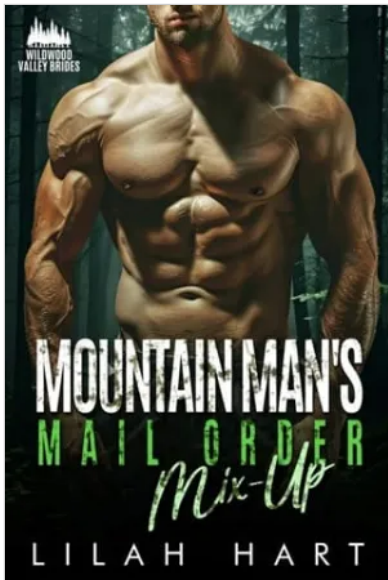




Mountain Man's Mail Order Mix-Up (Wildwood Valley Brides #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: She came to marry a stranger, then fell for the wrong man. Now her fresh start might mean breaking one heart to follow another.

Im in Wildwood Valley to get married.

Ive never met my groom-to-be, but weve messaged for weeks. Mostly, Im here out of desperation. Ive lost my job and my parents. Starting fresh in a new town sounds like a good idea.

But when I head into the towns only diner to kill some time, I meet a man like no one Ive ever met. Hes tall and bulky and handsomehes exactly what Id expect one of the lumberjacks in this town to look like.

Problem is, he isnt my groom. And the more I get to know him, the more it sounds like calling off my wedding might be a good idea.

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MACKENZIE

If you handed me a list of the top stressors, I'd check off every one.

Death of a loved one? Check.

Moving? Check.

Job loss? Check.

Arriving in a strange town in a wedding gown to marry a man I'd never met? Check, check, check.

Okay, that last one had to be one of the biggest stressors of all.

I'd seen a picture of my future husband, and I assumed he'd seen one of me. But we never actually spoke, not even on the phone. We hadn't even really chatted much in the app that matched single guys with their future wives. Or maybe it was the other way around. It matched me with my future husband.

At one time, they would've called that a mail-order bride situation. But it had all been done over the internet, so did it really qualify? Was there such a thing as an email-order bride?

"This is it," I told the driver as he pulled into the parking lot of the Wildwood Valley Inn. My fiancé instructed me to check in here and said he'd handle paying for the room until we got married, which was happening in only two days. I had no idea

when I'd finally get to meet him in person.

"Tips appreciated," the rideshare driver said as I reached for the handle.

I froze, staring at my phone. I'd ordered this through the app. I never carried cash, and I was short on money altogether. I hated the idea of using even more of my shrinking bank account, but I couldn't, in good conscience, not tip him. I tapped on the screen and tipped him a couple of bucks.

"I have luggage in the back," I said.

"Oh, right."

I expected him to reach for the door handle. Instead, he popped the trunk and pressed play to resume the obnoxious financial podcast he'd been listening to the entire ride. Apparently, the guy was trying very hard to get rich quick. Join the club.

I stepped out of the car and started to shut the door, but I realized it wouldn't surprise me if he just drove off, luggage and all. So I left the door open until I had my suitcase out of the trunk. Then I shut it without saying goodbye and extended the retractable handle on my suitcase.

I'd barely taken two steps toward the inn entrance when the driver sped off, hopping onto the interstate. No doubt rushing the thirty-plus miles back to the airport to get his next sucker—er, fare .

The building in front of me wasn't at all what I expected. It was charming, with an English Tudor facade that matched the sign on the pancake restaurant next door. The fonts on the signs were identical. They must be owned by the same company.

Only one car sat in the parking lot, and the lot next door was completely empty. Not

surprising, considering it was early afternoon. Plus, no cars didn't equal no people. Maybe everyone, like me, had taken a rideshare to get here. Probably the same guy who'd just deposited me in front of the inn.

With a sigh, I grabbed the handle of the rolling suitcase I'd had since high school and started toward the front door.

The bright, sunny day made it impossible to see through the glass.

But as soon as I pulled it open, I was face-to-face with an older woman, her thick hair styled into a bob and her bright green eyeglasses clashing perfectly with her hot pink shirt.

I couldn't help but smile as I took her in. Did she always wear green, or did she have a pair of glasses for every outfit?

"Good morning," the woman said, then laughed. "Or I guess it's afternoon now. You must be Bridget."

I froze just inside the door. I was trying to maneuver my suitcase through it as she spoke, but her words stopped me, and the door slammed into both my butt and my suitcase, sending it rolling forward.

I rushed to stand beside it, grateful the place was empty.

I'd be mortified if more than one person had seen that.

"I'm not Bridget," I said.

Was I in the wrong place? No, this was definitely the Wildwood Valley Inn. Were there two Wildwood Valley Inns? It was all absurd, but that was exactly how my

mind worked when something didn't go as expected.

The woman's smile fell—not completely, but enough to make my stomach clench. “Oh dear. I swore you were her. Do you have a reservation?”

I rolled my suitcase to the counter and summoned what little confidence I had left. “I'm Mackenzie Hawkins. I was told I'd have a place to stay. I'm here to marry Reilly Clark.”

Now her smile really fell. Her mouth formed an O. She glanced at the computer screen, then finally moved toward it and began typing.

Tap, tap, tap.

I was nearing the end of my patience, but whatever was happening here, I was pretty sure it wasn't her fault. I just needed to get in touch with my groom and make sure he was going to pay for a place for me to stay, like he'd promised.

“It'll be fine,” she said, staring at the screen.

Was she talking to me or herself? My stomach churned.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “You're seriously making me nervous.”

“Okay, so...there's been a little bit of a mix-up.”

She stepped away from the keyboard and looked directly at me. The smile hadn't returned, but at least she wasn't frowning anymore. She was breathing deeply, slowly. Trying to calm herself, maybe?

“It seems two women are matched to the same guy.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. She had to be mistaken. There was no way?—

“I’ve been talking to Reilly,” I said quickly. “He’s paying for my stay here, and we’re getting married Sunday. It’s all good.”

Her head started shaking slowly, subtle at first, then more aggressive. “No.”

“No to what?” I asked. “Staying here? Marrying him?”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “None of the grooms know they’re getting married. I fixed each one up with the perfect bride. And every weekend, one will arrive in town. Only this weekend, two brides are arriving, and I have no idea what to do with the extra one.”

This made no sense. “You’re saying Reilly has been talking to two women?”

“Reilly hasn’t been talking to anyone,” she said. “All the messages you exchanged came from me.”

I stared at her, uncomprehending. The sweet texts that came every morning. The photos. The compliments. They hadn’t come from him. They’d come from this woman.

“I left everything,” I whispered. “My job, my home, my friends, my family...”

I trailed off. I hadn’t given up all that much, actually. I’d lost my job right before signing up for the service. It wasn’t that I was looking for a sugar daddy. But I could no longer afford my tiny apartment or the ramen noodles I’d been surviving on long before the job loss.

Coming to a small town like this meant opportunity. I could find work. Maybe wait

tables at the pancake place or clean rooms here at the inn. I could even help this woman—whatever it was she was doing.

“I’m sorry, dear,” she said. “But it’s going to be okay. You got here first, so you get dibs.”

Dibs. On a man. Like he was the chocolate éclair in a box of a dozen donuts.

“Let me just...” the woman said.

She looked back at her monitor. Her nametag caught my eye. Bobbi.

“Yes, that’ll work,” she said. “I’ll just wiggle some things around and make everyone happy. Room 233. Your fiancé will be here at seven.”

My fiancé. Those two words echoed in my head as I wandered in circles, trying to find the elevator. There really should’ve been a sign with an arrow. I finally found it way down a hallway of rooms to the right.

My plan was to rest until my date, but five hours was a lot of time to kill, and I knew one thing that would calm me down. Even though it was just after two o’clock, a glass of wine was exactly what I needed right now.

There was just one problem with that idea. The likelihood of finding wine in the walkable area near the inn? Yeah, not likely at all. Even if the pancake restaurant was still open, the chances of finding wine there were slim to nothing.

Bobbi was nowhere in sight when I returned to the lobby. So I hiked my crossbody bag into place and pushed open the front door of the inn. And there it was, like it had been planted by the gods just for me.

The Soda Jerk, a sign read. It was posted on a building that had not an ounce of the charm of the one I'd just exited, which was odd, considering the pancake place next door was an identical match.

I'd have guessed that old, rundown building had been there first, but the inn hardly looked brand new either.

I crossed the parking lot, stopped, looked both ways—nothing coming—and rushed across the street. There was a steep hill to my left, and I couldn't see beyond it. If a vehicle came barreling over it, I wouldn't see it until it was too late.

I stopped at the edge of the parking lot and stared at the scene in front of me.

Only one vehicle in the parking lot, and that one was off to the side of the building.

It was a gigantic pickup truck. I'd assume the restaurant was closed, but it was hard to miss the neon open sign in the front window.

All I knew was this place would have something. Maybe not a full selection, but anything that could calm my racing heart would do.

As I stepped inside, blinking against the change in lighting, nothing could've prepared me for what I saw.

On the outside, it looked like a dive bar but inside was a bright, cheery fifties-style diner.

We had one of those back home when I was growing up.

Burgers, fries, milkshakes...the whole nine yards. But not a drop of alcohol.

This was a dry county. Of course, it was. It was a small town, so I should've expected that. They probably didn't even have liquor stores. Or beer in their grocery stores.

There was likely some workaround a short drive away where locals got their fix. But I didn't have a car. I barely had enough money for a drink. But at this point, it was starting to feel less like a luxury and more like medicine.

The biggest surprise, though? The whole place was empty.

"Hello?" I called out.

It was after one, but that was still technically lunchtime, right? Was this a sign they'd failed their health food inspection or something? That was what we'd assume back in Chattanooga, where I lived. But this wasn't Chattanooga. It was Wildwood Valley, population negative twenty.

Suddenly, the door behind the counter flipped open with a slam, and out walked a man who looked like he'd stepped out of a lumberjack calendar. Tall, with broad shoulders and bulky, muscular arms that stretched the sleeves of his white T-shirt.

"Kitchen's closed until five," he said, letting his gaze scan the length of me. "But you can have a seat at the bar if you want a drink."

Bar? A drink?

I glanced at the bright blue countertop resting atop the silver, corrugated metal base. The barstools matched the metal until you got to the padded tops—hot pink vinyl. The whole place was straight out of a retro movie set.

"I was looking for a glass of wine," I said, returning my gaze to him.

He was still staring at me, and the intensity in his eyes made my knees feel a little weak. “Nope. Won’t find that here.”

Great. On to Plan B.

“Well, if I can’t have alcohol, sugar will have to do,” I said.

“Didn’t say you couldn’t have alcohol. Just not the hard stuff. Beer and flavored seltzers. That’s all we’ve got.”

I perked up a little.

“I was looking into some of that alcoholic sweet tea,” he said. “I’ve had requests for it.” Then he nodded toward the bar. “Go ahead and have a seat. I’ll hook you up.”

At the end of all that, I realized I’d been standing there, gaping at him like a lovestruck teenager. I’d just never seen anybody so gorgeous. And he worked in a restaurant? Actually, it sounded like he owned the place.

That didn’t fit. Lumberjack-looking guys didn’t own cutesy fifties diners. There had to be a story there, and I couldn’t wait to find out what it was.

Problem was, I was supposed to be meeting my fiancé in four hours. And unless the woman at the inn had sent me the wrong pictures, this guy wasn’t him. But it couldn’t hurt to kill a couple of hours with a restaurant owner who wasn’t the slightest bit interested in me.

Okay, maybe it could hurt. But I couldn’t stop myself. I grabbed one of the barstools and took a seat at the counter. Then I ordered a berry-flavored seltzer and waited while he disappeared behind the swinging door.

Yes, this could definitely be a bad idea. But it wouldn't be the first time I followed through on a bad idea. And this time, it might actually be fun.

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WEST

Her name was Mackenzie. She was staying at the inn across the street. She was scheduled to marry a guy she'd never met.

That last part came out after her first sip of her second seltzer. It had loosened her tongue a little, but she still seemed completely sober.

I surprised her when I grabbed a bottle of beer and leaned against the counter facing her. And that was when she asked for my story.

"I've lived here all my life," I said. "My grandparents owned this place. Opened it when I was just a baby. My sister was running it until about two weeks ago, when she traveled to North Carolina with some friends for a bachelorette party. She met a guy there and, well, never came back."

Her eyes widened. "So now you're running the place alone?"

"Trying to figure it out," I said. "I helped out around here, but I left to join the military. My sister tried to show me the ropes, but I didn't really need the money. So when she left, I had to take it over. And here we are."

She got a little excess moisture on her lip, and her tongue snaked out to grab it. The move did things to me I hadn't expected.

What would it be like to kiss her? Not just her lips, but everywhere on that beautiful body? I'd pull off that pretty little dress and lay her down on her bed, moving my lips

and tongue over every inch of her, then settling between her thighs and giving her the best orgasm of her life.

“Do you run this place by yourself?” she asked.

Her words jerked me out of my very vivid fantasy.

“Nope. That’s why the kitchen’s closed. We’ve been dead recently.

Business isn’t exactly booming. We rely on travelers, and the sign near the ramp needs to be replaced.

Nobody’s going to stop based on a billboard that looks like it was put up twenty years ago.”

“Yeah, I saw the billboard,” she said. “It did make me wonder.”

“The inn’s struggling too. They’re trying to figure out ways to revitalize a town that died when the factory shut down eighteen years ago.”

My parents worked for that factory. Both lost their jobs at once, but they were able to fall back on this diner as a way to make money since my grandmother couldn’t really run things anymore after my grandfather died.

But when my nana died, my parents got a pretty hefty inheritance. They turned it over to my sister to run and took off for a beachfront condo in Florida, living off that inheritance and their factory pensions. They were living the good life while I was here contemplating alcohol-infused tea.

“I’m keeping costs down by having the cook and wait staff take off after lunch and not come back until four,” I said.

“They stick around if we have business, but those days are becoming fewer and further between. It sucks. But luckily for me, there’s nowhere else for people in this town to work, so they stick around. ”

“Really?”

“The closest town is a good twenty minutes away.”

“There’s a grocery store, though, right?” she asked.

Oh, yeah. She was moving here. Marrying some lucky son of a bitch who’d never even met her. That’s what she’d said, anyway.

I lived up in the mountains. I knew some of the locals. Timber was the only real industry left in this town, and it attracted guys looking for work, which was how we ended up with so many single dudes in the same town.

“So what about you?” she asked. “What’s your situation? Are you married? Engaged? Living with a hot girlfriend?”

I took another swig of my beer and stared at her. I was leaning against the counter, my ass against it, directly in front of where she sat. I had this weird urge to go around and sit on one of the stools, if only to be closer to her.

“None of the above,” I said. “Just got discharged a couple of years ago.”

Her eyes widened. “Military?”

I nodded. “Navy.”

I was dying to add that I’d been in the special forces, but I didn’t talk about that. This

was the first time I'd felt the urge to brag about it in front of someone, which was a total toolbag move. I just wanted to impress her.

"You aren't one of the men around here ordering up a bride online?"

That deserved another long sip of my beer. She said it in a way that made it sound... distasteful. But hadn't she done it? She'd uprooted her life to come here and marry some guy.

"Can't say I even knew that was happening," I finally replied. "But I've got a lot on my plate right now. I don't have time to get married."

What did that even mean? It had nothing to do with my schedule.

I just got bored with the game of it all.

But then, staring at this drop-dead gorgeous beauty, I had to admit, a woman like her was worth it.

If I'd even once felt something that came close to this attraction I had for her, I would've stayed in the game.

But she was taken. Engaged to a man she'd never met. Just my luck.

"You know, I could go for some food."

Her eyes widened, no doubt in surprise at the sudden subject change. Her bottle of seltzer water was still in front of her, barely touched.

She didn't respond right away. Just stared at me. But finally, she spoke.

“I thought the kitchen was closed.”

“I can make everything on the menu,” I said. “Well, we don’t have a lot on our menu, and most of it’s bad for you.”

“That’s my kind of food.” She smiled, and the warmth behind that smile went straight to my heart. “You know what? I’d love a big, juicy cheeseburger. Do you have pepper jack cheese?”

“I do. My favorite. I use it to make grilled cheese sandwiches sometimes.”

“You’ll have to make that for me someday.”

She gave me a wink, and I had to push myself to leave her and head to the kitchen to get started cooking.

But what really had me smiling like a kid on Christmas morning was something very simple.

The words she’d said about making her a grilled pepper jack cheese sandwich sometime. Did that mean she saw a future with me?

I’d just hold onto that a little longer and try to forget the fact that she was marrying someone else. Some lucky bastard who probably didn’t know how amazing this woman was. Not yet, anyway.

If I had anything to do with it, he’d never find out.

Yes, I made the decision as I tossed a basket of fries into the fryer. I definitely needed to keep this woman all to myself. By the time I was done with her, she’d forget all about the guy she was supposed to meet tonight.

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MACKENZIE

H oly crap. That was good.

The burger sat in a red, wax-paper-covered basket, and I wasn't lying. It was the most delicious burger I'd ever had in my life. Everything about it, from the bun to the veggies to the condiments to that delicious cheese, was just perfect.

"Thanks," the guy who'd introduced himself earlier as West said. "Don't tell my cook. He likes to believe I depend on him."

I glanced toward the window. The parking lot was still empty. The one across the street was mostly empty too.

"What time does your guy come in?"

If he'd said already, I'd forgotten. To be honest, when he was standing across from me, it was tough to focus on anything he was saying. I just kept imagining what it would be like to kiss him. To feel those strong, muscular arms around me.

Before he said anything, he picked up the phone and set it face down on the table. We were in a corner booth, seated way too far apart from each other. At least, that was how I felt about it.

"Four," he said. "But we usually don't get customers until well into the dinner hour. What time are you meeting your Prince Charming?"

Everything in me froze up at that question. I'd told him all about my situation earlier. Even as I'd said the words, I was already having serious doubts about the plan.

The picture I'd seen of my supposed fiancé had been imprinted on my mind until about a half hour ago. Until the second I walked in here and took one look at West. Now I couldn't see anyone but him.

I leaned in. "Can you keep a secret?"

He stopped, mid-sip from the last of his beer. "Sure can."

"I just found out that the woman across the street is the one who's been communicating with me. She's been pretending to be the guy I was matched with. I don't even know if my supposed fiancé knows I exist."

West frowned. "But isn't he supposed to pick you up at seven?"

I shrugged. "That's what she said. What I thought he was saying, actually. But who knows if he even gets why he's coming here to pick me up. Apparently, she accidentally set him up with two brides, so two women are coming to town to meet him. Since I'm here first, she said I get dibs."

He blinked. "Dibs?"

"Like he's property."

"Like you're two kids fighting over the front seat."

"Exactly." I shook my head. "It sounded weird to me too."

"So, you don't plan to meet him? You're thinking about standing up your date?"

That was a good question. It made me sound like an awful person. West would think less of me—and the last thing I wanted was for him to think less of me.

“Maybe I should tell Bobbi I’ve changed my mind. She can set him up with the other fiancée whenever she arrives.”

“You don’t want to marry him?” he asked.

I thought about that for a long moment. There was only one answer, and it was clearer to me than anything ever had been before.

“I don’t want to marry some guy who was tricked into doing it, but that’s not why.” I paused. No, I had to be honest with him. “All I know is I want to stay here and keep getting to know you.”

That was too forward. He probably wasn’t at all interested in me.

He’d made me a cheeseburger and some fries, that was all.

Oh, and he also grabbed a seltzer from the cooler.

He hadn’t charged me for any of it yet, but I assumed that check was coming, and I’d watch even more of my pathetic checking account balance drain away.

Was this crazy? My supposed fiancé was paying for my room.

All I had to do was go back to the inn and I’d be living for free.

But for the first time in my life, I wasn’t worried.

I probably should be. I didn’t have the money to get back home.

I had no way of getting around. Plus, it was clear this town had no opportunities.

But I could clean rooms at the inn. Or wait tables here, if this guy would pay me. Staying here, broke, was more appealing than putting hundreds of miles between me and this man I'd just met.

I'd kept my eyes on what remained of my burger, but now I looked up at him.

He didn't look scared. He hadn't gone cold on me.

The opposite, in fact. He didn't seem to smile much, but I didn't realize until then that his tense expression wasn't the norm for him.

His features softened, and he looked relaxed for the first time since I walked through that door.

His lips twitched, then curved upward slightly—a tentative smile. “I'll talk to Bobbi for you.

I shook my head. “No, I should tell her. I'm the one backing out. Do you need any help around here? Because it looks like I'm going to need a job. I was planning on it anyway, but I had no idea how much of a shortage of jobs there'd be in Wildwood Valley.”

“No,” he said.

My stomach lurched. The cheeseburger sat like a big lump in it. On the surface, it would seem like I was disappointed that he didn't want to help me by giving me a job. Or maybe he really couldn't. He had said money was tight.

But no, this went deeper than that. I'd just bared a huge part of my soul to him. I told

him I wanted to call off my marriage to get to know him better, and he'd semi-smiled. How had I misinterpreted that signal so completely?

"You can stay with me," he said. "In my guest bedroom, of course. Or, if you're not comfortable with that, you can sleep at my sister's. She has a house she's not using. She's trying to get it going as a rental, but it sits empty most of the year."

I took a bite of French fry and stared at him. My heart was now racing as I listened to his offer.

He went on, "You can also use my laptop if you need it. I'll help you find work. You could work here, if that's what you really want, but I don't have much in the way of hours. My two servers are young college kids, home for the summer. I'll definitely need help in just a few weeks, but for now..."

His voice trailed off. As he spoke, he kept his eyes on me, that intensity still in his stare. But his features remained relaxed. Gone was the tension from earlier. Maybe my situation reminded him he was lucky.

Whatever the case, I wasn't fooling myself. He was doing this to be nice. Pity, not attraction. I'd endured my fair share of pity after both of my parents died in a car accident when I was a senior in high school, and I'd grown to hate it. Right now, I absolutely despised it.

I didn't want his pity. I wanted... Well, I wasn't sure what I wanted from him yet, but it was the opposite of pity.

"I'm going to take you up on your offer," I said, picking up my burger and hoping I could stomach the rest of it. As delicious as it was, my body had suddenly turned on me. "If your sister wouldn't mind..."

I took a bite without looking directly at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that his features changed. He wasn't even halfway smiling anymore, and some of the tension had returned. Not all, but some.

"My sister won't mind," he said.

Now I looked at him full-on, frowning. "But you mind."

He gave a nod. "Yes, I do. I'll be right back."

He left me sitting there, reviewing everything we'd said up to this point. Things were going so well. How had I screwed it up? Or maybe he had screwed it up. Maybe he should be honest with me. Just open his mouth and say what he was thinking.

I couldn't demand that, though. I needed his help, whether I liked it or not.

There was another option. I could go back across the street and wait for seven o'clock. I could meet my groom, enjoy my free room, and marry him on Sunday and move in with him—if he was up for it.

By the time West came walking back to the table, I'd already run through all the options in my head.

No, I couldn't do that. I couldn't marry someone else.

Not now that I'd met this guy—even if he wasn't into me.

I didn't know what that said about me, but I'd rather spend the rest of my life single, pining for a guy I couldn't have, than trapped in a marriage with someone who wasn't West.

As he sat down, I noticed he was holding a glass full of liquid that wasn't beer. It looked like tea. He probably had to lay off the alcohol in case a customer came in.

"I didn't even ask if you wanted another seltzer," he said.

"I have plenty left."

I lifted the can, finding it nearly as full as when he handed it to me. I'd been inhaling my food and totally forgotten to drink. That wasn't like me.

"You know what?" He set his bottle down and glancing at the door. "If you don't want to marry that guy, you shouldn't do it. We'll work through some options."

I blinked. "You'd help me with that?"

He nodded. "Of course. I have to admit, I'd rather you ditch him and marry me so we could see where this goes. But if you're not into it, I understand. I still want to help you."

I frowned at him. Was he saying...?

"I told you I want to stay here and get to know you," I said.

He nodded and looked down at his now-empty basket. He'd cleared his plate. I hadn't.

"When you said you'd stay with my sister, I just assumed maybe you changed your mind," he said. "But I guess that doesn't make sense. You might want to get to know me without living under the same roof."

I shook my head and picked up my seltzer, taking a long sip. There wasn't much

alcohol in it, but it was enough to give me the courage to say what I said next.

“I’ve been thinking about kissing you since we sat down here,” I admitted. “Maybe before. So yeah...I probably shouldn’t marry another guy, even if you’re not?—”

“I’m definitely into you,” he interrupted. “And I’ve been thinking about doing a whole hell of a lot more than kissing you.”

He punctuated that with another generous chug of his beer.

I couldn’t move. I was completely frozen.

“I’ve never had a kiss,” I said.

Oh, shit. Had I just admitted that? It was something I should be embarrassed about. But for some reason, I felt like I could be open with him.

“You’ve never been kissed?” he asked.

“Or anything. I’m a virgin.”

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WEST

This woman—this beautiful, smart, sexy woman—had just told me she was a virgin.

The things I'd been thinking of doing to Mackenzie felt shameful now as I put them in the context of what I'd just learned.

She'd never done any of this before, and I was over here thinking about bending her over this table and doing her from behind.

I should be ashamed. I deserved an ass whooping for that.

But I didn't want to run, not like I normally would when a woman told me she was a virgin. In fact, I felt like the luckiest bastard alive that I even had a shot. Some primal part of me enjoyed the fact that no man had ever touched her. Not in that way.

"It's not like I'm waiting for marriage or anything," she said.

"It wasn't even a deliberate choice. Time just got away from me.

I guess you can probably guess I haven't led the best life.

I had to start working when I was fourteen.

Babysitting jobs, cleaning friends' parents' houses.

I even mowed some yards and pulled some weeds.

Dating was out of the question. My dad couldn't keep a job, and my mom was more into drinking than working, so my focus wasn't exactly on dating or hanging out with friends. ”

That made me angry on her behalf. She deserved a childhood.

Everyone did, but especially this angel seated in front of me.

I wanted to go back and give her everything she'd missed.

But it was too late for that, so I'd just take what I could get.

I'd make every day moving forward perfect for her, if she let me.

“I've been wondering what it would be like to kiss someone like you,” she said.

My eyebrows shot up. “Someone like me?”

Was that a good or bad thing? I really had no clue.

“You know, a guy with experience.” She shrugged. “Someone who could show me what I've been missing.”

That sounded like a challenge. Oh, I knew what I was doing all right. I knew what I wanted to do to her, anyway.

The silence stretched between us as we stared at each other. Finally, she broke the stare, but it was for good reason.

She slid the napkin from her lap and tossed it on top of her plate. I held my breath, not sure what she might do next.

Before I could decide what to do to encourage her to come closer, she began scooting. It was an awkward sideways move that involved occasionally stopping to readjust her skirt, which seemed to want to stay with her burger.

She was almost all the way to the curve in the wraparound booth when I realized I'd been sitting there waiting for her to come to me like an asshole. So I started scooting to meet her, inching my way to the right.

We met at the curve. Although my attention was fully on her, she was still staring straight ahead, almost as though she were afraid to make eye contact.

"I feel like a teenager, wondering if I should make a move," I said, thinking out loud.

She squeezed her eyes closed, then opened them again and looked at me. Her expression was exactly what I needed to see right now. The heat had returned to her stare. And she licked her lips, as though preparing for the kiss she knew was coming.

But then she did something that shocked me.

Her left hand landed on my right thigh. As my face inched toward hers, I tried to ignore the activity that was going on just a foot or so from where her hand rested.

My dick pressed painfully against the back of my zipper, and I was grateful the table hid the bulge it was no doubt creating.

This was her first kiss. Her first time getting in any way physical with a guy. And that was why I stayed as still as I could while my mouth lowered to hers.

Brushing her lips gently at first, I used my tongue to part the seam of her mouth and gently deepen the kiss.

It escalated so quickly, I wasn't even sure who took it to the next level.

All I knew was that her hand was moving up my inseam, and there was no way I could hold back the moan. It just slipped out.

She seemed to take that for the encouragement it was.

Her fingers traced higher, brushing the hard length of me through my jeans, and fuck, I couldn't stop my hips from jerking toward her touch.

She made a soft, curious sound against my mouth, like she was testing, learning—and then she did it again, firmer this time, her palm pressing down just right.

I broke the kiss with a rough exhale. “You sure you want to do this here?”

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she leaned in, nipping at my bottom lip before sliding her tongue into my mouth, bold as hell. Her hand kept working me, slow strokes that had me gripping the edge of the booth to keep from flipping her onto her back right then.

I let my own hands wander, skimming up her thigh, pushing her skirt higher until I found bare skin. She gasped when my fingers dipped under the edge of her panties—satin, fuck—and I swallowed the sound, kissing her deeper.

“Tell me to stop,” I murmured against her lips.

She shook her head, her breath coming fast. “Don't you dare.”

That was all I needed. I teased her through the thin fabric, feeling how wet she was already, and she arched into my touch with a whimper. The diner was empty, the blinds half-drawn, but anyone could walk in.

The risk should've sobered me up. Instead, it just made me harder.

Her fingers fumbled with my belt, and I helped her, popping the button on my jeans, shoving them down just enough to free myself. Her eyes dropped, her lips parting as she took me in, and Christ, the way she looked at me—like she wanted to devour me—nearly undid me right there.

“Next time,” I growled, wrapping her hand around me, showing her how I liked it, “I’m going to taste you first.”

She bit her lip, her strokes uneven but perfect, her thumb swiping over the head of my cock in a way that made my vision blur. I slid a finger under her panties, finding her hot and slick, and her hips jerked.

“Oh,” she breathed, her rhythm faltering.

I smirked. “You haven’t seen anything yet, sweetheart.”

And then I kissed her again, deep and filthy, because I knew—we both knew—this booth wouldn’t be the last of it.

MACKENZIE

Dang, this felt good. Better than anything had in my life. And we'd only just started.

West maneuvered me on the bench until I was on my back, my legs parted in front of him. It felt unladylike, but I had a feeling he wanted me to be anything but ladylike right now. And there was something freeing about that.

His breath was hot against my skin as he trailed his lips down my stomach and lower, until his fingers hooked into the delicate lace of my panties. I gasped as he tugged them down, the cool air kissing my exposed flesh. But his hands, his mouth—they were anything but cool.

“You’re still wearing too much,” he murmured against my inner thigh.

His teeth grazed my sensitive skin. I shivered, my fingers tangling in his hair as he dragged the skirt up to my hips, exposing me completely to his hungry gaze.

“But this—” His tongue flicked over me, just once, teasing. “—this is exactly where I want you.”

My breath hitched, my back arching as he tasted me in slow, deliberate strokes.

Every flick of his tongue was a promise, every suck a whispered “mine.” I whimpered, my thighs trembling around his shoulders as he licked deeper, driving me toward the edge with nothing but his mouth and the wicked skill of his tongue.

Warmth spread through me, and then I felt like I was climbing toward something. I didn't know what, but all my senses were on full alert. The air I breathed seemed crisper, fresher.

I gripped the edge of the bench and rode a wave that took me up, up, up—until I let out a little cry as waves of pure bliss rolled through me.

It took me a good minute or so to catch my breath, and then I let out a little cry. Even though I'd stilled, West waited until it was clear my orgasm was complete before lifting his head.

"I have a condom back at my place," he said. "We could run back there and get it and finish this. Spend the next couple of hours together."

I shook my head. "I'm on birth control. It's all good."

It probably seemed weird to him, but my best friend and I had gotten on birth control as soon as we graduated high school.

She was scared about her first gynecologist appointment and asked me to go with her.

Each of us had stayed in the waiting room while the other was getting examined.

It helped somehow, just knowing the other was there.

"Perfect," he said. "I didn't really want to leave. But I do need to lock the door."

I sat up, propping myself on my elbows, and looked down at him, alarmed, as he traveled the rest of the wraparound seat, then stood. The door had been unlocked this whole time? Someone could've walked in.

But wait...why did I care? I was new here. Nobody knew me. Still, this wasn't the way I wanted to introduce myself to Wildwood Valley. Not if I was going to be a permanent resident.

"Come with me," West said as he walked from the door to the counter where we'd met.

How long ago had that been? Not even an hour, I was guessing. But I'd never felt this connected to anyone in my life.

He led me to the flip door he'd blasted through when I first walked in. The kitchen was to the right, but he walked past that too. Whatever we were going to do, we probably needed to find a surface that wasn't used for food.

Sure enough, he led me to a small room next to what looked like a walk-in cooler. I followed him through the door and found a mid-sized room with a desk toward the back and a chair on either side.

"Close the door," he said.

He took a seat behind the desk. I couldn't help but notice his businesslike tone and posture, and I wondered if he'd changed his mind about sleeping with me. Or was this foreplay?

As a fresh round of moisture rushed between my legs, I did exactly as he'd commanded, taking a seat and settling my skirt into place.

Oh crap. I'd forgotten my panties. They were still out there, around where we'd been sitting.

I couldn't forget to grab those afterward.

The last thing I needed was someone stumbling upon them while sitting down to dinner.

“So you’re interested in working here,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me a little about your qualifications?”

Okay, now I really didn’t know if he was serious or not. But either way, I probably should answer the question honestly.

“I’ve waited tables off and on for years,” I said. “I started when I was sixteen at a meat-and-three. I had to wait until I was eighteen to work somewhere that served alcohol. I’m a good hostess too. Exactly how much does the position pay?”

“The pay is negotiable. But there are things you could do to earn a little more.”

“Like what?”

He sat back in his chair and ran his gaze over me. My body heated up, each section of me warming as his gaze landed on it.

“Things get stressful around here,” he said. “Sometimes I might need a little...relief.”

He paused before that last word. If this were a real job interview, I would’ve been out of there by now. But we were here to do this. And I was more than a little turned on by the game we were playing.

“So I could earn a dollar an hour more if I come around that desk and relieve you?” I asked.

I probably sucked at this, but he’d understand. It was my first time at any of it. No way could I be an expert at dirty talk.

“That’s exactly what I want you to do,” he said. “But first, take off that dress.”

I stood, my hands trembling again, and lifted off the dress. He’d seen part of me—the bottom part—up close and personal. But I’d never shown my breasts to a man before.

I took a deep breath and jerked the dress up over my head, letting it fall to the floor. Then I just looked silly, wearing a bra and nothing else. So I reached back and unclasped it, closing my eyes as I bared my full body to him.

“Whoa,” he said.

The tone of his voice popped my eyes open. There was definite appreciation there—even if “whoa” wasn’t the word I would’ve expected. But “whoa” had to be a good thing, right?

“You’re fucking beautiful,” he said. “Most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. How is it possible you’re all mine?” He seemed to catch himself and rushed to say, “My new server, anyway. Well, if I choose to hire you, that is.”

That last part was said in a businesslike tone, similar to the way he’d been speaking earlier. It was part of the act.

“Your turn,” I said. “Unzip those pants.”

That felt weird to say, but it did the trick. He gave a nod, then unfastened his jeans and lowered his zipper. He pulled both his jeans and underwear down, and for the second time, his cock sprang out. But this time, I’d do more than touch it.

This time, he was all mine.

I walked around the desk, not even waiting to be invited. He swiveled his chair to

face me as I came around the side. I couldn't take my eyes off his erection. He was so big and so very hard.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

As he sat, resting his arms on each armrest with his jeans and underwear around his thighs, he said, "I want you to suck my cock. I want you to take me in as deep as you can."

I stepped closer and knelt, but there was a problem. I couldn't get close enough. So, not taking my eyes off his erection, I tugged his jeans all the way to his ankles. Then I moved between them, settling my knees on the blanket his pants and underwear provided.

I finally lifted my gaze to his face as I wrapped my hand around him and stroked, going all the way down, then back up again, taking in the tip and going to the base.

Finally, I lowered my head and snaked out my tongue, lapping up the moisture that had formed on his tip.

He moaned. When I looked up, his eyes were closed, his breathing heavy.

A surge of power flashed through me. The game we'd been playing was forgotten as I took him as deep as I could go, using my hand, my mouth, my lips, and my tongue. I wasn't sure if I was even doing it right, but it felt instinctual. And his moans indicated I was on the right track.

Finally, I felt a hand on my shoulder. "You have to stop. I'm going to come."

I didn't see anything wrong with that, but yeah, I wouldn't lose my virginity this way. So I pushed myself to a standing position, then waited for instructions on what to do

next.

I thought he might pull me onto the chair with him, but instead, he gestured toward the desk. “Have a seat.”

I wasn’t sure how to make that work, but he helped by lifting me onto the surface, settling me near the edge. Then he parted my legs and lowered his head, running his tongue over each of my nipples.

I braced myself on my palms behind me and tilted my head to the ceiling, savoring every second of the feel of his tongue on me. When I felt his thumb on my clit, I almost lost it right then and there. Sensations exploded inside me. For the first time, I realized it was possible I could come again.

It seemed too soon, but I was already feeling that slow buildup. All that would change when he slid inside me. Losing my virginity would be painful. Friends—and the internet—had prepared me for that.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I looped my legs around his waist, tugging him toward me. “Fuck me.”

I’d never said anything like that before. I wasn’t sure how he’d take it, but his expression darkened and his mouth twitched, like he was fighting a smile. He definitely liked it. I noted that for future reference.

His smile promptly vanished as he focused on inching his way inside me, not going too deep. His eyes were on my face the whole time, checking to make sure it wasn’t painful.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on his thumb moving over my clit. It felt so good,

I could almost forget how painful the other part was.

It was all for a good reason because soon, I'd no longer be a virgin. More importantly, I'd have lost my virginity to West. I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather give it to. It made me happier than anything I could imagine.

After finally working through the pain, I dared to open my eyes and look at him.

He was staring down at me, his jaw tense, his hips thrusting gently.

I wanted to tell him to go deeper, but that would be painful, so I bit my lip and focused on the sight of him.

It turned me on even more than his touch.

Soon, I wasn't thinking about the pain. Only the pleasure.

The heat rose in my body, starting in my midsection and rising all the way up to my face.

His gaze lowered to my breasts, and I knew he was watching, probably mesmerized by the way they moved with each of his thrusts.

I couldn't wait to ride him. I'd be on top, brazenly touching myself as he lay beneath me.

And then I was coming, and once again, every cell in my body seemed electrified. My pussy clenched around his cock in a way that I knew made it tough for him to hold out. But my orgasm would probably serve as a green light to him.

Sure enough, even before I'd come down, he moaned, his eyes closed as he moved

faster and faster, still careful not to go too deep but getting himself there all the same. Then he cried out, his hands clenching my thighs a little tighter, his other hand sliding away from my clit.

It was the sexiest sight imaginable—my man, in the throes of orgasm. A sight I had a feeling I'd get used to over the coming years. Because this was definitely not just the first time, but the first of many.

Finally, he opened his eyes again and looked at me. "You okay?"

"Never been better." I frowned. "But I feel bad."

Worry marred his features. The last thing I wanted to do was worry him.

"I need to tell Bobbi I can't marry Reilly," I rushed to say.

He nodded, brushing a thumb over my thigh. "We'll go talk to her together."

A little rush of relief moved through me. I wasn't alone in this. I wasn't walking back into that lodge with trembling legs and a guilty conscience while he stayed here, pretending none of this happened. I was walking in with him.

He stood first and helped me down from the desk, brushing his hands down my sides like he couldn't stop touching me. I didn't want him to stop.

"We'll go now," he said. "We'll tell Bobbi the truth, then..."

I looked up at him. "Then?"

"Then you go back to my place." His voice dipped low, promise laced in every word. "I'll finish up the dinner shift here and when I come home to you, we'll do this all

over again.”

“Perfect,” I whispered.

He kissed me again—quick, deep, and full of heat—before leading me out of the office. And just like that, we stepped into the next chapter of our lives together.

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MACKENZIE

There was something about Wildwood Valley weddings that got me every time. Maybe it was the mountain backdrop. Maybe it was the fact that everyone in town somehow knew the bride's middle name and the groom's favorite kind of pie. Or maybe it's just that the last few years had made me soft.

I was seated near the back row of the Wildwood Valley Wedding Chapel, right between two of the newer brides who'd arrived in recent months—each with that starry, swept-away look in their eyes I knew so well.

I didn't say much, just smiled, kept a hand on my round belly, and watched as the couple at the altar sealed it with a kiss.

The bride looked radiant, and the groom looked stunned in that I-can't-believe-she's-mine kind of way. And the way the whole town had shown up? Even old man Coulter from the feed store had traded his overalls for slacks.

But the most interesting part? It wasn't just who was getting married. It was how they ended up together. That was a fun, interesting story—even more interesting than the story of the way West and I met more than four years ago, and that was saying a lot.

When everyone stood to file out, I caught sight of West standing tall with the other groomsmen. He spotted me right away, winked, then held out a hand like he always did. Like he still did, every single day.

We didn't rush to leave. We walked out last, hand in hand, behind the crowd and the

chaos and the laughter.

“They looked happy,” he said, his voice low, just for me.

“They did.”

Our two-year-old daughter was staying with West’s sister, who’d moved back to town to help run the diner. That gave us an afternoon to spend time with our friends. With our son set to arrive any day now, time to ourselves was in short supply.

West glanced down at me, his fingers lacing through mine. “Can you believe this is our life now?”

I laughed softly. “Sometimes I wake up and expect to still be living out of a suitcase. But yeah...I believe it.”

The chapel stood just across the gravel road, sunlight hitting the stained-glass windows in a way that always made it look like a storybook.

It was a church on Sundays, but the rest of the week, it was used as an event venue and wedding chapel.

I’d been hired as the events coordinator, and it was the best job imaginable.

I even had a little office in back where I could schedule ceremonies while our daughter napped in the playpen.

And West’s diner? Thriving. He’d finally gotten that billboard updated, but really, it was the inn that was drawing people to town. The number of locals was also growing, and West and I were about to add yet another resident when Mac was born next month.

West tugged me gently toward him, resting a palm on the swell of my belly. “Think he’ll be a line cook or a preacher?”

I grinned. “Maybe both.”

We stood there for a while, just watching the last guests climb into their cars and disappear down the winding road. “I still remember the day you walked into my diner,” he murmured. “Standing there, looking all kinds of uncertain.”

“Pretty sure I was trying to run away.”

“Lucky for me, you didn’t.”

I leaned into him. “Lucky for me, you made me stay.”

And just like that, the chapel doors closed behind us. Another couple married. Another Wildwood Valley story just beginning.

And ours?

Ours was still unfolding.