



Dad Bod Snow Job (Dad Bod Christmas)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: This Christmas, one curvy elf is determined to teach a grumpy lumberjack that hes the whole package.

Holly: When life hands me lemons, Im making spiked eggnog and heading back to my hometown. My new boss? Nico Barrett the burliest Christmas tree farmer this side of the North Pole. He may be twelve years older and grumpier than a bear with a thorn in his paw, but Ive had a crush on this flannel-wearing mountain man since I was wearing training bras.

Sure, my perfect sister dated him first, but she never appreciated how this gentle giant filled out his work shirts. Nico is XXXL of pure lumberjack goodness! He might prefer the company of his dog to people, but this Christmas, Im ready to show this self-conscious mountain man that his North Pole is exactly what I want for Christmas.

Nico: I have enough problems trying to keep my business afloat... until Holly crashes into my life armed with dangerous curves, stubborn determination, and a smile that could melt the polar ice caps.

The curvy firecracker makes my North Pole stand at attention, but a woman like Holly deserves better than this grumpy lumber-chunk with a Dad Bod and trust issues.

Now shes snowed in at my cabin, and my traitor of a dog has switched sides for her belly rubs. Holly keeps eyeing me like Im the biggest present under the tree, and my willpower is crumbling. Soon, I'm making promises that will land us both on Santas naughty list. Permanently.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Holly

“Rejected again?” Mrs. Jenkins slides a fresh mug of peppermint hot chocolate beside my crumpled resume. “Their loss, honey. Though if you're looking for work...”

She leans over the diner counter, voice dropping to a staged whisper reserved for Grade A gossip. “Bennett's Tree Farm is hemorrhaging staff. The third-generation business might not make it to Christmas.”

My hand freezes mid-stir, peppermint candy cane dissolving forgotten in my mug. After three weeks of rejection letters and dwindling savings, this could be my chance. “Nico Bennett's place?”

“Poor man's struggling. Equipment's breaking down, can't keep workers, and these big box stores selling plastic trees?” She clucks her tongue. “Takes more than muscles and good looks to run a business these days.”

Nico Bennett. The man who'd made my awkward pre-teen years bearable. My sister's ex-boyfriend would slip me hot chocolate and teach me the names of different evergreens, but that was before things went sour with Sarah.

My marketing brain whirs to life. Small business, established customer base, untapped digital markets...

“Social media campaigns could triple his holiday sales.” I pull up Instagram on my phone. Zero posts. Not even a website. “Only a basic online ordering system, no

delivery service...”

“Sounds fancy.” Mrs. Jenkins winks. “But that boy needs help now. Two employees quit right after Thanksgiving.”

I slap cash on the diner counter to cover my bill and tip, sweep my resume into my purse, and bolt home to slip into my lucky candy cane sweater dress. The dress might be overkill for selling Christmas trees, but looking the part could convince Nico to hire me.

My boots crunch through fresh snow as I climb the winding path to Bennett's. Pine and balsam fill my lungs, flooding me with memories. God, I'd forgotten this—real air, room to breathe, friendly faces nodding hello.

After what happened last month... Well, some wake-up calls come with flashing lights and sirens. Sometimes, they send you running home to start over.

The frosted window catches my reflection, and for once, I don't look away. The candy cane-striped sweater dress skims my curves like it was made for me.

Red hair tumbles past my shoulders, wild and free, staging a rebellion. No more drowning in shapeless sweaters—this body's done playing hide and seek. I'm done hiding who I am. The mobile florist business plan on my laptop proves that.

The door flies open. My heart stops as Nico Bennett fills the doorframe, all six-plus feet of flannel-clad mountain man towering over me.

His dark hair is a mess, longer than I remember, and the silver flecks in his beard have no business looking that good. His winter-blue eyes widen with recognition, then narrow as he studies my face.

“Holly?” His voice roughens like whiskey over woodsmoke. “Holly Carter?”

My stomach flips. Ten years since the messy breakup with Sarah sent him retreating into his mountain man solitude. Will he see me as my own person now or just another Carter woman ready to complicate his life?

“Hi, Nico.” The words catch in my throat as his grip tightens on the door frame, knuckles white against weathered wood.

“What brings you back to Riley's Ridge?”

“Mrs. Jenkins mentioned you might need holiday help.” I lift my chin, channeling every ounce of confidence I can muster.

He steps back, a silent invitation to enter. The movement brings him closer, his broad frame making the doorway shrink. Heat radiates off him as I slip past, my shoulder barely brushing his chest.

The shop interior stops me in my tracks. Rustic would be a kind description. Bare wooden walls stretch upward, lonely strings of lights draped like sad afterthoughts. Noble firs and blue spruces prop against every available surface, while two men in neon safety vests wrestle a massive fir through the back door.

Nico kicks a box of ornaments from my path. “Why leave the city?” His gruff question comes with another protective gesture as he guides me around a precarious stack of wreaths, his hand hovering near my elbow. “Thought all you Carter women were corporate types.”

“For heaven's sake, this tree is asymmetrical!”

A woman in designer boots, whose tone could strip paint, taps an impatient rhythm

against the wood floor, pointing at a Douglas fir.

“Ma'am, I understand your concerns—” Nico strides toward her, his shoulders bunching beneath his flannel shirt. “Let me show you another option.”

“I've already looked at six trees!” The customer's voice rises another octave. “And each one has been worse than the last. Do you even know what you're doing?”

Three years of handling nightmare clients kick in before I can overthink it. “Excuse me,” I step forward. “Sorry to interrupt. You're looking for a statement piece. Something that will wow the neighbors?”

The woman blinks, momentarily startled out of her tirade. Behind me, Nico radiates heat like a wall of warmth, his massive presence blocking out the rest of the shop.

“Well, yes, but?—”

“You're going to love this.” I gesture to the Douglas fir like I'm unveiling a masterpiece. “The natural asymmetry? That's what makes it perfect for creating depth in your display. When you're decorating a room, do you want everything symmetrical? Of course not. You want visual interest.”

I run my hand along one of the branches, demonstrating how the needles catch the light. Three marketing pitches about optimal ornament placement and lighting angles tumble from my lips. Each time I move, Nico shifts his stance as if ready to catch me if I stumble.

The customer's expression shifts from skeptical to considering. “But what about the bare spot on this side?”

“That's not a bare spot—it's an opportunity.” I grab a box of lights from a nearby

display.

The teenage employee is gawking, but Nico waves him away, his attention fixed on my sales pitch.

“Add strategic lighting here, and those variations become artistic shadow play. The fuller side faces the window, while this side leaves room for your special ornaments to shine.”

The air crackles with Nico's attention. My skin prickles with awareness as I work, but I don't dare look at him. Instead, I drape a frosted garland across a display, matching it perfectly to the tree. The safety-vested workers pause their tree wrestling to watch, exchanging looks when Nico ignores their attempts to get his attention.

“Frame your window with this and add these remote-controlled lights.” I grab a stunning silver and crystal wreath. “This piece above the window? Your neighbors won't just see a tree. They'll see a magazine-worthy Christmas display.”

The woman laughs. “That would show them, wouldn't it?”

Ten minutes later, the bell chimes farewell as she leaves, arms laden with her “asymmetrical” tree and enough decorations to light up half of Riley's Ridge. My saleswoman's smile holds until she disappears down the steps.

“I'm sorry if I overstepped,” I say, turning to find Nico much closer than expected.

His gaze flicks to my dress and lingers a moment too long before darting away. “That was...” His voice trails off as he steps closer. His cologne mingles with coffee and winter air, making my head spin. “Impressive.”

“Thanks.” I smooth my dress, hyper-aware of his proximity. “So, about that job?”

“The city must've paid better than minimum wage plus commission.” He runs a hand through his hair, messing it further. “Corporate marketing to Christmas trees is quite a change.”

“Good things grow in small towns.” The words spill out before I can stop them.

His eyes lock on mine, searching. “Office is this way,” he says, gesturing toward a door. “If you still want the job.”

The energy in the shop shifts as we walk. Employees scatter from Nico's path, their whispers falling silent. The safety-vested workers pause mid-lift with a Fraser fir between them, waiting for instructions. Nico doesn't even glance their way.

The gangly teenager pipes up about a late delivery, his voice cracking. Nico's hand brushes against my lower back as he guides me past them, ignoring their startled looks. No one moves until we pass, like trees bending away from a storm.

The office makes a broom closet look spacious. Nico's broad shoulders block the doorway as he flicks on the light. “Watch your step.” His voice roughens as I slip past him, the cramped space forcing me closer than is deemed comfortable.

One desk dominates the tiny room, its surface buried under paperwork. Two chairs squeeze in like afterthoughts. The scent of coffee and pine intensifies in the enclosed space, mixing with something distinctly Nico.

“Have a seat.” He clears a stack of invoices from the visitor's chair. “Unless the corporate world spoiled you for folding chairs and bad lighting.”

The lamplight catches the silver in his hair, and my fingers itch to brush through it. “I think I'll survive.”

I sink into the chair, gripping my purse to keep my hands still. I got the job. Phase one of Operation New Life is underway. The seasonal job will cover my expenses while I develop my mobile florist business plan. And if I help save Bennett's Tree Farm along the way, it'll be a bonus.

“Why come back to Riley's Ridge?” Nico shuffles through a drawer, not meeting my eyes. “Most people don't trade high rises for Christmas trees.”

He hands me the employment forms. The paper crinkles beneath my fingers. “Maybe I missed the trees.”

“Holly.” My name in his deep voice shoots warmth through my chest. “The truth.”

“The city wasn't...” Images flash—concrete walls, endless meetings, Sarah's perfectly curated life I was supposed to want. “It wasn't home.”

His hands still over the paperwork. Something flickers in his eyes before he looks down again. “And Riley's Ridge is?”

“It could be.” My heart pounds as his gaze lifts to mine. “With the right opportunity.”

My pen scratches across the paper while Nico studies inventory lists, his massive frame making the desk look like doll furniture. Everything about him is overwhelming—his height, presence, the way his eyes keep finding mine despite his attempts to focus on the paperwork.

Am I making a terrible mistake? How can I focus on saving his business when being near him scrambles my thoughts?

“Eight AM tomorrow.” He stands as I finish the last form, and the office shrinks further. “Dress warm. The mountain's unforgiving in December.”

“Will do. Don’t worry about me.” I rise too quickly, my boot catching on the chair leg. I pitch forward with a squeak.

Nico moves faster than a man his size should. His hands catch my waist, steadying me against his chest. Time freezes. His heart thunders against my palms. My fingers curl into his flannel shirt without permission.

“Sorry!” I straighten but don't step back. I can't with the chair behind me and Nico's warmth flooding my senses. “I swear I'm usually more coordinated than this. That's a lie. I'm always this clumsy. Good thing you're solid as a tree trunk.”

“Be careful.” His hands linger at my waist for a heartbeat too long before dropping away. The loss hits like a cold wind. “Working here is dangerous enough without?—”

“Without me tripping over my own feet?” His gruff concern wraps around me like a blanket. “I'll try not to face-plant into any Christmas trees.”

He makes a sound that might be a laugh—or possibly indigestion—it's hard to tell with the grumpy lumberjack type.

Not that I mind. A girl doesn't wear a dress that makes her look like a candy cane unless she's hoping to catch someone's attention.

I edge toward the door before I do something stupid like lean into him again.

“Wait.” He runs a hand through his hair. “You should probably see the operation before tomorrow. If you still want the job after the tour.”

My pulse skips. “Lead the way, boss.”

His jaw tightens at the word “boss,” but he gestures for me to precede him. “Bundle up. Most of it's outside.”

I dig mittens from my purse, hyperaware of his presence, as he shrugs into a work coat that makes his shoulders look even broader. My phone weighs heavy in my pocket. The farm's nonexistent social media presence begs for attention, but something tells me Nico Bennett needs more time before listening to my marketing plans.

Baby steps, Holly. Win him over first.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Nico

Holly Carter raises her phone, framing the giant spruce against the winter sky. Sunlight catches her hair, turning it to fire. My fingers itch to brush away the snowflakes settling on those red waves. The shade is stirring memories of a twelve-year-old girl with braces and braids, trailing behind her big sister, hiding behind books, and stealing glances at me.

The candy cane dress peeks out under her coat, a splash of Christmas cheer against winter white. There is no trace of the shy kid anymore. She moves with confidence and pulls at something in my chest.

“This tree must be at least fifty years old.” She circles the trunk, boots crunching in fresh snow. “Imagine the stories it could tell.”

“Sixty-three. My grandfather planted it the year he bought the land.”

She beams up at me. Christ. No one should look that appealing with a bright red nose and mittened hands. The years between us shrink and stretch with every smile—too many when I think about her age, not enough when she looks at me like that.

“That's exactly the kind of story your customers would love! Mind if I film a quick video?”

Before I can respond, she's pointing her phone at me. “Tell me about your grandfather.”

“I don't do social media.” The words come out harsher than intended. The bank's latest letter burns in my back pocket, a reminder that old-fashioned methods might not be enough anymore.

“Good thing I do, then.” She lowers the phone, but that sunshine smile doesn't dim. Nothing like Sarah's calculated charm—Holly's warmth reaches her eyes. “Because this place? It's magic. And people should know about it.”

I want to argue. Social media won't fix broken equipment or pay the bank loans. But she's already moving down the path, phone raised to capture the snow-laden branches. My heart kicks against my ribs as her boot hits an icy patch.

“Careful.” I catch up in two strides, my hand finding her elbow. Her small frame fits against my side like she was made for me. Dangerous thinking. “Path gets treacherous here.”

“My hero.” She tucks her free hand into my arm like it belongs, making me feel like a goddamn Victorian gentleman instead of a lumberjack with too much gray in his beard. “So, tell me about the different types of trees while I pretend not to be terrified of falling.”

“You're not scared.” The words slip out before I can stop them.

“Oh?” Her eyebrow arches as she steadies herself against my arm. “What makes you so sure?”

Because you're fearless. You walked into my messy shop and made it yours in ten minutes flat. Because you're twenty-four, full of potential, and the last thing you need is to hitch your star to a sinking ship like Bennett's Tree Farm.

When I was twenty-four, I was dating her sister, convinced I knew everything. Now

I'm thirty-six with gray in my beard and a business drowning in debt—the years between us stretch like a chasm.

“A hunch.” I guide her around a slick section of the path. The smell of vanilla and cinnamon drifts from her hair. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs and making my head spin. “Norway spruce like the old one back there. Blue spruce. Fraser fir. Each has its own character.”

“Like you.” The words are soft, almost lost in the mountain air.

My step falters. Holly can't say things like that. She can't look at me with those bright eyes like I'm an answer instead of a complication. Sarah used to look at me like I was her ticket out of Riley's Ridge. But Holly looks at me like she sees something worth staying for.

“Oh!” She releases my arm to dart toward a small clearing, and my side feels cold without her. “This would be perfect for photos. You could set up a cute backdrop and some lights. Families would love it.”

Her enthusiasm pulls at something long dormant in my chest. Through her eyes, my run-down farm transforms into something magical. But magic doesn't pay bills. It doesn't erase the twelve years between us or the complications her last name brings.

Movement in my cabin window catches my attention. Bear's massive black form presses against the glass, watching Holly with unusual interest.

“Is that your dog?” She bounces on her toes, nearly slipping again. My hand finds her elbow automatically, my body betraying my determination to keep a distance. “What's his name?”

“Bear.” His name comes out gruff. Like owner, like dog. “He's not friendly with

strangers.”

“Is that right?” That sunshine smile blazes at me, and this close, I catch another wave of cinnamon and vanilla.

Her eyes dance with mischief as she steps away, no doubt already plotting her next video.

“The wholesale lot's through there.” I point to it, desperate to maintain professional distance. “Equipment shed's behind it. Mind the ice.”

“Got it.” She's already moving, phone raised. “Oh! You could do virtual tours for people who can't make the drive. Maybe online ordering for wholesale clients—” She stops mid-spin, catching my expression. “Too much?”

“The job's selling trees,” I say, my voice gruffer than intended. “Not fixing my business.”

She tilts her head, studying me with those too-bright eyes. “Why not both?”

Because you make me want things I can't have. Watching you try to save this place will break something in me.

The bank statement in my back pocket feels heavier. Three generations of Bennetts have run this farm. None of them needed social media or virtual tours. But none faced competition from big box stores or the convenience of artificial trees.

“We should head back.” Storm clouds gather over the mountain. “You'll need proper boots tomorrow. And gloves. Real ones, not those mittens.”

“Worried about me?” She falls into step beside me, closer than necessary.

Yes. “Just being practical.”

Her laugh wraps around me like warm honey. “Sure it is. Like kicking all those boxes out of my way was purely practical.”

Heat crawls up my neck. She's too observant, too bright, too young. Too tempting.

“The staff's gone home,” I say instead of answering. “Lock up's at five.”

“Oh.” She toys with her phone, a blush creeping up her cheeks. “I spotted a diner on my way up. If you wanted to grab hot chocolate? You could tell me more about the wholesale operation.”

“I don't—” The word 'fraternize' dies on my tongue as she glances up, snowflakes caught in her lashes. She immediately looks down again, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Sorry, that was probably inappropriate.” Her voice softens. “It's just... even lumberjacks need coffee breaks, right?”

Every reason I should say no crowds my throat. The age gap. The business. The whole damn town watching. But seeing her in my world, bringing color and life to everything she touches...

“Tomorrow,” I say firmly. “Eight AM. Proper boots.”

Her face lights up, and something warm unfurls in my chest. “I mean, yes. Eight AM. I'll bring coffee.”

The smile she gives me could power the whole damn mountain. She practically bounces on her toes like it's Christmas morning, and I just gave her everything on her

list. Before I can react, she leans in and presses a quick, soft kiss to my cheek.

"You won't regret this!" she whispers, already pulling away, pink staining her cheeks.

The words—and the ghost of her lips—hit somewhere beneath my ribs.

She hurries down the path toward her car, that ridiculous dress swishing beneath her coat. My body moves on instinct when she hits an icy patch, but she catches herself. The shy smile she sends over her shoulder sucker punches me right in the chest.

I watch until her taillights disappear before heading to my office. Focusing on invoices and bank statements feels impossible. A text from an unknown number lights up my phone.

“Found these boots! Crisis averted. See you at 8! ”

The Christmas tree emoji mocks me. I should delete the text. Should set boundaries. Keep things professional.

Instead, I save her number and grab my coat, hoping that the effort of moving trees will knock some sense into me because Holly Carter is sunshine and Christmas spirit and everything I can't afford to want.

And I'm already in trouble.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Holly

“Y ou've got this,” I mutter, blowing a strand of hair from my face. “Only a few more feet of lights, and then I can show Nico the Instagram mock-ups.”

The ladder wobbles beneath me as I stretch to wrap another strand of twinkling lights around the massive display tree. My first official task as Bennett's Tree Farm's newest employee—try not to die while decorating.

Late afternoon sun streams through the freshly cleaned windows, making the newly organized shop sparkle. Not bad for my first day.

The temporary shop looks nothing like the chaos I walked into yesterday. Ornaments sorted by color and theme line the shelves I discovered under boxes of tangled tinsel. Price tags hang neatly on every pre-cut tree.

Even the ancient cash register sports a festive bow—though I'm hoping my social media pitch might convince Nico to upgrade to something from this century.

My hand brushes the spot on my arm where Nico steadied me yesterday, and warmth blooms in my chest. Who knew coming home would lead to working for my teenage crush? Although “crush” barely describes how my body reacts around Nico.

Get it together, Holly. Sure, Nico Bennett starring in my teenage dreams was one thing, but now I need to be professional. This job is about building my savings and launching my business. If I can prove my marketing skills by helping his farm succeed... that's just good strategy. No matter how distracting his forearms are.

A sharp bark draws my attention. Through the frost-kissed window, I glimpse Bear, Nico's massive German Shepherd, stalking toward customers browsing the pre-cut trees.

But I'm a bit preoccupied with my own predicament. My foot is caught in a loop of lights, and suddenly, I'm doing an awkward dance six feet up. "Come on, you sparkly little menace."

I tug at the strand wrapped around my boot. The ladder wobbles precariously. I grab the top rung, desperately holding on so I don't crash into the carefully arranged displays below.

This is what I get for thinking I could handle the giant display tree solo. At least the lights aren't plugged in. Yet. Although electrocution might be less embarrassing than having my new boss find me trussed up like a Christmas turkey on my first day.

A blast of cold air hits my legs as the door swings open. Heavy boots thud against the wooden floor, followed by the click of claws. I freeze mid-wobble, still tangled in the string of lights around my ankle.

Nico fills the doorway, snowflakes dusting his dark hair and broad shoulders. His presence makes the shop feel smaller somehow, like all the oxygen gets sucked toward him. Bear pads in beside him, both of them taking in my predicament.

I try to look casual, like getting trapped by Christmas lights is totally part of my decorating strategy. The ladder creaks ominously beneath me.

"Hi!" I chirp, aiming for professional but landing somewhere between breathless and squeaky. "I'm almost finished putting the finishing touches on our main display. What do you think of the?—"

Nico's sharp blue eyes sweep the room, taking in the transformed shop. His expression remains unreadable, but something flickers in his gaze as he notices the well-organized shelves, the clean windows, and the neat price tags.

Finally, his gaze lands on me again. He breaks the silence with a deep sigh. "You're going to fall."

"Not a chance!" I beam down at him despite my precarious perch. I straighten my spine, determined to prove I can handle a simple decorating task without disaster striking. "I'm adding some festive flair to match all the improvements. Have you seen the new display window? And wait until I show you my ideas for?—"

Nico doesn't move. He stands there, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching me with those intense blue eyes. The corner of his mouth twitches—not quite a smirk, but close enough to make me want to prove him wrong even more.

I turn back to the lights, trying to focus on untangling the strand wrapped around the top branches. But his presence looms larger than life behind me, making my fingers clumsy. The ladder sways slightly as I shift my weight.

Bear circles the ladder, his tail giving a tentative wag. Yesterday's warning about his aggression toward strangers echoes in my mind, but those amber eyes look more curious than threatening.

"You could help, you know," I suggest brightly, glancing down at Nico. "Instead of standing there looking broody."

His eyebrows lift. "And miss the show?"

"Oh, so Mr. Grumpy Lumberjack has a sense of humor." I wiggle my trapped foot, but the lights only tangle tighter.

He shifts below, boots scuffing against the wooden floor. “Holly?—”

“I’ve got it!” But I don’t. The ladder gives an ominous creak.

I admit defeat and start my careful descent.

Three steps down, Bear moves closer. His ears flatten against his head, and his amber eyes lock onto me. The tail that was wagging a moment ago is now stiff, and I realize how sharp the teeth are in those strong jaws.

My foot hovers mid-step. “Nico?”

“Bear, heel.” Nico’s clipped response does nothing to calm my nerves.

He moves smoothly, crouching to grip Bear’s collar. His muscles flex beneath his flannel shirt as he holds the massive dog in check. Bear lets out a low growl, and Nico’s jaw tightens. His piercing blue eyes dart between me and his dog, alert and focused.

But something in Bear’s posture—the way his ears keep twitching forward despite his growl—tells me there’s more curiosity than threat. Keeping my movements slow and deliberate, I lower myself to Bear’s level, lights still trailing from my ankle.

“Hey there, handsome. You’re just doing your job, aren’t you? Making sure no one causes trouble in your territory.”

Bear’s ears perk up slightly. His amber eyes stay locked on mine, but the growl softens to a curious rumble.

“That’s right, you’re such a good boy. So protective and strong.” I keep my hand low, palm up, letting him see I’m not a threat.

Nico's grip on Bear's collar hasn't loosened. He's in front of Bear, angled toward me; the protective stance sends a flutter through my stomach that has nothing to do with fear.

Bear's nose twitches as he scents the air. His tail gives another hesitant wag.

“See? We can be friends. I bet you're the best security guard this farm has ever had.”

The praise works magic. Bear's posture relaxes, and his tail picks up speed. He takes a tentative step forward, straining against Nico's hold.

“Easy,” Nico warns, a note of surprise in his deep voice.

I hold perfectly still as Bear stretches his neck, nose inching closer to my outstretched hand. His breath is warm against my palm as he takes in my scent.

“That's it, sweetheart. Just getting to know each other.”

The massive dog gives my fingers a delicate sniff, then another. His tail is wagging enthusiastically now, and his ears have perked up fully. Suddenly, he pushes forward eagerly, nearly pulling free of Nico's grip in his sudden enthusiasm to get closer to me.

“He never does that,” Nico says, his deep voice rough with disbelief. “Bear doesn't trust anyone.”

Pride blooms in my chest. I can't help the grin that spreads across my face as I scratch under Bear's chin, earning more enthusiastic tail wags.

“What can I say?” I quip, feeling bold from my success. “I have a way with grumpy guys.”

The words slip out before I can stop them. I bite my lip, sneaking a glance at Nico through my lashes. His blue eyes have gone soft around the edges as he watches Bear practically melt under my fingers. The corner of his mouth twitches like he's fighting a smile.

Nico reaches across, his fingers brushing my ankle as he untangles the lights. The touch sends electricity zipping through my body. I bite my lip to hold back a gasp.

“You're something else, Holly Carter,” he says, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine.

Bear nudges my hand, demanding more attention. “Well, your dog seems to think I'm okay.”

Nico releases Bear's collar slowly, like he's still not quite sure this is real. When Bear immediately flops onto his side, exposing his belly for rubs, Nico laughs. The sound is rough from disuse, but it transforms his whole face.

Oh. Oh wow. If I thought grumpy Nico was dangerous to my heart, smiling Nico is absolutely lethal.

Bear wriggles closer, shoving his head under my palm while his tail thumps a steady rhythm against the floor. I glance up to find Nico watching us, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

“It's taken him six years to warm up to the staff,” he says quietly. “Even my brother can't pet him.”

“Really?” I scratch that sweet spot behind Bear's ears, but my attention is fixed on Nico. “Maybe he just needed the right approach.”

“Maybe.” His eyes lock with mine, intense and searching. “He's got good instincts about people.”

My breath catches. Is he saying what I think he's saying? Before I can respond, Bear lets out a whine and headbutts my hip, nearly knocking me off balance.

Nico's hand shoots out to steady me, his palm warm against my lower back. The touch sends electricity zipping through my body, and I bite my lip to hold back a gasp.

“Easy there, big guy,” Nico says, but I'm not sure if he's talking to Bear or himself. His hand lingers on my back a moment longer than necessary before he slowly pulls away.

Bear looks between us, his tail still wagging, and I swear that dog is smirking.

“Right.” Nico clears his throat, taking a step back. “The trees need unloading.” His gaze sweeps the transformed shop. “You've done good work today. But maybe tackle the rest of the decorating with both feet on the ground.”

“No promises.” I grin up at him. “I have big plans for this place. Wait until you see the social media mock-ups I've been working on?—”

“Holly.” My name in his deep voice sends shivers down my spine. “One miracle at a time.”

“Persistent, remember?” I scratch Bear's ears one last time. “And now I have an ally.”

Bear's tail thumps against the floor in agreement.

“Traitor,” Nico mutters, but his voice holds a warmth I haven't heard before. He

shakes his head, walking toward the door. “Try not to let him convince you to give away all our inventory while I'm gone.”

I watch him go, absently scratching Bear's belly. Day one, and I've already won over the guard dog. Now for the bigger challenge—his equally guarded owner.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Nico

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, watching snowflakes dance in the truck's headlights. Bear's massive head rests on the center console, his amber eyes fixed on Holly's front door.

"You're pathetic, you know that?" I scratch behind his ears. "One pretty girl shows up with treats, and suddenly, you forget whose side you're on."

Bear's tail thumps against the seat.

"Don't give me that innocent act. I saw you yesterday, rolling over when you saw Holly. What happened to being the fierce guard dog?"

He huffs, and I swear he's laughing at me.

"Holly is temporary help," I say, but the words taste bitter. "As soon as she lands a fancy marketing job, she'll leave faster than you can say 'Christmas spirit.'"

Bear fixes me with those soulful eyes, head tilted.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm being realistic." I lean back, crossing my arms. "Come on, look at her. She's young, beautiful, and smart as hell. Do you think someone like that stays in Riley's Ridge? Works at a struggling tree farm with a grumpy old man?"

Bear lets out a low growl, and I ruffle his fur, seeking comfort as much as giving it.

"Guess I can't blame you, though. She has a way about her."

Snow drifts past my headlights in the pre-dawn darkness. My grip tightens on the steering wheel as Holly bounds out of her house, a wicker basket swinging from her arm. Bear's tail picks up a hopeful rhythm against the seat before she even reaches the truck.

"Good morning!" Holly climbs in, bringing a wave of vanilla and cinnamon with her, the wicker basket clutched to her chest. "I made muffins for breakfast."

I shift the truck into drive and pull away from the curb, my eyes fixed on the road as she rustles through her basket. "You didn't need to do that."

Bear stretches forward, nose twitching. "Yes, handsome boy. Special peanut butter ones for you."

"Nico?" Holly holds up a muffin in my peripheral vision. "They're still warm."

I lean forward, uncomfortably aware of the steering wheel pressing against my stomach. "I'm good, thanks. Trying to watch what I eat."

"Please. You can lift things that would break most men in half. Pretty sure one muffin won't hurt those impressive muscles of yours."

I focus on navigating the empty streets, ignoring how her casual compliment sends heat crawling up my neck. Holly's just being nice. That's all.

"Cranberry Orange or Blueberry?" she asks, waving a muffin under my nose.

The simple question catches me off guard. I don't remember the last time someone baked for me—probably my mother, a decade ago. "Either flavor is fine."

She breaks off a piece of muffin and presses the warm morsel to my lips. "Open up."

I open my mouth, hyper-aware of her closeness in the confined cab. Her fingertips barely graze my lips, but my brain short-circuits. The first taste hits—butter and berries and something else that reminds me of Sunday mornings from a lifetime ago.

"See?" Holly's soft voice is triumphant. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Something loosens in my chest, a tension I hadn't even realized existed. I roll my shoulders to shake off the unfamiliar feeling of being cared for.

"Fine," I grumble, but there's no heat in it. "One muffin. That's it."

Bear whines from the backseat, and Holly laughs, breaking his tension. "Don't worry, big guy. You're next."

I swallow hard, the spot where her fingers brushed my lip still tingling. Holly turns my carefully ordered world upside down, making everything wonderfully and terrifyingly alive.

It's like she threw open the curtains and let the sun pour in, warming places I thought had gone cold for good.

The drive passes in comfortable silence, though her presence beside me buzzes like electricity under my skin. Bear's contented sighs from the backseat match my mellowing mood. As we wind through town, the dark sky bleeds into dawn, Christmas lights twinkling in shop windows like leftover stars.

I park near our assigned spot, tension coiling at the sight of the early morning crowd. Holly leaps out, transforming from my quiet companion into Bennett's Tree Farm's secret weapon. Her boots crunch through the fresh snow as she surveys our spot.

"This is perfect! Right by the entrance where everyone can see us."

The farm hands beat us here, muscling the big trees into perfect rows before sunrise. While I haul supplies from the truck bed, Holly studies the space like a general plotting strategy. Bear trots at her heels, positioning himself between her and passing strangers. His protective instincts mirror mine—my shoulders tense when someone walks too close to her.

A young couple approaches during my battle with the tree stand. The guy wears that familiar look—someone bracing for his wallet to take a hit. Usually, I'd nod an acknowledgment and let them browse, but Holly approaches with a friendly smile.

"Good morning! Are you looking for your first Christmas tree together?"

The woman clutches her partner's arm, face brightening. "How did you know?"

"Call it instinct." Holly winks, beckoning them closer. "Plus, you radiate that 'new home' glow. Here, feel these branches—" She trails her fingers through a fir's needles. "Feel how soft? Notice how evenly spaced they are. Perfect for showcasing ornaments."

I stack the remaining trees, stealing glances as Holly weaves her magic. She transforms selling Christmas trees into something personal, like sharing secrets with old friends. She reveals details I've overlooked, making me see my inventory through fresh eyes.

"The Balsam has this amazing citrusy scent," she's saying, crushing a needle between her fingers for them to smell. "But if you're worried about needle drop, the Nordmann holds them longer."

Her enthusiasm spreads like wildfire—even the guy's expression has shifted from

resignation to interest. The couple share a knowing look, already envisioning their Christmas morning.

Watching Holly work, I see what I've missed all these years. She isn't selling trees—she's offering people their future memories. Something squeezes in my chest, and I can't blame the heavy lifting this time.

The morning rush dies down, leaving a scattered handful of trees where dozens stood before. Holly surveys our depleted stock with satisfaction before spinning toward our showcase tree.

"Time to make this Instagram-worthy!" She hauls over a box of decorations, circling the tree with a critical eye. "The top needs something special."

She stretches on her tiptoes, grasping at branches well beyond her reach. The hem of her sweater rides up, revealing a strip of skin above her jeans. I force my eyes away, suddenly fascinated by our stack of business cards.

"Nico? Little help?"

I step closer, reaching for the tinsel. "Let me get that."

"Not what I had in mind." She flashes a grin. "I need a boost."

"There's a ladder in the truck," I point out.

"This is faster." Before I can protest, she grabs my shoulders, using me for leverage. "Hold still!"

Her hair spills around my face, flooding my senses with vanilla and cinnamon. She wobbles, clutching my shoulders. My hands instinctively grip her waist, fingers

spanning her ribcage.

"Higher?" Her voice floats down, cheeks pink with exertion. "Almost there."

I lift her those crucial inches, my hands spanning her waist. She wobbles, fingers digging into my shoulders, and the movement pulls her closer. Soft curves press against my jaw, and every muscle in my body turns to stone.

"Careful," I manage, my voice rough.

"I trust you." She tosses the words out like they cost nothing while they slam into my chest with the force of a falling tree. So many years alone, she breaks through my walls with three simple words.

Blood rushes south.

My brain fights to focus on anything safe—inventory counts, delivery schedules, equipment repairs. Anything but how perfectly she fits in my hands or the warmth bleeding through her sweater.

"Thanks!" She beams, her cheeks flushed. "See? Much better than a ladder."

I grunt in response, not trusting my voice.

Holly slides down my chest, and I force myself to step back. Bear watches from his post, tail wagging in what looks suspiciously like amusement.

"Not a word," I mutter under his knowing gaze.

Movement at the edge of our lot catches my eye. Jack cuts an imposing figure—six-two of muscle wrapped in flannel and worn jeans, with unnerving eyes that see too

much. The striking woman beside him, looks like she stepped out of a magazine, her fancy coat a jarring splash of city style among my evergreens.

"Good to see you, Nico." Jack clasps my hand. "Looks like business is booming."

"Yeah, sales are up." My attention drifts to Holly as she weaves through the trees at the far end of our lot, something about her purposeful stride making my shoulders tense. "Your tree's ready whenever?—"

Jack follows my distracted gaze. "Having trouble with your seasonal help?"

"Redheads," I grumble, shaking my head. "Going to be the death of me." I catch myself before adding how she's transformed our sales. How she's transformed everything.

Jack introduces Eden before heading toward the premium section, his hand resting casually on her lower back. They move through the trees with easy familiarity, hands brushing as they examine branches. The sight settles like a weight in my chest, heavy with possibilities I keep denying myself.

Holly's laugh pierces the quiet, drawing my attention back. Bear circles her, pinecone dangling from his mouth, tail slicing the air with each wag. Something in my chest expands at the sight of them together, warm and dangerous.

Bear lunges forward, dropping the pinecone to nose at her legs until she topples backward. She lands in a puff of snow, squealing with delight as he licks her face.

"Bear! Stop!" Her giggles bounce off the trees.

I should intervene. Instead, I drink in the moment—red hair splayed across white snow, cheeks flushed with joy, eyes sparkling. She fits here, in my world, like she's

always belonged.

She rolls to her feet, and Bear pounces into action. They dart between the premium trees, her boots spraying snow, his tail raised like a victory flag. My usually stoic guard dog bounds after her like a puppy, transformed by her presence.

Just like his owner.

They vanish behind our showcase display. A tree wobbles, and my contentment evaporates. "Holly? Careful back there?—"

Bear bursts through the gap. Holly spins to avoid him, grabbing a branch to steady herself. The tree rocks. Her eyes meet mine as it tilts.

"Oh no," she cries.

Bear's barking pierces through my panic. The only two beings in my world that matter are in danger.

"Holly!" Time slows as the first tree slams into the second. Then the third. Our perfect display transforms into a line of tumbling evergreen dominoes.

My body moves before my brain catches up. I launch forward, measuring distance against gravity. Three strides. Two. Our eyes lock; hers are wide with surprise but not fear. Never fear. One stride.

I catch her around the waist just as the nearest tree groans. Spinning us away from danger, I curl my body around hers, shielding her as we fall. The impact drives the air from my lungs, but I barely notice. All I register is Holly's warmth pressed against my chest, her heartbeat racing in time with mine.

The last tree crashes beside us—pine needles scatter like rain, then... silence. Holly's sprawled across me, her face inches from mine. Snowflakes catch in her eyelashes, and her breath comes in little puffs against my lips. I hold her close, my hands spanning her waist, shielding her even though the threat is over.

"My hero," she whispers, and before I can process the softness in her voice, she presses a quick kiss to my mouth.

The contact blazes through me like a forest fire. God help me, I want more. Want everything. But I can't. I grunt and ease her aside, pushing to my feet before I do something foolish like haul her back into my arms. "You okay?"

"Never better." Her grin lights up her entire face as she accepts my offered hand. Rising, she shakes pine needles from her hair like confetti. "Although we just redesigned your display. Sorry."

Bear shoulders his way to us, checking Holly first—traitor—then me, his concern morphing into that wolfish grin dogs get when they know they've caused trouble and gotten away with it.

A kid's voice pierces the quiet. "That was awesome!"

A small crowd has gathered, wearing expressions ranging from sympathy to barely contained laughter. There's nothing like a bit of slapstick to draw the afternoon shoppers.

"I'll handle cleanup," Holly offers, brushing snow from her jeans, cheeks pink. "It's my fault, after all."

"Probably safer if I do it." I fight to keep my voice gruff, ignoring how my lips still burn from her kiss. "You stay where I can see you."

"Spoilsport." She steps closer, voice dropping so only I can hear. "You can't protect me from everything, Nico."

"Watch me," I mutter, but she's already turning to the waiting customers with unshakeable cheer.

"Welcome! Don't mind the chaos—we're just trying something new with our displays."

I shake my head, watching her work her magic on the crowd. The sight of her among my trees, covered in snow and pine needles, Bear at her heels like he's appointed himself her personal guardian—it hits me then. My world's been tilting off its axis since Holly arrived, but maybe it wasn't properly balanced in the first place.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Holly

The kitchen timer dings as I adjust my phone's camera angle to capture the perfect shot of my steaming peppermint mocha. The caption practically writes itself: “Fueling up for another magical day at Bennett's Christmas Tree Farm! Don't forget to visit us at the Winter Festival this weekend! #RileysRidgeChristmas #SmallTownMagic.”

I toggle to the farm's analytics page, grinning at the engagement stats.

“Sixty-eight likes in ten minutes!” I squeal at my phone screen, almost choking on my morning toast. “And that's only the teaser video!”

Okay, maybe the sudden spike in female followers has something to do with my “Meet the Team” video series. But two weeks of running the tree farm’s social media accounts has taught me a few things: raw lumber is surprisingly photogenic, fresh snow makes everything look magical, and nothing gets more engagement than videos of a certain grumpy lumberjack doing his thing.

Not that I've been specifically filming Nico or anything. It's just that he happens to be doing something impressive every time I pull out my phone. Like yesterday, when he hoisted two massive firs onto his shoulders like they weighed nothing, his flannel shirt stretching across those broad?—

My cheeks heat as I catch myself daydreaming again.

Ugh. Focus.

I smooth down the green velvet of my new elf costume, my heart racing as I check my reflection in the kitchen window. The dress hugs every curve like a second skin—the kind of outfit that might give Nico Bennett a heart attack. Perfect. Underneath, the lacy red bra and panties feel deliciously scandalous against my skin.

I've been working with Nico and I'm getting a handle on his style. Despite all the meaningful glances and “accidental” touches, all the opportunities that have come up have taught me something crucial about Nico Bennett: the man won't make the first move.

Yesterday, I caught him staring when he thought I wasn't looking. His eyes darkened before he turned away, muttering something about “workplace safety.”

Well, the mountain man might have “avoiding people” down to an art form, but subtle hints clearly aren't working. Time for the nuclear option: Operation Seduce the Mountain Man.

Even if it means jingling every time I move.

Mom floats into the kitchen, humming “Silver Bells,” her favorite mug full of piping hot tea. She pauses mid-hum, her eyes doing that subtle up-and-down they do when she's holding back from commenting on my outfits. “You're chipper this morning.”

“Did you see our latest posts? The behind-the-scenes content is connecting with people.” I hold up my phone, proudly displaying the farm's Instagram feed.

“That's nice, dear,” Mom says, using the same tone as when I announced I was quitting my city job and moving home. The same tone as when I started working at the farm. Her patented “I'm-worried-but-always-supportive” tone.

Mom settles at the kitchen table, wrapping both hands around her steaming cup. “It's

an awful lot of effort for seasonal work, honey.”

Dad's appearance in the doorway cuts her off. He stops short, newspaper tucked under one arm, reading glasses perched on his nose. His eyebrows climb toward his hairline as he takes in my outfit. “That's”—he adjusts his glasses like they might be malfunctioning—“festive.”

“Wait till you see the light-up version,” I say, striking a pose that makes the bells jingle. “Though that one's strictly for after dark. Workplace safety and all that.”

Dad settles at the table, unfolding his paper with a crisp snap. “I hope Nico appreciates your efforts.”

Heat crawls up my neck. Nico's default response to most things is stoic silence or the occasional grunt. He's too busy prowling the fields with his ax like some rugged mountain man from a romance novel cover.

Not that I noticed.

Dad sets down his paper, using that gentle tone that makes me feel five years old again. “You're earning minimum wage, honey. Shouldn't you be looking for something more... substantial? Put that marketing degree to work?”

“I am putting it to work,” I say, keeping my voice professional despite the familiar sting. “I'm saving to start my own business. And the farm matters—you should see people's faces when they find their perfect Christmas tree.”

What I don't say? How I don't miss my old city life. The suffocating studio apartment. The soul-crushing client calls. The pitch meetings that left me feeling hollow inside. Here, at least, the work means something real.

“Sarah called last night.” Mom's voice has that studied casualness that sets off warning bells. “She cleared her schedule through New Year's.”

My smile feels brittle as I gather the empty dishes. “When does she arrive?”

“Next week.” Dad brightens visibly. “She's doing so well at the firm. Although she works too hard.”

Of course she does.

I focus on rinsing my plate in the sink, letting their voices fade into background noise. The water is scalding hot, but I barely notice. All I can think about is Sarah sweeping back into town and making my life difficult.

“I should head to work,” I say. “I’m leaving work early today. There's a vintage van for sale in Millbrook—perfect for my mobile florist business. The owner can only meet before dark.”

Dad folds the paper open at the weather report. “The Gazette says this storm could bring six to eight inches of snow. Highway patrol's already warning about travel conditions. Might want to reconsider that van viewing today.”

My heart sinks. I've been saving for months, and this van is perfect—already fitted with display shelves and everything. “Maybe I can get there before it hits. The owner says there's other interest.”

“Be careful driving up that mountain road,” Dad warns. “It gets treacherous, especially near Bennett's property. Remember when Sarah's car got stuck up there that Christmas Eve?”

Mom brightens at the memory. “That's right! Nico rescued her. They looked so sweet

together, all bundled up in his truck.”

“I have snow tires,” I cut in, not wanting to hear another verse of “The Ballad of Sarah and Nico.”

That song ended years ago. Since breaking up with Nico, Sarah’s moved on with Tom, Dick, Harry and all of their cousins. Meanwhile, Nico is still brooding.

The image of being snowed in at the farm with Nico flashes through my mind. The two of us alone, a roaring fire?—

“Holly?” Mom’s voice breaks through my completely inappropriate daydream. “Did you hear what I said? Sarah is excited to visit the farm and see how it’s changed.”

Translation: Sarah’s multitasking—keeping tabs on her ex while fulfilling her self-appointed role as my career critic. Big sister duties, apparently.

“Sarah always had good business instincts,” Dad adds proudly. “Probably why she and Nico didn’t work out. She was meant for bigger things.”

Unlike me, goes unsaid.

Mom follows me to the door, adjusting my scarf like she did when I was young. “We’re proud of you, sweetheart. We want you to be happy. Like Sarah. Your sister has dreams, ambitions.”

“So do I.” I step back, needing space. “But they’re different from hers.”

Different from what everyone expects of me. A mobile florist in Riley’s Ridge. Roots in this community. Maybe even a family someday, although I keep that dream tucked away where no one can judge it.

The morning air hits me like a slap, and I pull my coat tighter. My boots crunch through the fresh snow as I head toward my car.

Let them compare me to Sarah. They don't see how the farm comes alive with each improvement I suggest. They don't see Nico's eyes crinkle at the corners when he tries not to smile at my ridiculous costumes.

They definitely don't see how my teenage crush has grown into something real—something worth fighting for.

Storm clouds are gathering over the mountain where Bennett's Tree Farm sits like a Christmas card come to life. Where a certain grumpy lumberjack is probably already hauling trees, unaware that his ex-girlfriend is about to blow back into town like an unwanted winter storm.

Sarah can try to reclaim her territory all she wants. I'm done being the good little sister who stays in her lane.

The engine turns over with a groan. I crank up the heat before checking my reflection, adjusting my elf hat at a jaunty angle. The silky lingerie whispers against my skin as I shift in the driver's seat.

Nico Bennett won't know what hit him.

Operation Seduce the Mountain Man is officially in progress.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Nico

The sun isn't even up, but Holly Carter is perched on a stack of pallets with her damn phone, turning my morning work routine into some kind of lumberjack photoshoot.

Not that I checked my reflection in the truck window before getting out. Or spent extra time trimming my beard this morning. And this flannel is clean, but it's not my best one. The fact that it's the same color that Holly said brought out my eyes last week is a coincidence.

"Little early for social media, isn't it?" I call out, puffing up my barrel chest like some preening rooster, the buttons of my flannel straining from the effort. Christ, I'm pathetic.

She grins, giving me that sunshine smile that makes my chest tight. "Early morning light is perfect for catching authentic moments. Plus, I have to head to the shop soon."

Authentic moments. Because nothing is more authentic than pretending I don't notice Holly filming while I haul trees around like some performing bear. But she's been here every morning this week, showing up before dawn to work on her "content creation" before heading to her paid job. Her dedication would be admirable if her presence in the work yard wasn't so distracting.

My lips still burn from yesterday's kiss, that moment replaying every time I close my eyes. She'd been sprawled across my chest in the snow, fearless and warm, and I'd

wanted... Christ, I'd wanted everything. But wanting and having are different things, especially when there's twelve years between you. Especially when the woman in question deserves better than a struggling tree farmer with more responsibilities than prospects.

A branch snags my sleeve as I hoist the Fraser Fir. The tree's weight shifts, forcing me to brace my legs and flex my arms to keep control. Movement catches my eye—Holly leaning forward on her perch, phone raised, capturing my graceless wrestling match with an oversized Christmas tree.

My muscles burn with the effort to make it look effortless. Nothing says professional lumberjack like losing a fight with your own inventory.

“Boss!” Mike's voice carries across the yard. “Number two saw's acting up again.”

I set the tree in position, rolling my shoulders. Mike is standing out front of the maintenance shed, holding a commercial chainsaw. Replacing it would cost a month's worth of profits.

“Don't run it,” I bark, crossing the yard.

Holly scrambles down from her perch, trailing after me with that phone still recording. I tense, tracking her movement through the equipment-littered yard. One misplaced step in those impractical boots of hers...

“Stay back,” I warn, my voice rougher than intended. “Shop rule—only certified operators near the saws.”

Mike shoots me a knowing look. He's worked here for fifteen seasons and knows every chainsaw we own inside out. Knows me too well, apparently, given the way his eyes dart between Holly and me.

I pull off my work gloves, tucking them in my back pocket as I take the saw from Mike. “Get the guys started on loading the Harrison order. I’ll handle this.”

“You sure? I could?—”

“Already down two workers this season. Need you in one piece.” I reach for the toolbox, the familiar weight settling in my hands. “And someone needs to make sure the new girl doesn’t trip over anything while making her videos.”

Holly’s laugh rings out across the yard. “The new girl can hear you.”

I focus on the saw’s engine, refusing to look at her. But my mouth betrays me. “Then maybe you’ll listen when I tell you that area isn’t safe.”

Mike chuckles, heading toward the loading zone. “Yes, boss. Whatever you say, boss.”

I adjust the idle setting, the metal cool against my bare fingers. Holly edges closer, and my muscles tense again. But she stays behind the yellow safety line—the one I painted last week after watching her nearly collide with a stack of pallets while filming.

“You’re good with them,” she says softly. “Your crew.”

My grunt is noncommittal. These men depend on me for their livelihoods. Their families need those paychecks, especially during the holidays. The bank notice burning a hole in my desk upstairs makes that responsibility weigh heavier each day.

“They respect you,” she says, phone lowered now. “Everyone does. That’s why I’ve been filming. People need to see what I see—the care you take, the expertise, the authenticity of this place.”

The saw roars to life, smooth and steady.

“You’ve been filming me without permission.” I grip the chainsaw handle tighter, needing something solid to hold on to. “What are you doing with the videos?”

Her fingers dance across the phone screen. “They’re not for public viewing. Yet.”

I straighten, wiping my hands on a shop rag. “Holly?—”

“I have some ideas. Ways to compete with the box stores that are undercutting your prices.” She sketches pictures in the air as she talks, painting a vision of Bennett’s future. “People love DIY content. How-to videos, behind-the-scenes tutorials. That’s valuable information and has broad appeal.”

I set the chainsaw on its wall mount with more force than necessary. “I run a lumber yard, not a how-to business.”

She lifts her chin, signaling that she’s about to steamroll over my objections. “Five minutes. That’s all I’m asking. Please?”

That “please” hits me like a physical blow. Dangerous word when ushered from pretty lips.

“People love stories about real people. And you’re the real deal. A family-owned farm competing against corporate giants.”

She holds up her phone, showing me a clip of the crew prepping trees at sunrise.

The footage captures something I see every morning—the quiet pride in the work, the camaraderie between the men, the mountain backdrop painting everything in gold.

My protest dies in my throat.

“And this one...” She swipes to a video of me demonstrating a tree-cutting technique to Mike’s nephew last week. “See how you take time to teach? That’s what people connect with. That’s what sets you apart from big box stores.”

Heat crawls up my neck. “Who would watch this?”

Her laugh rings across the yard, bright and confident. Her smile hints at something else, but she’s already pulling up another video before I can decipher it.

I test the words, tasting their absurdity. “You’re suggesting we sell Christmas trees by turning my crew into social media stars?”

I can’t deny the shop runs smoother since she reorganized the inventory system. Sales are up fifteen percent from the updates she made to the window displays.

But the idea of being on social media makes my skin crawl. My family’s legacy is not a reality show.

“What’s next?” I growl, crossing my arms. You want me to wear a Santa suit and bounce babies on my knee?”

Holly’s eyes light up. “Actually...”

“No.”

The future flashes before me, brutal in its beauty—a little boy with her wild curls and my eyes, giggling on my lap while Holly stands behind us, her fingers warm on my shoulder, our family complete?—

“You're perfect for this, Nico. That beard screams Santa for the kids, and—” she bites her lip, eyes dancing “—the moms will love the rugged lumberjack vibe.”

I grab fresh snow, crushing it against my face to drown the ache of wanting. Of imagining things I can't have. The ice bites, anchoring me to reality.

“Your business sense is impressive.” And it is—she's transformed my simple tree lot into something magical. Her touch is everywhere, from the organized stockroom to the new displays drawing a steady stream of customers. “But this social media stuff?—”

A snowball hits my chest, cutting off my protest in a burst of white powder. Her aim is as deadly as that smile. “Did you?—”

Holly's laughter sparkles through the icy air as she dances backward, her red sweater bright against the snow. Those nimble fingers are already crafting another weapon. “Come on, Mr. Christmas Tree King. Show me what you've got!”

Awesome. My entire crew has ringside seats to their boss getting pelted with snowballs. The second one smacks my shoulder, and her victory dance isn't helping my dignity.

“Are you testing my reflexes?” Steam clouds my words as I pack snow between my palms.

“This is market research!” She darts behind a tree, leaving boot prints in the snow, laughter trailing behind her.

God, her smile is addictive.

My throw catches the branches above her, and she shrieks as snow rains down on her

curls. Mike shoots me a smirk from the loading dock that says I'm not fooling anyone. For once, I don't care who's watching.

A blast of Arctic air sweeps across the yard, dusting Holly's curls with snow. She's pink-cheeked from our battle, but a full-body shiver gives her away, even as she tries to hide it.

“Inside,” I order, yanking my gloves from my back pocket. “Before you freeze.”

Her eyes widen. “Does this mean you'll listen to my pitch?”

“This means I’m not explaining to your parents why their daughter turned into an icicle on my watch.” I point to the shop entrance, ignoring how my hands itch to shrug off my jacket and drape it over her shivering frame. “Fifteen minutes, then you're on register duty.”

My crew finds urgent work stacking timber as we pass, but Mike's knowing grin says I'll never hear the end of this one.

She skips to the office, hugging her phone like it's filled with holiday magic. I follow, lying that I'm escaping the cold, not chasing that smile.

“Take a seat by the heater,” I say, moving toward my desk.

Holly perches on the chair closest to the radiator, pulling out her phone again.

“I suggest that we show people the heart of Bennett’s.” She pulls up another video, but her fingers tremble. “The craft, the expertise, the?—”

“Phone down.” I grab my work coat from the hook, its worn canvas rough against my palms. “Here.”

Her fingers pause mid-text. “But you'll freeze.”

“I have enough insulation.” A lame excuse, but leaving her shivering is not an option. “Take it before you catch pneumonia. Can't sell trees from a hospital bed.”

The coat swallows her when I settle it on her shoulders, making her look like a kid playing dress-up in her dad's clothes. Something protective and dangerous twists in my chest.

I spin toward the coffeemaker, desperate for distraction. “Take this.” I press a steaming mug into her hands. “We'll continue this discussion after closing. If you're available.”

She clutches the coffee, nearly swallowed by my coat. “Really?”

“Really. Now go earn your paycheck.”

Her smile could melt the snow outside. “Tonight, then.”

The bank notice mocks me from my desk, the amount burning into my skull. Fifteen thousand dollars. Equipment loans don't care that we're heading into our busiest season. Don't care that my crew's counting on holiday bonuses.

Fat snowflakes drift past the yellow security light outside my office window, adding another layer to the fresh powder coating the lot. Only two cars remain—mine and a little red Honda, practically buried in snow.

My fingers crumple the paperwork. Holly shouldn't be working this late to get my attention. And she should certainly not be driving home in this weather.

One week at Bennett's, and everything's different. The shop runs like clockwork.

Customers linger and spend more. Even Bear, my trusty wingman, turns into a lovesick puppy around her.

I'm right there with him, resisting Holly's charms but failing miserably.

Six o'clock. Right on time, she breezes in wearing my coat, laptop tucked under one arm.

"Brought backup." She sets down two steaming mugs. "Peppermint hot chocolate."

"Bribing me with sugar?"

"Is it working?"

She claims the chair across from me, spreading out her phone and notebook covered in precise writing. The office walls close in—they always do when she's here.

"Let's see these numbers you're so excited about."

She straightens, all business now. "Silver Pines is your main competition, right? The artificial tree place?"

"Them and the Madison Mall setup." My teeth grind. "Mass-produced garbage at prices we can't match."

"But that's exactly it." She taps her notebook, eyes bright. "They can't match what you offer. The experience. The expertise?—"

"The overhead?" The bank notice burns in my drawer.

"No." That determined chin lifts. "They also don't have three generations of

knowledge about tree cultivation. Or a crew that treats customers like family. Or..." Her cheeks flush. "Or an owner who spends an hour helping a kid pick the perfect Christmas tree and then teaches him how to care for it."

The room suddenly feels ten degrees warmer. "You filmed that?"

"Marketing gold." Her eyes dance. "But it's real. That's what people want. Authenticity. Tradition."

She's young enough to navigate TikTok while I think hashtags come with eggs. But her passion hooks me. "Social media's the answer?"

Holly walks me through projections and strategies. It's Greek to me, but the way she talks about Bennett's—like it's precious, worth saving—is what gets me.

"Pre-orders could cover the equipment loan repayments." She points to her screen. "With a proper tracking system?"

"How'd you know about the loans?"

Pink stains her cheeks. "Same way I know you cover Matt's shifts since his baby came early. That you let the Wilsons delay payment on account of Mr. Wilson losing his job." Her gaze holds mine. "I notice things."

The words hit somewhere beneath my ribs.

"Change is hard. Sometimes, not changing is harder." Her voice softens. "Let me help, Nico. Please?"

That "please" should come with a warning label.

I hear myself say. “Show me what you can do.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Nico

Holly's smile could light up the whole damn mountain, hell, probably the entire valley too. She hugs that laptop against her chest like a kid on Christmas morning who just got everything they ever wanted, and the sight hits me right in the gut.

"Thank you," I manage to get out, jerking my chin toward her laptop. I have to look anywhere but at her face, or I might do something stupid. "For everything you've done here. The shop runs better now." That's the understatement of the year.

My chest aches at how right she looks here in my office, my coat still drowning her small frame. God help me, the way she looks at me... She's so beautiful. And way too young for me.

Holly's eyes burn into me, but I keep my attention locked on the bank notice in my hands, crumpling it tighter until the paper's nothing but a ball of stress between my fingers.

"I see you looking at me when you think I'm not watching," she says quietly. "But you keep pulling away. Is it because you believe it isn't professional or because of your history with Sarah?"

My jaw clenches. Sarah's name on Holly's lips feels wrong, like oil on water. "I'm trying to protect you." The words scrape my throat. "The age difference. The town gossip. Your family?—"

"I don't need protection." Three steps bring her into my space. Her floral

scent—jasmine and roses—wraps around me, making my head spin. “I’ve had feelings for you since I was twelve. And now that I’m back, watching you with your crew, with Bear?—”

I shove back from my desk, the chair scraping against the wooden floor as I put physical distance between us. My hands grip the back of the chair until my knuckles turn white. The need to touch her, to pull her close, to claim what every cell in my body screams is mine—it’s torture.

“Holly.” Her name comes out rougher than I intended.

She steps toward me, and I circle behind my desk, keeping it between us like a shield. The December wind howls outside my office window, matching the storm raging inside me, rattling the glass in its frame.

“I’m not blind, Nico. I feel it too—this thing between us.” Her voice is soft but steady, each word a dangerous temptation.

Christ. The way she says my name is like honey and silk wrapped into sound. It takes everything I have—every ounce of self-control I’ve built over years of keeping people at arm’s length—not to cross the room and show her exactly what she does to me.

Instead, I turn to face the window, bracing my hands on the sill until the wood bites into my palms. Through the frost-covered glass, I watch my crew loading trees onto trucks, trying to ground myself in the familiar sight of work and routine.

“You’re too?—”

“Don’t you dare say I’m too young.” The fierce determination in her voice makes me grip the windowsill harder, my knuckles turning white with the effort. “I’m not a kid anymore.”

No, she isn't. The curve of her hips when she bends to help customers, the way she bites her lip when she's concentrating, the soft brush of her fingers when she hands me paperwork—every little thing sets my blood on fire, awakening something primal I'm fighting to keep caged.

“You deserve better than this.” I gesture vaguely at myself, at the cramped office with the stack of bills burying me beneath their crushing weight. “Better than me.”

She moves closer, the subtle scent of her vanilla perfume making my mouth dry. My body tenses, every muscle coiled tight, fighting the magnetic pull drawing me toward her.

“Let me be the judge of what I deserve,” she whispers, her voice soft but determined in a way that makes my chest ache.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my racing heart to slow, trying to remember why this is a terrible idea. It would take one touch to shatter my carefully maintained control. One taste of those soft, tempting lips, and I'd be lost, drowning in everything she is.

Holly's fingers brush my jaw, feather-light but burning like a brand against my skin. I catch her wrist to stop her before I do something I'll regret.

Instead, my thumb betrays me, tracing circles on her pulse point, feeling it race beneath my touch like a trapped bird.

“You're sunshine and Christmas magic and everything I can't—” I cut myself off, breathing hard, the words threatening to choke me.

Her fingers brush my jaw again, more insistent this way. “Can't what?”

“Have.” My thumb continues its path across her delicate skin. “You deserve better

than some grumpy bastard who can barely keep his business afloat.”

“You think you're not good enough? You're everything I've ever wanted.”

My control shatters.

I back her against the wall, one hand tangling in her soft hair, my callused fingers trembling against her scalp. “Holly...”

Her fingers curl into my shirt, twisting the fabric, holding on as if she's afraid I'll push her away. As if I could ever make myself let go now—her pulse hammers against my palm where it rests at her neck.

“I'm asking you to let me in,” she whispers, her breath warm against my jaw.

To hell with restraint. I crush my mouth to hers, swallowing her soft gasp of surprise. She tastes like peppermint and promises, her lips sweet and yielding under mine.

When we break apart, I'm breathing hard. I rest my forehead against hers, fighting for what's left of my control. “This changes everything.”

Holly's smile turns wicked, those brown eyes dancing with mischief. “Good. Why fight it?”

The last thread of my control snaps like a bowstring pulled too tight.

My growl is low, possessive, rumbling up from my chest. I lift her onto the desk, papers fluttering to the floor like abandoned confetti.

All that matters is Holly's mouth against mine, her legs wrapping around my waist, and her quiet gasp when my fingers tangle in her hair.

The silky strands slip through my fingers like water as I break away, trailing hungry kisses down the delicate curve of her neck.

Holly melts against me with a whimper that sets my blood on fire. Her fingers slide into my hair, nails scraping my scalp, sending shivers down my spine, and I groan into her mouth. She kisses me back with a desperation that matches mine, as if she's been starving for this too.

Every brush of her lips, every soft sound she makes, pulls me deeper under her spell.

“Nico.”

The sound of my name on her lips drives me wild and ignites something primal deep in my chest.

“You don't know what you do to me,” I growl against her throat. “Walking around in my coat. Smiling at my dog. Making me want things I can't?—”

She tugs my hair, forcing me to look at her. Her eyes are dark with desire, lips swollen from my kisses. “Stop telling me what you can't have. I'm right here. I want this. I want you.”

I capture her mouth again, pouring everything I can't say into the kiss. She tastes like promises I'm afraid to believe in, like every Christmas wish I never dared to make.

I'm done for. Lost. The soft little sound she makes when I bite her neck sends a shock wave straight to my dick. Hell, I've been hard since I kissed her, but this is killing me.

The office is warm, too warm, and it's just us. I could take her right here. Strip her and bury myself inside her. But I have plans, and they don't involve my damn desk.

Her legs are wrapped tight around my waist, her body arching into mine. The way she's grinding her pelvis against my cock threatens to send me over the edge.

I need her to come apart. I'm going to wreck her, make her mine.

“That's it, baby,” I rasp, my hands digging into her flesh as I hold her close. “Keep moving like that. Rock that sweet pussy against me.”

Her breath is hot against my neck, her fingers twisting in my hair, holding me captive as she melts into my touch. “Feels so good, Nico. Please...”

I tighten my grip on her thigh, urging her to move faster, harder. “I got you, Holly. You're doing perfect. Let go for me, baby. Come on my cock.”

She whimpers, her hips swirling with growing desperation. “I'm close. So close...”

“That's it, baby. Let go.” My voice is rough, the filthy words spilling from my mouth as I nuzzle her neck, my teeth scraping her skin. “You like riding me like this, don't you? Being my good girl?”

“Yes,” she chokes out, her body tensing. “Nico...”

I'm throbbing, my cock straining against the zipper of my jeans as I grind against her. Christ, I need to be inside her. But not yet. First, I need to feel her come undone in my arms.

“Come for me, Holly. Let me feel it,” I urge, my mouth trailing down to her collarbone, my tongue teasing the hollow of her throat.

Her breath catches, her body stiffening as she spirals tighter and tighter. Then, with a muffled cry, she shatters.

“Fuck, Holly,” I groan, my forehead resting against hers as I savor the aftershocks rippling through her. “You feel so damn good.”

She nuzzles my neck, her breath warm against my skin. “You too. I can feel how hard you are for me.”

I swallow a groan, fighting for control. “You have no idea what you do to me, baby. Been trying to keep my hands off you since you walked into my shop.”

Her eyes darken, a wicked smile curving her lips. “Then don't.”

My body roars to life, every nerve ending on fire. A fresh wave of need slams into me like a freight train. I kiss her again, only it's deeper this time. She meets me with equal hunger, her small hands fisting in my shirt.

I eventually tear my mouth from hers, the taste of her lingering on my tongue, addictive as hell. I could spend the rest of my life kissing her.

But reality crashes back in like a bucket of ice water. It's getting late, and Holly needs to go home. I grit my teeth, fighting every instinct that screams at me to keep her here, to claim her fully.

“Holly,” I growl, my voice rough with restrained desire. “We need to stop.”

She whimpers, the sound nearly shattering my resolve. “Nico, please?—”

“Not like this,” I manage, cupping her face. “Not rushed. When I take you, I want hours. Days.”

It takes every ounce of willpower to step back, to put space between us.

With a reluctant groan, I lift her off the desk, her legs tightening around my waist for a moment before she slides back down to the floor. Her hair's a mess, clothes rumpled, cheeks flushed, and that smile on her face... Christ, she's gorgeous.

I let out a low curse as I try to catch my breath, fisting my hand in my hair. I want to haul her back against me, bury myself inside her, and never let go.

Instead, I step back, raking a hand through my hair, forcing my body to calm down. I shouldn't have touched her. I shouldn't have lost control. But I don't regret it.

Her eyes hold a wicked gleam like she knows what she's doing to me and enjoys every second.

“Come on,” I manage to say, my voice still rough. “I’ll walk you out.”

As I lock up the office, she takes my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. The simple touch sets my heart pounding again, desire coursing through my veins. I pull her close, unable to resist another kiss. Holly fits against me like she belongs in my arms.

The temperature's dropped, and the wind bites at our skin. Bear's waiting by the door, tail wagging, looking up at us expectantly. Holly leans down to scratch his ears, and the damn dog practically melts under her touch.

“You two are a bad influence on me,” I mutter, clearing my throat as I turn away and shove my hands in my pockets.

She laughs, and it sounds like wind chimes in the cold air. “Admit it, you love us.”

I snort, glancing over at her. “Something like that.”

We walk toward her car, our boots crunching in the snow. Her hand finds mine again, and our fingers entwine as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

At her car door, she pauses, turning to me with a playful smile. "So, I guess I'll see you tomorrow. Bright and early."

"Yeah." I drag my gaze from her lips and nod. "Tomorrow."

She bites her lip, and I fight the urge to pull her back into my arms.

"You're not going to fire me, are you? For... you know." She gestures back and forth between us.

Fire her? Ha. It's more like I'd chain her to my damn bed and never let her leave. "You think I could fire you after that?"

Her eyes widen, and she laughs, the sound warm and alluring in the frosty air. Leaning up, she brushes her lips against mine, soft and teasing. "Good. I'll keep it our little secret, boss."

The touch of her lips stokes the fire inside me again, but I force a chuckle, shoving my hands deeper into my pockets. "Smartass."

She grins and opens the car door, sliding in behind the wheel. As she settles in, she glances up at me through her lashes, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "See you tomorrow, Nico."

I'm frozen to the spot, unable to move as she starts the car, waves, and pulls away. When her taillights disappear down the road, I exhale a shaky breath, raking a hand through my hair.

God help me, I'm in trouble. But I can't wait for tomorrow.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Holly

The industrial-sized tree baler whirs to life under my hands, and I silently thank whoever designed this costume's stretchy velvet as I bend to guide the Fraser Fir into position. The secret red lingerie underneath gives me an extra boost of confidence, even if no one can see it.

Well, almost no one.

Nico's heated gaze follows my every move from across the yard, his jaw clenching each time my skirt rides up. After our encounter in his office last week, that look promises all kinds of delicious trouble.

"Need help with that, Holly?" Tommy calls out, starting toward me.

A low growl cuts through the winter air. "I've got it."

Nico materializes beside me, his broad chest pressing against my back as he reaches for the controls. His touch is professional, but his voice drops to a whisper only I can hear. "Trying to torture me in that outfit, sunshine?"

I bite my lip, fighting a smile. "Is it working?"

His fingers tighten on the controls. "You have no idea."

The tree slides smoothly through the netting, wrapped tight and ready for transport. I turn to grab another, deliberately brushing against him. The bell on my hat jingles

with the movement.

"That's not safe." His hand catches my waist, steadying me. "You shouldn't be operating machinery in that... costume."

"But the kids love it." I gesture to where a small crowd has gathered by the hot chocolate stand, all eyes on the Christmas elf wrapping their trees. "And sales are up thirty percent since last week."

His thumb traces small circles on my hip, hidden from view by the baler. "The costume isn't what's bringing in customers. Your ideas, the social media campaign, the pre-orders—that's all you."

Heat blooms in my chest at his praise. "Does this mean you'll let me film you for the ax-throwing demonstration?"

"Don't push it." But there's a smile in his voice, and his hand stays on my waist.

"Mr. Bennett!" Pete's voice carries across the yard. "Got a call about that equipment order!"

Nico tenses, his fingers flexing against my side before he steps back. "Stay here. I'll handle the next batch myself."

"I'm perfectly capable?—"

"Holly." The way he says my name, rough and wanting, makes my knees weak. "That skirt is dangerous enough without you bending over machinery."

I watch him stride away, enjoying the view. His shoulders bunch beneath his flannel shirt as he disappears into the office, and I allow myself a small victory grin. Phase

one of Operation Seduce the Mountain Man is definitely working.

The shop bell chimes as I duck inside, grateful for the warmth. My fingers are nearly numb from the cold, but it's worth it to see Nico's reaction to the costume. I find him in the storage room, inventory sheets spread across a stack of boxes.

"You're supposed to be outside," he says without looking up, but his shoulders tense at my approach.

"Too cold." I perch on the edge of his makeshift desk, letting my legs dangle. "Besides..." I take a deep breath, suddenly nervous. This isn't just about the van—it's about my future. About showing Nico I'm not going anywhere. "I wanted to talk to you about something important."

His pen stills, that intense gaze focusing fully on me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Actually..." I pull the van listing from my pocket, smoothing the creased paper with trembling fingers. "I've been thinking about my future. Here, in Riley's Ridge."

Something flashes in his eyes—hope, maybe, but he guards it quickly. "Thought you'd be heading back to the city once you found a better job."

"That's just it." I slide off the desk to face him properly. "I don't want a better job. I mean, I do, but not in the city. I want to build something here." My voice softens. "This is home."

He stands slowly, like any sudden movement might shatter the moment. "Holly..."

"I want to start a mobile florist business." The words tumble out in a rush. "Not competing with the shop in town—something different. Weddings, events, custom

installations. I could work with local growers, maybe even source some flowers from that greenhouse you mentioned expanding..."

I hold out the van listing with shaking hands. "This van... it's not just transportation. It's the start of everything I want to build here. In Riley's Ridge."

Where you are, I don't say, but from the way his breath catches, I think he hears it anyway.

His fingers trace the edge of the van listing, but his eyes stay locked on mine. "You're serious about this? About staying?"

"I know what everyone expects," I say, thinking of Sarah, of my parents' subtle disappointment. "Get a corporate job in the city. Climb the ladder. But that's not me. I spent three years trying to be that person, and it felt like drowning."

Understanding floods his expression. He knows something about expectations, about the weight of other people's dreams.

"Here..." I gesture to encompass the shop, the trees beyond the window, the whole of Riley's Ridge. "Everything feels possible. Even turning a beat-up delivery van into a flower shop on wheels."

"It's not beat-up," he says gruffly, studying the listing more intently. "It's vintage. Good solid construction in these older models, if they're maintained right."

A laugh bubbles up, warm and real. Trust Nico to focus on the mechanical details when I'm basically telling him I want to build a life in his town. But there's something tender in the way he's examining the listing, like he's already planning improvements.

"The refrigeration unit will need updating," he continues, rubbing his jaw. "And the

suspension—mountain roads are hell on—" He breaks off, catching my amused expression. "What?"

"Nothing." I step closer, drawn into his orbit like always. "You're cute when you're being all knowledgeable and protective."

His eyes darken. "Protective?"

"Mm-hmm." I straighten his collar, letting my fingers linger. "The way you immediately start planning how to make my dream safer and better. It's sexy."

He catches my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. "You really want this? To put down roots here?"

The vulnerability in his voice makes my heart ache. I think of what Sarah told me once, about Nico always expecting people to leave. About him keeping everyone at arm's length since his parents died, protecting himself by staying alone.

"My roots are already here," I say softly. "They always have been. The city, that corporate life—it was like trying to grow in the wrong soil. But here..."

I take a shaky breath. "Remember last week, when you showed me how to test if a tree was healthy? You said to check the roots, because that's where the strength comes from. That's what Riley's Ridge is for me. What you?—"

His kiss is hungry, possessive, stealing my breath. My hat falls off as his hands tangle in my hair, but I don't care. All that matters is the heat of his mouth, the solid warmth of his body against mine.

The storage room door creaks.

Nico moves faster than I thought possible, putting three feet of space between us just as Tommy pokes his head in. "Boss? We've got a situation with the—oh!" His eyes widen at my disheveled state. "Sorry, I didn't?—"

"What's the situation?" Nico's voice is remarkably steady for someone who was just kissing me senseless.

"The um, the Hendersons' tree. The one they pre-ordered? It won't fit in their car."

"I'll handle it." Nico straightens his shirt, not meeting Tommy's eyes. "Go help Pete with the morning deliveries."

Tommy practically runs from the storage room. As soon as his footsteps fade, I burst into giggles.

"This isn't funny." But Nico's lips twitch. "You're a menace in that costume."

"You love it." I retrieve my hat from where it fell, settling it at a jaunty angle. "So, about the van..."

He runs a hand through his hair, looking torn between kissing me again and lecturing me about vehicle safety. "Let me help. With the van, the business, all of it."

"Really?" I bounce on my toes, making the bell jingle.

"On two conditions." He holds up one finger. "First, you let me check the van thoroughly before you make any decisions."

I nod eagerly. "And second?"

His eyes darken as they sweep over my costume. "You change into something less..."

"Less what?" I step closer, enjoying the way his breath catches.

"Less distracting." He catches my wrist before I can touch him. "I mean it, Holly. That mountain road is dangerous enough without you sitting next to me in this outfit."

"Fine." I press a quick kiss to his jaw, darting away before he can grab me. "I'll change. But only because you're helping with the van."

"And Holly?" His voice stops me at the door. "If this van checks out... I know a guy who specializes in custom vehicle modifications. Could help with the refrigeration unit setup."

Warmth blooms in my chest. He's not just supporting my dream—he's investing in it. Planning for it. For me.

"Thank you." I mean for more than just the van help, and from his soft smile, he knows it.

"Go change," he growls, but there's tenderness beneath the gruff tone. "Before I forget why we shouldn't finish what we started in here."

I practically skip to the break room, holiday bells jingling with each step. Phase two of Operation Seduce the Mountain Man is officially in progress.

Behind me, I hear him mutter something that sounds suspiciously like "that damn costume will be the death of me."

I grin, already planning our mountain drive.

Nico's words feel like a promise. Like a future opening up before us, bright as Christmas morning.

Outside, storm clouds gather over the mountain, dark and heavy with snow. But I'm not worried. I practically skip to the break room, holiday bells jingling with each step.

“Ready to go?” Nico's voice startles me out of my thoughts. He's changed into a clean flannel shirt, dark blue bringing out his eyes. Not that I'm noticing. Much.

“I'll grab my coat!” I race toward the office, nearly colliding with a stack of wreaths. Behind me, one of the workers is asking Nico about delivery schedules.

I'm a walking disaster with anything mechanical, but I know how to work what God gave me. Using my assets to make a grumpy man lose his carefully maintained control? My superpower.

I smooth down my costume, tweaking the neckline until it's just this side of “Oops, did I do that?”

“Carter.” Nico's at the door, filling the frame with those ridiculous shoulders. “Van's not getting any newer.”

“Coming!” I grab my coat, fumbling with the buttons in my haste.

He holds the door, and I slip past him. His truck gleams in the weak winter sunlight, a beast of a machine that matches its owner. As I climb in, the scent of pine and leather surrounds me, all masculine and overwhelming. Just like him.

Nico slides behind the wheel, his thick thigh brushing mine. The truck roars to life, the vibrations thrumming through me like his growled commands from this morning. My body remembers every single one.

I glance at his hands on the steering wheel, remembering how easily they spanned my waist. The memory sends heat curling low in my belly. I want to feel his hands on me

again.

Twenty-four years of complete inexperience with men means I've been saving all my natural talent for the right lumberjack. And judging by how his jaw clenches every time I “accidentally” brush against him—like right now, as I “adjust” my seatbelt—I'd say Nico Bennett is the one.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:28 am

Nico

The first snowflakes spiral down just as I finish inspecting the van's undercarriage. Rust spots on the frame. Leaky transmission. Shoddy brake lines. No way in hell I'm letting Holly buy this death trap, no matter how perfect the interior setup might be.

"Well?" Holly leans against the van's side, arms crossed. She changed out of the elf costume before we left, but somehow her cheeks are still flushed pink, her eyes bright with hope. "What's the verdict?"

The seller, Ray, hovers nearby, pretending to take a phone call. He quoted Holly triple what this heap is worth. My jaw clenches as I watch him pace, phone pressed to his ear, performing for an audience that doesn't exist.

"Let me handle this." I wipe my hands on a shop rag, keeping my voice low. Professional and not like I'm fantasizing about throwing her over my shoulder and getting her off this mountain before the weather turns. "Guy's trying to rip you off."

Her chin lifts with that determined look I'm learning to love and fear. "I can negotiate."

She squeezes my arm, then saunters toward Ray with a bright smile, and twenty minutes later we're heading down the mountain in my truck with Holly practically vibrating with satisfaction.

"Did you see his face when I pointed out the transmission fluid leak?" She bounces in her seat, reminding me of Bear when he's excited. "He couldn't backpedal fast

enough."

"You threatened to report him to the Better Business Bureau."

"And the Department of Transportation." Her grin turns wicked. "I learned from the best. All those hours watching you negotiate with suppliers..."

Pride wars with possessiveness in my chest. She's brilliant, my Holly. Fierce. But the snow is falling faster now, coating the windshield despite the wipers' steady rhythm. Fat flakes swirl in the headlights, hypnotic and disorienting.

The engine coughs. Sputters. Dies.

"No. No, no, no." I wrestle the steering wheel as we coast to the shoulder. The truck shudders to a stop, steam rising from under the hood in the beam of the headlights.

Holly peers through the thickening snow. "What happened?"

"Stay here." I grab my jacket from behind the seat. "I need to check something."

The wind hits like a physical blow as I pop the hood. Steam billows up, carrying the unmistakable smell of burnt rubber and hot metal. The serpentine belt hangs in shredded strips, probably wearing thin for weeks without me noticing. Damn it.

Footsteps crunch in the snow behind me. Of course, she didn't stay in the truck.

"That doesn't look good." Holly huddles deeper into her coat, snowflakes catching in her hair like a crown of stars.

"Belt's shot." I slam the hood harder than necessary. "We're not going anywhere without a tow."

She pulls out her phone. "I'll call—" The words die as she stares at the screen. "No signal."

Perfect.

I check my phone. Nothing. The storm must be interfering with reception, and we're too far up the mountain for a reliable signal anyway.

Holly shivers, and every protective instinct roars to life. "Back in the truck. Now."

"So bossy." But she complies, letting me open her door. "What's the plan?"

I slide behind the wheel, mentally calculating distances. The truck's dead. No cell service. Snow is falling harder by the minute. And my cabin is...

"My place is about two miles up that access road." I point through the curtain of white. "We can wait out the storm there."

"Your cabin?" Her voice sounds strange. Breathy.

"Unless you'd rather freeze?" The thought of her in danger, even from something as simple as cold, sets my teeth on edge.

"Race you there." She reaches for her door handle.

"Holly." I catch her wrist. "We stick together. This storm's getting worse, and the trail's easy to lose in weather like this."

She studies my face for a long moment, then nods. "Okay. Together."

Something primal stirs at her easy trust. At the way she says 'together' like it's more

than just hiking through snow.

I grab the emergency kit from behind the seat, then help her out of the truck. The wind whips between the trees, carrying ice crystals that sting any exposed skin. Holly's smaller frame sways against the gust, and I automatically step between her and the wind.

"Stay close." I take her gloved hand in mine, tucking our joined fingers into my coat pocket. "Path's steep in places."

Her answering squeeze makes my heart stutter. "My hero."

I pull her closer as we begin the trek uphill. "Should have checked the weather more carefully before bringing you up here."

"Pretty sure you checked three different forecasts this morning." She bumps my shoulder. "And the highway patrol reports. And probably sacrificed a goat to the weather gods."

"Smartass."

"You love it."

I do. God help me, I love everything about her. The way she teases. The way she fights. The way she sees right through every wall I've built.

The snow falls thicker now, muffling all sound except our breathing and the crunch of boots through fresh powder.

Holly matches my stride, but I can feel her trembling. The path winds through dense evergreens, their branches heavy with snow. In summer, this is an easy walk.

Tonight, with visibility dropping by the minute, every step needs careful consideration.

"Almost to the bridge," I tell her, tightening my grip on her hand. "Watch your step here."

The wooden footbridge over Miller's Creek is barely visible through the swirling snow. Water rushes beneath, swollen from the early winter melt.

"Um, Nico?" Holly's voice wavers. "That doesn't look very stable."

I test the first plank. It holds, but ice makes the surface treacherous. "I'll go first. Hold the guide rope."

One step. Two. The old wood creaks under my weight.

Holly follows, gripping the rope with both hands. "See? Nothing to worry?—"

The words end in a shriek as her foot slides on the ice. She pitches sideways, and my heart stops. I lunge for her, but she's already falling, missing the creek but landing hard in the snow-covered bank. The impact sends her sliding straight into the frigid water.

"Holly!"

I'm in the water before her name leaves my mouth, hauling her up against my chest. She sputters and coughs, clinging to my jacket as I lift her onto the bank. The creek water runs in icy rivulets down her coat.

"I'm okay," she gasps, teeth already chattering. "Just wet. And cold. Really cold."

Training kicks in. Assess. Act. Keep her safe.

I strip off my coat, wrapping it around her shoulders even as I drag the emergency kit closer. "We need to get you warm. Now."

"I can walk?—"

"Emergency blanket first." I yank the foil blanket from the kit, the material crinkling as I wrap it around her over my coat. "Your clothes are soaked through. The blanket will trap body heat."

Her lips are turning blue, but she still manages a shaky smile. "You're very good at this whole rescue thing."

"Years of winter safety training." I check her hands - cold but still pink. Good. "Can you feel your fingers and toes?"

She nods, then frowns. "You'll freeze without your coat."

"I run hot." When she starts to stand, I stop her. "Don't. Cold shock affects muscle coordination. Let me carry you."

I scoop her up, adjusting the foil blanket to cover her completely. She's a shivering bundle of silver foil and wet wool in my arms. Her nose presses cold against my throat as she burrows closer.

She burrows closer, pressing her cold nose against my throat. "You're warm."

My heart clenches. She feels so small in my arms, so precious.

"The cabin's close. Ten minutes tops." I pick my way carefully through the snow,

hyperaware of my precious cargo.

She nods against my chest. "Is that smoke?"

"Timer on the woodstove." At her questioning look, I shrug, careful not to jostle her. "I like coming home to a warm house."

"So practical." She shivers again, but this time I don't think it's from cold. "And sexy."

"Keep talking to me."

"About what?"

"Anything. Tell me more about your flower shop plans."

She starts describing her ideas for seasonal arrangements, her voice growing steadier as we walk. Good. Keeping her talking means keeping her conscious.

The cabin emerges from the white haze like a Christmas card come to life. Smoke curls from the chimney, and warm light spills from the windows I forgot to turn off this morning.

"It's perfect." Her voice is soft with wonder despite her shivers. "Like something from a fairy tale."

I shoulder open the door, kicking it shut against the wind. "You need a hot shower before hypothermia sets in."

"I'm f-fine." But her violent shivering betrays her. "Just need to dry off?—"

"Holly." I set her on her feet in the bathroom, keeping one arm around her waist when she sways. "You're showing signs of mild hypothermia. You're getting in that shower if I have to put you there myself."

Her eyes spark with mischief despite her chattering teeth. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Christ. Even half-frozen she manages to test my control.

"Behave." I turn on the shower, adjusting the temperature to lukewarm. Can't shock her system with too much heat too fast. "I'll get you some dry clothes."

I find my smallest flannel shirt and a pair of sweats with a drawstring waist. When I return to the bathroom, Holly's struggling with her coat zipper, fingers too numb to grip.

"Let me." I carefully peel off the wet layers - coat, scarf, sweater. Each piece hits the floor with a wet slap. The shirt beneath clings to her curves, nearly transparent. I force my eyes away. Focus on the practical. Getting her warm. Safe.

I swallow against a throat gone dry. My body thrums with hers. It's too much. Too fast. But I can't deny this anymore. It's so right.

"Nico?" She lifts her hands, icy fingers brushing my jaw. "Please."

Her touch sets off a rush of possession. I tear at my clothes, not bothering to fold or hang, instincts screaming to get to her.

She's still shivering when I sweep her into my arms, carry her into the shower, and kick the door shut behind us with my foot. Water pummels our bodies, steam rising around us as I press her against the tile wall, fitting my body to hers.

Our mouths crash together, a tangle of tongues, teeth, and pent-up need. Her hands slide into my hair, tugging gently, and I'm lost.

She tastes like peppermint and want and pure, unfiltered desire. My hands roam, mapping the soft curve of her hips, the supple swell of her breasts. I haven't touched a woman in years, but my body knows what to do. How to please. How to take. How to give.

I kiss a path down her jaw to the pulse, beating frantically at the base of her throat. Her fingers tighten in my hair, guiding me. The steam rises around us, carrying away the chill from the mountainside as I explore every inch of her with my lips and tongue.

Her fingers scrape down my back, and I shudder, my mouth slanting harder over hers. I skim her thighs, her hips, her ass, lifting and pressing and needing to feel all of her.

I want to give her pleasure. Every kind of pleasure.

Her fingers thread through my hair, pulling me closer. "Don't stop."

I kiss my way down her neck, over her collarbone, pausing to worship the rapid beat of her pulse again.

"Nico," she gasps, and her eyes flutter open, dazed and dark with passion. "I need?—"

"Anything." I tear my mouth from hers, trailing kisses down her throat, licking and biting and sucking. Marking her as mine. "Tell me what you need, and it's yours."

Her hands fist in my hair, pulling me back to her mouth with a ferocity that matches mine. I growl my answer as the water sluices over us, hot and steamy and endless.

Holly

S team curls around us as the hot water beats down, creating a cocoon that feels like our own little world. My heart's racing, partly from nerves, partly from wanting him so much it's almost overwhelming.

Nico's hands skim my skin, still hesitant like he's holding back. Always so careful with me. But tonight I want all of him—the control, the passion, everything he keeps locked away.

I sink to my knees, looking up at him through the spray. Water runs down his chest, and my mouth goes dry at the sight. He's beautiful—all hard muscle and strength, but it's the tenderness in his eyes that undoes me.

"Holly." His voice catches, rough with emotion. "Sweetheart, you don't have to?—"

I silence him by taking him in my mouth. Clumsy but eager. His sharp intake of breath sends a thrill through me. This is what I want—him losing that iron control, letting go with me.

"Christ." His hands find my hair, steadying me. "Easy, baby. Let me show you."

I pull back, heat flooding my face. "I want it to be good for you."

"Everything about you is good." His voice is rough velvet. "You're everything I never let myself want."

He guides me with soft words and gentle touches until I find a rhythm. Every groan, every tremor in his muscles makes me bolder. This powerful man—my lumberjack, my protector—is coming undone because of me.

"Holly." My name sounds like a prayer, like a confession. "Look at me, baby."

I meet his eyes, dark with desire but swimming with something deeper. His thumb traces my bottom lip, and I feel the slight tremor in his touch.

"You're incredible," he breathes.

I shake my head, determined. "I want this. Want you. Always you."

When he finally loses control, his hands tightening in my hair, I feel it—the moment he finally lets go completely. The moment he's fully mine.

He pulls me to my feet, crushing me against his chest. His kiss tastes of desperation and surrender and love—so much love I could drown in it.

"You're shaking," he murmurs against my lips, worry creeping into his voice.

I tuck my face into his neck, breathing him in. "Happy shaking. Perfect shaking."

"My brave girl." His chuckle rumbles through me as he reaches for the shampoo. "Let me take care of you now, sweetheart. Let me show you what you mean to me."

And in this moment, with steam rising around us and his hands gentle in my hair, I know—this is it. This is what coming home feels like. This is what forever feels like.