulling back a handful of branches, it's then I see two wary eyes staring into mine, belonging to a tiny, shivering kitten. Oh, double fuck.

I reach my hand into the small space as the kitten lets out a mewl and I pull him or her out of the shrub and into my chest. It's tiny, but still alive, at least. But the poor little fur ball is a tired, weak little wet bundle of dark orange fluff and it's meowing like crazy. "Let's get you inside," I say, quickly checking along the fence line to make sure there's no other little kitties stranded. Then I bend to pick up Fudge again and hurry to Ainsley's back door. "Good work, Fudgey." I kiss him on the head as I nudge the door open and place him back on the ground, securing the cat flap behind me this time. I grab the nearest thing I can find, being Ainsley's Christmas sweater, and wrap the shivering little guy up in it while I dash up the hallway to wake her.

She's just stirring as I come barreling in. She's rubbing her hands over her eyes. "Cole! What the..." Her eyes grow wide as I come over to the bed holding the little kitten.

"Fudge was missing," I say in a rush. "I just found him outside. He was trying to help this little guy, I swear to God this cat thinks he's a sniffer dog. I need to get him to Presley's and dry off Fudge. He's soaking, too."

"Oh, my god." Ainsley springs the covers back and leaps over toward me, throwing on my hoodie as she moves. Reaching out, I carefully pass her the kitten and she holds it in the crook of her arm close to her chest, still wrapped in her sweater. "I can't believe this."

“I know. We gotta keep it warm. I’ll get help.”

“I’ll call Pres,” she says. “Is Fudgey okay?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:34 pm*

“Yeah, he’s just wet and cold. I’ll grab a towel.”

“I have some spare ones under the sink in the bathroom,” she calls after me.

“Thanks.” I push off the bed to do just that as she quickly reaches for her phone, and I race back to dry off Fudge and wrap a blanket around him to keep him warm, too. He’s shaking like a leaf, God knows how long he was out here. I kiss his head again. “I’m so proud of you.”

A quick phone call to Presley is all it takes and we’re on our way to Piney Paws.

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Ainsley

My heart is racing ten to the dozen. I’m holding the little kitten the whole way there while Cole drives slowly, the entire street is slick with ice and snow. Its eyes keep opening and closing. Sweet, trusting little eyes blink up at me. I hope the little dude makes it.

God knows how long the kitten has been out there, it seems to be growing weaker by the minute. I just hope we’re not too late.

Cole finally gets into town, the snow hasn’t stopped all night but there’s still time to get supplies before it gets worse. Thank goodness for snow tires. As soon as he parks, we rush him into Presley’s clinic. Fudge is with us in his pet carrier for a check up as Pres greets us at reception, and quickly takes the little kitten into her consulting room

while we fill her in on the details.

“I’ll check him over, get him warm and do everything I can,” she says, taking him out of my arms, still wrapped in my sweater. “You might have found him just in the nick of time.”

Tears well in my eyes. I’ve only held the kitten for the drive over here and I’m already beside myself. I don’t know what I’ll do if he dies.

Cole wraps an arm around me. “He’s in the best hands, Ains — wait, did you just say him?” Cole eyes Pres. “With all the commotion, we didn’t have time to check.”

She gives us a little smile, despite the situation. “He’s a he,” she confirms. “Leave him with me. I’ll check on Fudge, too. You’re welcome to wait, or I’ll call you both soon with an update.”

We head out to the waiting room, trying to figure out what to do next while we anxiously wait. “I think one of us should stay here,” I say, “and one of us should go get some supplies for the weekend. I also need to call my mom.”

“That’s a good idea,” Cole says. “I’m happy to run errands while you stay?”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. I can walk up to Chip’s market now, it’s a few minutes away. You stay with Fudge and the little fella.”

He dips his forehead to press mine and for those few seconds; I enjoy his warmth. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ll just grab the basics and call my mom on the way. Maybe we can quickly stop by after we leave here.”

Cole thinks for a moment, tapping his fingers on his chin. I can see he's worried about the little kitten and it's so darned sweet. "Alright, but call me when you're done at Chip's and let me know what the hospital says. We can head over there after this."

"Okay." I rock onto my tippy toes to reach up and kiss him. When his lips softly press to mine, it makes me believe that everything is going to be okay. I just hope the little kitten survives. He wasn't looking too good in the car. But he's in the best place now.

"Be careful," he says.

"I will." We kiss again. The waiting room hasn't even opened for business yet, so we're the only ones here. "Call me if there's any update."

Cole nods and squeezes my hand as he watches me leave.

I zip up my puffer jacket as soon as I'm out in the cold air and shove my mitten clad hands into my pockets. I cross the street to make my way down to Chip's market, just past the Town Hall on the corner. My smile is a weak one at best as I look up to Frosty. He's covered in snow but still standing, the same for the Christmas tree towering boldly just a few feet away. I hope they both survive with the excessive snowfall we're going to get tonight. Every year it seems to get worse.

I stop to look up at the giant structure, wondering how the heck Travis, Cole and the guys even got him up in the air. It's then I feel someone approach behind me and I turn to look.

My breath catches in my throat as I see Drake walking up behind me.

Freaking Drake! I immediately step away, backing up toward Frosty and trying to get over the shock of seeing him here. What the heck? Has he been following me? It's



too late to try and run away from him. He's right in front of me.

"Drake," I warn as he stops right in my path. I have no reason to be afraid of him. He's never been violent, but the look on his face right now... he's not happy, and his nose looks awful from where Cole punched him. Serves him right.

"You think that was funny the other night when your new boyfriend socked me in the face?" he launches straight into a tirade which startles me.

"Go away!" I hiss as I push off Frosty and quickly take a step to the side, getting around him and trying to run. But he's too fast and grabs me by the arm. I yelp as he pulls me back.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

“You’re going to talk to me whether you like it or not!” The grip of his arm is strong and he’s not letting go.

“Ow, Drake! You’re hurting me!”

He snickers. “You should have thought about that before you shackled up with lover boy.” He tugs me towards the side of the Town Hall, away from the view of the street.

“Let go of me!” I yelp, struggling against him. But he keeps a firm grasp on me as he pulls me along to the side wall off the main street. “I’ll scream, Drake, don’t think I won’t.”

“Scream all you want. It’s still early, there’s no one around.”

I manage to swing out of his grasp, but he still backs me against the wall. “You’re acting crazy,” I pant, bewildered by his behavior. “Why are you here? What do you want?”

“Ask your dumbass boyfriend. Do you honestly think he will be faithful to you?” he sneers. “He’s the town fuck boy, everyone knows it. You won’t be enough for him. No one can love you like I do.”

It’s my turn to laugh without humor when all I want to do is spit in his face. “Love me?” I shake my head. “You don’t love anyone but yourself. And I am enough for him! Cole isn’t a cheater like you, so I’ve no doubt he will be faithful. You couldn’t lie straight in bed.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” he spits. “I told you once and I’ll tell you a million times, I’m sorry I strayed. We’d been together so long, I needed to spread my wings. It was a mistake.”

His words make me sick to my stomach. Not one thing about his demeanor now, or ever, has been sorry about what he did. His eyes are wild, and his face fierce. He looks like he hasn’t slept in a week. Or he’s strung out. Maybe both.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re disgusting. You should have broken up with me before you hooked up with that other woman. Now, you need to get out of my way or I will?—”

He presses me into the wall with more force and my heart accelerates. What the hell is Drake doing? “You’ll what?”

I hear my phone buzzing in my bag. It could be Cole, the hospital... There’s been a lot going on this morning. I have places I need to be and more important shit than standing out here freezing in a showdown with Drake. And quite frankly, he’s scaring the shit out of me.

## CHAPTER 21

### AINSLEY

I quickly decide that arguing with him is only going to rile him even further. So I try a different tactic, anything to get away from him. “Look, Drake, I get the fact that things didn’t go so well for us in the end. But has it really come to this?”

He steps back a little, running his hand through his hair. “It made me so mad seeing you with him,” he says. “It made me realize what I’d lost.”

It takes everything in me not to gag, but I don't want to piss him off any further. I just want to find a way out of this. "So, you've changed your ways?" I say, trying my best to calm my voice and try to act as normal as I can. My heart is beating so damned fast, with no idea what he's going to do now that he's got me in his clutches.

"Yes. I love you, Ainsley. I wish you could see it." He almost sounds resigned to the fact, so much so, I stupidly think he's going to let me go. I mean, he can't keep me here forever. I don't like the way he's pinning me to the wall. My legs threaten to buckle, but I tell myself I'll get out of this.

"I do see it," I whisper, and it almost kills me to say it. The words are like poison in my mouth, but I'm just trying to placate him so I can try to break free and run.

He looks at me warily. "You do?"

"Mmhmm." My phone chimes again and he shifts on his feet. This seems to piss him off, his jaw clenching and his eyes narrowing.

"Don't answer that. We need to talk."

"We're talking," I say. "Why don't we walk down to the cafe and talk there?"

He laughs without humor. "So you can yell to someone there and they can call the cops on my ass?"

"I wouldn't do that," I lie. "I want to talk, too."

"I don't believe you!" He grits his teeth again, his eyes bulging from his sockets.

He yanks my arm again and pulls me along the length of the wall toward the side entry door. The same door Cole and I came out of just last night.

“Drake, what are you doing?” But my voice falls on deaf ears as he yanks the door open and shoves me inside. I don’t even know how he knew it would be open. I yelp as I stumble, trying not to trip over my own feet. It’s while he’s closing the door that I shove him in the back and take off, sprinting away from him down the hallway and into the main hall where I stood with Cole and all my friends last night. Where we ate his mom’s cookies and tried to escape Mayor Lockwood’s small talk. Right where the whole town celebrated the beginning of the holiday festivities, and the Christmas tree and Frosty reveal. Not that Cole or I saw much of that.

Now I’m being chased by my crazy-ex who’s lost his mind.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

I hear him behind me. I know he's close. But the beauty about being small is I'm also fast.

I turn my head to see where he is, my heart hammering as he lunges for me, trying to grab my arm. I swing my bag and clonk him in the head as he stumbles back and I keep running.

I head for the stairs that lead up to the mezzanine, where Cole was recently renovating with Travis.

Cole. God. He's going to be worried soon if he doesn't hear from me. It hasn't been that long since I left him, so he'd have no reason to call until he has news on the kitten.

I don't want to think about what Drake has in mind if he catches me.

"Ainsley!" he calls after me. "Stop running from me, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk!"

"Well then, stop chasing me!" I yell back, reaching the stairs. But I feel his hand on me again as he grabs me by the wrist. I'm shaking with equal parts adrenaline, and fear, as I spin to face him. No one knows I'm here, and Drake is acting like a complete lunatic.

"I didn't mean to hurt you!" he yells. Which gives me no comfort whatsoever.

"You're hurting me now!" I hurl back, trying to pull free. Miraculously he lets me go,

but I fall forwards and catch myself on the first step before I trip face first. “Look at what you’re doing!”

He runs his hands through his hair and down his face. “I’ve fucked up, Ains. I lost the most beautiful girl I ever had, and I lost my job last week. Your asshole boyfriend broke my nose. My life is in the toilet!”

Yeah, you lost me because you cheated on me because you needed to sow your wild oats. I shudder at the way he shortens my name. It’s just nothing like how Cole says it.

My phone rings again before I even get to reply to his verbiage. Not that there’s anything to even say to his sob story. He’s made his own decisions in life and I’m sick of taking the brunt of it. I’m sick of being made to feel as though I was the problem.

“I need to answer it, Drake. Cole is waiting for me, he’s going to know soon. He’ll find me.”

“Don’t even mention his name!” he shouts, getting agitated all over again. “He can’t take what’s mine, Ainsley. Now, give me your phone!”

“No!” I shout back, my foot resting on the edge of the next step, trying to back away from him. I’m gearing to push off the steps and run upstairs so I can lock myself in one of the storage rooms. He tries to grab my bag right off my shoulder, but I manage to shrug him off. If he gets hold of that phone, I’m screwed. I’ve no way of contacting anyone or getting any help, other than trying to get upstairs and yelling out of the window. That might not be such a bad idea. “Stop grabbing me!” I bubble out, tears are threatening to spill. I’m so terrified, my mind searching like crazy to find a way out of this nightmare.

“Stop trying to run away,” he grits angrily. I honestly don’t know where his anger

toward me is coming from. Jealousy can make people do crazy things, I suppose, but even this isn't a side to him I've never seen. "I just want to talk."

"I told you we could talk at the cafe, but you didn't want to. The time for talking isn't here, Drake. Not after chasing me and dragging me in here!"

He runs his hands over his face. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You're scaring me by doing this. Please let me go and we can talk about this when you've calmed down." Of course, I don't mean a world of it.

He runs his hands over his face again and lets out a deep sigh. I take that opportunity to turn and push off my foot, resting on the next step and launch myself up the stairs. It doesn't matter what he says, he's too up and down at the moment to know what the hell he's doing. I wouldn't be surprised if he's been drinking again. This is so out of character for him. Yes, he was angry at the dance, but it was nothing like this.

"Ainsley!" He bolts up the stairs after me, but I'm taking each step like my life depends on it, not even looking back to see where he is. I swear to God I'm going to have heart failure if this goes on for much longer. My adrenaline is the only thing keeping me from crumbling into a heap.

I'm just at the top when I feel his hands on my bag again and I swing around to push him off.

He loses his footing as he tries to hold on to me before he trips, essentially falling backward down the stairs. I cry out as he starts waving his arms in rapid reverse circles, trying to find his footing. "Ains—oh shit—" I reach out in an attempt to stop him from falling, attempting to grab at his arm, but I can't reach. He makes a terrified wailing sound as he loses balance and falls down with a loud clatter. He lands awkwardly three or four steps away from where I'm still standing at the top, staring



down in horror.

Then, if that isn't terrifying enough, he keeps on rolling. His body resembles a rag doll falling down the entire staircase. It's like watching a tumbleweed rolling in the wind and I stand there with tears falling, my face buried in my hands. When I peek out, Drake is laying still at the bottom of the stairs...unmoving.

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Cole

I'm getting anxious. I haven't heard from Ainsley yet and an hour has nearly passed. Maybe Chip's was busier than she anticipated and everyone has rushed out early to get supplies for the weekend. She often has her phone on silent for work, maybe she didn't switch it over? When Emma calls me to see if Ains is with me, I feel that sense of panic again, like when I couldn't find Fudge. She hasn't returned Emma's calls since Em got to the hospital, or my text ten minutes ago. Em assures me that Valerie is fine. She was just checking when we'd be coming to the hospital.

I've tried Ainsley's cell a few times, to no avail. It just rings out. So I decide to head up to Chip's myself. I take Fudge with me; he got the all clear. He was just cold and tired, but he's gonna be fine. The little dude is stable, and Presley is still running some tests and keeping him warm. He's not out of the woods yet. The nurse said they'll call me as soon as he can be released. That's a relief.

I head out on foot, still carrying Fudge in his travel case. Crossing the road just across from the Town Hall, I see poor Frosty is getting covered in more snow than he knows what to do with. I look down at the ground and bend to pick up a large scrunchie. It's made of the same squishy fabric that looks a lot like the ones Ainsley wears. On closer examination, it's a gingerbread man scrunchie because it has gingerbread men all around it and she had it in her hair this morning.

At the same time that realization is dawning, my phone chimes in my back pocket and I swiftly reach around and pull it out. Ainsley's name flashes on the screen and I breathe a silent prayer of relief.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

“Ains! Thank God, where are?—”

“Cole!” she cries. Immediately, I’m thrown back into panic again at her tone. “Cole!” she’s sobbing.

“Baby, where are you? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Dr-Drake,” she stutters. “He grabbed me on the street. He’s gone crazy.”

My heart is beating so fast I can barely hear her over the blood pounding in my ears. “Fuck. Where are you?”

“In the Town Hall, he pushed me inside, Cole... then chased me. I ran up the stairs and he ran after me. Then... he fell down....” She bursts into tears. “He’s not moving. I think he’s dead!”

Thank fuck I’m close by. I run toward the side entry of the Town Hall to see if it’s open. “I’m just outside. I’m seconds away. Just stay where you are.”

“Cole, I’m scared.”

“Can you call 911, baby? I’ll be there in a second.”

“Okay,” she murmurs. She sounds so scared, but I’m literally less than a minute from her.

We hang up and I sprint as fast as I can. When I reach the door, my hands grab the

handle and yank it open. I fling the door wide and run through, still holding poor Fudge. The little guy is protesting his meows, but I don't have time to stop. "It's alright," I tell him. "Everything is gonna be alright." When I run into the hall, I scan the wide space to the back of the stairs where I lift my gaze to see Ainsley is still standing at the top... and Drake's body lays at the bottom in a crumpled, awkward mess.

"Ainsley!"

"Cole!" she cries, running down the steps as I run toward her. It looks like she's just hung up from calling the cops as she pulls the phone from her ear. I place Fudge safely down as I quickly step over Drake and she flies into my arms, sobbing into my shoulder.

"It's okay, baby. I'm here, shhhh, everything is okay now."

"He's gone crazy," she sobs. "He grabbed me and pulled me in here wanting to talk, but he kept shouting and wouldn't let me go."

"I found your scrunchie outside," I breathe, my heart rate trying to settle itself. I'm just so glad she's okay, and it wasn't her falling down the stairs. "After Emma said she couldn't get a hold of you, and I didn't get a message back from you, I started to worry."

We both look down at Drake on the floor, that's when we hear a groan.

Ainsley untangles herself from me for a moment so I can bend down and check his vitals.

The crazy fucker is still breathing. Lucky for him. His eyes are closed and his breathing shallow, but he's alive for the moment.

“Did you call the police?”

“Yes.” She nods. “They’re sending an ambulance.”

Just as she says it, sirens blare in the distance. “We best wait for them out front, there’s no point trying to move him. And he’s not going anywhere. Why don’t you take Fudge? I can stay here.” Not that the fucker deserves me staying with him. I want to ring his fucking neck for what he’s done.

“No!” she cries. “I don’t want to be without you, Cole.”

I stand and wrap my arm around her. “You’re never going to be without me, you hear?”

I wrap my arms around her, she’s shaking like a leaf and sobbing into my chest.

“Let’s both go out front and we’ll let the police know where to find him.”

“Okay.” She sniffs. We both look down at him on the floor. Nope, he’s definitely not going anywhere anytime soon.

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A few hours later....

I tuck a blanket around Ainsley as we wait for Presley to come back out at Piney Paws.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Ainsley is exhausted, but hanging in there after we went to the police station so she could give her statement over the incident. She insisted she was okay and that we should still go and get the supplies for the weekend. I went into Chip's Market while she stayed in the car with Fudge. We made our way back to Presley's, supplies safely in my truck.

Ainsley didn't want her mom to be worried so we agreed to wait it out on telling her until we get the kitten back, and Ainsley's had time to process what happened without falling into a heap.

I'm so relieved that she's okay, and when Drake is out of hospital, he'll be taken into custody.

The fucker looks like he's going to survive, though he had a broken leg and several broken ribs from the fall. I don't even feel one bit of sympathy for him. In fact, I hope they lock him up and throw away the key.

"My God, Ainsley!" Pres says when she comes out to the waiting room and we give her a quick run down what's happened since we saw her a few hours ago. She wraps her arms around her friend and gives her a big hug. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Ainsley sniffs, but she nods slowly. "I'm okay, just in shock, I think. I didn't know what Drake was going to do. He's lucky to be alive after the fall. I really hope he gets the help he needs."

I look at my girl in absolute awe. Even now, she should be cussing and cursing his name and wishing he had broken his neck. But she isn't. She still doesn't wish any ill

will upon him, despite what he did. Her strength and character never cease to amaze me.

“Well, you’ll both be pleased to know Little Ginger is doing just fine. We’ve got him stable and he doesn’t have any injuries. He’s just very exhausted and hungry and needs to put on some weight. I also ran a scan to see if he’s microchipped, but he isn’t. At this point, I don’t know if he’s a stray, or if someone is looking for him and hasn’t had the time yet to register him. But I think with some food, warmth and a little love, he’s going to be okay.”

“Oh, Pres,” Ainsley sobs again, reaching out to her friend as they embrace once more. “Thank you so much.”

“Yes, thank you.” I say as Pres squeezes an affectionate hand on my arm.

“Any time.” She smiles.

“We’re happy to look after the little guy until we find his owners, if he has any,” I add. “I don’t think Fudge will mind.”

Ainsley lifts her head from hugging Presley to look at me. Despite her harrowing ordeal, she smiles at me with so much love in her eyes, I can’t help but smile like a fool back at her. “We’d love that,” she whispers to Presley.

“I’ll go get him,” she says. “I think it would be better for him being with you guys, rather than in a cage here over the weekend with the snowstorm.”

“Sounds good.” Ainsley steps back to my side, and I place a gentle arm around her shoulders.

“And congrats, you two. I knew you would make a great couple.” She winks.

We both smile. “Hey, we could only try to hide it for so long,” I say.

“That reminds me,” Ainsley says. “Parker said you had a little something to share the other night, but Cole and I left before we had time to talk to you again.”

A little smile plays on Presley’s lips as her hands slide down to her stomach. “I’m pregnant again,” she whispers.

“Fuck.” I let out a breath. “Congrats. Trav kept that under wraps.”

“I swore him to secrecy until after the first trimester.”

I reach out to give her a big one armed bear hug. Ainsley wraps her arm around her from my other side as we all share a group hug.

“Congratulations,” Ainsley whispers. “That’s the best news.”

“Thank you,” Pres gushes. “We’re very excited. Now, let me go get the little guy.”

“Do you think we could call him Little Ginger for now?” I ask as Pres heads off to grab him. “Since Pres called him that when she first came out.”

“Seems fitting to me,” Ains says, looking up at me with tears in her eyes.

I touch her face softly with two knuckles. “And maybe we can keep him and share custody as neighbors if no one claims him?”

Her face breaks into a smile, and it’s so fucking sweet to see that after today’s events.

“Cole, I’d love that.”



I incline my head downward and press my lips to hers. “Not as much as I love you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

“Or as much as I love you.”

We hear Presley’s throat clear as we break from our kiss and look up, both a little sheepish. But Presley’s grin is bigger than mine.

“You guys go and rest. Hunker down for the weekend and we’ll all get together when the storm is over,” she says, passing Little Ginger over to us, along with my sweater from before. He’s now wrapped in a fuzzy blanket with his head sticking out the top.

“Thanks, Pres,” we both say in unison and Presley laughs at us, both already saying the same thing at the same time. Soon we’ll be finishing each other’s sentences.

After she waves us off, we head out to the truck and I get my little tribe all settled in. Ainsley has both Fudge and Little Ginger nestled into her lap. I jog around the other side and jump in, turning to face her. “You did so good today, baby.”

She smiles softly, though I know she’s still shaken up and will be for some time to come. “Thank you for being there, and for getting to me so fast.”

“Always,” I say. “I’ll never leave you, Ainsley. He can’t hurt you again.”

“I know I’ve told you today already, but I love you.”

I close my eyes momentarily, hearing that. “You can tell me anytime. I love you too, Shorty.”

“Can we go see my mom and then head home before the snow comes in again?”

Emma said they are keeping Valerie a little longer for observation until Monday, then we can collect her after the snowstorm passes.

“Let’s do it. Then I’ll make us some snacks and we can have a movie marathon with the kids.” I look down to Fudge, who’s made himself quite at home in Ainsley’s lap. And Little Ginger already has his eyes closed. “I know you want to get your team Charlie fix this weekend.”

She looks across at me as surprise flits across her face. “You’d do that for me?”

The corner of my mouth pulls up in a smile. “I’d do anything for you.”

I lean over and kiss her again. Stroking Fudge at the same time and giving Little Ginger a gentle rub on the top of his head with my finger.

And suddenly my life feels complete with my own little tribe. There’s nowhere else I wanna be right now. Storm or no storm. Here with them is everything I need.

## EPILOGUE

Ainsley

A week later ...

The snowstorm passed over the weekend and we spent most of the time over at my place with the fire lit and, true to Cole’s word; we had a Twilight movie marathon. It’s just one of the many things I love about him.

We thought it would be fun to hunker down in the basement now that Cole fixed the door; the realtor was taking too long so he just did it himself. We also got the decorations out of storage and jazzed up my Christmas tree. Fudge got himself

tangled in the LED lights as we were trying to untangle them, ready to put on the tree.

Cole doesn't have many Christmas decorations and usually just goes to his parents to help put up their humongous tree. He only has a small tree at his place with built-in fairy lights, plus a wreath for his door and some Christmas lights he always puts out in front of his house.

Little Ginger has been amazing since we brought him home and Fudge has really taken a shining to him. When we first got home that day, we checked outside and around our properties again to make sure we hadn't missed any other little kittens that may have been stranded. It's still a mystery where he came from, but since he had no collar or a microchip, we're thinking he's probably a stray. We're trying not to get our hopes up, but that shared custody thing sounded pretty sweet to me.

Cole has been nothing but doting since we got back that afternoon after crazy Drake tried to attack me. I think he thought I was going to break. While I am still rattled and shaken up, Cole's been doing his best to help me forget about that for a while and enjoy the time with him and the fur babies while we hunkered down over the weekend. I still can't believe Drake went crazy like that chasing after me, but I meant what I said; he really needs to seek help and get his life back on track.

We picked Mom up right after the storm and she's recovering really well. I've been over there helping every day until she gets back to her normal routine.

Tonight I'm at work, with Little Ginger his own little travel case with his blanket and a soft toy to rest his head on. He's been with me all week as it's a little hard for Cole to take him on the job sites and we need to monitor him while he gets his strength back. He's been doing so great and getting more food into his tiny body. He spends most of his time sleeping.

Molly, Oscar and Hank just left and I'm about to lock up for the night when I see a

familiar figure coming toward me with a great, big, devilish grin on his face.

Cole.

“What are you looking so happy about?” I giggle. I’m still not able to control my pulse around him, or the way he makes me blush with no words needed.

“I thought I might stop by and tell you how beautiful you are.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

I press my lips together just as I release them. Then he bends down to kiss me. “Hello to you, too.” I smile.

He tugs at my high swinging ponytail. He’s been jibing me all week about his little fantasy of doing me in my office when no one else is here. I had no idea that could be tonight. “Cole,” I warn, but I can’t hide the amusement in my tone. “There’s camera’s here.” I even glance around for effect.

“Not in your office, there isn’t.” He steps inside as I lock the doors.

“You’re a bad influence,” I tell him as I turn back to the main section of the library. Cole follows and glances around as we walk.

“So everyone has gone for the day?” He raises his eyebrows, clearly not taking my warning as a serious answer.

“It’s just me and Little Ginger.”

“How’s the little guy been today?”

“He’s great. Come see for yourself.”

I keep him up to date through the day, but it has been a couple of hours since my last text. I walk toward my office as Cole falls into step with me.

“How was your day?” he asks as we pass the neatly stacked sections of the library on the way to my office.

“It was good. I finished the letter to my dad on my lunch break.” After the storm was over, I decided to see what dad wanted that day he called, and sure enough it was some half assed attempt to invite me to Christmas, to which I declined. He was astonished because I don’t think he’s ever heard the words ‘no’ in his life, but never asked me why. So I told him I was spending time with my new boyfriend, his family and my mom, and that I have never felt welcome at his place. I didn’t let him even get a word in before I brought the conversation to an end. After I hung up the phone, I felt a sense of relief I never knew was possible.

Cole was right, standing up to him was everything and more.

But I still felt I had things I wanted to write down to release them. Now I plan on burning the letter before Christmas.

“Ains, that’s awesome. You doin’ okay?”

“I am.” I nod. He knows I’ve been writing the letter this past week. “You really are in the wrong trade, you know. I mean, you’re a great builder and handyman. But have you ever thought about going into counseling?” I poke him in the ribs playfully.

He laughs. “I’m sure I could rival Dr. Phil if I really wanted, but I think I’ll stick to my day job.”

We walk into my office and both look over to the little canvas travel case on the ground as it stirs and a second later, Little Ginger pops his head out the top.

Cole bends down to pull him free with one hand and brings the little kitten to his face. “Daddy’s here, yes he is...yes he is...” he coos, and my heart literally melts.

“Cole,” I giggle. “Presley said we don’t know yet?—”

He waves it off. "It's been a week and no one has posted on the community lost and found pages, or responded to the flyers we put up around town and in the Piney Paws window. He had no tag or collar, and no microchip. So if he belongs to someone, they would have surely come forward by now."

"I don't want you to get your hopes up." I know both of our hopes are well and truly up. We love the little fur ball and hope he gets to stay with us and Fudge.

"How about foster Daddy then, for now?"

My lip twitches in a smile. "I like that."

He grins. "Oh, yeah? You like me saying, Daddy?"

My nipples pebble at the way he voices the words, combined with the sexy way he tilts his head. His honey eyes dip down my body. "Uh, huh. I love it."

"I think I'd love it even more if I'm inside you while you're the one sayin' it."

I laugh. "You're hopeless."

"You hear that, Little Ginger? Our girl says she loves it." He kisses Ginger's head and places him gently back down in his carrier where he has a little stretch, only to curl up again on top of the blanket. When I glance back at Cole, he's watching me. His eyes heat even more, taking one step closer to me. "I bet you don't care right now if Daddy closes the door and tugs that pretty ponytail, do you?"

I can't help but giggle as I feel his deep, dark words between my thighs.

"Seeing you in that sexy uniform, baby. It does things to me."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

“What things?” I breathe. My nipples aching for his touch as my core throbs in my panties. I watch him walk over to the door and kick it shut, locking it from the inside. He stalks back over to me with sexy hunger blazing in his eyes, wasting no time in caging me in and guiding me backward against the wall. His hips press to my body and he pins me in place, his hard cock digging into my stomach.

“You feel that?” he all but growls in my ear. The breath of his words tickling me just below my lobe.

“I feel it,” I pant as his arm reaches to the back of my head and he gently tugs my ponytail back so my chin lifts.

“You told me you longed to be pulled by the hair, and I swore I’d have my way with you in your office, so you better start undressing.”

I stare at him wide eyed. We’re really gonna do this here?

Before I can chicken out, I slide my blazer off my shoulders and let it drop to the floor. My hands find my own shirt buttons as I watch him let his flannel shirt drop to the ground. I hear the unzip of his pants just as I rip open my blouse, the buttons flying everywhere. His grin is unmistakable and I can’t get it off fast enough.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” he mutters. He pulls me in, glancing down at my chest and snakes one hand to cup my breast, squeezing it, tugging my nipple. Then he pulls it up so they both pop out. I do a gasp/groan combo at the friction the bra lift gives me and nearly find nirvana when he bows his head to suckle a nipple into his mouth. “I’m gonna cup these babies while you kneel on your desk, ass out, and I do you from

behind. Got it, My Little Librarian?”

I moan out a response. “Oh, God, Cole.”

He chuckles against my flesh and moves to the other nipple, but pulls away after a moment to shrug his pants and boxers down to his thighs. “On the table,” he growls, letting me free for a moment so I can yank up my skirt and climb on the desk.

This is so freaking brazen, I can’t believe I’m even letting him do this.

He shuffles over to my desk, literally swiping my diary and papers out of the way. Shoving some books over to the far end, he helps me climb up. Flushing, I position myself with my ass facing him, my skirt pulled up to my hips. I think it’s going to take some time before things get easier with my shyness around him.

“Fuck,” he moans. And I know without looking at him that he’s fisting himself. “I’m gonna do you so good, baby. Then I’ll take you home to bed.”

“Please, Cole. I need it.”

I feel him press forward. His hands find my hips and he pulls me closer to him in one movement. I squeal and throw my head over my shoulder to watch him standing there, guiding the movements from the back of my desk. I feel his hand reach back down to the base of his cock and a moment later, his thick head is nudging my entrance. I open my knees a little wider as he pushes in, his other hand slides a round to cup my breast and pull my nipple. “COLE!” Groaning, I rock my head back, loving every single sensation buzzing around my body. I adore the fullness and how he stills so I can adjust.

“Yeah, you like that?” His hand finds my ponytail again, and he pulls it back, his lips grazing my neck as he pushes all the way in. I feel his length slide into my slick heat

and my insides contract around him, our closeness overtaking every sense I have.

“I love it, Cole. I love you. Now, please fuck me.”

He grunts a laugh behind me as his free hand reaches around to my throbbing little bundle of nerves between my thighs. “Oh, I’m gonna do that baby and more. So much more.”

“I love you,Daddy.”

His hips hitch, as well as his labored breathing, and we both start to move in our perfect rhythm of lust and passion that has only gotten stronger between us since all the commotion of the past week. Tangled with the danger and excitement of doing this in my office, I’m ready to explode. “I love you too,My Little Librarian.”

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Cole

A week after that...

“Now come on, Marley, you better have your game face on today. Stacey or no Stacey, you can’t let a girl distract you at a time like this.”

We’re gearing up for the snowball fight and there are literally hundreds of townsfolk here, maybe more. I wasn’t joking about smashing the record for the largest snowball fight in Wyoming. This is turning out to be one of the best events Silver Pines has ever seen. Ainsley was heading the team for The Hunger Games treasure hunt this morning, while I got everything prepped for the snowball fight this afternoon.

“You know you’re gonna have a stampede of more than two hundred kids here in less

than half an hour?” Travis echoes from behind as Marley and I make sure the final bunker is in place, courtesy of the hay bales from Travis’s neighbor that will be used as shields.

“We’re all organized, aren’t we, Marles?” I tap my comrade on the shoulder and Marley nods enthusiastically.

“This is going to be so much fun,” he says.

I still can’t even believe we’re even doing this, or the fact it made its way on to the annual Christmas festivity list.

“Well, if no one is too badly hurt or frozen by the end of it, there’s Carols by Candlelight tonight down by the skating rink,” Travis says.

I ribbed him all week about becoming a daddy again and keeping it from me, even though I get why he did. It’s made me believe even more that I’d love to have a kid or two some day. And I can see it in my future. The way Ainsley loves and looks after the kids that come into the library, and the fur babies, already tells me she’d be a great mom someday. The thought of her being pregnant with my kid excites me.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:35 pm*

As I glance up, Travis narrows his eyes. “You still thinking about the snowball fight?”

I shake off the notion for a moment because I need to keep my eyes on the game. “Yup. And it’s gonna be just as good as your fancy Rockefeller Center ice skating rink,” I tell him.

Travis piques a brow and gives me a look that says, good luck with that. “You sure?” Not that he gives me time to answer. “Though, I have to say you and Ains have done wonders filling in for me and Pres while we’ve been busy with April this year.”

I grin. “Any time. Happy to knock you off your perch.”

“You wish,” he jibes back.

When I see Ains waving toward us, I jog over and wrap her up in my arms. Under our jackets, we’re both wearing the same reindeer sweater, complete with a red bobble nose that juts out from the center of his face.

That night last week at the library was so fucking hot. I remind her of it every day, and that we should make it a once a week feature. Something I’m yet to convince her of.

Maybe once a month might be a little more realistic. Taking her over her desk while still in her uniform, pulling her ponytail, is one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen in my life. Something I vow I will do again on a regular basis.

It's early days with us yet, but we have a strong connection, and we both want to be in this long term. Hell, we've already said we love each other numerous times.

I'm also glad that it looks as though Drake will get what he deserves and should likely serve up to a year in jail for simple assault against Ainsley. Though she still maintains he needs professional help and treatment for his alcohol addiction. Onlytime will tell.

The rumor mill is already circulating that he'll be moving back to his parents' town somewhere just on the border of Wyoming and Idaho. Away from here, anyway. There is a restraining order against him so he won't be able to come near her again. And I'm really hoping this time he isn't stupid enough to violate that after all the trouble and trauma he's caused my girl.

"You ready for the snowball fight?" I land her on her feet and bend to peck her on the lips.

"Ready as I'll ever be." She laughs. It's taken the past two weeks to have her not looking over her shoulder everywhere she goes. I think it's eased her mind now that she knows Drake will be out of town permanently, and she can work on trying to put the past behind her.

She's decided to burn the letter to her dad with me tonight, and I'm so proud of my girl for telling him no and doing what she wants to do this Christmas.

Valerie is doing so much better every day. I've been around at her place doing some handyman jobs while Ainsley helped her decorate for Christmas, and made sure she isn't trying to do too much. For Christmas day, she's going to spend it with us at my parents' house.

Little Ginger is now officially ours. He was never claimed, so we've officially adopted him and are co-parenting just fine between our places. Fudge has taken him

under his wing, and the two of them are inseparable. Fudge is trying to teach him the cat flap situation, but he's still a little too small for that. It's pretty cute, though, watching them curl up together and fall asleep in the same bed. We're even going to take them both to see Mr and Mrs Curruthers soon for a visit.

Ains and I spend most nights with each other, over at one of our places. I'm sure in the future she will give up her rental and we will move in together. I want her to be ready. I want it all with her. I'd love to make her mine and marry her one day and take her off the market for good.

All in good time.

"What are you smiling about?" she whispers as Marley and Trav walk over to some of the other adults arriving. I see Jake with their rescue dog, Muffin, and Rich and Justin hoping to get in on the kids' snowball fight. Realistically, they're big kids themselves, so they will fit right in.

"Thinking about what I'm going to do to you later," I say, nibbling on her ear while no one is looking. "Over and over again."

"You have to survive this snowball fight and tell everyone the ground rules first," she giggles. It's pretty easy. We've set up the hay bales down two sides of the park. There's two people per team, and they get to launch snowballs at the other team from behind their bunker, while trying to run to the next bunker to take shelter.

The adults will score per team how many hits each team gets, and the winners will get a two hundred dollar voucher from The Toy Playground in town to spend on anything they want. Justin and Rich have both agreed to help, though I think they're going to be doing more snowball launching at each other than some of the kids. If we break the Wyoming record for the biggest snowball fight, it'll be even better.

"Then I can do you?"

She nods against my shoulder and I feel half a chub coming on, even out here in the freezing cold. “Any which way you want.”

“Promise?” I pull on the reindeer bobble in the middle of her jumper, sliding my hand inside her jacket and over to her tit for a quick squeeze.

“Promise.” She smiles, not even bothering to brush my hand away.

And even standing out here in the freezing cold, with the snowfall cloaking over us, the biggest snowball fight in Wyoming about to begin, I feel like I’m home. Because I’m with her.

“I love you,My Little Librarian.”

She reaches up to give me another quick kiss. “I love you, too,sexy Daddy.”

And that right there soothes my soul, right to my very core.

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THE END