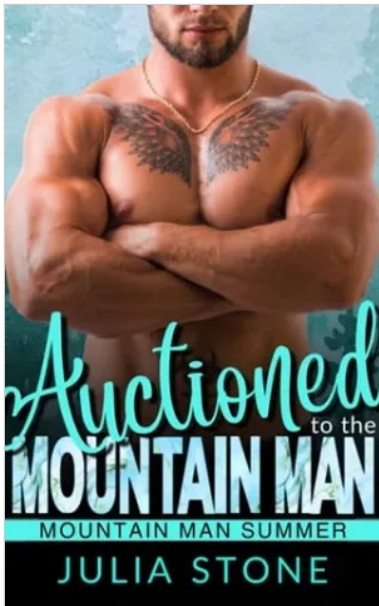




Auctioned to the Mountain Man (Mountain Man Summer #15)

Author: *Julia Stone*

Category: Romance

Description: She's young, bright, and only his for a fleeting weekend—if he can keep his hands to himself.

Lily:

I signed up for the charity auction to help restore the town's old movie theater—not to get bought by a man twice my age with sawdust in his beard and a stare that pins me in place.

Silas is older. Broodier. Built like a lumberjack with calloused hands and a voice that rumbles low and slow.

I was hoping for a relaxing weekend at a lakeside cabin. Instead, I'm stuck hauling wood and tools while he grunts instructions and acts like he didn't just outbid a crowd of younger guys to claim me.

This was supposed to be simple. It's not.

Because now I can't stop wondering what those hands would feel like on my skin.

Silas:

I'm only at the auction to donate furniture. But then she walks on stage—young, soft, smiling like she has no idea how dangerous that look is to a man like me.

I'm in my forties. She's barely pushing twenty-five. I should walk away. Instead, I lift my paddle and buy myself a problem I can't stop wanting.

One weekend. That's all I have with her.

She thinks she's here to help me work.

She has no idea I'm already planning how to keep her.

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Lily

Shoot. Shoot.

My feet move in a blur as I hug a trash can under one arm and fist candy wrappers in my other hand.

Running around the room to clean up what looks like a wild end to a stay at the lodge, I'm moving from one task to another as I run down my mental checklist of things to do. Next, the beds.

"You're going to be late at this rate." Standing in the hall, Frankie is happy to remind me of what I already know as she digs through the cleaning products on her cart.

Clutching some rags, she turns toward the opening of the room I'm in, getting an eyeful of my flushed cheeks as I hug a wad of crumpled sheets to my chest. "Lily."

"Some men love the smell of bleach. I can sacrifice a few extra minutes helping you, seriously." Grunting as I squash the sheets into her cart, I huff out of frustration as I pull back.

Another busy season at the Shady Pines Lodge.

Another year marked by struggles to secure staffing.

I can't blame Sofie for scaring away the new hires, not this time.

Not when the last two people she hired only wanted to work here to enjoy the lovely pool and have an easy job where they could spend half their time playing around on their phone. Not here.

Frankie might be known for lazing about, but she always gets her work done before she's caught slacking. Recently, she hasn't been caught in the lounge flipping through magazines or sneaking snacks in the kitchen with her husband. It's gotten that bad.

"No one's going to buy you looking like that .

" She wrinkles her nose, her gaze sweeping over my rumpled clothes and messy hair like I'm a disaster in a physical form.

"I'm serious, Lily. There are three more rooms—I can handle it.

How are you supposed to catch a sexy boyfriend if you can't even bother to look the part?

If not that, how are you supposed to enjoy this mini-vacation? "

Oh my God.

"I'm not trying to get a boyfriend—I'm trying to help save the theater.

There's a big difference." I explain, fighting the urge to roll my eyes, before I rush back into my room to grab the pillowcases and blankets next.

Returning, I scoff. "Besides, if a guy's good-looking, why would he need a charity auction to get a woman to spend the weekend with him?

Pretty sure he could manage that on his own. "

Frankie rolls a shoulder. She doesn't get it. She found the love of her life right here at the lodge. During my time here, I haven't encountered a single tourist who would offer me even a sideways glance.

A bitter laugh escapes me. "Realistically? With my luck, I'll end up bought by some lonely weirdo. Thank God Poppy set rules for this thing."

My phone buzzes—a reminder vibrating against my back pocket. Grimacing, I shut off the alarm and look around to see what else I can help with before I'm entirely out of time.

* * *

"I am so sorry." The words tumble out breathless as I skid to a stop just inside the grand old lobby of the Golden Ridge Cinema, my fingers raking through wind-tangled hair in a futile attempt to salvage some semblance of presentability.

The air smells faintly of lemon polish and old velvet, undercut by the nervous energy of last-minute preparations.

Poppy—organizer, ringleader, and the woman holding this entire charity auction together with sheer force of will—snaps her head up at the sound of my voice. Relief flickers across her face, sharp and unmistakable, but it's not just about my tardiness.

She needs all the help she can get to secure the necessary funds for this project.

Her clipboard dips as she exhales, shoulders loosening just a fraction before a warm smile takes over her lips.

"I'm glad you were able to make it," she says before her eyes fall back to her clipboard. "I swapped your place with Rue. Have a drink and cool down. You look

flushed.”

I am flushed. My clothes are sticking to my skin thanks to this summer heat, and I tried to wash up to get rid of the chemical smell clinging to my skin, but time wasn't on my side.

Thank goodness those who bid on me can't smell me from the stage.

Thanking her, I coast through the half-finished room and stop at one of the tables with refreshments. Snagging a bottle of water, I chug half of it as I make my way into another room full of people. Darkened with the exception of the light coming from the stage, I'm surprised by the turnout.

While I know not everyone here has come to bid, there are plenty of townspeople who want to support the renovation of this place.

Against the far wall, a row of women stands in a loose line, their murmured conversations blending into the low hum of the crowd.

Some shift nervously in their heels; others laugh too brightly, fingers fiddling with hemlines or stray curls.

After finishing my drink, I toss the bottle and make my way over to join them.

Another woman announces each participant to the crowd, describing their interests and giving a few details about them.

Leaning against the wall, my heart thuds in my chest in anticipation. As soon as the next auction begins, the roll of numbers blur together. There's a written poster clinging to the wall with the order of names, and I work to figure out how much longer before it's my turn.

A weekend. That's all this is. A weekend playing tour guide or dinner companion for some deep-pocketed stranger sounds like a blessing right now.

After today's never-ending shift at the lodge—too many rooms to clean, too many loads of laundry to manage—I'll take this over another chaotic week. At least here, the only thing at stake is my patience.

Poppy's rule echoes in my head, crisp as the day she laid it out. This event is entirely platonic. No refunds if things get weird, but no guilt, either, if we walk. A safety net stitched tight with common sense.

So, if a creep decides to buy me, I can spend my entire weekend with my feet propped up doing absolutely nothing. As easy as it sounds, I want to keep my word and play along.

As two more women go up to the stage, I shift closer to the stairs. With my name coming next, I strive to perfect my smile.

No matter what happens, I've got to stay positive and enjoy myself. This is supposed to be fun, and I want to have a blast.

"And next, we have Lily!" The announcer calls out my name, beckoning me to join her. "Lily is twenty-three years old. She passes time by indulging in horror flicks and has quite the caffeine addiction, so be prepared to fund her daily dose of coffee from Willow Perk!"

Chuckles break out across the crowd at the tease, and I step into the light.

The spotlight burns against my skin, so bright it bleaches the room into a blur of silhouettes.

How did the other women manage not to squint?

I blink rapidly, willing my eyes to adjust, but the crowd remains a sea of shadowy figures—a murmur here, the glint of a watch there.

The auctioneer's voice cuts through the haze. "Do I hear two-hundred?"

Two-hundred? That is far too much. I feel like I'm worth a couple crumpled bills and some loose change.

A paddle lifts. Somewhere to my left. Someone wants me. More than one by another raise of another paddle by a higher number.

Reminding myself that many of these people just want to donate money, I don't let it go to my head, even if the number is crawling higher and higher.

The last donation rings in for five-hundred, and the woman next to me happily announces that the shadow in the back has won me, and to come claim his prize.

Here we go.

On shaky legs, I make it down the steps. My heart is thudding with nerves. Frankie made jokes earlier, but I'm kind of freaking out.

Even if this is completely platonic, I've never spent time with a man before. Never. At my age, it's a bit pathetic, but I can't help it.

Men tend to avoid me—not with malice, but with the same instinctive wariness of a cat circling an unfamiliar object. I'm the wrong shape for their attention. Too quiet. Too stiff. Too something.

And yet—somewhere in that faceless crowd, a man just paid to change that.

The thought sends a fresh wave of heat up my neck. The stage lights fade behind me, but the weight of stares follows, pressing like fingertips between my shoulder blades.

I don't have to wait long before I'm joined by my shadowy figure.

All he has to do is appear, and my next breath is catching in the back of my throat.

The man standing before me isn't just tall—he's a freaking giant, shoulders blocking out everyone around us.

I have to crane my neck just to see his face, and when I do, my throat goes dry.

Dark, intense eyes lock onto mine, the kind that don't blink enough. Stubble dusts his sharp jawline, and his rolled-up sleeves reveal forearms thick with muscle and a dusting of dark hair.

At his sides, his hands curl. Hands that have to be twice the size of mine. Even his fingers are dusted in hair.

He's hot. He's also someone I've never seen in my life.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't offer a hand. Just jerks his chin toward the exit, silently ordering me to follow, before turning on his heel.

Swallowing hard, I follow along. All while wondering what in the world I've gotten myself into.

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Silas

I had one job.

Drop off the furniture donation, accept whatever half-hearted thanks Poppy tossed my way, and get the hell back up the mountain before she could rope me into one of her schemes.

Simple as simple can get.

Poppy doesn't do simple. The woman's a force of nature—relentless, unstoppable, and armed with a smile that could disarm a damn warlord.

So, when she shoved a paddle into my hand and insisted I join the charity auction, I should've known better. Should've known I was about to get tangled up in trouble.

She insisted I could hire one of these women for help with my business.

Bullshit.

She wanted my wallet, not my company's logo. But I played along, because saying no to Poppy is like trying to out-stubborn a hurricane.

Then she stepped onto the stage.

Lily. No last name. No backstory. Just wide eyes, a nervous smile, and a pair of jeans that clung to her like a second layer of skin. Ones that make the tips of my ears warm

just thinking about what she looks like without them.

One look, and I was done.

I didn't want her just for the weekend.

In my mind, the moment I laid my eyes on her, I was picturing forever.

That's why I raised my paddle again. And again, and again—until every other bidder backed off and my bank account screamed in protest.

Now I've got a beauty staring at me like I've grown a second head on my shoulder.

I slap down my payment, ignoring Poppy's shit-eating grin when she realizes I'm walking out with more than I bargained for. The woman looks downright delighted, like she's just won the lottery instead of auctioning off a stranger's dignity.

I don't give her the satisfaction of a reaction. Just stalk toward my truck, my spine so rigid I'm half-surprised it doesn't snap under the weight of my own impulsivity.

Lily is still gawking. First at me, now at the truck—her wide eyes tracing the bold Crafted Roots Co. logo stamped across the side of it.

She must see how obvious it is that I shouldn't be here, that I didn't belong in that room.

I've burned a stupid amount of cash, so I might as well get something out of this disaster. The truck's back door groans as I shove it up, releasing a gust of cedar and freshly cut oak. That scent usually relaxes me, but right in this moment, it just claws at my nerves.

“We need to unload everything inside.”

I don’t look at her. Won’t. If I do, this stops being about donating a desk or a set of benches to Poppy’s theater.

If I look at her, all I’ll be able to think about is how easy it’d be to lift her onto the truck bed and take her up the mountain, where the only sounds are the creak of bedsprings and the wind through the pines.

That can’t happen. Not until I’ve made it clear what my business is.

Fuck, I don’t even know what that is yet. Right now, I need to convince myself that this isn’t a moment of weakness or loneliness rearing its ugly head.

The brunette sputters at my words, her wide-eyed look suddenly turning into a full grimace. “Wait, you’re serious? I can’t—I mean, there’s like twenty pieces in there.”

I nod, agreeing with her observation skills.

“Twenty-five, if you want to count the different parts that need to be put together for the desk.”

Her lips part in shock, and she probably thinks I’m joking. I’m not.

“Poppy made it pretty clear with her no-refunds policy. So, if you don’t mind—” I motion to the benches before flicking my eyes over to the building. It’s a short walk, and I hardly had any issue loading up the moving truck by myself in the first place.

Lily makes a face, hardly trying to hide how much she doesn’t want to do a bit of hard labor. Well, since I’m donating my time for free, someone has to pay.

“You know,” Lily huffs, straining to lift one end of the bench, “most women at these auctions get dinner dates. Or help bake cookies.”

She grunts as the wood slips in her grip and curses under her breath as she checks her hands for splinters.

When her eyes lift, I see a layer of defiance deep in those brown eyes. “Why is this thing so heavy?”

“Real wood,” I answer, hefting another bench with one arm. The difference between us would be comical if it didn’t twist something low in my gut. “Built to last. Unlike your patience, apparently.”

The words come out sharper than I mean them to. It’s the image that does it—some smooth-talking guy spinning her around a dance floor or tasting frosting off her finger. My jaw locks.

This is why I stick to my workshop. Wood doesn’t care if I’m rough-edged or quiet. It doesn’t expect charming banter or grand gestures—just honest work and steady hands.

I adjust my grip on the bench, ignoring what sounds like a frustrated growl that comes from her. “The quicker we move, the quicker we can get back to the mountain and get some real work done.”

To cover Lily’s costs, I’ll have to make a few extra pieces to sell on the side.

When a frown curls on her lips, I tell myself that it’s better this way. That I can’t get attached to her over the course of three days if the last thing she wants to do is breathe the same air as me.

With spite fueling her, she grunts as she picks up the bench again. “If I pull a muscle, you’re getting the bill.”

Snorting, I move past her with ease, ready to finish this job and move on to the next.

* * *

I leave Poppy instructions on how to build the pieces that aren’t already assembled. Between her worried glances at both of us and the hole I’ve got burning in the back of my head from being glared at, I’m ready to run back to the peace and serenity that the mountain brings.

The fresh air can’t fill my lungs soon enough.

Once we’re back outside, away from the rush of others claiming their prizes, I’m squinting toward the scenery.

“You’ll want to pack a bag, a few extra clothes, just in case. Bring something you don’t mind ruining. Might tear a hole or two as well.” Stating the obvious, I remember to blink.

Lily’s flushed from the labor, and I’ve purposely tried not to let my eyes drift in her direction each time she’s worked to catch her breath.

“You want me to stay with you? After all that?” Scoffing, the motion of her dragging her fingers through her hair catches my eyes, and I fail terribly this time around.

“Need to make sure you actually show up. Besides... It’s more convenient for both of us.” My throat suddenly dries, and I shift, uncomfortable under her gaze.

What I can’t tell her is that this is already too much.

That I'm on the edge of saying goodbye, but the damn feeling in my gut won't let me.

It's lodged deep in my chest now, twisting into something I can't name.

And I know—if I let her walk away tonight, I'll be haunted by it. This ache. This pull.

I don't know how to kill it, so maybe dragging her up there with me is the only way to silence it.

That's all this is. I'm not looking for more. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

She breathes in deep, holding in her breath like a bomb ticking away to explode. "This is going to be the worst weekend of my life."

She stalks toward the line of cars, shoulders stiff with resolve. I reach out before I can stop myself. My fingers brush her shoulder—barely—and heat pulses through me like I've touched something wired straight to my spine.

It's enough to lodge something thick in my throat, sharp and sudden.

Lily, of course, doesn't flinch. She lets out a dramatic exhale, tosses a glare over her shoulder, and rolls her eyes like I'm the one being unreasonable.

"Relax. I'll find you," she says, voice like flint. "For Poppy, I'll keep my word. But don't think you're getting off easy. I'm not going to be the only one miserable this weekend. Be ready, dude."

It should sound like a threat. Maybe it is. But it's hard to take her seriously when I'm standing this close—close enough to see the heat burning behind her eyes, the tension in her jaw, the way her defiance hums just under the surface.

Picking my brain at what she reminds me of, my mouth twitches as the realization settles in—a Chihuahua. A little thing that has all teeth, and sometimes, may bite. Especially if I get too close.

“Silas,” I correct, realizing that I haven’t even bothered to introduce myself since she’d stepped off stage. “At least call me by my name if you’re going to threaten me.”

Calling her out only earns me flushed cheeks for all of three seconds before she’s pulling out of my grip, stomping toward what I assume is her vehicle. I hope she keeps her word, more than I care to admit.

Three days, that’s all I have to get over this. Somehow, I’ll find a way.

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Lily

As frustrating as Silas is, he's got one of the most beautiful cabins I've ever laid my eyes on.

The cabin comes into view through a break in the trees—tucked between tall pines like it grew there on its own.

It's all weathered wood and deep green trim, as if the place decided long ago it belonged to the forest. A wraparound porch curls around the front, facing the lake that stretches out in front of it like a sheet of glass.

The water's so still it looks painted on—soft blue reflecting streaks of peach and gold from the sky. Everything is quiet out here. Not the kind of silence that feels empty, but the kind that settles deep in a person's bones. Peaceful. Disarming.

I swallow hard, arms crossed despite there being no breeze. I don't want to admit how... perfect it is. The way sunlight filters through the trees, the way the dock juts out just far enough to tempt bare feet and late-night stargazing.

It's beautiful. Inconveniently beautiful.

The lake could help fuel my fantasy of the perfect vacation, if it weren't for the glaring building next to his cabin. A building, I can only assume, is his workshop.

I can't believe this man is the one behind Crafted Roots Co. While no one may know his face, I'm pretty sure everyone in town has seen his furniture. I've come across a

few pieces being sold at the local farmer's market during the warm season.

The person selling it wasn't this man. If it were, I would've noticed him long before.

It's honestly tragic—a face that handsome wasted on someone so infuriating. A mask, really. Someone who conceals the walking, talking personification of chaos and evil.

If I thought I wasn't exhausted after my shift at the lodge, hauling all that furniture proved me wrong. Now I'm dragging myself up the path to his place, feet heavy, and shoulders aching.

Apparently, I can't escape this mountain, even off the clock.

Stifling a yawn, I climb the creaking wooden steps and knock harder than necessary on the screen door. If I have to suffer through this evening, he's not getting any version of me that resembles polite.

Unfortunately, Silas isn't a creep. While he's a jerk, he's too respectful for his own good. So, I can't get out of this by running to Poppy, making false claims. That doesn't mean I don't have a backup plan.

If I can get him to ask me to leave, then the remaining days of the weekend are mine.

I hear his heavy steps on the other side before he swings the door open. It's the weirdest thing, seeing the way relief fills his eyes when he sees me. Telling myself that it's all an act, a way for me to lower my guard so he can torture me more than he already has, I don't fall for it.

When I meet his forest green eyes, I pretend my stomach doesn't clench up, or that I'm filled with butterflies without reason. Instead, I straighten my shoulders and tip my chin to show just how fearless I am.

“About time.” He takes me in like it’s the first time all over again. “Thought you’d gotten lost.”

Grade A asshole, I swear.

The moment I step inside, the scent of cedar and pine resin hits me like a wall—warm and earthy, with the faintest tang of woodsmoke clinging to the beams overhead.

I hate to admit it, but the inside of his cabin is just as beautiful as the outside.

Rough-hewn wooden furniture dominates the space—a dining table with legs thick as my thighs, bookshelves carved with geometric patterns, a rocking chair that looks like something I would’ve hopped on as a kid.

I run my fingers along a shelf near the door, half-convinced he built it all himself. The wood is smooth under my touch, sanded to a satin finish. Stained a reddish color. Yeah, he probably did.

My gaze snags on a framed photo resting in the middle of a few paperbacks and a carved wooden buck.

Three men stand shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a lake, all variations of the same rugged template. Silas is the tallest, his scowl slightly softer than the one he’s wearing now. His hair was a little shorter, and he’s not doting as many deep age lines.

“Your brothers?” I ask before I can stop myself.

He grunts, nudging the door shut. “Yeah. They help with the business.”

Tearing my eyes away from the photographic soft expression, I turn my attention back to his hardened one.

“So, where am I sleeping?” Figuring it’ll be best just to hurry this along, I push to free my hands of my belongings.

If he lets me take a nap, I won’t lie, I’ll second-guess my plan to make him suffer.

He passes by me, silently beckoning to follow behind. His stride is long, so I’m fighting to keep up.

For a cabin that doesn’t seem to have much life inside, it’s quite large. I point that out, too. Curious about why a guy like him would want to take up this much space, he doesn’t humor me with an answer.

With one glance over his shoulder, and a non-committed grunt later, I’m left more curious about him than ever.

“Let me guess, you grew up with a big family and wanted something similar.” Pursing my lips, I squint at his back. “A wife and a bunch of kids. At least two. No, three.”

He suddenly stops, and I run right into him. He still smells like sweat from all the work we’d done earlier, but with it intertwining with his usual scent, it’s not a bad combo.

“You’ll sleep here.” Pushing open the nearest door, he motions me to enter a room that smells of dust and a lack of life. “Settle for now. I’ll find you when I’m ready. The bathroom is on the left.”

His eyes narrow on me, and I’m sure his frown is sharper than earlier.

I must’ve hit a sensitive spot. Well, is it my fault he probably scares every woman who gets near him? No wonder he was at that auction in the first place.

Deciding how I want to thank him, I don't get the chance to ponder long. Not when he's turning away and leaving me all to my lonesome.

Good. It's better this way. If he regrets offering to host me, I have a better chance of getting a boot out of here.

While he simmers, I take the chance to plop down on the bed.

The bed creaks as I collapse onto it, the firm mattress barely yielding under my weight. I roll onto my side, pressing my face into the pillow. It smells faintly of detergent, like it's recently been changed.

Did he rush home and quickly prepare the room?

My body doesn't care to ponder for too long.

Eyelids heavy as lead, I barely register the scratch of wool blankets against my skin or the distant sound of floorboards creaking elsewhere in the cabin. I could be lying on concrete, and it wouldn't make a difference.

Somewhere between one breath and the next, sleep drags me under. I'm snoring before I can even think about setting some kind of alarm.

* * *

Silas doesn't wake me up. Or, maybe he tried, and I was too gone. Who knows? Either way, when I wake up, I'm disoriented as can be.

The foreign surroundings don't help much, but all I have to do is remind myself what happened to snap back into it.

My phone tells me it's four in the morning. The bed tells me I should try to slip in a few more hours of sleep.

Instead, I get up. Feeling gross from sleeping in my day clothes, I grab my outfit for the day and hunt down the bathroom to shower.

The shower spray hits my shoulders like a thousand tiny pinpricks, hot enough to turn my skin pink. It feels good against my sore muscles, and I'm happy to say his shower head has lovely pressure.

Moving to wash my hair, I look between two completely different bottles. One is mine, promising a coconut butter scent. His is right next to it, looking daunting and bulky.

Remembering how good he smelled, even in the midst of work, I hesitate, as if I have the choice to pick and choose what I want to wash up with.

It would be rude to use something of his without asking.

What better reason to use it ?

Pumping an entire white puddle in the middle of my hand, I breathe in and groan.

The scent is stupidly good, all earthy and sharp, clinging to my fingers even as I rub it over my hair and collarbones.

What a mistake that is.

The suds slide down my stomach and hips as I inhale deeply, and suddenly my nipples are tight little points, sensitive against the steam. I grit my teeth.

Don't. Don't you dare, Lilian.

But, despite my mental scolding, it isn't enough. My traitorous hands keep moving, soap slick between my thighs now, and— oh.

It's pathetic. Twenty-three and still a virgin, still so starved for touch that even washing myself feels illicit. The water's loud enough to drown out any shaky breaths, but not the heat pooling low in my belly.

Not the way my hips twitch when I remember how Silas looked in the doorway earlier—all broad shoulders and rough hands, watching me with those unreadable eyes.

Is he even aware of how he was looking at me?

My fingers press harder. My teeth dig deeper into my bottom lip as I barely contain my moan.

I shouldn't. Not here. Not while thinking of him. But my body doesn't care about shame, doesn't care that I'm borrowing his soap or his bed.

The climax hits fast and clumsy, my forehead thumping against the tile as my knees nearly buckle.

Panting hard, my clit throbs like it's hardly satisfied. I'm hardly satisfied.

When I finally turn off the water, my skin is scalded red. Running fingers through my slick hair, I push it all out of my face and soak in what I'd just done.

This is no good. I can't hate the guy and then get off with him in my mind at the same time. This is seriously no good. How am I going to be able to look him in the eye

now?

Finding the world's fluffiest towels inside a closet, I take my time cooling off. The flush on my skin can't entirely be blamed on the hot water. I need to calm down before I see him, or else he'll read me like a book.

Once I'm dressed and ready to take on the day, I work my way by finding my way around his house. Through the dark, it's a challenge in itself. Thanks to the distant glow, Silas makes it easier without trying.

The smell of coffee hits me before the sight of him does. A giant like him makes the table he's sitting at seem normal-sized. While he sips at his drink, he flips through the same gazettes we get at the lodge. Focused on whatever article has his attention, his face is surprisingly relaxed.

He's wearing plaid pants and a tank top that doesn't come close to hiding his tree-trunk arms.

My legs wobble, reminding me of what kind of thoughts were just roaming my mind. I seriously should be ashamed of myself.

"Good morning."

His eyes snap up, and I hear the paper between his fingers crinkle. Like I'm the one who is stressing him out, his brows come together as he takes me in.

I know he said to pack some worn clothing, so I hoped a large shirt and some shorts would do the trick. I can't take another day of burning up. Hoping that, paired up with the mountain's cooler air, I'd stand a better chance at surviving.

But under his gaze? I can already feel the heat prickling back onto my skin, almost

like he's as bad as the sun itself.

“Help yourself to something to eat. Check the fridge. Pot has some coffee left, too.”
His eyes snap back to his paper. “You’re going to be burning a lot of energy today.”

I get another stupid flutter, another pesky tingle. My brain is going rogue, picturing things he doesn't mean one bit.

The only position he's putting me in today is one that requires heavy lifting, probably.

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Silas

The wood beneath my hands is smooth, the grain flowing like a stream under my fingers as I guide the chisel along the edge of the cabinet door. Large swirls merge together to form a delicate design. My knuckles ache from the pressure of each swipe, but it's not a bad ache.

I'm one step closer to making a beautiful piece.

Across the workshop, Lily's got her wrist stained as much as the arm of the rocking chair she's working on.

I tell myself not to look up, not to take in her progress. Worst case, she fucks up the job bad enough that I have to go a shade darker myself. Best case, she'll do a fine job, and I'll be forced to listen to her excitement as I give credit where it's due.

As if that's a bad thing. Not bad, more haunting than anything.

Another curl of wood falls away from the cabinet door, floating toward the ground with the others. One perfect swipe, just like the others.

“ Shoot .”

Hearing her whisper her displeasure, I lift my gaze.

She's got a blotch of stain on her knee now, and she's grimacing at the brown patch that'll take some scrubbing to get off. If she's the one trying to remove it, being a

novice, it'll take days. If I were the one to do it...

No. Stop now before you get ahead of yourself.

Reaching over, I grab my small piece of sandpaper and rub against the curls, leaving them perfectly smooth.

"So, are your brothers going to join us?" Completely clueless to what I'm thinking, she dips the tip of her rag into the gallon-sized bucket before working on the other arm. "Seems like you can use all the help you can get. Especially if you're relying on auctions to find employees."

"They won't be coming. They stop by throughout the week." Curling my fingers, each digit feels like rusted metal. With each piece, they grow increasingly stiff. "You're all I have this weekend."

Does she need to know that I told Bradley and Coop to stay far away from the workshop? Of course not. They can enjoy their weekend, and I can go without worrying about my siblings getting distracted by the beauty.

Besides, from that large shirt she's wearing, she's probably got a boyfriend of some sort. It's a university shirt, so he must be far away to let a bastard like me buy her out.

The thought annoys me, and the fine details of my work are the ones to take a hit as I nick the wrong spot. Cursing under my breath, I try to fix my mistake. The wood is no longer smooth.

Minutes pass, and I lose track of time as I move to the other door, trying my best to make both perfectly identical. It's impossible, of course, and that's what is best about my pieces. The flaws point out the beauty. Still, I'm feeling more agitated than usual.

Lily hums under her breath as she puts all her focus on her work. Whether she's aware of it or not, I catch her smiling a little.

The knot in my stomach tightens even more.

“So, where is this chair going to end up?” She pulls back and swipes at her forehead, unknowingly making another mark on her skin. “I hope you sell this one. With how much stuff you gave Poppy, it may be a bad idea to give others free stuff, too.”

Grunting in agreement, I pull back and grab a cloth to dab at my own sweat. “A friend owns an antique shop on the edge of town. He lets me put in a few pieces. That'll be one of them.”

Ready to get back to work, I frown when she sets her rag down before coasting over to the other side of my shop. Looking at the few finished pieces, I can see her curiosity forming right away.

Dropping my rag, I'm on the move.

Lily doesn't hesitate—she reaches out, her fingertips hovering over the golden oak finish of a table I spent days sanding to perfection. She's not trying to be trouble, but that doesn't stop my gut from tightening, my pulse kicking up as I close the distance between us.

My hand snaps out, catching her wrist just before her stained fingers can ruin the wood.

She gasps out, caught off guard.

The second my fingers lock around her, I feel it—the rabbit-quick flutter of her pulse beneath my thumb. Her other hand flies to her chest, gripping that ridiculous,

oversized shirt like it's the only thing keeping her upright.

Her eyes go wide, lips parting, cheeks flushing a shade of pink so warm it makes my teeth ache.

Pretty. The word lodges itself in my throat.

"Dry your hands before you touch things," I mutter, forcing my voice low and steady. It takes every ounce of control I have not to let it crack, not to let her hear the way my breath wants to hitch.

Because I'm not angry.

I'm not even annoyed.

The only thing in my head right now is the image of bending her over the very table she's so damn curious about and exploring how supportive it would be under our weight.

Fuck me. I've got it bad. Instead of addressing this issue, I've made it worse.

Like she doesn't understand where I'm coming from, she glances down at the handprint she's left over her right breast. The one I'm trying my damned hardest not to look at. "Oh."

Releasing her, I bury my fingers through my hair and turn away. I've stopped her from causing more damage, so that's good and all. Now, I need to walk away before I do something stupid.

Something I can't take back.

Reminding myself that she's probably got someone waiting for her back at home, my feet remain glued to the ground. I don't think my boots have ever felt so heavy.

"I didn't think about that, I'm sorry." She sighs behind me, apologizing for something she really doesn't need to. "You're just really good at what you do. It's hard not to appreciate your stuff."

For giving me a compliment, she sounds grouchy about it.

When I glance over my shoulder, a mistake, of course, I see she's still flustered. She's poking and prodding at that shirt.

I told her to bring clothing that isn't important. Something worth losing.

"That shirt important to you?" My voice comes out rougher than I intend, fingers flexing at my sides like I'm still fighting the urge to reach for her again.

I don't owe her an apology—but I did startle her, and now there's a smear of dark stain streaked across the faded lettering. There's no saving the fabric.

She blinks, slow and dazed, like she's still catching up. Then her fingers twist nervously in the material, tugging it away from her skin just enough that I catch a glimpse of collarbone, the delicate hollow of her throat.

"Oh, it's from a few years ago, back when I attended school. It's not—no, it's just comfy, I guess." Her words trip over themselves, soft and flustered, and something hot coils low in my gut.

I drag a hand down my face, exhaling hard through my nose.

It's hers.

Not some boyfriend's. Not some other man's. Just hers, worn thin from time, from use, from her body curled up in it.

The realization shouldn't hit me this hard.

I need air. Space. A minute to wrestle back the stupid, reckless thoughts flooding my head—because it shouldn't matter. It doesn't change anything.

She could still have someone. She should have someone.

I shouldn't be standing here, staring at the way the fabric clings to her just a little where the stain's soaked in, wondering how much darker it'd be if I pressed my palm there.

"I'm gonna step out," I mutter, already turning before she can see the way my jaw ticks. "Get back to work and finish that chair."

My voice is steady. My hands aren't. They're itching to touch her. Itching to map out her body and see everything that shirt is covering.

She clicks her tongue, frowning at me like a switch has been flipped.

"Does it kill you to be nice?" Her voice is sharp, cutting through the thick air between us.

I need to walk away.

Lily doesn't let me escape before I can.

She steps forward, deliberate, slow—like she knows exactly how much it unravels me to breathe in the same air. Her frown mirrors mine, but there's fire in her eyes, a

defiance that makes my pulse hammer against my ribs.

When I breathe in deep, it's not just the scent of the woodstain filling my lungs. It's my shampoo clinging to her that makes my head spin. Makes me think she knows exactly what she's doing. Like she knows what to do to push me over the ledge.

"You bought me at that auction," she says, jabbing a finger into my chest. The contact burns, even through my shirt.

"But you act like I'm some kind of burden.

Like you can't stand the sight of me. So what's your deal, huh?

Why am I here if all you're gonna do is glare at me like I've pissed you off just by existing?

I get it, you spent way too much money to call it a loss, but why are you putting us both through this? "

Every word is a spark, igniting something raw and reckless inside me. My control is fraying, snapping thread by thread. My blood is rushing everywhere but my head. Not that it matters.

I can't think. Not about anything but her. She's haunted me from the moment I laid my eyes on her.

I catch her wrist before she can poke me again, causing her breath to catch in the back of her throat.

"You want to know why?" My voice is rough, barely more than a growl.

She feigns her bravery, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze. Her eyes narrow, but she doesn't yank out of my grip. "Yeah. I do."

That's it. That's all it takes.

I don't bother thinking anymore. Convincing myself not to be reckless isn't on the table.

I yank her against me, my other hand tangling in her hair, tilting her head back. There's no hesitation, no gentle lead-in—just hunger, sharp and consuming.

Our mouths crash together, teeth clashing, lips bruising. She gasps into the kiss, taken by surprise, but she doesn't pull away. No, she lets my tongue explore and invade, moaning like she's wanted this as much as I have.

The kiss is not sweet. It's not soft.

I back her into one of my workbenches, wood creaking under the force, and her hands fist my shirt like she's torn between shoving me away and dragging me closer. I don't give her the chance to decide.

My tongue swipes deeper into her mouth, tasting her, devouring her, like I've been starving for this for my entire life and she's the only thing that can fill me.

She whimpers—a sound that goes straight to my cock—and I swallow it greedily.

This is why.

Because she's infuriating. Because she pushes me. Because I've never wanted anyone this much, this badly, and it's been eating me alive since the moment I laid eyes on her.

She called me out on my dreams, noticing with ease what I wanted. A family big enough to fill every room.

The only problem is that a woman has never jumped out at me. Never made me want to sink to my knees and beg her to accept me.

Lily makes me desperate, and I don't know what in the hell to do with these foreign feelings. So I kiss her, over and over, until she's breaking away for air. And then?

I kiss her again.

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Lily

He's a pretty good kisser. Better than I'd expect from a reclusive loner who avoids people like they're carrying the plague.

Maybe that's why we lose the next ten minutes tangled up like desperate teenagers—all hungry lips and wandering hands, his fingers gripping my waist like he's afraid I'll vanish if he lets go.

There's too much tongue, not enough air, and a whole lot of heat building between us, but Silas doesn't seem in any hurry to take things further, which is a problem.

Because right now, my body is a live wire, sparking under his touch, and the ache between my thighs is quickly turning into a demand.

If I asked him sweetly—begged, even—would he finally slide one of those rough, broad hands into my shorts and touch me? Really touch me?

The thought alone sends a shiver down my spine, and an embarrassingly needy sound escapes me as he does the exact opposite of what I crave.

He pulls back, leaving me gasping, my lips still burning from his. A whine lodges in my throat, sharp and desperate, but he only studies me like I'm some unsolvable equation.

Confused. Frustrated.

Maybe because kissing was never part of the deal. In fact, we're trampling over the rules of this arrangement like they're nothing. There's nothing platonic about the way I bite my lip or how his fingers dig into my hips like he's fighting not to yank me closer.

I should stop this. I could. After all, I've got exactly what I came for—an excuse to leave.

Yet for the first time since he dragged me into this mess, I'm not plotting how to escape.

I'm too busy wishing my arms were longer, my grip stronger, so I could fist his shirt in my hands and pull until there's no space left between us at all.

The air between us is thick, charged like the moment before a storm breaks. Instead of pulling me back under, he turns away, his jaw tight, and leaves me hanging.

Going as far as returning to where he was previously working, I watch in pure disbelief as he picks up his chisel like nothing happened. Doesn't say a single word to explain his actions.

I wish I had the strength he has to move on. My entire body feels weak, purely ready to give him full control.

Seemingly satisfied with nothing but a handful of kisses, I watch as wood curls under the weight of each push of his tool.

His knuckles are pale, his grip intense. Okay, maybe he's not as calm as I thought.

A shiver runs through me at the thought of pushing him over the edge, making him have no option but to cave to the pressure growing between both of us.

I press my thighs together, trying to smother the ache, but fail miserably.

Alright. If he can pretend everything is okay, then so can I.

Once the work is done, he'll have nothing to put his attention on as an excuse. Once I'm the only thing in his view, he'll have no other choice but to deal with this thing growing between us.

Or, I'll take the time we're separated to think clearly. To ponder on leaving, like I probably should.

If Frankie were here, she'd tell me to put my virginity on a platter and serve it to him for dessert. She'd tell me to go wild and not waste such a great opportunity. It's not like men are desperate for my attention.

Even if Silas isn't the nicest kind of person, he makes my body ache and my pulse race. Once his hands get on me, he doesn't have to speak to get me going. The only thing he needs to claim and write his name on is my heart.

Is it crazy that I want to find a pen?

Clearly, I'm inhaling too much of that staining liquid.

Hopping off the workbench on wobbly legs, I try to act nonchalant. Going back to the chair, I pick up my rag and continue working.

Dizzy from the fumes, head swimming from the kisses, I ignore the weight of his eyes drifting in my direction more than not.

I feel his gaze like a physical touch every time I shift, every time I swallow thickly. He's watching, but he doesn't move. Never shifts under the pressure between us.

Unlike him, I try to keep my attention on my work. Trying to make sure all the wood turns the same shade of brown, I ignore the tremble of my fingers.

I don't know how much time passes as we work in silence. Enough that I'm tempted to demand he turn on whatever system is connected to the speakers hanging on the wall.

Once he's done chipping away with his chisel, he's taking measurements before filling the air with the shrillish scream of a saw. It's loud enough to drown out my thoughts, thank goodness.

Just when I'm finishing up the chair, he's scratching down a list with a pencil that's swallowed up by his hand with brows furrowed so deep. Is he aware that he's got some sawdust in his beard?

His eyes snap up, catching me mid-stare like he's got some sixth sense for when I'm watching him. He straightens, shoulders rolling under his sweat-damp shirt, and clears his throat like he's dislodging more than just sawdust.

"Need to make a run to town. Gotta pick up some pieces and parts. Might as well grab lunch." A pause. A flick of his gaze down my body, quick but searing. "You hungry?"

"Starving." The answer flies out too fast, my voice catching on something far hungrier than food.

The workshop continues to feel stifling, the air thick with resin and unsaid things. I turn toward the stained sink, scrubbing my hands under water that runs rust-brown with stain and sweat. My reflection in the grimy mirror is flushed, lips still swollen from his.

When I turn back, he's waiting by the door, arms crossed, like he doesn't have the patience to linger about. But I don't miss the way his nose flares when I step into his space, close enough to return the same behavior.

I block his path, just for a heartbeat. Just long enough to lift my hand and brush a curl of wood shaving from his beard. My fingers linger, tracing the coarse strands, dislodging sawdust like I'm memorizing the texture of him.

If he weren't a giant, I have no doubt how easily I'd kiss him right about now. Unfortunately, I don't think I could reach him if I tried to stand on the tips of my toes.

I really want to kiss him again.

"Much better." Humming in the back of my throat, my mouth curves into a smile. "Stuff gets everywhere, you know?"

His eyes search mine as my touch lingers for too long before I pull back. For only a brief moment, they flicker down, and I wonder if he's considering kissing me again. Before I can ponder for long, he's clearing his throat again and stepping out of my reach.

"Let's go. Might be able to avoid the lunch rush." Giving me his back, he leads me away from the workshop and toward a different truck. This one is just a normal vehicle, unlike the box truck he packs up for deliveries.

When I slide in, I take a deep breath, and tremble. The seats, the console, everything has his scent—like he spends each ride dousing everything nearby with his cologne.

Even when I try to get away from it, I can't. Like a constant form of temptation, I have to push this down and pretend everything is going to be just fine.

He slides in next to me, wasting no time taking the dirt trail down the mountain.

He doesn't bring up the kisses. Doesn't explain what in the heck all of this means for us. I need some kind of direction here. Something to point me in the right direction.

Unfortunately, he's more concerned with getting to Ridge Rock Hardware to get a box of screws and some hinges than to solve the mysteries of our situation.

I let my mind wander as he busies himself with the tedious task, my gaze drifting to the plants nearby—their leaves trembling in the faint breeze. Twisting around with the intention of looking at something more interesting, he stops me.

He's never been one for words, but his body speaks volumes. Without a glance, his hand finds the small of my back, fingers pressing into the curve like he's mapping me from memory.

The touch of his fingers, possessive yet effortless, as he flips the box in his other hand with careless precision as he looks over the numbers printed on the label.

No hesitation, no explanation—just the quiet certainty of a man who acts on instinct, as if defying reason is the most natural thing in the world.

This man embodies frustration. I can't tell if he wants to put distance between us or erase it.

Even though he doesn't give me any explanation of why he does what he does, I soak in his warmth and appreciate the plants from a distance.

Silas might leave me feeling confused and a little lost, but there's no denying how nice it feels to be wanted.

For a little while, I won't fight him. Instead, I'll secretly enjoy the moment.

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Silas

“So, what did you go to school for?”

Tucked away in a booth at the Maplewood diner, I watch as Lily devours her fries on her plate.

My stomach twists and turns, hungry for something that isn’t the half-eaten burger on my plate.

Sitting back in her seat, my eyes follow her fingers as her tongue swipes at the salt clinging to them. “I got my associate’s in hospitality management.”

The way she stuffs her mouth with another fry to end the conversation, I try to think of anything nearby she’d do for a living. Willowbrook Ridge isn’t some busy city. We’ve got a motel at best, and a handful of bed and breakfasts on the mountain. There’s that lodge, too.

“What do you do for a living?” Figuring the quickest way to get the information I need is to ask, I watch as her cheeks turn a pinkish hue.

“Is this why you insisted on buying me lunch? All you wanted to do was interrogate me?” She cocks a brow, hardly hiding the stiffness to her words.

“I want to know why I didn’t know of your existence before yesterday.” Admitting the truth, my words ease the tension in her shoulders—the color pink spreads toward her ears.

“I work as a housekeeper. Most of my time is spent at Shady Pines Lodge. I don’t get a lot of free time to myself, so when I do, I don’t ever leave my apartment.” Lowering her gaze, she pushes around the remainder of her food. “This weekend was supposed to be a break from my usual routine.”

I’ve never had a reason to stay at the lodge, but I’ve heard it’s quite nice.

Once tomorrow arrives, and I have to say my goodbyes, I’ll have to contact the owner and see if they want to order something with a discount.

Maybe some outdoor benches, or a table, or something big enough of a project that’ll give me the chance to catch a glimpse of Lily while she’s in her zone.

She’s leaving tomorrow.

I had purposely tried not to think about it, and before those kisses, it had been a possible task. Now, I don’t know how I’ll be able to say goodbye. Now, not so much.

Just thinking about not seeing her again, not having her within my reach, has my skin prickling and my appetite nonexistent.

“I’m sure working on your carpentry skills isn’t something you do often, but if you ever want to earn some extra cash on the side after all this is done, I won’t say no. I mean, you aren’t the best, but the help is nice—” Making the offer without thinking, I fumble with my words.

I’ve literally paid for this woman to accompany me through the weekend. She’s only doing everything she has to in order to keep her word. After tomorrow, she has no reason to come back. What am I thinking?

Lily squints, staring at me hard. Her expression is impossible to read as she swipes up

one last fry. With a sigh, she clicks her tongue. “You are the most confusing man I’ve ever met.”

I am?

“Come on, finish up your food. The day is only halfway over. We’ve got more hard labor to do.” Sending fake enthusiasm in my direction, she pairs it with a smile that grips my lungs so tight that it’s hard to breathe.

The only thing confusing is what this woman is doing to me. While I haven’t figured out the fine details of why I feel the way I do, I know one thing is certain. Lily is special. No other woman has ever pulled out such an intense sensation from me.

There’s no point in denying that I want her. Not just her body, but I want her at my side. Somehow, I need to figure out how to do this right without scaring her off.

If I tell her I don’t just want her here for the weekend, but for the rest of my life, I have to step carefully.

She’s in her early twenties, and I’m almost double her age.

Settling down with a man like me is going to take some convincing.

One step at a time, even under a time crunch, I’ll have to figure out which path will get me the woman of my dreams.

* * *

“A drill would make this so much easier.”

Lily’s voice is tight, her breath huffing out between clenched teeth as she wrestles

with the stubborn screwdriver. A bead of sweat slides down her temple, catching the light from the bulb above before vanishing into the collar of her shirt.

The air hangs thick with the scent of sawdust and heated metal; the fans do little more than push the stifling heat around. Her knuckles whiten around the handle as her agitation continues to grow.

“We’d be done by now, you know.” Her nose scrunches as she glares at the stubborn screw.

“Risks splitting the wood. Or stripping the screw.” I don’t look up, focusing on the handle I’m securing to the other side of the cabinet. My voice stays even, but the heat licks at my patience, too. “This is the safest way.”

She lets out a sharp grunt, the sound edged with defiance. “You always play it safe?”

My frown is instant, my grip slipping as her jab lands. The screwdriver jerks, driving the screw too deep, and I bite back a curse. Her next scoff—loud, deliberate—grates like sandpaper. “Do you always look for the easy way out?”

The words hang between us, sharp enough to cut. The temperature isn’t the only thing simmering here. Lily’s frustration radiates off her in waves, but it’s not just the work.

There’s something restless in the way her eyes dart across the shop, like she’s itching for a fight—or a way to prove me wrong.

“I look for the most time-efficient ways, thank you. If we can finish this task faster, then that gives us time to do something else.” She jerks her chin up, challenge flashing in her gaze as it sweeps over my tools.

I can practically see the gears turning.

She's looking for a damn drill just to spite me.

Offering to hire her was a mistake.

Or maybe it's the way my blood thrums when she glares at me, all fire and stubborn pride, that's the real problem.

Because right now, the only thing I want more than finishing this cabinet is pinning her against it and shutting her up with my mouth, taking away her ability to argue about such trivial things.

Finishing up the handle, I stalk toward her and brush her hand aside. The contact is brief, but it sparks through me like a live wire.

"I'll handle this. Go stand in front of the fan before you overheat."

She doesn't move right away. Her eyes narrow, locking onto my face like she's trying to decode something—like I'm a puzzle she's not sure she wants to solve. I can't read her. I never can.

Then, without a word, she turns and heads toward the big floor fan, her steps heavy with attitude.

I crouch down and inspect her half-sunk screw. The problem is obvious. Damn knot. Of course, she hit one on her first try. Bad luck or cursed hands—either way, she didn't stand a chance.

My lips twitch into a smirk before I let out a quiet laugh. Shaking my head, I lean in and muscle the screw through the knot, slow and firm until the threads finally catch. The next two glide in effortlessly, no resistance—like the wood had been holding its breath and finally let go.

“I’m not taking back what I said,” she calls out, voice raised just enough to carry over the fan. She’s glancing back at me from over her shoulder, a flicker of defiance in her eyes.

I could explain. Could tell her about the knot, about why it wasn’t really her fault. But I don’t.

There’s something about her like this—flushed cheeks, sharp glares, the edge in her voice—that I can’t help but enjoy.

Once I finish attaching the doors to the base, she helps me carefully place the glass, after I’ve coaxed her back over. Slotting each in one at a time, I blink the sweat from my eyes. Using my shirt to swipe at my brow, I’m the one to sigh next.

“We made good progress today. Didn’t think I’d finish this piece.” My words hang between us, and when I glance up, she’s watching me with that look again—the one that makes my throat go dry. “How about we call it? A cool shower sounds good right now.”

Separate showers. Obviously.

The thought flickers anyway—steam curling between us, water sluicing over her shoulders, my hands working the tension from her muscles as an apology for being such an ass. Fuck. I shove the image away.

What I need are baby steps. Then again, it’s not like I’ve got time to be cautious when every glance from her feels like a lit match tossed at gasoline.

Her words from earlier echo in my skull. You always play it safe?

Maybe that’s the problem. Here I am—all rough edges and heavy hands—trying to

tiptoe around her like she's something fragile. What I really want to know is whether she'd melt against me or bite back harder.

"Yeah, I'm done." She nods sharply, breaking whatever spell had her staring. No second invitation needed—she's already peeling away, escaping this sweatbox of a room. With quick steps, it's more like she's running from me.

Well then. With tomorrow being the last day we'll be together, hardly even twenty-four hours depending on how quickly she'll want to call things, I won't waste any more time dancing around her.

I'll make my intentions clear, make it obvious that I want her.

If she doesn't want me, or I scare her away, then I'll let her go tonight. There's no chance I'll be able to watch her leave otherwise without regretting a missed opportunity of my lifetime.

The chance of finding the woman of my dreams and making the fantasy of having a big family a reality.

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Lily

Silas doesn't take a long shower. Seven minutes tops. Enough time to let cool water douse his flushed skin from earlier.

He barely gives me time to smother the heat crawling under my skin—just long enough to press my thighs together, drag in a shaky breath, and try to pretend I'm not imagining the water sluicing down his back. Then, like the jerk he is, he swings the bathroom door wide open.

Steam rolls out in a thick, hazy wave, carrying the scent of his soap clinging to damp skin.

Despite finding me clutching my nightwear in a tight grip, he doesn't move out of my way. Not immediately.

Leaning against the doorframe like he owns the very air between us, I take notice that he's wearing nothing but those same plaid pants slung low on his hips from the night before.

The only difference? He's not wearing a shirt today.

My gaze trips over him, greedy and traitorous. Water glistens on his collarbone, the defined cut of his stomach, and those few scattered freckles I want to trace with my tongue. By the time I drag my eyes up to his, my cheeks are burning.

Amusement flickers in his dark stare, his mouth tilting as he watches me squirm. He

doesn't say a word. Doesn't have to. A test of strength forms in the way he flexes his forearm against the doorframe, muscles tensing like he's holding himself back. Or maybe just savoring the way my breath hitches.

Does he get off on this? Does he enjoy teasing me until I'm wound tight, until my nails bite into my palms, only to walk away, leaving me aching, furious, and wanting?

If this is his goal, well, it's working.

He takes in my belongings in my grip, his mouth twitching when he notices my shampoo bottle. "And here I thought you forgot to pack that. Good to know."

Meaning—he noticed I used his soap. Now that's embarrassing.

Huffing as I dip under his arm, I don't waste time shutting the door on him to finally block him out. I'm clawing at my clothes, demanding relief as I twist at the shower knobs to get the water going.

I don't need my imagination of him showering or breathing in his soap to turn me on. My body is already on fire, my clit throbbing and begging for attention. It has been ever since he got his hands on me.

I'm torturing myself by letting this simmer. Letting him win.

The shower's spray is cold, but it does nothing to douse the fire under my skin. I scrub my hair too hard, lather my body too fast, my movements sharp with frustration. When my fingers finally dip lower, skimming the slick heat between my thighs, I freeze.

Is this really it?

Am I really going to fold every time Silas riles me up, fingers curling into my own flesh because he refuses to do it himself? It's pathetic. Worse—it's unfair.

Why does he get to stroke this hunger and walk away untouched? Why am I the one left breathless, my body a battlefield of unslaked need, while he smirks from the sidelines?

I let him set the pace, silently hoping to give me a continuation.

Not again. Not this time.

I'll be the one to make the move.

So, instead of relieving the intense throbbing between my thighs, I get out of the shower.

Fumbling with getting dressed, I abandon the bathroom to hunt him down. Hair still dripping, skin still flushed from scrubbing, I find him sitting so comfortably on his couch. When he feels my stare, he looks my way.

I don't give him time to speak. Instead, I'm stomping toward him. Heart racing and lungs burning from forgetting to breathe, my hands curl into fists.

"Lily—" He chokes on my name, his eyes struggling to pick where to stare.

"You are the most frustrating man I've ever met. Infuriating, actually. The list might not be long, but you are number one." My chest heaves as the words come flowing out.

His brows suddenly furrow deep, his eyes narrowing. "How long is the list?"

I'm ready to strangle this man. Right now, I can't tell if I want to use my hands or my thighs. "Why does that even matter? Seriously. You—"

A raw, guttural sound tears from my throat, made up of half frustration, half surrender, as I fling my hands wildly between us.

Words evaporate like steam on my tongue. Who is this person I've become under his watchful gaze? This reckless, hungry creature who can't stop staring at the way his bare chest rises with each controlled breath?

The power shift hits me like a lightning strike. For once, he isn't the immovable mountain looming over me. For once, those broad shoulders are level with my heaving chest, his stormy eyes looking up through dark lashes as I loom over him instead.

I can reach him now.

The realization sends me stumbling forward before my brain catches up. My knees hit the couch on either side of his thighs, my frown mirroring his as my fingers dig into the rock-hard muscle of his bicep to steady myself.

I expect resistance. A firm grip to halt my advance. Another infuriating display of his self-control.

Instead, his hands slam onto my hips with enough force to bruise, yanking me down until I'm straddling him completely. Every nerve ending ignites as I feel him, all of him, thick and straining against me through the thin barrier of our clothes.

A ragged groan escapes him when I instinctively roll my hips, the friction drawing twin sounds of pleasure from us both.

“Stop holding back,” I pant against his lips, our breath mingling in the charged space between us. My nails scrape down his chest, reveling in the way his abs contract under my touch. “Unless you’re scared you can’t handle what happens when you finally let go.”

I’m not a handful. Maybe a pain in the ass, but so is he. We’re perfect for each other. Can’t he see that?

When he growls, a shiver rolls through my body.

Acting like he’s the one suffering here, he slips his hands under my shirt and glides his fingers against my skin.

As he leans forward, the heat of his breath against my chest makes my pebbling nipples against the fabric so obvious.

No wonder he was struggling to pick where to stare.

“I’m scared you’ll leave once I do,” he admits in a hoarse whisper.

My heart flutters when I see the hunger in his gaze, the attempt to keep himself under control.

Is that what this has been all along?

“I’m not going anywhere.” I cradle his bearded cheeks, my thumbs brushing the sharp planes of his cheekbones. My hips roll again, slower this time, grinding against the hard length of him, and his groan vibrates through my palms.

His mouth is right there—those teasing lips I’ve caught myself staring at all day. A shiver races up my spine as I trace his lower lip with my thumb.

How have I managed to survive this long without it?

I crash into him, sealing our mouths together in a kiss that feels like relief and catching fire all at once.

His restraint shatters—tongue sweeping against mine, hands dragging me impossibly closer—and I melt into the heat of him, into the delicious truth that he’s just as gone for me as I am for him.

His hands slide under the waistband of my shorts without warning, those rough carpenter’s palms gripping the bare curves of my ass with a possessiveness that wrings a whimper from my throat.

His fingertips dig in just shy of where I need them, teasing the crease of my thighs—so close to my aching pussy I can already feel the slick heat between my legs.

“Do I have to beg you to touch me?” I ask him in a blur, panting against his tongue.

His entire body lights up, and my body aches underneath another heavy squeeze. “Yes .”

That proves it. This man enjoys making me suffer. He might not know it, but his cock does. I don’t think it can get any harder from beneath me.

I want to know what it looks like. Even if I’m a virgin, I want to wrap my fingers around every swollen inch and guide it between my thighs. I want it badly.

Moving to rest my forehead against his shoulders, I grind harder to get a little friction. How embarrassing. Since we’ve gotten this far, there’s no turning back. No point in telling him anything but the truth.

“Silas.” Pleading his name, my teeth graze his throat. Against my tongue, I can feel his pulse racing. “Touch me, please. I’ve never been this wound up before. I don’t know what to do.”

His fingers inch closer, but it doesn’t matter. My underwear is in the way. If I’d been more clumsy, I could’ve forgotten to put them on. Instead, I’m left with regrets.

As easy as it would be for him to work his way beneath them, he does the opposite. Pulling his hands away entirely, I don’t have enough time to argue. Not when he’s turning me around.

“Lift your hips.” The command rumbles against my ear, rough and deep, sending a shiver down my spine. His voice is pure sin—a promise and a threat all at once.

I didn’t think it was possible to ache more for him, but my body betrays me, heat pooling low as I obey.

His fingers hook into the waistband of my shorts and underwear, dragging them down my thighs with deliberate slowness. The fabric rasps against my skin, and then I’m sinking back onto his lap, bare this time, the hard lines of his body searing into me.

His touch lingers at my knees, teasing, before he shoves the last of my clothing away. Left in nothing but my shirt, I feel the cool air kiss my exposed skin—but it’s nothing compared to the fire of his gaze.

Then his thighs flex beneath me, spreading me open, and my breath hitches. His mouth brushes my ear, lips grazing just enough to make my pulse stutter.

Don’t move. Don’t squirm.

But it’s agony not caving to this. Every inch of me is hyperaware—the cotton of his

pajama pants beneath me, the possessive grip of his hands, the way his breath fans hot over my neck.

I've never felt so exposed. So vulnerable.

"You say I'm frustrating, Lily," he murmurs, and the words are a slow, wicked caress. "But you don't have a clue what that word means."

His palm skims down my stomach, fingertips tracing idle, maddening circles. Lower. Lower. My muscles tense in anticipation, my thighs trembling as he inches closer—

"I'm at my wits' end." The raw hunger in his voice undoes me.

Then his fingers finally find where I need him most, brushing lightly, teasingly over the slick slit of my pussy.

A gasp escapes me, and he growls in response, his touch growing with pressure.

"Tell me," he murmurs, his lips grazing my ear. "What does your pretty little pussy look like? Since I can't see it... I need to know."

I whimper as his fingers part my swollen lips, stroking slow, torturous lines through my wetness. His fingers avoid my clit on purpose, deliberately making a whine catch in the back of my throat.

"Is it pink?" he asks, voice rough. "Soft and pink like the rest of you? Or does it blush darker when you're this desperate?"

"Y-yes," I pant, arching into his touch. I'm not usually this open, but people don't normally demand to know things about my pussy.

Silas is more than I could have ever prepared myself for.

“Fuck,” he groans, circling my clit with agonizing precision. “Knew it would be. Knew you’d be perfect here too.”

His thumb presses harder, and I moan, clutching at his arms. He doesn’t yank away or hiss when my nails dig deep. If anything, I think it turns him on. Finally, he presses against my sensitive nub, rubbing just right to make my hips jerk.

My fingers have never felt this good. I’ve never brought myself to an orgasm so quickly, but at this rate, I’ll be soaking his fingertips in no time.

“Every time you open your mouth, it drives me insane.” Rumbling the truth, he reaches up with his free hand to turn my face, angling us for another slow, torturous kiss. All tongue and hunger, he devours my next moan.

My breath hitches as his fingers slide lower, dipping inside just enough to tease. Slowly, he works in one finger, curling it between my velvety walls.

When he inhales sharply, I know my secret is out. My tightness is impossible to hide, even more so when he presses in a second,

My virginity doesn’t make him yank away, Instead, it makes him groan low and deep like it’s me stroking his cock instead of him feeding my arousal.

While he soaks his fingers, his thumb returns to my clit, brutally giving me dual stimulations strong enough to make my thighs quiver.

“That’s it,” he rasps, his mouth hot against my throat. “Let me see how pretty you are when you come.”

And when his fingers curl just right, when his thumb flicks in tight, relentless circles—I do.

My walls clamp around his fingers and stars take over my vision, leaving me blinded. As I pinch my eyes shut and my throat aches from crying out, I'm left as nothing but a puddle against his lap.

This man has officially done it.

I am gone. There is no going back to an addiction less sweet.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am

Silas

There's no question about it. Lily has to be mine. Whatever it takes, I need to schedule a wedding, pick out a beautiful ring, and figure out the best shops for her to choose a dress.

While I'm here already seeing the future, Lily's body is jerking and adjusting to what is happening in the present.

My cock aches beneath her, and I don't need to look to know that I've ruined a good pair of pants. It could've been all the rubbing she did against my lap that did the final blow, but I've come undone just before her.

I should feel embarrassed, but this was the hottest thing I've experienced in a decade. Maybe longer.

When I slide my fingers out of her pussy and toward her clit, she doesn't waste time batting my hand away. Oversensitized, her body goes limp against mine.

Nothing has ever felt so right before in my life.

I don't think I want to ever let a moment like this go.

She's a melted puddle against my lap, my chest, all warm skin and boneless satisfaction. I stroke her hair, my fingers catching in the damp strands at her temples. Her breathing still comes in uneven little huffs, and when I shift, she makes a soft, protesting noise.

“C’mon,” I murmur, nudging her. “Up. Just for a second.”

She groans but obeys, pushing up on shaky arms. Her legs wobble when I guide her to stand, and she sways into me, trusting me to keep her upright.

I do, one arm around her waist while the other swipes her underwear and shorts from the floor.

Then I lift her, discovering just how light she is, and carry her down the hall so we can get our rest.

I don’t take her to her room.

Mine is closer, darker, the sheets still rumpled from this morning. I lay her down, and she sighs, curling into the pillow like she belongs there. It’s a shame it took so long to discover the fact.

Slipping off toward the bathroom long enough to get cleaned up and to put on a new pair of underwear, I return with a warm, damp rag.

She’s half-asleep, her lashes fluttering as I wipe between her thighs. She hums, arching slightly, but doesn’t complain. I work gently, then tug her underwear back on, my fingers greedily touching every inch of skin I can.

Once I slide in beside her and pull her to my chest, I discover how well she fits against my body. Swallowing, my throat feels tight.

This is love. I know it is. However, it’s also new, and I’m not accustomed to new things. Not used to the way my chest aches when she nuzzles into me, not used to the fear that she’ll up and leave my life altogether.

Her breath evens out against my skin, and she's out like a light.

I hold her tighter and sigh into her hair. Pressing my lips against the crown of her head, I keep my confession to myself, choosing to save it for a better time. I've really worn her out.

She's not used to this either, surely never having had a man between her legs. The revelation is one that'll go to my head every single time I think about it.

Whatever it takes, I won't let another man near her.

* * *

It's not the morning sun that wakes me up—it's her.

The slow stretch of her body against mine, the way her back arches just slightly as she rouses. My arm is locked around her waist, holding her in place, but she doesn't fight it. Not even a little.

Instead, she presses closer, nuzzling into my chest like she's determined to soak up every last bit of my warmth before the day steals her away.

Her wavy brown hair is a mess, strands clinging to her flushed cheeks, catching in the soft part of her lips. I reach up, brushing them away, and her eyes crack open—just enough for me to see the way the sunlight turns her usual deep brown into something golden, rich like honey.

She blinks up at me, slow, drowsy, and her lips curve in a sleep-soft smile.

"Morning," she murmurs, voice rough in that way that sends heat straight through me.

I tighten my arm around her, sighing into her hair before breathing in deep. If I pretend I'm still asleep, we don't have to separate. Not yet.

She laughs, the sound fueling the thumping of my heart. Settling in, her fingers tracing idle patterns over my ribs like she's memorizing the shape of me.

Is she wondering if this is real? I've already asked myself twice, so I wouldn't blame her.

Her fingers are still against my ribs when she sits up, the sheet pooling around her waist. Sunlight spills over her flushed cheeks, catching in the loose waves of her hair as she looks down at me.

"It's Sunday," she says, like it's some kind of revelation.

I know what day it is. I've reminded myself ten times over.

"Just for today, let's not work. Let's take today off," she pleads, her thumbs brushing over my skin. "Just one day. We can swim in the lake. Or fish. Or just lie in the sun and do nothing. I seriously want to relax and do nothing."

Her smile is all sweetness, all warmth, but something in my chest twists.

"And then what?" I ask, voice rougher than I mean it to be.

Her brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"After—" I sit up, forcing her back just enough to meet her eyes. "—you've relaxed. What happens then?"

The auction is over. Her debt's paid. She doesn't owe me a damn thing anymore—not

her time, not her body, not the return of my love.

So what the hell happens now? I need to know. I can't let her leave my bed until I have my answer.

Lily stares at me, lips parted. For a second, she doesn't move. Then she blinks, slow, like she's turning my words over in her head.

"Isn't it obvious?" she finally says, voice small. "Or, am I assuming after everything that happened last night? Maybe this... isn't something you want to continue. You don't really seem like the kind of guy who would fool around."

My brows slam down. What?

She laughs then—a quiet, nervous sound that shouldn't hit me as hard as it does. But it does. It punches through me, sharp and bright, and suddenly my heart is hammering against my ribs like it's trying to break free.

"Fool around?" The words come out rough, edged with something too close to disbelief.

Before she can blink, I'm rolling her beneath me, pressing her into the mattress, my body caging hers. She gasps, but there's no fear in those golden-brown eyes—just heat and need.

"You think that's what this is?" I growl, leaning down until my lips brush the shell of her ear. "That I could be the kind of man who fucks a woman like it means nothing?"

Her breath hitches. She immediately shakes her head, and the tension in my limbs loosens.

“I’m not the type to fool around, Lily. When I find the one—” My thumb traces her bottom lip, and my tongue runs along my own. “—I settle. And you? There’s no question about it. You’re it.”

Her eyes widen, but a smile starts creeping in, slow and sweet and smug.

“So,” I murmur, dragging my knuckles down her throat, “question is—can you handle me? Knowing I won’t let go? Knowing our differences don’t mean shit to me?”

Her hands slide up my chest, fingertips tracing every ridge of muscle, every scar, like she’s relearning me. When they reach my jaw, she cups my face, her thumbs brushing over my stubble.

“Prove it,” she whispers, wiggling under me just enough to make my blood roar. “Show me how bad you want me.”

After last night, she should know that all she has to do is beg me for whatever she wants, and I’ll happily give it to her.

Right now, she’s playing safe. Avoiding the act carefully.

Little minx. Not that it matters. If she lights up as quickly as she had the night before, I won’t have to wait for long before she’s pleading for more.

I don’t hesitate. My mouth crashes down on hers, swallowing her gasp. Pressing my weight against her, her moan vibrates against my teeth.

I want to finish what we started. Make her mine.

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Lily

Silas's mouth is hot and demanding on my throat, teeth scraping just hard enough to make me shiver. He's marking me, claiming me, like he wants the whole town to know I'm his.

I can't lie, I love it.

Not only is this man the grumpiest giant I've ever met, but he's also got a jealous and possessive side to him.

His hands push under my shirt, rough palms skimming up my ribs, and I arch into his touch before he even reaches my breasts. The fabric is gone in one impatient tug, tossed somewhere behind him, and then he's just looking at me—eyes raking over my bare skin like he's starving.

“Perfect,” he growls, his voice rough enough to send heat pooling low in my belly.

I huff a laugh, even as my cheeks flush. “Hardly impressive, actually.”

His gaze snaps to mine, sharp. “I love them.”

Silas doesn't waste time before his mouth is on me, tongue circling one nipple in slow, torturous strokes before he sucks it deep.

A moan escapes from my throat as pleasure sparks straight down my spine, my toes curling against the sheets. His hand kneads my other breast, thumb brushing over the

peak in time with the pull of his lips, and I swear I can feel it everywhere—like he’s lighting me up from the inside out.

“Silas—” I gasp, fingers tangling in his hair.

When he pulls off with a pop, he flicks his tongue against my other nipple and blows. “Will you let me inside, Lily? My fingers felt so good, but I want to give you more. Fuck, so much more.”

My pussy flutters at the promise in his voice. Sounding so sure of himself, I don’t need to ask him what he has to offer. I can feel his cock throbbing against the thin strip of my panties. By now, I’m sure I’ve soaked the cotton all the way through.

If my arousal isn’t what does the trick, it’s his own wetting both layers, keeping us separated each time he grinds against me.

“I will,” I promise him, my words breathless. “Please...”

His mouth curves, and one smile is all he has to show me to steal my heart. He’s so satisfied with one word.

“Please, what, Lily?”

Squirming beneath him, my hips try to lift. “I want you inside.”

Stating the obvious, I’m relieved all at once when he shoves my panties aside, introducing his fingers like it’s the first time all over again.

Before, I caved and hit my limit far too soon. Not wanting this to end, I try not to chase the pleasure that comes with his fingers stroking me where I’m most sensitive.

It's like he's already memorized my body. It's unfair, and I know I'm entering a losing battle.

His fingers still working me with slow, maddening precision, he pulls back just enough to shove his boxers down, freeing his cock in one rough motion. My breath hitches at the sight—thick, flushed a deep, needy red, the head already glistening, his slit slick with arousal.

He gives himself a firm squeeze, dragging his thumb over the tip, and I whimper at the way his grip tightens, like he's imagining it's me instead.

He's perfect.

His fingers finally leave me, and I whine at the loss—but then he's there, the blunt head of his cock dragging through my slick, teasing me with just the barest pressure. He smears my arousal over himself, groaning low in his throat as he coats his length in it.

Without the patience to remove my underwear, his attention is glued to my current state.

“Look at you,” he murmurs, his voice rough. “So fucking wet for me already.”

His tip catches at my entrance, and my hips jerk instinctively, seeking more, but he holds himself back, that infuriating control still in place.

He reaches forward, his palm sliding over my stomach in a slow, possessive stroke—like he's savoring the thought of what's to come, and the result of acting so recklessly.

“Gonna fill you up so well,” he promises, his thumb pressing just below my navel, as

if he can already imagine the way I'll take him. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I nod, breathless, my fingers digging into the sheets.

He doesn't make me wait any longer.

With a sharp, throaty groan, he pushes his way inside, stretching me open with three shallow thrusts before finishing me off with one forward push.

I cry out, back arching as he bottoms out, his hips flush against mine. For a second, neither of us moves—just the heavy, shared panting between us, the unbearable heat of him buried deep.

Then he pulls back, almost out, before repeating the same motion. Three to tease, and one to leave me clawing at the threads beneath us.

Once he connects the dots that I can survive him, my vision whites out at the edges as he gives up on the shallow jerks of his hips.

"Fuck—" His voice is wrecked, his hands gripping my hips hard enough to ache. "Knew you'd feel like this. Knew you'd take me so perfectly."

I can only gasp, fists shaking against the bunched-up sheets as he starts a punishing rhythm, each thrust wringing another broken sound from my lips.

The bed creaks beneath us, a sharp, rhythmic protest with every snap of his hips. The sound is obscene, loud enough to disturb the peace outside.

I can't worry too much, not when my thoughts dissolve into static each time he slams back in.

Moaning his name, my vocabulary grows limited as I forget how to speak. Releasing the sheets, I reach for him and drag his body down against mine. His thrusts morph into grinding our hips together, and I can feel it. The approach of another orgasm.

This one isn't like the ones I experience through masturbation. I can feel the pleasure digging deep into my stomach, reaching a depth unimaginable.

Chest flush against mine, his uneven breathing brushes my ear, followed by the throaty moans that leave his lips.

His voice is rough in my ear, every ragged sound sending sparks down my spine. The slap of skin on skin is relentless, each one punctuated by my own breathless cries, the wet, filthy sound of him moving inside me.

It's an experience I could never have imagined. One I wouldn't give up for the world. One I'm going to grow addicted to.

When his rhythm finally fractures, when his groan shudders through me, I swear I can feel the sound vibrating against my ribs like thunder. My body stretches to take him deeper, and I lift my hips to do just that.

"I'm close—" The words tear from my throat, raw and desperate, as pleasure coils tight in my belly. His cock drags against every sensitive spot inside me, relentless, merciless, and my walls clench around him tight, but it doesn't slow him down.

His thrusts only grow rougher, deeper, enough to make me dizzy.

A sob breaks free as the orgasm crashes over me, white-hot and all-consuming. My body arches, fingers clawing at the sheets, but he pins me down, his grip bruising, his voice a growl against my ear. "Fuck, Lily. Fuck. "

Every pulse of my climax drags another ragged moan from my lips, my thighs trembling as he drives into me, chasing his pleasure. His rhythm turns erratic, his breath harsh against my skin, and then—

A low, guttural sound rips from his chest as he buries himself deep. I feel him spill, hot and thick, and my body instinctively clenches around him, milking every last drop. He groans, fingers digging into my hips as he lifts them, angling me just so, making sure it takes.

“Good girl,” he rasps, and the praise sends another shudder through my body. His release fills me, and I fight to catch my breath as I adjust to the overwhelming fullness—the filthy, perfect rightness of it.

When he finally stills, his weight heavy and satisfying on top of me, all I can do is gasp, my heartbeat thundering in my ears.

Then, slowly, he pulls back, bracing himself on his forearms as he looks down at me.

His eyes are heavy, filled with something deeper than desire.

Something that makes my chest ache. The way he watches me, like I’m the only thing in the world worth seeing, makes it impossible not to smile, even as my lips tremble.

He groans softly as he pulls out, and I bite back a whimper at the loss. But before I can protest, he’s shifting, pressing my knees together with a firm but gentle hand.

I laugh breathlessly. “What are you doing?”

“You read me like a book when you first entered my home.” His lips quirk as he reaches for a pillow, sliding it beneath my hips with deliberate care. His fingers trail along my thigh, sending shivers in their wake. “I do want a family.”

My breath catches as I put the pieces together pretty quickly.

He leans down, pressing a kiss to my knee—so tender it makes my heart throb. “Not two or three, though. I’m thinking four or five.”

A laugh bubbles up, half-disbelieving, half-thrilled. “Ambitious one, aren’t you?”

His gaze locks onto mine, unwavering. “I do need a wife, too, to paint the perfect future.”

This guy. Does he hear himself? So impatient, skipping all the normal steps in a relationship.

I’m no better, grinning like a fool and nodding like I’m as crazy as he is.

His thumb brushes my cheek, and I turn my face into his touch, pressing a kiss to his palm. “You bought me for a weekend, but I think you got a lifetime instead.”

His smile is slow, devastating. “Best deal I ever made.”

And just like that, I know—I’d let him bargain for my soul, if this is what he offers in return.

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Silas

Epilogue

The park is loud with laughter—our laughter, tangled up in the shrieks of three little hellions tearing through the grass.

Liam, the oldest, is already scaling the jungle gym like he's got something to prove.

Ellie's right behind him, pigtails flying, her stubborn little mouth set in that same determined pout Lily wears when she's pissed.

And then there's Ben, the toddler of the bunch for now, wobbling after them with all the grace of a drunk duckling.

I should be watching them closer. I know I should. But my eyes keep dragging back to the woman beside me, her swollen feet propped up on the stroller, her hands resting on the curve of her stomach—our fourth soon to come.

Lily groans, tilting her head back against the bench. "I swear, Silas, this is the last one. My ankles look like overstuffed sausages."

I grin, reaching over to squeeze her knee. "You say that every time."

"This time I mean it." She glares, but there's no heat. Just that soft, exhausted glow that makes my chest ache. The sun catches the gold in her hair, the flush on her cheeks, the way her lips twitch like she's fighting a smile.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I murmur. Every time she gets this glow, I struggle to keep my hands to myself. It’s no wonder that she’s exhausted all the time.

She swats at me, bashful. “Watch the kids. You stare at me plenty as it is.”

But I don’t. Not yet. I steal another second—just one—to memorize her like this. Wild-haired, radiant, and all mine.

Ever since she’s been put on maternity leave, I’ve spent every second with her. Rarely in the shop, I might as well be on vacation myself.

Instead of spending all our free time in the bedroom, we’ve stopped at parks when the kids don’t want to swim. We used to go on strolls, but Lily can’t go too far before getting taken out of commission.

Tonight, once everyone is knocked out, maybe I can change that. I can appreciate her pregnancy glow up close.

Then Ellie screeches like a wild animal, and Ben faceplants into the mulch, giving me no choice but to play referee over the slide they’ve worked their way toward instead of fantasizing sexy times with my wife.

Lily sighs at my side, but there isn’t any weight to it. “Go be a dad, hotshot.”

Moving to stand, I press my lips to her forehead and enjoy the light sound of her laugh. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Reaching up to cup my cheek, she drags me down to her lips like she can’t help herself. One kiss turns to two before being interrupted by another wail.

“Good luck,” she muses, slowly pulling away.

I'm going to need it. I'll also need all the strength in the world not to convince these children how good of an idea it is to cut our day short to go back home so they can take a nap.

Another few hours. I'll survive. It'll be what makes waiting worthwhile in the end.