



Defended by the Lumberjack (Moonshine Ridge Lumberjacks #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Putting on a suit and tie to attend the company's Christmas dinner isn't my idea of a good time but a glimpse of the curvy chef that runs the fancy restaurant has me rethinking my plans for an early exit.

July's everything I want and I've got plans to make her mine, but her shyness is rooted in a past full of people she couldn't count on. I'll have to prove I'm on her side before she believes I want her forever.

When a customer at her restaurant crosses the line, I'll put my job and my reputation on the line to defend her.

Because my future is with July and I'll do whatever it takes to protect her.

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Chapter One

July

I 'm nervous. But I got through Thanksgiving fine, so the Christmas season can't be any worse, right?

Right?

"Chef!" One of the crew yells for me from the back of the kitchen, pulling my attention off the dining room where my nerves have had me anchored. Wiping my hands down my smock, I head back.

Kitchen stuff, I can handle.

"No, no, no....here. Put that back in the walk-in. Oh em gee, Patrick, why?"

It's not a cooking show. It's an actual kitchen. Filled with actual assistants and prep cooks, line cooks, a sous chef, and one lead chef whose name is on the line.

Me.

"But we need it for the main course." Patrick pouts. Patrick is too old to pout and, according to his resume, he's also too experienced to have already pulled the spinach out.

"But we don't need it for another half an hour. Please-- just...please."

I wave him and his greens off the prep surface and put Perry on the station.

It's fine. It's fine. It's...fine. I chant in my inside-my-head voice and get back to the tasks that only I can handle.

Savor is my dream, and I am ridiculously young to have already achieved it. Which is only one of a million reasons I'm convinced it's going to crumble out from underneath me at any minute.

The upscale restaurant at the Moonshine Ridge Ski Resort opened three years ago under the same name, but with a different chef. I got the job as sous chef last year, after my stint in Italy apprenticing under the world's worst boss.

Again. Not "mean makes good TV" bad boss-- an actual jerk. And not the least bit hot.

I almost quit three times during that apprenticeship, it was so bad. But I really want this.

Having to fight tooth and nail for my pride as well as my self-esteem for those six months was the reason I took the job here when I was ready to face the process of applying for jobs.

Moonshine Ridge is so tiny. Savor is located in the local ski resort, which is also tiny, owned and operated by a local couple.

Eddy and Pepper Jones wanted to bring upscale dining to the area, but without the pomp and circumstance that accompanies high profile areas catering to high profile clientele.

I researched the community, the restaurant, and the job description and jumped on the

offer when it came in.

It was the perfect place to get the hands-on experience I'd need to rebuild my confidence in my abilities in a low-key setting.

Then our chef quit. He walked out three months ago on barely two weeks' notice to take a job at some new place in the Florida Keys.

Said he couldn't take another season in this "nothing" town where we go days sometimes with no business because the road up the mountain gets closed when the weather is really bad.

But it did mean that the lead chef position got thrust into my lap early in my career, and right before our busy season at the resort.

For Thanksgiving, we did a buffet dinner with all the usuals. It was busy-- really busy-- but still mostly locals. The runs had only been fully open for a few days before the holiday, with our first good snow coming late this year.

Now we're in the Christmas season. Winter on the mountain has been busy making up for its late show and the resort is bustling.

I'm tasked with managing the kitchen staff, keeping lists of supplies and ingredients that have to be ordered or fetched up from the larger town of Slow River in the valley, creating new menus, experimenting with new ideas, and accommodating the large parties coming up to hold their annual holiday and end-of-year office parties at the only place in town that's really big enough to hold them.

Like the Murdock brothers' timber company is tonight. All three of the Murdock brothers, three silver foxes that are as surly as they are handsome, their office staff, field supervisors, crew leaders-- pretty much everyone who's on the company's

permanent payroll-- and their significant others.

There must be thirty people in the private banquet room and, of course, the Murdocks were not going to go for a prix fixe menu.

My eyes scan the dining room beyond the safety of the kitchen where I'm queen and can handle any conflict. Out there though...my shoulders sag along with my confidence as I watch the tables fill.

My tenure as lead chef of Savor is on a trial basis. If I can't step up, they'll start looking for a new chef.

I have a lot riding on making sure I bring in good reviews and repeat business in order to prove I deserve to keep my kitchen.

Levi

The fucking bosses sure do love their dress-up dinners.

I tug at the tie that feels like a noose around my neck and follow the hostess across the grand dining room to the private room where the company part is being held.

"Wasn't sure you were gonna show this year, man." Jake slaps me on the shoulder, over the fabric of the suit jacket that's nowhere near as comfortable as the lined flannel I left hanging on the peg by the door at home.

Jake knows how much I love getting dressed up for the events our company holds a few times a year.

He laughs at me as I search the tables done up with the deep burgundy linens and ornate center pieces of poinsettias and pine boughs, looking for my name engraved on

one of the little cards sitting among the cloth napkins.

"Adam and Phoenix here yet?" I grouch, pulling at the Windsor knot at my throat a little more forcefully than necessary.

Our buddy's a newlywed, with a baby on the way already. Apparently he found himself a damsel in distress, played the hero, won a bride. Lucky son of a bitch.

Appetizers start appearing as I find my assigned seat. Shedding the suit jacket and draping it over the back of my chair, I grab a couple before they're gone.

"Food's better this year," I mention aloud as Adam and his wife make their appearance,

"Yeah, I thought maybe it was just me." Adam says, popping one of the tiny puff pastries in his mouth.

"I heard they have a new chef this year," Phoenix says, accepting a glass of ginger ale off a tray and taking a delicate bite of one of the stuffed mushrooms.

"He deserves a raise," I say, snagging another morsel from a passing tray. "I hope dinner's as good as these things are."

The banquet room fills up. Too many people for my taste and it'll be a while yet before we start sitting down for the meal.

I find myself wandering away from the main dining room, into one of the corridors that skirt this building, connecting the various areas with floor to ceiling windows looking out over the snow-covered mountains.

Fucking magic, man. It's early December, snow's been falling all week and a near-full

moon has the rugged peaks lit up in a soft blue light.

I hate that my work is seasonal. Not being out in the woods for months at a time every year makes me itch more than the suit I'm wearing.

Adam got lucky. He's got somebody now. Phoenix looks at him like he's her whole damn world. Maybe if I had that for myself, being cooped up in the cabin all winter wouldn't feel like torture.

But last I looked, there weren't any more women hanging off of cliff-sides.

Behind me, I hear a door open. Must lead directly into the kitchen.

The sounds of voices frantically talking about canapés and sauces, punctuated by sounds that remind me of my grandmother's kitchen on holidays like this-- lots of people all whisking and chopping at once-- fill the empty hall, and then the sounds fade as the door closes.

The air is suddenly charged. An extra presence takes up some of the space that was all mine a second ago, soft soles muffling footsteps walking up to the window beside me.

The hall we're in is softly lit, intended to let the view outside take center stage, but I can make out the shape of her feminine curves under the garb that identifies her as one of the chefs.

Her hair appears to be a soft shade of brown, maybe a dark blonde.

It's hard to tell with it pinned up close to her head the way it is.

"Tough night?" I ask, desperate to hear the angel speak to me and at a loss for

anything more clever to say.

"A little." She sounds tired, worried maybe, as she stares into the moonlit landscape before us, talking more to it than to me maybe.

"Tough party tonight," she says to the mountains. Her voice is melodic and soft despite the tone of despair present in it. "They haven't been happy with anything I've sent out. Probably going to lose my job after this."

"You're the head chef?" I wonder out loud, the flavor of those little bite size hors d'oeuvres lingering in my memory.

"For now." She seems to snap out of her thoughts, realizing she's talking to another person. A professional demeanor slides into place, masking her sullen thoughts.

The girl turns to face me, a smile plastered on lips that have my full attention.

She's so much younger than I expected. Making me feel like a dirty old man for the things I've been thinking about her. She crushes her fancy chef hat in her left hand and extends her right for a shake.

"July West."

It takes a second and a half for me to respond to her gesture in any civilized manner. Blood's rushing, dampening my hearing and tunneling my vision, on its way south where it's making my dick behave badly.

"Levi, uh...Davis." My brain finally gets a signal to my hand to take hers but when we make contact, I find myself unable to let go.

July's pillow lips pull into a smile that's sweet, innocent, shy, and a lot more real than

the one she was wearing like a mask when she first looked up at me.

"Hi, Levi. Sorry about dumping my problems on you. I didn't expect anyone else to be out here."

Her eyes hold mine long enough for me to see my future in them, then they slide down the full length of my body in a quick once-over that might be just her realizing the size of me-- but feels like more.

My heart thumps and I have the dumbest impulse to beat my chest with my fists, toss the curvy little chef over my shoulder and carry her away some place where nothing can ever make her sad again.

"I have to get back to work." She sounds like she's explaining to me but then I realize she needs her hand back.

"I'm not fired yet," she plays off her fears with a brave laugh, setting the hat on her head and disappearing into the busy kitchen behind the door, turning back to give me one last smile before she's gone.

A party giving her grief? One that's got enough pull to cost her her job? We haven't even sat down for the main course yet for fucks sake.

I had back into the banquet room, feeling stunned, something primitive in my brain chanting "mine" on repeat.

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Chapter Two

July

" C hef!" Perry holds up a plate for me to see before dumping it on the dishwashing station.

He doesn't need to say a word, I already know.

"They left." He says it like it's supposed to comfort me but all it does is make anxiety twist in my gut.

One of the tables tonight just refused to be satisfied with anything that came out of my kitchen. The sent back nearly everything. Overcooked, undercooked, watery, bland, spicy... nothing me and my team did was right.

I should be glad they finally left, but it just means not having another chance to make them happy.

"Did the Murdock's go too?"

Perry nods, and my mood sinks further.

It's been a busy night even in spite of the problem guests.

I barely had a chance to step out of the kitchen, but I did take a second to find Levi among the diners.

Part of the Murdock company party. I spotted him at one of the tables during the dessert course, talking casually with a couple sitting beside him but looking uncomfortable in the tie and dress shirt.

My heart does a problematic little flip flop at the memory of the big man that I met too briefly in the silent corridor earlier.

I'd needed a moment to clear my head and get through the chaotic night.

Levi was an unexpected calming presence. His voice was warm and caring and when he wrapped my hand in his, I've never felt safer with anyone in my life.

I'd hoped that maybe he'd one of the people left lingering in the banquet room or milling around the bar after the kitchen closed, but when I get a chance to peel off my smock and leave my kitchen in the capable hands of the clean-up crew I'm disappointed that I can't find him.

"Waiting on a boyfriend?"

The deep voice catches me off guard, making me startle even as a thrill runs through me at its sound.

Turning around to find the source, I see Levi standing a few feet behind me. One hand shoved in the pocket of his suit pants, the tie he had on earlier is missing now, two of the buttons of his navy, silk dress shirt undone at his throat to reveal a curl of dark chest hair.

His suit jacket is slung over his arm as he shifts awkwardly on his feet like he's nervous about my answer.

"No boyfriend." My pulse quickens in time with how fast I saw the words.

Levi takes a step closer, emerging from the spot by the windows where I found him earlier like he's been waiting on me.

My heart squeezes with hope that that's true.

"Husband?" His eyes travel to my left hand, a quiver of uncertainty in his voice despite the absence of a ring.

I shake my head quickly. "No husband either."

Levi's next step is more confident, bringing him right up in front of me.

Close enough that I can smell the masculine scents of sandalwood, leather and spice that make up his cologne, a hint of alcohol that he might have been drinking or might have gotten spilled during the evening, and the lingering scents of the dinner that I cooked for him.

Cooking for people is my passion, one I chose to make my profession, but the thought that this man was enjoying a meal I prepared, hits me in the same primal way that responds to his nearness as I look up to meet his intense gaze.

"Girlfriend?" His lips quirk under the thick beard.

"Nope."

"Thank fuck."

Levi

My lips have hers hostage before she has a chance to say another word.

Not that July fights my kiss.

Totally the opposite, in fact. The curvy bundle in my arms reaches around me, pulling herself closer while the lips I've been preoccupied with all night work against mine in a way that has a half feral sound working its way out of my throat.

If she'd said she was in a relationship with anyone-- anyone-- I was ready to fight them for her.

My arms snake around July's body, the suit jacket sliding to the floor when I set my hands on her wide hips, July's hands slip between our bodies. Despite the close press, she runs them up my chest and I feel her fingers in my beard before she loops her arms behind my neck.

My dick's choking behind my fly for air. No. Not air. The fucker's at full mast and pulsing with need to get inside July. Her eager little gasps between our connected lips at every touch of my hands moving along her curves not doing a damn bit of good to talk sense into my dick or my brain.

"Baby, you keep wiggling against me like that and I'll be taking you up against those windows."

July nuzzles into my beard while I whisper at her hoarsely. Full tits brush against my chest while she moves into the rigid line of my cock where it hits her lower belly and every movement has me closer to the limits of my self-control.

"Might as well, I'm probably already getting fired, right?"

Her eyes are a warm, light brown, like dried pine needles, and there's a challenge in them when she angles a smirk up toward me that has me wondering how serious she really is.

"Come home with me tonight, Levi. I don't want you to leave yet.

" July takes her body away from mine and catches my hand in hers.

I'm so gone, I almost forget to grab my jacket off the floor as I eagerly let her lead me to a door marked "staff only" and up two flights of stairs to what looks like it was originally built to be a fancy suite in the resort's old lodgings.

I willingly let July lead me into her private space, a small apartment that has been renovated from the original room.

"It's been a shitty night," she tells me like she's making a confession as she drops smock and hat aside. "You're the only good thing that happened all day, Levi. I-- "

Her delicate throat works in a hard swallow and the confidence in her eyes falters, taking her gaze off me as she slips off her shoes and begins pulling pins out of her hair.

"I don't really have much experience...with..." She pulls her full lower lip between her teeth and knits her brows together, looking back up at me through long lashes.

Her eyes travel down my body, landing on the fly of my pants where my hard-on tents the damn things behind the zipper.

"...men," she finishes her sentence quietly as she works the last pin out of her hair, letting dusty-blond locks fall loose in crimped curls that hang past her shoulders.

"But I've never met anyone that made me feel like you do and I don't know how much longer I'm going to get to stay on the ridge. So, if you like what you see...?"

My mouth goes dry as July undoes a drawstring at her waist and lets her loose pants

hit the floor around her ankles.

Fuck yeah, I like what I see.

I'm more than happy to stay here and give this girl whatever she needs for the night, but before that happens, we need to get one thing clear between us.

This isn't just tonight.

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Chapter Three

July

Levi's been pretty quiet, but his eyes are laser focused on my every move. From taking out the pins in my hair to untying my pants.

He doesn't say a word when I confess my inexperience or to my obvious proposition.

I don't think he would have waited for me after work if he wasn't interested. I don't think he would have followed me to my apartment if he wasn't expecting something.

Maybe my body isn't what he imagined now that he can see what's under the loose chef's uniform. Or maybe he's rethinking getting involved with a woman who just admitted she doesn't really know what she's doing.

Although, the heat in his stare makes me think that's a battle he might be losing with himself.

I'm down to just my bra under a camisole top and a pair of cotton panties that definitely back up my claim that I'm not used to seducing strangers I've just met.

"I like a lot more than just what I can see, July."

Levi's gruff voice is thick and low as he steps closer to me.

His hands slide up my arms, his thumb trailing over my throat and up my jaw line.

His eyes rake down my body so completely I feel it.

My nipples are already hard under my bra, my panties uncomfortably wet between my legs.

I want this man. I want this man in a way I've never felt before.

"I don't know how to explain it, darling, but you're mine, July. And I'm yours. You owned me the minute I saw you in the hall downstairs."

"Is that what this feeling is, Levi?" I step free of the clothes pooled on the floor and meet him halfway. "Because I feel the same way."

"Good. Because you need to know that if I stay, it's going to be for good. I want you July, but I want forever, not just tonight."

It's a ridiculous demand and I shouldn't be nodding my head so eagerly, let alone giving myself over to this man so completely so quickly. I can't help myself. It doesn't sound like a line, and I feel what he's saying with the same certainty that's carried in his tone.

Our lips crash together in a new kiss and Levi picks me up easily, carrying me into my room and dropping me on the bed as if I were as weightless as a doll.

I move into the center of the bed, making way for Levi to join me, his large body covering mine as he crawls onto the mattress to settle between my legs.

Struggling to sit up, I start working on the buttons of his shirt while his hands reach behind me to unclasp my bra and then strip me from it and my cami at the same time.

"My God, July, these are perfect for me."

He breathes the words like a prayer as he fills his hands with my breasts. Pressing me back into the heavy, winter duvet, Levi covers one of my aching hard nipples with his mouth. So hot and wet on my sensitive skin that I arch my back into the feeling.

I feel the warmth of his naked chest against my stomach, against my mound, with just my panties between my flesh and his as he lavishes attention on my breasts.

The sound of his shoes hitting the floor as he kicks them off echoes through my quiet room along with the sound of my moans and gasps as he tongues and sucks my nipples.

I want to finish undressing him. I want to unbuckle his belt and push the soft, wool trousers off his hips and find out what kind of underwear he wears to a fancy company Christmas party. Then I want those on the floor too.

But Levi's in control now and he's not giving it back.

Levi

J uly's body is all softness, filling my hands and molding so fucking sweetly to the hard planes of the muscles that I've built over the years of working for the logging company. Every part of her feels like it was made just for me.

I work my way down her body, giving each breast a goodbye kiss before exploring the roundness of her belly and then her hips.

Laying kisses over those curves, I close my eyes and think of watching them expand while our babies grow inside her.

Fuck. I never thought breeding a woman would have me feeling so worked up, but the idea has me fumbling between us to get my slacks undone so I can fist my cock.

Possessiveness swells up from someplace deep inside me and I'm overcome with the need to claim this woman. I have to fill July's tight little pussy with my cock, mark her with my cum and erase anyone else who's ever been here before me.

"You said you don't have a lot of experience."

I'm settled between her legs now, my thumb pressing into her center through the soaking wet spot that's darkened the pink cotton briefs left between her sweet cunt and my mouth.

"Are you still a virgin, baby?"

I don't know what I'll do if she says yes.

The caveman roaring inside my brain wants to be the only one who will ever touch her, but a more civilized part of me is terrified of hurting her.

"No... sorry."

Relief floods me, then that possessive need to make her mine. Just mine.

"Was he someone special?"

Maybe we should have this talk when my mouth isn't watering from the anticipation of getting her sweet taste on my tongue, but there's a primal drumbeat inside my head that has to know.

Above me, July's head makes a soft sound as it hits the pillow and she laughs lightly at the ceiling.

"I was a twenty-two year old virgin living in Italy with roommates that acted like

virginity was a disease. He was a Spanish history student visiting for his studies. He looked at my body like it was art and he acted like my v-card was a trophy.

We went on two dates and I never spoke to him again. Deed done. Roommates placated. He wasn't special and it didn't live up to the hype."

Another confusing battle rages inside me. Relief that her previous lover wasn't someone that will always be competing with me for space in her heart, and anger that he didn't make an effort to try.

"I'm gonna change that for you, right now, baby. When I'm done, you won't remember anyone but me."

Slipping the panties down her hips, I press my nose into the scent that has me half crazed and inhale. Then I do my very best to make sure I live up to the hype.

July makes a cute little noise. She sounds like she's all in with my promise and I plan to keep it.

"Knees up, baby girl, let me taste this pussy."

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Chapter Four

July

Levi's nose dips between my legs and I'm suddenly very self-conscious of the fact that I've spent the last eight hours in the kitchen.

I should have taken a shower first.

The way Levi breathes in my scent and groans darkly before pulling my underwear off of me completely makes me less concerned about the kitchen smells that cling to me after a long shift.

I nervously follow his instructions to raise my knees and spread my thighs apart so he can wedge his broad shoulders between them.

"Relax, baby, let me make you feel good-- if I do anything you don't like, you make sure to let me know."

Levi's tongue slicks between my folds. It's such an unexpected feeling that I don't know how to react. Then he does it again, slower, taking his time like he's savoring a delicacy. His thumbs move closer to my center, pinning my thighs apart.

My brain is offline, my ears only aware of the sound of my own heavy breathing, Levi's occasional groans, and the lewd, wet sounds of his mouth working my sex till I'm unable to stay still-- or quiet.

"That's it, give in to it, let go, Jules-- I want your cream coating my beard."

If he keeps doing that thing with his fingers, he's going to get it. I can feel Levi's soft beard brushing between my thighs, his tongue slipping around my entrance and then spearing deep while his thumb works firm circles over my clit.

The combination of sensations breaks my brain in the most beautiful way, blanking out the stress of the night and bringing all my focus to the pleasure building inside me.

My body gives in before my mind does, pulling tight in a full body muscle spasm but then I'm not paying attention to anything else.

For a few, blissful seconds-- or maybe for an eternity, it's hard to tell-- everything just feels .

The air in the room feels cold on my sweaty skin, the sound of my blood rushing through my veins feels loud in my ears, my shouts of Levi's name feel raw in my throat, and my entire body feels warm and languid while euphoria washes all those other feelings away.

Slowly, I become aware that Levi's no longer touching me, but I feel his stare. When I open my eyes, the huge man is on his knees, naked, and gripping a monster cock that's so hard it looks like it might break in half if he squeezes any tighter.

"You're fucking beautiful, Jules. I've never seen anything better than watching you come undone for me."

There's no shyness left in me. I let my knees fall wide, allowing Levi's hungry gaze to roam my body entirely as he strokes himself from root to tip. The glistening moisture leaking from the head of his dick has me licking my lips.

"Stay right there, baby girl. Next time." Levi's hand catches my shoulder and pushes me back gently when I make a move towards him. "If I let you put your mouth on me right now, I'll be breaking that promise I made to you."

He follows me down to the sheets, his larger body covering mine, pressing me into the mattress and trapping me with his weight.

Why does it feel so good to be pinned beneath him like a trapped animal? But I don't feel trapped, I feel safe.

"You already kept your promise," I point out, wiggling under him to offer my body to him more completely.

"Nah, that was just the appetizer." He smirks before kissing me. I don't tase myself on him, but I can smell myself in his beard. It's oddly erotic and it has my pussy leaking with new need for him.

"This is the main course. Are you ready?"

Levi notches the broad head of his erection to my opening, giving me a meaningful look. I nod, but my body tenses in anticipation.

He's huge. As much as I want him, I'm worried he'd hurt me even if I was far more experienced.

"Shhh, relax. Just let me in." Levi shifts position, moving to drag his cock between my slick folds. He lets me move against his shaft, then he moves with me, working me up again until I'm so desperate to feel him filling me inside that I don't care how big he is.

"I need you, Levi." I rasp, tilting my pelvis till he's pressing to my entrance again,

"Inside. Please."

Levi

July begs and I'm powerless to deny her any longer. My dick sinks into her willing body and a shudder runs through me at the feel of her tightness suctioning around my thick length.

"Fuck, Jules, you're taking my whole cock." I choke my words out, shocked when I bottom out at the root of my cock without July wincing or pushing me back.

I'm a big guy at six, five, and I know I'm packing more than average between my legs as well.

Daring a glance between us to where our bodies are joined is almost my undoing. It's so fucking hot to see my length completely sheathed in July's little pussy.

But I promised to rock my girl's world. I meant it when I said I planned to erase her memory of anyone before me and that's what I'm going to do.

"Levi-- please..." July's fingers scrabble on my shoulders, her thighs clamping around my hips. "I need...something...to move...please."

She's so fucking pretty, panting under me, begging for more and desperate to chase her next release.

"It's okay, baby, I got you."

I kiss her again, those bee-stung lips of hers are impossible for me to resist. Then I give her what she needs.

Keeping my thrusts slow at first, I grit my teeth against the urge to slam into her and fuck her hard. I want this to feel good-- for both of us-- and Jules feels so good with her tight walls squeezing my dick, I want it to last.

It's not long before she's setting the pace for us though, meeting my thrusts with increasing urgency. I feel the first flutters of her channel around me and do my best not to let it take me over the edge before she gets there first.

Then I feel short nails in my back, and the rub and slide of July's body on mine with the mewling little cries she makes as her second orgasm of the night wracks her body has me losing my damn mind.

I feel my spine tingle, my balls tighten and then I'm filling her up exactly the way I was meant to.

We sleep together through the night, wrapped up in each other like we've been doing it our whole lives already. Before day breaks with its sleepy winter light late in the morning, I wake my girl up, desperate to have her again before I have to head down the mountain without her.

"I'll be back tonight," I promise. Leaning across the rumpled sheets to kiss her pouty lips.

"I have the dinner shift till nine." July's hands wrap around my neck, her kisses feeling a hell of a lot more like good morning than good bye.

"I'll be back before then. I have to go into the office and get a few things done. You want me to bring some things back? I can stay a few days."

"Sounds perfect. I don't get time off until Monday."

Believe it or not, July and I actually managed to do some talking through the night. I know she needs to stay at the ski resort to be close to her work. As soon as she has a few days off, I plan to pack her up and bring her down to my place.

We'll work out the logistics later. But she won't be living in the cramped one bedroom apartment of employee housing much longer.

And she won't be losing her job either.

It's not a long drive down to my cabin. I found property for sale along one of the nameless, winding roads that spur off the main highway on the uphill side of town.

Moonshine Ridge might be small as towns go, but it's built tight, with most all the businesses that make up "town" within walking distance of each other.

Residential areas sprouted up around the city center over time, with most of the houses close enough to pass for actual neighborhoods.

I wanted open space. So I built my place out here, on the five acres I was able to snag for a good price, but only because I had the resources to put in the road myself.

And speaking of those resources; I hope I'm not about to hang myself with the rope I was given, but I don't even bother swinging home for a shower and a change of clothes.

Passing the turn off to my place, I head straight for the Murdock offices knowing damn good and well that the big boss, Clinton, doesn't have anything better to do with his Saturday morning than be at work.

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Chapter Five

July

My phone buzzes and I smile as I read the text from Levi.

He's been texting all day, letting me know he meant every word he told me last night about our future together. I can't explain it, but I know he's right about being meant for each other.

I text him back to let him know I left a key for him with the front desk staff so he doesn't have to wait for me downstairs. I add silly hearts to the message and he sends back a kissing face and tells me he'll be here soon, even though it's still early and I have hours before my dinner shift ends.

"Hey, July?" Pepper Jones pokes her head through the kitchen door.

"Yeah?" My heart rate ramps up to one-sixty. Pepper and her husband, Eddy, are the owners of the ski resort-- my bosses.

"I know it's going to be late and all, but when you're done tonight, could you swing by the office?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure thing."

Pepper's friendly voice gives nothing away, but if the bosses want to see me at ten o'clock on a Saturday night, it can't be good. Especially not after the unhappy

customer last night.

Even Levi's next text can't cheer me up as I start prepping for the early dinner crowd.

"Hey, Perry, I need to grab some things from the back." I give my assistant the heads up that I'll be out of the kitchen for a bit and push through the door to the hallway.

The owners did their best to build the state of the art kitchen in the space provided by the original nineteen-sixties architecture of the ski resort's main building, but inevitably, some of our supplies ended up being kept in a storage room that can't be accessed from inside the kitchen space.

Towels, storage containers, bowls, that sort of thing.

It seems the lunch crew didn't bother restocking the kitchen towels when they cleared out this afternoon, and not only am I the one with free hands at the moment, I could use a minute to myself.

"Hey Chef."

The man's voice catches me by surprise. When I turn around with an armful of dishtowels, he's standing in the store room doorway, blocking my exit.

"I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you in private."

The way he says "private" makes my skin crawl.

He takes a step just past the doorway and I see an older man with a slim build and thinning hair. A pot belly hangs over his belt and an unfriendly smile holds thin lips up at the corners.

I recognize him. This is the guy from that kept sending everything back last night. The guy that wasn't happy with anything that came out of my kitchen. The guy that's going to cost me my job.

"What do you want?" I clutch the towels and stand my ground, anger breaking through my initial fright.

"I was thinking we could make a deal," the guy tells me.

He says it casually, like he followed me in here to offer me a business opportunity. I laugh out loud, right in his face.

"You weren't satisfied with anything I served yesterday, I doubt there's any kind of deal we can make."

He takes a step further into the room with me and the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

The way he leers at me makes it pretty obvious what sort of "deal" he's talking about and the very thought makes bile rise in my throat.

"I think there's something you could serve to me that I'd be very satisfied with. If you let me put in a special order, I'll make sure to tell your boss that his new chef has the highest of my compliments."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Did this man intentionally sabotage my job just so he could stack the odds in his favor when he propositioned me?

"I'm not making any deals with you. Get out of my way, I need to get back to the kitchen."

But he's not budging and I'm cornered.

Levi

"S he said leave. Her. Alone."

The guy damn near crumbles to the floor when I grab his shoulder, bending his knees as he tries to twist out of my grasp like the snake he is.

"I was just--"

"I heard what you were 'just.'"

Dragging the asshole out of the store room where I found him trying to blackmail my woman into letting him put his hands on her, he's lucky I haven't beaten him to a blood stain on the bottom of my boot. Yet .

I don't give a fuck what this shit stain for a human has to say as I drag his worthless ass through the big dining hall and toward the main lobby doors.

I don't give a fuck who sees me doing it, either. Far as I'm concerned, everyone in the resort needs to know the guy's a worthless predator.

"Levi!"

That voice is one of only two that would make me stop dead in my tracks at this moment. It's not July. My boss walks out of an office near the lobby's front desk, leveling a scowl at me that's a far cry from the man I was speaking with earlier today.

"What the hell is going on here?" Eddy Jones steps out of the office behind Clinton Murdock, both men making it clear that I'm the one they see as the problem here.

"This man accosted me, Mr. Jones, I demand that he be arrested immediately." The weasel weasels out of my grip, straightening his clothes and pointing back at me as he addresses Eddy directly.

July's hurried steps catch up to the group of men caught in a stand-off.

"Oh my God, thank you, Levi!" Her arms wrap around my waist, the desperate note of gratitude in her voice breaking me out of my rage.

"You okay, baby? Did he touch you?"

July shakes her head, letting me know she's unharmed, just scared.

"And that slut." The guy I'm still planning on flattening dares to point at July. I step forward, he steps behind Eddy Jones, Clinton steps between me and Eddy. "She propositioned me! Said she'd make it worth my while if I saved her job."

Eddy's pretty-boy features scrunch into confusion, but he doesn't argue with the man. Just looks my way, then at the employee whose back he oughta have. A quick glance passes between him and my boss and he turns his head to the woman at the front desk just a few feet from us.

"Sheriff's on the way," she tells the lot of us, and I know my day's going south pretty damn fast, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to defend my woman.

There's not enough room for all of us in Eddy's small office, so we've moved to a corner of the main lounge, where a fire crackles in the stone fireplace that takes up one whole wall of the room and a wall of windows looks out on happy skiers and snowboarders enjoying the winter landscape outside.

"Mr. Pendergrast is one of our bigger accounts.

" Eddy is explaining for Deputy Hawkins' notes that the weasel shit that deserves to get thrown off this mountain is the wallet behind a lucrative company contract for the lodge, footing an impressive expense fund for his employees and their families to enjoy the resort as part of their benefits package.

July's bottom lip trembles as she listens to her employer calmly explaining his personal interest in keeping the man happy.

"Clint? What's your stake in this?" Hawk directs his next question at my boss, using a casual tone that suggests the two men know each other personally.

Clinton nods toward me.

"Levi works for the company. Came by bright and early this morning to give me what for over ruining his girl's job. No clue what he was going on about, but glad he found a girl."

Clinton runs a gaze between everyone gathered for the occasion. His permanent scowl, scowling deeper when he looks at the stranger among us. Robert Pendergrast's face reddens.

"Came up to talk first hand with Jones. Make sure he understood how impressed the Murdocks were with his new house chef. Drop off a token of our appreciation for the young lady's hard work."

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Chapter Six

July

Eddy's wife leans over her husband's shoulder and hands me a thick envelope.

"We were going to give this to you after closing tonight but since you're here now."

Pepper shrugs apologetically and I peek inside the envelope to find, not a termination notice and final paycheck, but several crisp, one hundred dollar bills.

"Clinton came up personally to make sure we weren't planning on letting you go," Eddy explains easily. "Left you a nice tip."

Nice tip is putting it mildly.

I stutter a timid thanks to Mr. Murdock but I'm not sure Eddy and Pepper's plans for my employment haven't changed now.

Deputy Hawkins scribbles some notes. Looks between us all and steps aside to make a call on his radio. The crackle of static and a dispatcher's voice addresses him by his first name, asking him what he needs.

"Can you send Tompkins up to the Ridge, Bette? I'm gonna need transport."

We all heard him. Even though he stepped across the room to make the call. Someone isn't driving themselves off the mountain tonight. My hand squeezes Levi's.

"Okay, so, that explains some things. Miss? What exactly happened between you and Mr. Pendergrast?"

All eyes land on me. My employers' filled with curiosity, Levi's soft and reassuring, Robert Pendergrast's narrowed and warning.

"Um...last night, I had a customer at a table that sent back every dish I sent out to their party.

Word got back to me before the end of the night that he'd put in a complaint about me to the Joneses.

I'm only head chef on a trial basis after we lost our full time lead so I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be employed here much longer. "

Eddy looks back over his shoulder at his wife, an unspoken question on his face. Pepper shakes her head slightly.

"We never received a complaint about Ms. West. For the record." Eddy looks at me, but addresses Hawkins' scribbling hand.

"I had every intention of expressing my dissatisfaction before we left." Pendergrast says. "I mean, look at her, she's barely old enough to be out of school. No wonder she's willing to make passes at customers in exchange for a good review."

"I did not !"

The deputy's hand pats me lightly on the shoulder as tears spring to my eyes.

I can't believe I have to sit here and defend myself against this creeper's gross accusations.

Levi edges forward on the seat, ready to beat the truth out of the lying scumbag on my behalf, but his boss level's a stern look at him that seems to remind him this isn't the place or time.

My hand reaches for Levi's knee and he settles back into the couch beside me, wrapping me protectively under one arm.

"I asked Miss West for her account, sir. Please wait your turn." Hawkins tells Pendergrast in a tone that probably sounds professional to anyone who's never met the deputy.

From the stifled amusement on my bosses' faces, I'm not the only one who recognizes the undercurrent of sarcasm.

"She didn't, Hawk! I can vouch for the girl."

We all look up to look at the new voice joining the conversation and see a gray-haired woman decked out in state-of-the-art snowboarding gear, pulling off gloves as she hustles toward us.

Levi

"What are you doing here, Marianne?"

Our local sheriff's deputy's voice is tight as he addresses the woman he obviously already knows.

"Pft, four feet of fresh powder, you think I was going to leave town without getting on that?" Marianne invites herself into our tense group, standing beside me at the end of the sofa where July sits between me and Deputy Hawkins.

"Eddy Jones, I'm ashamed of you! You shouldn't be putting this poor girl through this bullshit, you know damn good and well this asshole's a lying sack of shit. I don't care how deep his pockets are. It's not like your people are hurting for money, now, is it?"

Hawk seems to be the only one who knows this woman and he's not making introductions, leaving the rest of us to stare at her while she issues her scathing report.

Not that she's wrong. Everyone knows the Jones family is one of the four founding names behind Moonshine Ridge, going all the way back to an ancestor who struck gold up on the river in the eighteen sixties, leaving a lot of wealth and some serious land to trickle down to the current generation of the family.

In fact, the Murdocks bought their timber rights directly from Anders Jones after his business partnership with Brodie McAllister went south. Small town history, man. You can't live on the Ridge and not hear it.

"Go watch your security footage. Them cameras you have all around this place aren't just for show, are they?"

Pendergrast stares hatefully at our intruder.

Jig's up.

"Saw him skulking around the hallway earlier. Didn't think much of it at the time, but I heard him talking to her in the supply room, saying he was willing to save her job for her if she did him a favor."

Marianne looks to be in her early seventies, with steel gray hair pulled back in a sporty pony tail and an athletic build that suggests she's not letting age take her out easy.

When she says "did him a favor," she adds the air quotes with a look of pure disgust aimed right at the man being quoted.

Eddy and Hawkins head into the office to watch aforementioned security footage.

Pendergrast's wife and kids come in from the slopes to find him sitting with a bunch of strangers and Pepper and I both let the man face the music, explaining the accusations he's facing to a woman who's apparently unsurprised by her husband's behavior.

"You promised you were done. This was supposed to be about reconciling, Robert. This is the last straw, it's over."

Pepper, Clinton, July, and I all exchange silent glances at the easily overheard exchange taking place a few feet away.

The squawk of a police radio enters the lobby and a second deputy follows the desk clerk's point toward our solemn little party.

"Hawk called for transport?"

Pepper jumps up and takes the deputy that came up from the valley into the office. Leaving me alone with July and a man who's been glaring daggers at me since he walked into the lobby to find me dragging one of the resort guests out the door.

Clinton's eyes soften for July though. He puts out his hand toward her.

"You must be the lady that has Levi ready to face down an army in defense of your honor."

July giggles softly and leaves the crook under my arm to lean forward and shake my

boss's hand.

My gut tightens though.

The Murdocks are known to be pretty fucking precious about their reputation-- both for their ethical logging practices, and for the men and women they employ.

There's a damn good chance that by making such a public scene up here today, I might have saved July's job but at the cost of my own.

Clinton nods in silent thought as he releases July's hand and straightens back in his seat.

Raised voices sound from the direction of the office. Clinton eventually stands.

"Sorry miss, I just need to borrow Levi for a minute."

July's eyes fill with worry but I give her a quick shake of my head and a soft kiss to her lips.

Even if Clinton is about to tell me I'm unemployed, I don't give a fuck. I'll go flip burgers at Cedar McAllister's tavern restaurant, or work the late shift at the gas station market to keep July's dream safe and stay on the Ridge with her.

"I take it you're pretty serious about this girl?" Clinton puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me to an empty corner of the lobby, lowering his voice to private conversation levels.

"Yes sir. Very much so."

"Just met her though, didn't you?"

I glance back at July and see her sitting alone where we left her, nervously tapping her knee and looking between the office door and me. My heart swells up with an emotion that threatens to drown me in it.

"Yes sir," I confirm to the boss. "But I'm serious about her. July's going to be moving down to my place soon and I plan on putting my ring on her finger as soon as she'll let me."

I pull myself to my full six, five, which puts me eye level with old man Murdock's forehead. He can say whatever he wants about me but when it comes to my girl, he needs to tread lightly.

Clinton watches my posture and gives me a look like he just doesn't get it.

"Never put much stock into love at first sight, myself." He mutters more to himself than to me. "But I admire the integrity it takes for a man to stand up for what's right. Even when the consequences could bite him in the ass."

Clinton's eyes move to the open office door where my fate is being decided.

If there's no camera in the storage room, if the cameras don't record audio-- footage could work in Pendergrast's favor. It could look like a simple case of a guest following an employee into a room off record.

He could stick to his claim that July propositioned him, or he could claim he was just asking a question.

But there's no doubt the cameras caught me roughing him up as I dragged his sorry ass through the building.

The video will just show a jealous boyfriend coming unhinged on an innocent man

with no record of what triggered it.

Voices rise again inside the office, growing louder as the group emerges.

Deputy Tompkins has his handcuffs dangling from his hands, his eyes scanning the room when he sees that I'm not where they left me.

I still don't know who's getting the ride down to the Slow River station.

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Chapter Seven

July

"July? Can I have a word with you, please?"

Deputy Hawkins beckons me into the office where the older woman sits behind Eddy's desk, in front of a computer with paused video on the screen.

Hawk takes a breath, like having to answer a call on a Saturday afternoon is trying his patience.

Our local sheriff's deputy is more one of the townspeople than the face of the law on the Ridge, despite the uniform and a determined sense of duty, rumor has it that he's in thick with the women who run the historical society-- a quartet of old ladies who are as notorious in this small town as any gang running the streets of southern California.

"Marianne Smalls is willing to stand on record to what she witnessed." He takes a seat and flips a page on his notebook.

Smalls. The name is well-known up on the Ridge.

"Are you Howard's daughter?" I wonder aloud, trying to remember if our local colorful character ever mentioned having children.

"Hell no, half-sister. Daddy got around well into his nineties. Good to see my

brother's got some the old man's energy. Mable's a lucky girl."

The couple in question is, indeed, in their nineties. They got married the year before I moved to the mountain, with Mable being one of those old ladies I mentioned.

No wonder Marianne makes the deputy uneasy. I watch Hawk run his hand through his hair, his hat having been laid on the desk at some point. I share the mild shudder that shakes his shoulders at the mention of Mable and Howard Smalls' sex life.

That's just not the sort of thing you want to think about.

Marianne's given me a pretty thorough account of what she overheard and the video picked up most of the audio to corroborate.

Hawkins turns in the chair and hits a button on the computer keyboard, unpauseing the video. It's a view from a stationary camera somewhere in the hall outside the store room door. I walk in, Robert walks in shortly afterward.

He stands in the doorway and you can just make out the image of Marianne at the far end of the hallway as she comes around a corner.

Most of what Pendergrast said is caught on audio, backing up my story.

When he moves completely into the storage room with me, he's out of frame, but you can clearly hear me tell him to get out of my way.

The deputy pauses the video.

"Of course, the video caught Levi escorting the man from the room as well, but between Tompkins, me, and the Joneses, we agree it's obvious what was happening.

"Marianne's going to follow me into town to record a full statement and I'll need you to come in as well but--" Hawkins' eyes lift to watch my boss, Eddy, enter the office.

"You can wait till Monday to come by the station.

I'll also need to talk to Levi, but this should be pretty easy to get wrapped up. "

Everyone stands, the deputy waiting for Marianne to exit the room before putting his hat back on and closing the door behind him.

"Hang on a sec, July." Eddy gestures for me to sit back down as he takes the seat behind his desk.

Eddy's office is a pretty small room, big enough for the desk and a couple of chairs. The desktop computer on the counter behind him being the only real sign that the space gets used for resort operations at all.

Both my bosses hate being in the windowless space.

They're outdoors people to the bone, with Pepper having once been a competition snowboarder before a bad accident ended her Olympic dreams. Eddy's family own half the mountain up the highway from here; riverfront property that stretches a couple of miles.

They operate a rafting company and looking at Eddy's permanent tan, and weathered features, it's easy to see that he spends more than just the winter months outside.

I'm more of a book by a fire kinda girl. The bosses have been trying to get me on skis since I came to work for them, but the kitchen is my happy place.

"Hey, I just wanted to make sure you know we never doubted your story, right?"

Eddy leans on his desk, lacing his fingers and looking at me like he's apologizing.

With his blonde hair, Brad Pitt smile, and laid back personality, Eddy makes half my kitchen staff go stupid whenever he comes in. I like him, and I get that he's got a classic kinda hotness to him, but he doesn't do it for me.

Not like Levi does. With his dark features and bronzed skin. A thrill runs through me just picturing him.

"Pendergrast is a major account," Eddy's explaining.

"Was." He corrects the tense with a casual smirk.

"Asshole...anyway...we had to do the whole both sides thing and you know Hawk's a by-the-book kinda guy.

Just want to make sure you know Pep and I are planning on keeping you. If you want to stick around?"

I definitely want to stick around.

Levi

Deputy Tompkins cuffs Pendergrast, reads him his rights, and marches him to the patrol unit waiting outside.

"Assault, extortion...by the time we go through the evidence he'll be facing more than a couple of charges.

"Hawkins pockets his notebook and zips his jacket as we stand together on the steps outside the ski resort and watch his colleague haul the other man away.

"Not sure what'll stick in the long run, but he's eighty-sixed from the resort for life. "

Hawk chuckles.

"Don't expect he'll be welcome most anywhere on the Ridge. You know how news travels in these parts. Folks stick by one another up here."

The deputy's phone buzzes in a case on his belt. He pulls it free and I catch sight of the picture of his family on the lock screen before he checks the incoming message. I swear the man's ears turn pink under the brim of his hat.

"Wife says get my ass home." Is all the explanation he gives as he gives me a wink and jogs down the steps and hurries to the SUV waiting in the lot.

"Come by the office next week, I want to talk to you about a new crew position." Clinton comes out of the resort's heavy front doors, pausing beside me as he slips a knit beanie over his gray hair. "We're planning some changes to the field crews this season, you might like one of the new jobs."

He checks the watch on his right wrist and glances behind us.

"I know you like being outside, but I figure you're gonna want a job that gets you home more often now. Am I right?"

The job I work now keeps me out in the camps for weeks at a time. The boss is right, I like being in the field, but now I've got July to come home to-- damn straight I'm going to want to come home.

"Comes with a good salary too," Clinton's saying to no one in particular as he fishes in his pocket for keys. "Good enough to support a family if you need to."

Clinton doesn't say goodbye or bother waiting around for me to respond. He just heads down the steps and out to the truck that flashes its lights when he hits the button in his hand.

"What happened? Is everything okay?" July joins me, sliding under my arm like she's been doing it her whole life.

I'm still reeling. Still feeling wound up from finding my woman cornered by that jerk, still working through the nerves from worrying about her job and my own. Still processing Clinton's words, suggesting I just got a promotion and a raise instead of getting canned.

"Yeah, baby, everything out here's good-- what about you? What'd your boss say?"

All things considered, and from what I know of the people who own this ski resort, I'd be shocked if July caught any shit for what went down today. But her job was already on a trial basis before this, so it's always possible that the Joneses aren't down for the drama.

"Eddy wanted me to know they were on my side," she tells me, snuggling into my side either for comfort or for warmth-- I'll give her both. "Just, you know, had to hear both sides for the record and all."

"He say anything about your job? Clinton coming up here had to be good for you, right?"

"It's official!" July looks up at me, her pretty hazel eyes all lit up while she bounces on her feet. "I'm the head chef of Savor! Permanently."

The sweet little thing under my arm beams with pride, everything else from the hectic day left behind in her excitement.

"The chef needs to get back to her kitchen, doesn't she?"

The drama has eaten well into the dinner shift. As much as I want to haul her over my shoulder and back to my cabin, these are the concessions I'll have to make for supporting my woman's dreams.

July finds my hands, her fingers curling around mine as she stands toe to toe in front of me now and gives me a sly grin.

"Perry and Jordan have it covered tonight. I've already missed so much of the shift, I'd just throw off their routine if I came back now."

"Get in the truck baby girl, I've got plans for you tonight."

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Chapter Eight

July

After the day I've had, I don't hesitate, not even long enough to grab my toothbrush. Whatever I need, I know Levi will take care of me.

Right now, what I need is Levi.

Levi's truck winds down the main mountain highway and turns off on a spur road just a few miles downhill from the resort. After a few bumpy turns over the snow-packed road, a cabin comes into sight.

"This is your house?"

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't the beautiful, two story, modern structure with the gorgeous rough wood siding and the stone porch that sits in a clearing that appears to have been carved out of the forest just for the house.

"All mine," Levi says proudly, pulling the truck into an attached garage and closing the automatic door behind us once we're parked.

"And yours, too, July." He adds, as he leads me inside the house. "I hope I made myself clear last night? Because when I said forever, I meant forever with all the wedding bells and toy whistles that comes with it."

A thrill dances through my heart at being reminded that this man really sees a future

together. My feet start toward the kitchen but Levi's got other plans.

"Oh no you don't." He laughs, hauling me off my feet into a bridal carry and turning us toward the wide, wooden staircase that takes up an entire wall of the living room.

"You can explore the kitchen later-- after I've had my way with you."

Levi's heavy steps pause mid-stairs so he can kiss me, slow and deep.

When our mouths finally part, my breath is ragged and the kitchen is the furthest thing from my mind.

Levi nips my lower lip and growls as he looks me in the eyes.

"Twice," he says definitively. "At least."

His pace picks up, making quick work of the remaining stairs and dropping me on a king size bed inside a large master suite at the top of the stairs.

As Levi stands back, staring down at me with a grin, while he begins unbuttoning his shirt. I scramble up to my knees and crawl to the edge of the bed till he's within reach.

We've both had a stressful day, and Levi's not the only one feeling anxious to work out the tension.

"What do you think you're doing, baby?"

He looks down at me, watching me release the buckle on his belt and pull his hard length free as his jeans and briefs slide down his muscled thighs.

I wrap one hand around him and feel the way he surges in my grip. Then I settle into

a good position at the end of the mattress, pulling Levi closer till my open knees rest beside his legs, and gingerly press my lips to the weeping head of his cock.

Levi gasps above me as I slide him into my mouth. His hands fall into my hair, pulling out the remaining pins I hadn't found yet, and then combing his fingers through for a grip around my head that's both firm and still tender.

His gasp turns to a guttural moan. His hips thrust deeper, hitting the back of my throat and making me gag lightly.

My fist curls around the base of him, giving me leverage to control his movements better.

"Fuck, July, baby." Levi's voice is rough between hard breaths, his hands tightening around my head. I can feel the controlled strength in his grip, like he's fighting to keep his hold loose enough to let me choose my own pace.

I appreciate not getting choked to death on his monster dick, but above me, Levi's strangled voice sounds like a man on the edge of losing control.

"You look fucking incredible with my cock down your throat, baby."

I love the empowerment of this feeling. I experiment with a tighter grip and feel another surge against my hand, like he could possibly grow any larger.

Levi's hums, a wicked noise that sounds like he's fighting for patience.

I don't want him to be patient, I want to feel him come completely undone for me. I want to do to him what he did to me.

Working to remember every description I've read or heard from girlfriends, I slip one

hand underneath him, cupping his heavy balls while my other hand works the length of him in firm strokes that follow my mouth.

Levi's knees buckle, hitting the end of the bed. All that patience he'd managed to command, lost as I gently experiment with stroking the delicate skin of his sack and lightly tugging in combination with tonguing the vein just below the ridge of his cockhead.

Mission accomplished.

Levi

As soon as she puts her hand on my balls I know it's over. The rhythm we've found that let me hover on the edge and just enjoy the feel of July's mouth working its magic is shattered.

I can't even get out words to warn her before I'm exploding.

July doesn't let go of me, even as I empty ropes of hot cum into her mouth. Her little fist continues to stoke me from root to tip and the sensation of her throat working to swallow what I give her only makes my body give her more.

Finally, there's nothing left between us but my ragged breathing and July releases me to let me fall onto the mattress beside her.

"Damn, woman." I reach for her, pulling her up to me and holding her close enough to let her feel the harsh thud of my heartbeat.

July smiles against my chest, her fingers drawing through the hair and down my side.

I'm not as young as I used to be, I expect I'm going to need some recovery time,

which I put to good use.

By the time July's sweet juices are coating my beard, I'm already impossibly hard for her again.

"What was that for?" July asks, her breathless voice hitching between a sigh and a giggle while I lazily tongue her still-sensitive clit.

"Just returning the favor," I explain.

"I take it I did an okay job then?"

"You telling me you don't have experience with that either?" This girl. She's killing me. But I'm gonna die happy.

My forehead drops against her belly, and the way she laughs has me smiling between the kisses I place all along the softness there.

"I told you my entire sexual history, Levi. You're my first real boyfriend."

Her voice goes from playful to serious. There's a question mark in there that needs to get changed to an exclamation point.

"I'm your last boyfriend, baby girl."

I place one more kiss on her stomach and waste no time getting to her lips for the next kiss.

"Last boyfriend, only fiancé, only husband, only father of your children, only man who's going to be in your bed and by your side till my last breath on this planet."

Wide hazel eyes stare at me, seemingly oblivious to the hard cock seeking entry to her body or my hand cradling her bare breast.

"Too much?" I ask gently, trying to cover my worry that the answer is yes with a hint of humor.

July's beautiful lips slide into a smile and she slings her leg over mine, putting us facing each other and making it easy for my cock to find its way home.

"Just enough, Levi."

"Thank fuck."

I sink into her wet heat, gripping her hip to hold her in place as I work my way completely into her tight little tunnel.

The way her body grips mine, holds me, and begs for more, has me losing my mind all over again.

Then July surprises me with another power play, shoving me to my back while her body follows till she's straddled across my hips, my thick dick disappearing inside her stretched pussy with just enough view of that sight to make my hips buck up under her and my fingers press into the soft flesh above her knees.

"You look like a fucking queen up there, Jules."

My girl smiles down at me, wraps her hands around my wrists and starts to ride me.

If I thought I had a ghost of a chance at lasting longer than last time, that notion is wiped from my head as soon as July drops her head back on her shoulders. Her dark blonde hair hanging behind her far enough to brush my thighs as she slides up and

down my shaft.

She's amazing like this, deep in her own pleasure, lost to the outside world and everything it threw at her today.

July's hands release my arms and move up to her breasts, lifting the heavy orbs and brushing her own thumbs across her pebbled nipples.

"I need you to come for me, Jules; now ."

I can feel how close she is already; the way she's rocking her hips so her needy little clit grinds against the root of my cock, the way she moans for me when I press my thumb to that swollen button, the sudden squeeze of interior muscles that steal my breath.

I was already hanging on by a damn thread when she started touching herself, thank fuck she responds to my command.

July's orgasm wracks both our bodies, sending my movements out of sync to hers while I thrust into her from below. I feel each surge of my ejaculation as my balls empty deep inside her in a primal urge to plant my seed in her womb.

We lay together for a long time, bodies pressed against each other as we talk about the future.

"We should circle back around to that 'father of your children' part. " July nuzzles her face to my chest, her voice soft and dreamy.

"If you're telling me you're not on birth control, I'm more than fine with that."

I've been mentally rearranging the spare rooms in the house since I first laid eyes on

the angel in my arms. I can't wait to fill them with kids instead of the odds and ends of my single life that don't quite make the place a home on their own.

"Sorry, I'm on the shot."

"What the hell for?"

Soft shoulders shrug in my arms.

"Seemed like the smart thing to do when I went to Europe. I didn't want to risk getting tied to someone I wouldn't want in my life forever."

Possessiveness flares hot, despite my very relaxed state of being at the moment. I respond with a growl and curl my arm around July tightly.

"And now?" I can't help the grumble in my voice that comes out sounding like ownership.

"Now I'm thinking about maybe cancelling my next appointment...depending on what kind of timeline you had in mind?"

Her hair brushes my arms as she moves her head to look up at me, her delicate brow scrunched in question.

"Told ya I was fine if you weren't on anything already," I grump, not meaning to sound disappointed at having to wait to get our family started.

"But you should probably run it by your bosses before we start filling you up with babies.

They just approved your permanent employment, they might expect you to put in a

full year before you go out on maternity leave. "

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:08 am

Eleven Months Later

July

Let Perry take over.

Stay off your feet.

I'll pick you up after work.

My husband's texts buzz in quick succession, making me smile but also making me roll my eyes.

I'm fine. I'm taking breaks. I love you.

Levi and I got married in April; after the busy ski season, before the Mother's Day brunch and dinner that packed every table we could set up in the dining room without running afoul of the local fire chief's approval.

Despite promising Eddy and Pepper that I didn't expect to get pregnant in the first full year of my employment as Savor's official house chef, I noticed some changes a few weeks ago that had me booking an appointment with Doc Jones for a test.

That was just before Halloween and the doctor estimated I was already ten weeks along.

Levi's new job doesn't keep him away from home for the long stretches that he used

to be gone, but he was still away several days at a time over the summer logging season.

He'd come home smelling like fresh cut pine, muscles jacked from helping the field crews getting the cut timber loaded and down to the local saw mill, and with his cock so hard and ready for me after being apart for days that my clothes would just melt right off.

Apparently, the last remaining bits of birth control in my system also melted off, and now I'm going into the busy season and my second trimester at the same time; with an overprotective hubby whose job doesn't keep him busy enough in the winter to keep him too busy to fuss over me through my shifts in the kitchen.

Of course, I wouldn't change a thing.

Eddy and Pepper were excited to hear I'd be needing maternity leave sooner than expected, but it probably helps that I shouldn't need to turn the kitchen over to Perry until after the busy season ends.

My phone buzzes in my smock pocket with one more text.

Love you too. Both of you.

Levi might be protective, but he also respects my dream. After all, he did put himself on the line to defend it. So he knows exactly when to send his last "I love you" text that I'll be able to check before starting the hectic dinner shifts.

Of course, I usually have a few more texts waiting for me when I get my breaks. Not always ones I can check in front of other people.

My team is already at their stations, prepping without needing oversight. Even Patrick

has found his place and has stepped up to being one my best assistants.

"Beef is on the menu, folks!" I remind the staff.

We got a delivery from the UnU down in Slow Valley this morning, the freezers are full of good steak that will make the residents of Moonshine Ridge happy while it holds out.

"Let's cook."

I feel my pocket buzz and smile, knowing my husband is thinking of me and that I'll find out exactly what he's thinking when I can read my messages again.

And then I'll give him my response when we're home in bed later tonight.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:08 am

Fourteen Years Later

Levi

"I nappropriate."

Sunday rolls her eyes and moves to a picnic table, away from her mom and I.

My wife stifles a laugh and I leave my hand right where it belongs; cupping July's hip. Okay, okay, my hand might be filled with more of my woman's ample ass cheek than resting on the swell of her hip.

That's what has our thirteen year old daughter refusing to be associated with us.

Tomorrow, she'll find a new excuse to put distance between her and her parents. Like anyone in Moonshine Ridge doesn't know she's related to us.

"I love it when you're inappropriate," July whispers against my cheek as my fingers brush over the denim of her jeans.

"Mmm. Wait till I get you home, wife, I'm going to get all kinds of inappropriate once we have the bedroom doors closed."

From her seat at the table nearby, Sunday glares at her mom and I kissing like teenagers on the picnic blanket spread out on the lakeshore, her fingers flying over the screen of her phone.

Worst thing they ever did was to put in better cell service up on the Ridge.

July scoots her sweet ass a little closer to me and we try to be more discreet about our PDA.

Wouldn't want it getting around that Sunday's folks are still in love or anything.

"Who's she texting now?" I ask July.

"Her friend in Slow River," July answers quickly and a little too nonchalantly. It's got my dad senses on alert as I shoot a more discerning glance at our very recently teenage daughter.

"It's fine," July pats my thigh softly, "he's her age. They can't drive. You still have time before you have to worry."

I give my daughter one of my best dad glares, making sure she sees it. She gives me one of her best teenage eye rolls before putting her phone away.

Surprisingly, she rejoins us once the emcee's voice crackles over the loud speakers.

Fireworks over the lake are about to start.

Adam and Phoenix come back from the concessions with corn dogs and homemade chips. All the younger kids take up position shoulder to shoulder down front.

Even Sunday quietly rejoins us, taking a seat at the corner of the blanket. Presumably far enough away to avoid getting parent cooties on her.

It's been fourteen years since I found the curvy little chef in an empty hallway of the ski resort. Fourteen years since I made her mine and not one minute spent regretting it.

July's still the chef of Savor, loving every minute of living her dream. She started taking on apprentices two years back and although she tells me she'll probably never earn a Michelin star-- she's still built a name for herself that keeps the tables filled.

The Murdocks-- man, who saw that coming? All three of those grumpy old bastards settled down themselves not long after I put my ring on July's finger.

They even almost, mostly, kinda retired to stay home and raise families of their own.

My buddy, Jake, handles the office work nowadays.

Adam and I are still with the logging company too, doing damn well for ourselves after putting in so much time.

I can't speak for my buddies, but I know I like being able to come home to the wife and kids after work every day. But I never could handle a job indoors. I still spend my days in the field. Supposedly supervising, but I can't quite let go of the chainsaws and the log jacks.

Lucky for me, my wife loves the smell of fresh cut timber on me and the way the work keeps me in shape.

Independence Day fireworks light up the night sky over the lake that hugs the perimeter of Moonshine Ridge. The oohs and ahs of the Ridge's children following every burst of light as the colorful sparks fade and fall into the calm water.

July leans into my chest.

Defending this woman was the best move I ever made.