



My Bossy Mountain Man

(Summer in the Pines #9)

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Category: Romance

Description: My Bossy Mountain Man is a republishing of the mistitled My Bossy Valentine by Julia Stone.

He's all crossed arms by day—but behind closed doors, his aid awakens a hunger he can't deny.

Tulip:

Most people find me a lot—too loud, too colorful, too much. So when I land a job at the library, I expect my new boss to barely tolerate me. Dallas is silent, moody, and looks at me as if I'm a catastrophe on legs. Like I'm here to disturb the silence. He watches me like he's waiting for me to mess up, arms crossed, mouth in a frown. If he really finds me so annoying, why does he always seem to be right there when I need help? Why does his stare make me shiver in a way that has nothing to do with fear?

Dallas:

The library needs help—help I can't give it. That's why I hired Tulip. She's bright, cheerful, and exactly the kind of spark this place needs. I don't expect her to stick around, though. I'm not exactly Mr. Sunshine, and my personality tends to scare people off. But she keeps showing up, lighting up the aisles and drawing me in. If she continues to push my limits, I'm not sure I'll be able to keep my hands to myself during the library's closing hours.

Come join your favorite authors for a collection of steamy summer romances, where the mountain air is cool, and the nights are scorching. These rugged men can handle the wild—but love is the one thing they'll never see coming!

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Dallas

For years, I spent my free time scanning returned books and staring at the same four gray walls—the kind of walls that didn’t just look lifeless, but actively drained the soul out of anyone who lingered too long.

For what felt like an eternity, people avoided this place unless they had no other options to help pass the time.

For the longest time, I couldn’t understand why .

When the previous person who managed the joint refused to make any changes, I didn’t bother to look for ways the library could be improved.

This place was handed down to me like an obligation, not a gift, once he retired. The guy disappeared and never looked back. Funny enough, he looked relieved to never have to set foot inside again.

Once the role became mine, managing the local library became a joy of mine.

And for just as long as I’ve been at the top, I’ve wanted to change it.

Do something that matters. But a guy like me?

I had no idea where to start. What to do to make people come through the doors instead of drifting around the building like something terrifying lurked in the shadows.

Then, four months ago, I took a shot in the dark.

I posted an ad for a library aide—someone who wouldn't mind doing more than just reshelving dusty paperbacks. It was a big ask, especially given the minimum wage pay. But against all odds, I got a bite.

Enter Tulip Walters.

She was fresh air given human form. A rainbow crashing into my monochrome world. The moment she stepped inside, she didn't just see those lifeless walls—she squinted at them, like she was already imagining the colors she'd splash across them the moment I gave her creative control.

Then, she turned to me, flashed a smile so bright it stole the breath right out of my lungs, and demanded the job before I could even ask her name.

One look at her, and it didn't matter who else applied. She had the position faster than she had my heartbeat in her hands.

Now, when I walk in, the walls don't just look different—they feel different. Murals from local artists wind between the shelves, and paper chain links, Tulip's latest project, dangle from the ceiling low enough to touch.

Even my usual scowl doesn't stand a chance when I take in all the changes. It's not just the atmosphere that makes it this way. It's her.

She's gone out of her way to beckon people inside, spreading her cheerfulness. Now, thanks to her, we have a steady flow of people coming in and out through the hours.

Ranging from the recluses tucked away on the mountain to the families living in the suburban part of the town, all come over here to get a book or two from time to time.

When the front doors open this time around, I don't have to lift my eyes to know she's arrived.

True to her name, she glides gracefully across the room, trailing a soft, delightful scent of wildflowers behind her.

The fragrance weaves through the air, evoking images of sunlit fields and gentle breezes, as if nature itself is dancing in her presence.

While I may never uncover the truth, I like to imagine her spending her free time joyfully skipping through the fields on the mountain. This mental image always fills my chest with warmth whenever I breathe her in when she gets too close.

There's this pull on me that whenever she's near, I can't help but look. The habit is one I haven't tried to kick, caving with ease as my eyes lift toward her approaching form.

Today, she's wearing a summer dress that fits her curves perfectly. It's not the multi-colored polka dots scattered on her top half that has me swallowing thickly, but it's the way her eyes light up the moment they meet mine.

She looks happy to see me. Despite how much time she spends in this place, she continues to look at me like it's still her first day. Eager with life, filled with energy that is unlimited.

That alone should've been what rang the warning bells in my head.

Most people tense up when I'm around—not that I can help it. My face wasn't built for charm. Even my smile sends folks running faster than my scowl. Sometimes, I wondered if I was the one scaring people away, if it weren't for the condition of the library. Sometimes, it still crosses my mind.

But Tulip? She's not afraid in the slightest. Instead, she's all but skipping toward the desk, her sundress fluttering like she's bringing the outside in. When she throws herself against the curved desk, a wave of floral perfume hits me—and by now, I should be used to it.

My head swims as I inhale deeply. Deep enough to get drunk on such a sweet scent.

“Dallas,” she sing-songs, drumming her fingers on the wood. “Notice anything different?”

The handheld scanner beeps in my hand, filling the silence while I avoid her eyes and toss a book onto my cart. “You’ve dyed your hair.”

Yesterday, it was sun-bleached blonde. Today, it’s the exact shade of pink one would find on the inside of a seashell.

Her nails—painted a sunshine yellow that shouldn’t work but does—tap an impatient rhythm against the desk. I don’t even need to look to know she’s grinning.

“Sure did. What do you think?” She slides along the curve of the wood, maneuvering herself right back into my line of sight. “My sister says it’s ‘a bit much.’ Brook is boring. I think I need a second opinion.”

Against every instinct, I glance back up.

‘Beautiful’ lodges itself in my throat like a confession. I choke it down before it escapes. Can’t have her bolting when she realizes her boss is already six feet under and she hasn’t even started digging.

“It’s your hair. If you like it, that’s what matters.” The scanner beeps again, a mechanical distraction. “You wear the color well.”

The truth is, she could dye herself in every shade of the rainbow, and it wouldn't matter. Tulip Walters could make a potato sack look like a masterpiece. Can't lie to myself. She'd look best without anything at all, and thoughts like that are precisely why I can't tell her how I feel.

Her cheeks flush—just a hint of pink, like the dusk creeping over her hairline—before she moves around the desk. The way she drifts toward me, it's like she's floating across the carpet.

Then, once she settles next to my side to clock herself in, her elbow grazes my arm.

It's not an accident. Tulip doesn't do accidents. It's a glancing touch, her skin against mine, warm and fleeting, but it sends a jolt straight to my ribs.

Once upon a time, I thought she might know exactly how I felt about her. That's why she'd casually touch me, hoping I'd touch back. Most of the time, I've ignored the urge. Not even the strongest man can deny every opportunity for a brisk brush.

It turns out that the woman is just comfortable around everyone. I've watched her pat shoulders and squeeze hands in reassurance. Hell, she's even hugged a few of the mountain rescuers who have made their way in.

I tell myself it's because her sister is married to one of them, but jealousy always flares up at the worst of times.

Green isn't my color. While telling her that I fell hard for her at first glance isn't an option, scaring her away because I can't control my feelings is at the top of my list of things not to do.

She clocks herself in like nothing happened, then kneels down to slide open one of the cupboards. I hear the rustle of her digging around, the soft thud of the sanitation

wipes tumbling to the floor as she loses her grip. Quickly recovering, her nails tap against the plastic container.

My throat goes dry just as my eyes follow her movement.

It's not her coral colored hair that's making my chest stir. It's the realization of how she looks right at this moment.

She's kneeling at the perfect height.

The thought hits me like a sucker punch. Because from where I'm standing, if she just looked up with those innocent brown eyes of hers—

And then, of course, she does. Like she's a mind reader, or she's feeling my gaze, or...

Tulip tilts her head back, loose strands of pink hair catching the fluorescent lights, and shows me the tube of disinfectant wipes. "We're gonna need more of these. Looks like we're on the last one."

I should say something. Something professional, something sane. But all I can think is how her knees are digging into the thin library carpet, how her neck is bared just slightly when she tips her chin up, how easy it would be to—

"I'll pick some up later," I mutter, and my voice comes out rough like I've swallowed broken shards of glass. "Thank you."

Despite the filthy thoughts spiraling in my head, I don't entertain them. Hell, I don't linger on them long enough to get a response from my cock. Instead, I'll bank them for later when I'm alone, tucked away in my big empty bed instead of here.

I offer my hand to help her up. She takes it without hesitation, her fingers curling around mine with a warmth that lingers long after she's back on her feet.

"I'm going to clean up and tackle the dust collecting at the computer station," she says, dragging her thumb across my palm slowly before pulling away and hugging the plastic tube of wipes to her chest.

Better to be jealous of a tube than another man. If a man takes Tulip in like I do, then I will scare away those with library cards.

"Sure," I rasp, clearing my throat as the library doors swing open. A family shuffles in, their chatter filling the silence I struggle to do myself. I nod at them, then scan another book with the handheld. "Might take a fifteen after this. If you don't mind."

Fifteen minutes alone. Fifteen minutes to choke down this relentless want, to will my body back under control. Because right now? Every brush of her fingers, every hum under her breath, every time she breathes—it's all a live wire under my skin.

My cock's already made it clear it doesn't give a shit about professionalism plenty of times in the past. The longer she's near me, the more it stirs to life, thickening against the layer of denim.

"Anything for you, Dallas," she says, bright as sunlight, and fuck me, the way she says my name so melodically—

I grit my teeth. Twenty minutes. I'll need twenty now. I'm not sure a few tugs will be enough. Once I get behind a locked bathroom door, I'll have to rely on the grip of my fist to put me out of my misery.

Might have to think about that fantasy early, too.

It's a miracle I've lasted this long without snapping. Four months of her laughter, her leaning into my space, her looking at me like I'm something worth seeing. Four more months of this?

Yeah. Sure.

I'll keep lying to myself. Keep pretending I can survive on stolen glances and the ache of almost. Keep playing the careful boss, the unshakable wall between what I want and what I can't have. But the truth?

The truth is a ticking clock, and every second I'm near her, the wall I've built between us has one terrible foundation. Enough that I'm already seeing the cracks. Cracks that are growing thicker by the day.

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Tulip

The doorbell chimes, and I'm already halfway across the living room, bare feet skimming the hardwood in a rhythm just shy of a sprint. By the time I wrench the door open, my grin is wide enough to rival the mailman's—a man who's seen me like this more times than either of us can count.

“Third package this week,” he announces, holding out the cardboard box like a trophy. A few flyers and junk mail cling to it, doomed for the recycling bin the second I'm alone. Right now, they don't exist.

I take the parcel, fingers curling around the edges. “Might be more to follow if I can't help myself.” The words tumble out before I can stop them, but his chuckle tells me he gets it. I'm sure there are some folks out there who see him every day.

I'm not that bad. Yet.

With a wave, I retreat into my apartment, the door clicking shut behind me. The box weighs nothing and everything at once. All but skipping to my kitchen, I'm clawing at the strong tape, thankful that my package came right on time.

Pushing the flaps open, I'm pulling out one of the cutest summer dresses I've ever seen. It's a two-piece that'll show off a sliver of skin, hinting at what's beneath. The fabric is so thin that it'll easily withstand the summer breeze.

As much as I love Willowbrook Ridge, there isn't any place here to get something cute that fits me. So, if it risks seeing the mailman every day, then so be it. Anything

to get me toward my goal in life.

That goal being the task of making the grumpy librarian notice me. One of these days, I'm going to succeed. I can feel it deep in my bones.

Even if Dallas is way out of my league, and I risk losing the coolest job a woman can ask for, something in my stomach demands that I try.

I've never been near a person who just feels right. As soon as I stepped into his library and saw him, I knew I had to meet him properly. I had to get to know him and uncover the secrets no one else knew.

Who am I kidding? As soon as I met those steel-colored eyes, I accepted that I'd met my future husband. That's how confident I am.

Have to say, it's only his face that's scary. The rest of him? He might as well be a stuffed teddy bear. So soft and warm. One I'd kill to get my arms around. Thighs, too, if he'd let me.

A giggle escapes me at the thought, but the clock yanks me back to reality. Shoot. Time to move. I'll slip into this new piece, parade it past him like a dare.

Maybe this one will be the one to hook his attention and make those narrowed eyes linger just the way I want them to.

Or, even better, maybe he'll scold me for wearing something so daring.

Most people fear the outcome of their boss being displeased with them. Me? I'm happy to soak in whatever new side of Dallas I can get my hands on.

With how good this dress is going to look, I know there's no chance he'll be angry. In

fact, I'm willing to bet he'll start drooling before whisking me somewhere we can both get plenty of privacy.

A sigh leaves me as I clutch the dress tightly.

A woman can only dream.

* * *

Pushing my way into the library, I'm thankful for the air conditioning hitting my flushed skin.

It turns out there's a heat advisory going on, and I'm not the only one hoping for some relief from the heat wave happening outside. While warnings blare about staying indoors, I made the mistake of walking the whole way here with the thought of my crush fueling each step.

Now I think I'm ready to keel over and die. I'm too sweaty to be sexy. A few minutes under the cool air will get me right back to normal.

Arriving a little early, I take in my surroundings before I hunt down Dallas. Drifting toward the front desk, I dig around and hope to find something to drink. Thankfully, I forgot a bottle of water from my lunch a few shifts ago.

Every gulp makes it taste more delicious than the last.

A few of the tables are occupied with families, some by loners. All flipping through books to help pass the time while the sun beams up in the sky. Some of them send friendly glances, and I return with quick waves.

I truly adore this place. I love books. But I love the person in charge even more.

Tearing my eyes away from the view, I search for the man who enjoys putting all of his time into this place. Seven days a week, I don't think he ever gives himself a day off.

Most people would be stressed holding a record like his. Dallas treats this place like a hobby. It's one of those jobs where work doesn't feel like work.

Personally, I think the guy deserves a vacation. Now that I've got the whole thing down, I could work a few long shifts so he can prop his feet up and enjoy himself. But knowing him, he wouldn't dare let me even breathe the idea.

He should really look into hiring more help and give himself some time off. One of these days, I'll succeed in convincing him. For now, I'll appreciate how often we work together.

I eventually find Dallas skimming his fingers over a few books in the Sci-fi section.

My steps feel weightless as I make my way over toward him.

I steal a glance while he's distracted, his broad shoulders flexing slightly as he reaches for a book on the top shelf. As his height helps him, the whole length of his body works in his favor.

The faded cotton of his t-shirt stretches across his back, clinging just enough to outline the hard lines of muscle beneath. There's the little slip of skin right above his tailbone that makes me feel heated all over again.

Unfortunately, no amount of air conditioning can cool me down once I get worked up over a peek of what he looks like beneath his usual wear.

I am terrible.

He's always like this—unaware of how effortlessly he commands the space around him, how the simple act of browsing books makes my pulse skip. How easily I drool at the view, and how often my fingers twitch to touch him.

His jeans are worn soft, hugging his hips in a way that makes my fingers itch to trace the seams. Dark hair falls slightly over his forehead as he tilts his head, scanning the spines with that focused intensity that always seems glued to his expression.

His jaw is shadowed with stubble, strong and stubborn, and I wonder what it would feel like beneath my fingertips.

I should look away before he catches me staring. But I don't. Can't, actually.

While people struggle to maintain eye contact with him, I struggle to tear my eyes away.

“What are you looking for?” Moving my hands behind me, I step closer, hoping for the excuse to brush against him.

Dallas jerks, his focus broken as those gray eyes move in my direction. If I didn't know him, I'd think I'd upset him by the frown on his lips.

Upon realizing it's just me, his gaze drops, slow and deliberate. Taking in the way my new dress clings to every curve, I feel every inch his eyes roam over.

His throat bobs as he swallows hard, and my smile widens.

“New dress?” His question comes out in a rasp like he's got something caught in his throat.

“Just got it today.” I nudge closer, watching the way his knuckles whiten around the

book in his grip as I tilt my head. The air between us feels charged, thick with something unspoken. “What do you think? I don’t normally get something like this. If you can’t tell, I’m working on my look.”

My fingers drift up, grazing the sliver of bare skin just beneath my breasts—and his eyes follow, darkening.

Maybe I shouldn’t tease the guy who signs my paychecks. But the thrill is too sweet to resist, especially when his brows knit together like I’ve handed him an unsolvable riddle. His jaw tenses, his throat working as if he’s physically holding back words.

“It looks...” He tears his gaze away, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “...fine, Tulip.”

Fine. The word lands like a dull blade, and I swallow back the sting of disappointment before it can take root.

He clears his throat, suddenly very interested in the book in his hands. Once his eyes settle on the cover, I know there’s no pulling it away. Dang it.

“Someone called looking for a title, so I came to see if we had it.” He thrusts the book between us like a shield. “I should get back to them. Oh, and there’s a cart of returns that need to be put away.”

Just like that, he’s gone—retreating behind that infuriating, unreadable mask of his. But not before I catch the way his fingers flex at his side, like he’s stopping himself from reaching for something.

Or someone.

At his escape, I watch him coast across the library to attend to the desk. It’s his favorite location, after all. The best place for him to hide behind when he’s not in the

mood to deal with people.

Once I'm all alone, I let out a soft sigh. I fight the urge to thump my foot against the wooden shelf. Poor thing is older than me, and I'm willing to bet it can't take much of a hit.

Maybe I've got this all wrong. Maybe I'm not Dallas' type, and no matter what kind of changes I make to my appearance, he won't be interested.

What would Brook do?

I don't want to have to ask my sister for any advice in the love department, but I feel like I'm going in blind here. I really like Dallas.

When I'm not here, I don't just think about climbing shelves.

With an imagination like mine, it's a miracle I get any real work done. Virgins who've never even seen a cock in person shouldn't be able to conjure one up so easily—let alone his—but here I am, biting my lip hard enough to sting as my mind supplies far too many vivid details.

I've imagined doing the deed here, of all places, more times than I can count on both hands. Heck, earlier, I fantasized about him plucking off both pieces of this dress. No, not plucking. Tearing it off .

A shiver runs through me, and I catch myself standing there like an idiot, my skin too warm under this dress.

Get it together. I'm supposed to be his aide, not some daydreaming nuisance who spends too much time flipping through steamy romances during her breaks.

Forcing myself to move, I drift away from the science fiction section like a coward, toward the promised cart of returns. Weekends always leave us with a mountain of finished reads, and today's pile is no exception.

One by one, I slot the books back into place, my fingers tracing familiar spines without really seeing them. The quiet of the library presses in, and with it comes the nagging doubt—should I have said something else? Done something different?

My gaze drops to the dress clinging to my curves, the way it dips and hugs in all the right places. And yet...

He thinks it looks... fine.

A humorless laugh escapes me. I am so out of his league. Maybe this dress, this boldness, is just wishful thinking.

But then I remember the way his grip tightened on that book. The way his throat worked when he looked at me...

My poor heart flutters, struggling to get with the program.

The next book left on the reshelving cart catches my eye—a book on the autonomy of the human body. Belonging to the non-fiction section, I coast over there next. Thick and heavy, it belongs on the top shelf where the rest of the dusty books belong.

I glance around for the step stool, but it's nowhere in sight. Of course.

That's fine. I can reach it. I'm sure of it.

I stretch onto my toes, my fingers barely grazing the book's edge. The fabric of my dress rides up just a fraction, the cool air brushing against the exposed skin of my

waist. The book teeters between my fingertips—almost there—when suddenly, it slips.

My reaction time is too slow.

A sharp crack—not the book hitting the shelf, but the hard corner of it striking the bridge of my nose. Pain flares white-hot, radiating outward, and for a second, all I see are stars. Then warmth spills over my lips, dripping onto my chin.

Oh no. No, no, no—

A sharp inhale. The sudden thunder of footsteps behind me. Then—heat.

Dallas is there in an instant, his hands gripping my shoulders as he spins me toward him. He rarely curses out loud, but the moment he sees the blood streaking my face, the heavy book at my feet, he lets out a low, vicious string of colorful words.

“Jesus, Tulip—” His voice is rough, strained. One hand cups the back of my head, tilting me forward slightly, while the other grabs my hand to guide it toward my face. “Pinch it. Hard. And tilt your head forward, not back—you don’t want to choke on it.”

Staring at him, it takes a moment for my brain to catch up with his instructions. I mean, he never touches me. Yet, look at him now.

I’d giggle if my face weren’t currently throbbing.

His fingers are firm, almost trembling—whether from adrenaline or anger, I can’t tell. His eyes dart over my face, assessing, and for the first time, I see emotions flooding behind his eyes.

“Ouch.” Groaning as he makes me pinch my nose hard, the groan comes out nasally.

“Does it feel broken?” he demands. “Do you need an ambulance?”

I try to laugh, but it comes out as a wet, muffled sound. “Dallas, it’s just a nosebleed. I’m not dying.”

I hope not. Worst case scenario, there could be some swelling, or I might get a black eye. Maybe two.

Shoot. I’m going to need a lot of makeup to get through these next few days.

“You could’ve been hurt worse. That book weighs five pounds. It could’ve hit your eye, your temple—” He cuts himself off, jaw clenched so tight I swear I hear his teeth grind.

Then my gaze drops to my dress—the delicate fabric now splattered with crimson—and I grimace. “Oh, come on—”

A fresh drop of blood falls, adding another stain to the pretty fabric.

Dallas exhales sharply through his nose. He’s still holding me, his thumb brushing absently against my shoulder—like he’s forgotten he’s doing it. Like touching me is as natural as breathing.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up before you traumatize the kids in here.” Gliding his palm to the space between my shoulder blades, he guides me toward the storage room.

With the thought of this man taking care of me, I don’t even mind the mess I’m going to have to clean up later. Even if the library looks like a crime scene, I’m pretty sure

I've just hit the lottery.

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Dallas

“I don’t think my nose has bled like this since high school.”

To fill the silent air, Tulip rambles as she rests against the surface of a cluttered desk.

One, I had to push the sheets around to make enough room for her to sit.

This entire room is a hoarder’s wet dream.

Once an office, now turned into a storage space, there’s just enough room for the addition of the two of us.

After abandoning her long enough to get some paper towels to wet them, I’ve returned, fitting myself between her parted knees to help wipe away the dried crimson.

“Do you have a habit of books falling on your face even during your younger years?”
Curious to find out whatever I can about her, I pluck for information whenever I can.

The paper towel grazes her chin, and her lips curve into a smile—soft, but there. Even when her face is flushed and her nose is swelling, she still remains positive.

“While I did spend a lot of time at the school library, I’ll have to disappoint you by saying I stayed far away from any book that is more than an inch thick.

” A self-deprecating laugh slips out as her fingers brush the bridge of her nose.

“Actually, you can thank my inability to play sports. Took a few hits to the face, and my nose has always bled like a fountain because of it.”

I snort at the mental image and feel my frown crack before I can stop it. Shit. Too late.

I brace for her to flinch. I know what my smile looks like—all teeth, no warmth, like a damn villain plotting his next crime. Not exactly comforting. Not something people lean into.

But she doesn't pull away.

Instead, she's staring at me like I've just pulled the moon from the sky. Amazed. Unblinking. Her lips part slightly, like she's about to say something, but the words dissolve in the space between us. The air thickens, and for a heartbeat, neither of us moves.

Why isn't she looking away?

Her gaze holds mine, steady and unflinching, and it's making it impossible not to stare back.

But where her eyes linger with something warm—something knowing—mine drops to her mouth for entirely different reasons. I'm not admiring her smile. No, I'm too busy wondering if those lips are as soft as they look, if they'd part easy under mine, if she'd gasp or sigh or—

A nudge closer. A hesitation with the paper towel.

The spell shatters.

Her focus dips, breaking away as she glances down at the streak of blood trailing her chest. Crimson rivers winding over smooth skin, slipping dangerously close to the swell of her cleavage—another damn war I’m losing today. My jaw tightens.

I told myself I wouldn’t take advantage and look, but I don’t have the strength to keep my word. Not while her breasts are staring me back in the face.

God, what is wrong with me? Bleeding and injured, all I want to do is kiss and touch her. I need better control over myself.

“Um, I think I can finish this up.” Breaking the silence between us, she takes the paper towels from my fingers. There’s no denying the layer of pink growing deeper in color on her skin.

Shit, I’ve embarrassed her, haven’t I? This is why I try not to push. I make more people uncomfortable than not.

“Right.” Grunting, I turn away and make some distance so she can finish up. I take the moment to slip out, to make sure no one needs help.

In truth, distance is good. I need some fresh air in my system before all the heat in my body decides to rush south.

I’m running this place here. Need to keep it together.

Giving her a couple of minutes, when I return, I see her grimacing at her ruined top.

“I should probably run home. I don’t think parents will appreciate their kids looking at a bloodied aide.” Smile returning to her lips, she tries to crack a joke.

Tulip walks here every day. A twenty-minute stroll that she insists she doesn’t mind

walking. Even on rainy days, when she has her own poncho, boots, and an umbrella, she'll still come inside like a rainbow after a storm. Bright, colorful, and beautiful.

"No." The word escapes me without thinking.

As my greed takes over, the thought of losing any time with her fuels the demand to keep her here.

"I mean, I'm sure I have something around here you could wear.

The last thing I want to happen is for you to be blooded and have you pass out in that scorching heat happening outside. "

As she tilts her head in confusion, I rub the back of my neck as I try to figure out what I can give her.

Considering going through the lost and found to see if there's anything she could fit, something better comes to my mind.

"Hold on a moment." Leaving her on the desk, her legs kicking back and forth, I hunt through a few boxes of old posters and advertisements I've received over the last few years.

I have an issue with throwing things away, and most of these items have an inch-thick layer of dust collecting on them.

"I can help you go through that stuff," she calls out, reading my mind as I rub the dust between my fingertips. "If you want, I mean."

Moving from one box to another, I continue to shift things around. "A project like that would take all night."

It's a joke, but she shrugs.

"Say the word, and I won't mind staying a few hours over. Not like I've got anyone better to spend my time with." She lets a little sigh slip through, a hint of disappointment that's impossible to ignore.

She's spent plenty of time talking about her sister and her husband, gossiping and prattling on as if she doesn't have many people to share with. Somehow, Tulip doesn't have a boyfriend or husband to spend time with, so she's always opting to work alongside me to help pass the time.

Even once the sun is down and it's just us, she's willing. Picturing such a scenario has my mouth watering.

"I'll think about it. For now, let's just focus on you."

Cracking open another dusty box, I finally spot what I've been searching for—a few leftover shirts from last summer's reading program, folded and forgotten.

The fabric smells faintly of old paper, a nostalgic tug at my memory. I shuffle through them, checking sizes, before glancing up at her.

"What size would fit you best?" Wanting her to be comfortable, I'd be happy to give her the shirt off my back if none of these work out.

Her reaction is instant. The confidence she wears like armor flickers, just for a second, and her cheeks flush pink. Her legs stop swishing as she's suddenly fascinated by the floor.

"I really don't mind going back home," she mumbles, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "It's barely a walk. Forty minutes, max."

I give her a look—the kind that says don’t even try it —and she exhales sharply, biting her bottom lip. Her gaze darts away before she finally caves, voice softer now.

“Um... 2XL. If you have it.”

It takes a few seconds for my brain to catch up to the realization that she’s feeling self-conscious before I frown.

Parting my lips, I almost say it outright—that she’s got the kind of body to drive a man mad. Hell, I’ve lost sleep over it. Nights where I’ve stared at the ceiling, replaying the way her hips sway when she walks, how her waist nips in just enough to make my hands itch to span it.

The generous swell of her chest, the thighs that could ruin a man’s self-control—every damn curve crafted to haunt their imagination.

At first, I assumed she already knew how good she looked. That the confidence in her stride, the way her fingers lingered on the fabric, meant she didn’t need me to tell her. But now I wonder—was she asking for my opinion because she needed to hear it? Because I hadn’t given her enough?

Damn. If that’s true, then I’ve failed her before I even realized it.

I should fix this. Find the right words—ones that don’t feel hollow, but don’t cross the line either. Honesty has always been my compass, but with Tulip? It’s a gamble. With the risk of losing her completely, the stakes are high.

I should compliment her and see how things play out.

Finding a shirt in her size, I hand it over before my hand moves to the back of my neck.

I'm still searching for the right words—something honest but weightless, a compliment that won't betray too much—when she tugs the oversized shirt over her dress. The fabric swallows her waist, and my eyes are drawn right toward the design printed on it.

Staring back at me from her chest is a grinning cartoon book, its cover donning an unsettling smile while declaring ' Reading is Fun! '. No wonder people didn't come to claim their shirts.

"I love it," she muses, her usual energy slipping right back into her. "Makes me wonder if you'll ever entertain the idea of uniforms here."

Not a chance. That would be like clouds coming in to block out the sun.

"Not anytime soon. Don't worry, I won't make you wear absurd clothing like that." Rubbing the back of my neck, I look away before I get caught staring for too long. "If you love it, you can keep it. I'm sure when we clean this place up, you'll find other things you'll want, too."

Tulip inhales sharply as she hops off the desk. "So we are doing it? When?"

She doesn't hesitate—just surges forward, erasing the space between us like it was never there. She has no idea how intoxicating that energy is. It's reckless, magnetic, the kind of thing that makes restraint feel like a losing battle.

"Give me a few days to prepare. Additionally, if your nose requires attention, I want you to prioritize your healing first. I can give you an extra day off and—"

Her smile vanishes mid-sentence. Before I can finish, her finger jabs into the center of my chest.

“Don’t you dare.” The playful lilt in her voice is gone, replaced by something firmer. “If you give me a day off before you take one yourself, I’ll show up anyway. Try me, mister.”

It’s rare for her to get serious. Rarer still for it to hit me this hard.

I exhale, conceding with a nod as she keeps poking—each prod an accusation. Finally, I catch her wrist, my fingers curling around hers. A squeeze. A silent truce.

Then, her breath hitches. Just a faint catch in her throat, but it’s enough to freeze us both. For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. The air between us thickens, charged with something neither of us names.

“A few days, then.” My voice comes out rougher than I intend. “We’ll clean this place up. See if anything’s worth keeping.”

Slowly, I let go, turning away before I do something stupid. Stupid like feeding into this demand to touch her more. To pull her toward me and go as far as kiss her.

The more time I spend with her like this, the more starved I become.

A few days to prepare. That’s the plan, at least. The truth is, I’ll need a whole week just to survive a few hours alone with her. With her proven patience with me, I’m sure I won’t get away with waiting half of it.

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Tulip

Dallas's eyebrows practically hit his hairline when I walk in.

Good.

I do a little spin just to make sure he gets the full effect—my patched-up overalls, the threadbare shirt underneath, and, most importantly, the giant apple stitched right over my left pocket. His gaze lingers on it a second too long, and I bite back a laugh.

Yeah, yeah, it's ridiculous. But if he thinks that's over the top, just wait until he sees what's coming.

I have to maintain my usual optimistic demeanor. Ever since I showed up with discolored eyes, he's been worrying himself over nothing.

Not like an employer freaking out about worker's comp, but like, a man would for a woman he cares about.

As much as I love him checking up on me, peering close at my face, I'm happy that my black eyes are basically yellow now. No more swelling, thank goodness.

"Before you ask," I say, propping my elbows right next to a box of new books that need labeling, "this is strategic. I'm not sacrificing another dress to this place's dust bunnies. Those things are basically feral."

His mouth twitches, almost giving away a smile. Ever since five days ago, I've been

dying to see another one of those. Too bad they don't come very often.

"What do you think?" I pat my front pockets, slipping my fingers into them with deliberate casualness before turning slightly, as if modeling. The fabric hugs just right—comfortable but flattering.

Dallas's expression shifts, his gaze lingering a beat too long. Not just amused, but studying me, like my question is a puzzle he's turning over in his head. His eyes drag down, then up again, slow enough that my pulse kicks harder.

"You look..." He pauses, and I swear his throat bobs before his eyes lock onto mine. "You wear them well. They look nice on you. Very fitting for your character."

Woah.

Did I just hallucinate his words? I expected another fine at most. Instead, he's going all out here with his words.

Heat floods my cheeks, and I bite the inside of my lip to keep from grinning like an idiot. That compliment? That's going to replay in my mind for weeks.

Needing stability, I step toward the desk and lean against it, the edge digging into my hips. It barely holds me upright—not that it matters, because nothing could steady the giddy buzz under my skin or the dazed smile I can't suppress.

"Why, thank you, Dallas." My voice is too light, too airy. Moving to join him on the other side, each step feels like I'm walking on air.

Grabbing a container of cleaning wipes just to give my hands something to do, I can't help but graze against him.

“I appreciate the compliment.” Leaning in close enough to catch the faint scent of his cologne—something woody and warm—I send him a wink. “I’ll hurry so we can get to the real fun.”

A grunt. Classic Dallas. Right as I’m about to dart off, his voice stops me.

“Have you eaten dinner?” There’s an edge of concern there, his eyes flicking to the clock on the desktop.

He’d insisted on coming in late today, his compromise for not letting me pull the same marathon hours he does.

I purse my lips, shrugging. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Another grunt. It’s practically his default response when words fail him, which, with this man, is often.

Smiling, I drift toward the stacks, the quiet of the empty library wrapping around me.

Closing up isn’t hard—just pretty boring.

Wiping down keyboards, dusting shelves, killing germs. But there’s something almost meditative about it.

While it’s easy, it’s a lot of repetitive tasks to do every single day.

One of these days, I’ll convince him to hire more help. Maybe even talk him into a hobby that doesn’t involve scowling at our online catalogue, which isn’t up-to-date half of the time. For now, I’ll take these quiet moments, the rare hum of something unspoken between us.

The library feels different at night—hushed, hollow. Like a ghost town. No wonder Dallas considered cutting hours. Once autumn rolls in, this place will be even emptier.

But right now? With just the two of us here? It feels... charged.

I'm in the middle of sanitizing headphones when the library doors open, and a delicious smell comes with it. When a younger guy strolls in here with bags containing a logo I recognize rather well with my many Chinese take-out binges, I'm already drooling when Dallas signals him over.

This man is going to be the death of me.

My hunger must be written all over my face, because as soon as he's paid the driver, he's coasting across the building to lock the door and flip the open sign to closed. It's a little early, but I'm not going to be the one to tell him to wait.

"Hold on—tell me you didn't pay extra to get it delivered here." My attempt at scolding him crumbles as the rich, savory aroma of garlic and orange sauce hits my nose. My stomach betrays me with a quiet growl.

He absolutely did this on purpose.

I've mentioned this place to him before—offhand, months ago—raving about the homemade fried rice and wonton soup that is to die for. And now here it is, laid out between us like some kind of edible ambush.

"I paid the extra for me," he mutters, rummaging through the bag before pausing. A sigh slips from his lips, sounding the most forced I've ever heard. "They must've gotten the wrong idea. Two forks. Two cookies. Maybe they thought I couldn't eat this all by myself. I suppose I could give you some."

I snort, my lips curling into a full, helpless grin as I tap the back of my fingers against his arm. “How tragic. Thank you for reluctantly sharing this enormous order you placed just for yourself.”

He chuckles—a low, warm sound that does stupid things to my pulse—and starts unpacking the containers. The lids peel back with a whisper of steam, revealing glistening pieces of chicken covered in sauces I want to indulge in. He played it safe, getting different types.

This is a man after my heart. He doesn’t have to work hard for it. It’s his.

I take my first bite and moan. Something this delicious should be illegal.

Across from me, Dallas eats with the same quiet focus he does everything else, but there’s a looseness to his shoulders tonight. A comfort.

I try not to stare.

But, is it weird that this feels like the world’s most accidental date? No candles, no reservations, just takeout boxes in a library that smells like old paper and his stupidly addictive cologne.

And yet... the silence between us isn’t empty. It’s easy. The kind where neither of us feels the need to fill it. Just the clink of forks, the occasional hum of satisfaction, and the way his knee brushes mine under the table—once, twice—like neither of us wants to admit we noticed.

What more could a woman ask for? I never want this to end.

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Tulip

Unfortunately, the food disappears one bite at a time, and when nothing but trash remains, we must move on to the main event of the night. Organizing that storage room. It's a daunting task, even though I'm being positive about taking care of it.

Dallas is as eager as he can be to tackle it, I'm quick to figure out why the room is in the shape it is in the first place.

Snorting as he unfolds each poster, most of them containing useless promotional artwork that would be of no use to us, I easily help him decide that most of this stuff is junk. Despite its uselessness, it's going to take some coaxing and convincing to get a lot of this stuff in the trash.

Digging through a box, I find a bunch of flyers for a book signing that happened... seven months ago. First off, I didn't even know we did signings here. Second off...

"I think you've got a problem, Dallas. Seriously." I hold up one of the flyers, not bothering to look at the guy printed on them, even if he's mildly attractive. "Like, why do you need these?"

He sniffs, rolling his shoulders. "Paper costs money, and that guy puts out a book once a year. If he wants to do another setup here, then I don't have to worry about making more copies."

I mean, I guess that's a good excuse. Good enough to put the flyers back, for now.

Continuing to shift around, I come across the same shirt he'd given me. "Definitely toss these. While I might like this little guy, you're going to scare kids away if you try to repurpose them."

The corner of his mouth twitches, and for just a second, I see a hint of a smile.

"I could hand them out as a thank you for supporting the library?" Trying to give me any reason to put the box in the keep pile, he motions over toward it.

"I don't think so. Unless you want to scare away everyone that does come here." Scoffing, I put the box in the trash pile. The book mascot won't have to haunt anyone's mind but ours.

Ready to move on, I catch him still watching me. I don't know when it happened, but his frown is gone, replaced by a soft smile. Before my heart can even flutter, it's like he's catching himself in the act. One jerk later, and he's squashing the curve.

My feet are moving me toward him before my brain can catch up with my body.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." Huffing the words out, my hands move to my hips. "You have a nice smile."

Just like that, it's like my words have startled him. He jerks again, his brows coming together in confusion. "What?"

Planting my hands on my hips, I tilt my head to look up at him. "You've got a perfectly good smile and you're hoarding it all to yourself."

The effect is instantaneous. He stiffens like I've poked him with a cattle prod. Between confusion and disagreement, he struggles to find his response.

Now that I've started, the words tumble out. I step closer—close enough to count the faint creases at the corners of his eyes that prove he does smile, just never where people can see. “You’re always doing this. Purposely keeping yourself from smiling.”

Okay, maybe lecturing my boss about his facial expressions isn't in my job description. At the same time, I like to think our relationship expands a little past job roles. I care for him like a friend would, and seeing him react like this is piquing my curiosity.

Unless he's afraid of making every woman in town flock over here to get a library card, then he has nothing to worry about.

The compliment slips out before I can stop it. “You look nice when you smile.”

The words hang between us, made more intimate by our sudden proximity. Close enough now to catch the faded spice of his cologne, to see the way his throat moves when he swallows. Closer than strictly professional, probably—but when have I ever cared about that?

“I...” He clears his throat, gaze darting around the cramped space like he can't decide where to land. His fingers twitch at his sides before he finally meets my eyes, hesitant. “I'm like that book, Tulip. When I smile, it's unsettling.”

A cold prickle runs down my spine. Unsettling? No, I don't like that at all. Maybe he's like me—wearing his insecurities just beneath the surface, where no one else can see.

If that's the case... Well, I might still be wrestling with my demons, but that doesn't mean I can't help him face his.

“Dallas.” My voice is firm, but when he doesn't look at me, I soften it to barely more

than a whisper. “Look at me.”

Those storm-gray eyes flicker up, uncertain, and something in my chest tightens. I offer him the gentlest smile I can muster, the kind I hope reassures him.

“Smile for me.”

A simple request. An easy one.

And yet, he hesitates like I’ve asked him to walk over hot coals. His jaw tenses, his throat bobs—but then, finally, he gives in. His lips curve, just slightly. Just enough.

It’s a quiet, reluctant thing, that smile. At the same time, it’s enough.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach, wings beating in frantic rhythm with my racing heart. My breath catches, my thoughts scattering like leaves in the wind. What was I saying? What was I trying to do?

All I know is that Dallas, smiling, is a revelation.

The way it softens the sharp lines of his face, the way it makes his eyes crinkle at the edges... he’s handsome. More than I originally thought. He’s the kind of man who makes a woman like me wonder how she ever got close enough to touch him in the first place.

Swallowing hard, I force myself to focus. His lips are still tilted in that faint, hesitant curve, and I can’t look away.

“Do I look unsettled to you?” My voice comes out lower than I mean it to, rough at the edges, and a bit shaky.

His gaze darkens, lingering on my face before he exhales slowly. His hands curl into loose fists at his sides, like he's holding himself back.

"You look..." A pause. A heartbeat. "Flushed."

Heat floods my cheeks all over again. Honest to a fault, this man.

I should be embarrassed. Maybe I am. But more than that, I'm tired of ignoring the way this man affects me every single day we're together—that every glance, every accidental brush, doesn't send sparks skittering across my skin.

So I tilt my chin up, holding his gaze even as my pulse thunders in my ears.

"Whose fault do you think that is?"

Something foreign crosses his eyes. It's not confusion or surprise. Deep down, I can see the hunger burning behind his gaze. Perhaps it's always been there, and I've never noticed. Right now, it's impossible to ignore.

"I should apologize." The words come out rough. Should.

He's my boss. I should stop him from taking two steps toward me. I should tell him that he can't reach down and cradle my face like I'm precious, but I don't. I let him touch my cheeks, all while keeping my eyes on his.

I'm one breath away from begging him to kiss me. Thankfully, he doesn't need a big push.

He's so tall, I'd have to stand on the tips of my toes to be able to reach him. Before I'm the one to run out of patience, he reaches that point first as he's the one to swoop down, wasting no time to steal my breath.

I've never kissed someone before, so I'm no master here. Not that it matters. The moment our mouths meet, Dallas is in full control.

At first, all I feel is the heat of his breath against my cheeks before it tickles my lips. A wanting of what is to come, he groans right alongside me.

The heat of his tongue leaves me feeling scorched as he tips my head back, demanding entrance. It's like he's been waiting for this moment as long as I have, starving for the discovery of what I taste like.

Instead of getting shy, a moan is the only noise to come out of me at the stroke of his tongue against mine. While he's busy mapping out my mouth like he's an adventurer, his hands move away from my face and do some exploring for themselves.

"Fuck." His groan vibrates against my teeth before his hands find my hips. One tug, and my body is against his. Instantly, I can feel the way his body is responding. "Fuck."

I swear, the only time he curses is whenever it's just the two of us. More lately than ever. It's like he can't control himself when he's around me. As crazy a thought as that is, I want it to be true.

I want him to completely lose control of himself.

Just as he's sliding his palms behind me, squeezing my ass through the denim, I'm clutching at his shirt like it's a lifeline.

I want more. So much more.

He has to take care of this tingling between my legs. Even if I picked the worst freaking outfit ever, I just need him to tuck his hand between my thighs. Stroke the

fire a little bit until my legs are trembling. I don't care, whatever it takes.

Whimpering when his teeth catch my swollen bottom lip, I melt into a puddle against him.

"Dallas..." Moaning his name as he pulls back, through my half-lidded gaze, I see his pupils are blown.

He looks like a shark ready to attack. And he does. Starting with my cheek and then my ear, his mouth soon makes its way down toward my throat. Finally, I feel his tongue against my racing pulse.

"Every inch of you is delicious." He sounds angry as he sends the compliment in my direction. "I just want to lick you everywhere."

Is he angry that he can't taste all of me? Hey, we're already making out in the storage room. The lines have been crossed. It'll take me two seconds flat to ditch these overalls.

"I don't think the boss of this joint would mind if we kept this going," I breathe out, cracking a joke.

My words hit him, but not in the way I want them to. He doesn't laugh. Instead, he pulls back to look at me.

His hardened expression is gone. Instead, I'm taking in flushed cheeks, glossy lips, and a messy hair-do that I must've caused with my fingers in the heat of the moment.

His breath tickles my lips, a whisper of what was just there. So close to kissing me again, I'm tempted to stand on my toes and pull him down so I can feel his lips once more.

From the way heat is coiling at the pit of my stomach, I can already tell that there is so much more that I want him to do. Unfortunately, he decides it's best to put out the fire without his hands.

“We need to finish sorting.” Groaning the words out like our task is a chore, his brows come together as he puts some distance between us. “Then... I'll take you home.”

Oh. Oh. Shoot, did I mess this up?

No. I won't let it be that way. I finally got to kiss the man of my dreams, and I'm not going to let him have cold feet. No regrets. The lines have been crossed and there isn't any going back.

We'll be off the clock. I'll have the opportunity to finish what was started.

Even if I don't have a clue what I'm doing, I'm ready to go all out.

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Dallas

What have I done?

I kissed her. I kissed Tulip—really kissed her—and now my world is unraveling at the seams.

It wasn't just a brush of lips. It was fire and hunger, the kind of kiss that rewires a man's brain, that makes every other touch before it feel like a lie.

Now, kissing isn't enough. I want more. Her skin against my palms, her breath against my throat, the soft, broken sounds she'd make if I dropped to my knees and—

Shit. I can't.

This has to be wrong. It has to be. Because every second I spend near her, the last shreds of my control fray thinner, snapping one by one.

The air between us crackles with something dangerous, something inevitable. How long before I lose the fight? Before I pin her against these damn boxes and take what I've been starving for?

I don't know how we do it, how we continue working.

Somehow, I don't drag her back to me. Don't pin her against the nearest wall and finish what we started. Instead, we keep sorting—pretending—like my pulse isn't hammering loud enough for her to hear.

But every time I catch the flush on her cheeks, every time her words trip over themselves, I can feel my resolve unraveling. She's a live wire under my skin, and I'm losing the fight to stay grounded.

There's only so much a man can take before he snaps.

Every accidental brush of her fingers against mine—every time she leans in to take something from my grip—pushes me closer to the edge. My muscles lock, and my jaw clenches so tight it aches. How much longer can I last?

The pile of junk grows. My restraint doesn't.

Finally, all that's left is filling the dumpster with everything we no longer need. I just have to survive a little longer.

When Tulip pauses to rest between boxes hitting the pit of the dumpster, she drags the back of her hand across her forehead, leaving a smudge of dust on her skin. Then she tilts her face up—toward a sky now stripped of daylight, painted only in the deep, endless blues of night.

Her breath catches like it's a sight she's seen for the first time. I suppose it's the first time we've ever been together this late in the night.

It's a sight that brings a smile to her lips.

Not just any smile—the kind that steals the air from your lungs. The kind that makes the stars themselves seem to burn brighter, just to catch her attention. She watches them like they've spun the universe just for her, lips parted in quiet wonder.

I pretend I've stopped working to catch my breath. Not to memorize the way the moonlight traces her throat. Not to count every freckle the dark hasn't swallowed yet.

There's no doubt how deep I am. So deep, there's no going back. That kiss of ours has done nothing but destroy my ability to love again unless it's Tulip on the other end.

"Let's finish this up." Dusting her hands off, they move to her hips. "Just a few more boxes, and then tomorrow, maybe we can start hanging up some of those posters."

Nodding along to her suggestion, I know there's no point in wondering what we should do or shouldn't. I trust her to make the right calls. Especially since she'd already done so much for the place I love.

Nodding along with her, I guide her back inside, unable to help myself when it comes to avoiding touching her again. As soon as my palm finds the middle of her back, it feels right.

Moving the last of the boxes feels like a blur. It's not long before I'm the one locking up the library and leading us both to my truck.

I'd promised her a ride home, but now I'm wondering if it was a good idea or not.

Right now, the only thing I want to do is take Tulip up to the mountain and keep her there with me. Even if we did share a few kisses, I'm not sure she'd enjoy getting kidnapped.

So, I ignore the urge to whisk her away, instead following her directions to her apartment complex. Once we arrive, I'm not sure whether I should shut off the engine. I don't know if I should bid her goodnight.

Tulip's not making it any easier by hopping out. Instead, she's squirming against the seat, hesitating like she's unsure of what she wants to do.

While I know I've been out of the game for years, I don't think I remember something like this being so complicated.

Just as I turn to break the silence, she moves too—our bodies mirroring each other in the dim light.

She beats me to it.

“Would you like to come inside?”

Her voice wavers, stripped of its usual surety. The shadows swallow her expression, but I don't need to see her face to know what this costs her—the hitch in her breath says enough.

For a heartbeat, I just stare. The offer hangs between us, so far from the goodnight I expected that my mind blanks.

Then she backtracks, words tumbling out in a rush. “I get it if you don't want to. But with the library opening late tomorrow, there's still plenty of time—”

I don't let her finish.

“Yes.” It's rough, barely more than a whisper. “There's nothing I would like to do more.”

I hear another hitch in her breathing, a soft gasp that catches in the back of her throat.

I kill the engine before the truck even settles.

No hesitation. No chance for her to rethink this—to rethink us. I'm out of the cab in a heartbeat, boots hitting the pavement with a thud that echoes my racing pulse.

By the time I wrench her door open, my breath is ragged. Not from the sprint—from the anticipation.

“Let me,” I murmur, offering my hand. A flimsy excuse to feel her skin again, but I’ll take it. I’ll take anything.

Her fingers slide against mine, warm and sure. A sigh escapes her, soft as moonlight, and it undoes me. Because that sound? The way she leans into my touch?

She’s just as starved for this as I am.

As soon as she’s out of the truck, all it takes is ten steps and the twist of her key before I’m getting the opportunity to see more of Tulip than I ever have before.

Pastel paint colors her walls, and she’s happy to lead me deeper into her home so I can see what else there is to discover.

The coffee-themed curtains and decor surprise me when we reach the kitchen; I’ve never caught the scent of grounds on her clothes, nor have I ever seen her with a cup in her hands.

Yet here, surrounded by the scent of grounded beans and ceramic mugs with witty slogans hanging on hooks, it feels like discovering a secret side of her.

Does she wake up early and have herself a cup, or does she brew herself a pot after her shift whenever she’s feeling restless?

There’s still much I have left to learn.

She catches me studying her collection of glass canisters, each filled with different roasts. “Would you like a cup? I can make some.”

Her offer comes soft, hesitantly, as her thumb absently strokes my knuckles. Then she freezes. Her eyes drop to where our hands remain entwined, and I watch realization bloom across her face that we've yet to separate.

"I don't want coffee, Tulip. I want... I want whatever you want."

Her breath catches when I squeeze her hand—a silent plea to stay connected. For a moment, the kitchen disappears. There's just the pulse thrumming where our skin meets, the way her lashes flutter as she processes my words.

Finally, she nods. Meeting my gaze, she eliminates the space between us by taking all but one step forward.

"I want you to kiss me again."

Now that's something I can do.

My grip on her hand loosens—not to pull away, but to cradle her face instead. My thumbs trace the blush heating her cheeks as I drink in the way her eyes darken with want. There's no hesitation this time. No stolen moment to second-guess.

When my mouth finds hers, it's not just hunger fueling the kiss—it's certainty. Her fingers twist into my shirt, anchoring me to her as she sighs into the kiss, sweet and surrendering. It's a blissful few seconds I never want to end.

She pulls back before I can lose myself in her, her eyes wide and earnest. "I want you, Dallas."

The words hit me like a punch to the chest. How many nights had I spent imagining that exact confession? Too many to count—too many to admit without sounding pathetic.

But then her brow furrows. She worries her bottom lip between her teeth, and the sight sends a spike of concern through me. Whatever this is, it's serious enough to make her hesitate.

I give her space to breathe, cocking a brow in question as a nervous laugh escapes her.

“You totally stole my first kiss. Second and third too. I just... I know some guys wouldn't want to deal with someone who's...

well, completely inexperienced. With you, I don't want to mess this up.

I really like you, Dallas.” Her cheeks burn hotter beneath my thumbs, and suddenly her fingers are twisting in my shirt like she's afraid I'll bolt.

The world narrows to static.

She's never done this before. Never been touched. Never been wanted—not like this. And yet here she is, offering me everything with shaking hands and honesty.

The right thing would be to take this slowly. To be careful with her. But as I cradle her face between my hands, all reason evaporates.

No one else has touched her like this. No one else ever will. The thought coils tight in my chest—a possessive ache that burns hotter when her lashes flutter against her cheeks.

“There isn't a single thing I'd change about you,” I murmur against her skin.

My lips trace the curve of her cheekbone, tasting the salt of her skin while breathing in the faint sweetness of her shampoo.

When I reach her temple, she shivers. “If you want me even half as much as I want you, Tulip, we’ve got nothing to fear. ”

Her laugh comes breathless, barely there—until my mouth finds the delicate hollow spot beneath her ear.

Then it dissolves into a gasp that vibrates against my tongue.

I don’t miss my chance. I press closer, flattening my tongue against the frantic flutter of her pulse as her fingers scramble at my shoulders.

“Dallas—” My name fractures in her throat as she arches, offering more. Always more. Her surrender is sweeter than any victory I’ve ever known.

“Tell me where the nearest bed is, and I’ll do everything. You won’t even have to lift a finger.” With hunger fueling my words, I nip at her throat as that very same hunger grows into something bigger.

When she takes my hand this time, it’s to guide me deeper into her home. Unlike the start of my visit, I won’t be trying to take in the small details of her bedroom. Instead, I’ll be able to take her in.

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Tulip

It's almost ironic how many times I've deliberately dressed to catch this man's attention only to falter now, standing in the quiet sanctuary of my bedroom, suddenly achingly aware of every flaw.

The clasps of my overalls resist my trembling fingers, the metal cool and unyielding. One buckle gives way, the click too loud in the charged silence between us. The next buckle, I struggle to undo with trembling fingers.

I fumble, my pulse hammering, not from inexperience but from the terrifying possibility that he might see me—not the carefully curated version in pretty clothes, but the reality beneath. Stretch marks, softness, imperfections laid bare.

I'm not afraid of the act itself. I'm afraid of the way his eyes might darken with disappointment, how his hands might hesitate instead of crave.

My insecurities have always gripped me, and tonight, they tighten around my throat, whispering the same thoughts that weigh heavily in the back of my mind.

What if he changes his mind?

Then Dallas pulls his shirt over his head, and every anxious thought evaporates. Sizzles up like water on a hot pan.

The fabric slides up, revealing shoulders that belong on a laborer, not a man who spends his days shelving books. His chest is broad, dusted with just enough dark hair

to make my fingers itch to reach out and touch. The dim light catches the definition of his abdomen, and suddenly, my mouth is dry.

I gape at him, utterly still, like a fish tossed onto the riverbank.

His lips quirk. “You’re staring.”

Obviously. But all I manage is a strangled noise, halfway between a whimper and a laugh. His confidence is effortless, his body a quiet rebellion against every stereotype I’d pinned to him. The man who whispers sonnets in the library stacks also has this hidden under his T-shirts? It’s unfair.

“Hey.” A calloused thumb brushes my cheek, startling me. “You with me?”

I nod, but my breath hitches as his hand trails down to my half-undone overalls. His fingers replace mine, deftly working the last clasp.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmurs, “and I will.”

The problem is, I don’t want him to. With the way he takes his time to strip me of the denim-clad one-piece, it’s like he already knows I’ve got a mental battle going on.

“You’re just... really impressive, and I’m—”

My voice cracks as his expression shifts. Not the usual fleeting scowl, but something deeper—a frown carved into his features like a confession. It stills me.

“You’re gorgeous, Tulip.” His voice is rough, scraping against the quiet between us. “Every day I’ve spent with you, I’ve fought battles not to say it out loud. Not to reach for you. Do you have any idea what that does to a man?”

His hand closes around mine, pressing my palm flat against his chest. His skin is warm, the muscle taut beneath my fingers, and beneath that—

A heartbeat. Wild and relentless, matching the frantic rhythm of my own.

He's just as wrecked as I am.

The realization steals my breath.

He's not done.

As if I could possibly doubt the effect I have on him, he guides my hand lower with deliberate slowness, his grip firm but not demanding—an invitation, not a command.

My breath stutters as my fingers skim the cold metal of his belt buckle, then lower still, until the heat of him sears through the rough fabric of his jeans.

Even through the denim, he's hard—so hard. Thick and straining, the outline of him unmistakable beneath my trembling touch. Only a few desperate layers separate my palm from his cock, and the thought sends a sharp, liquid ache between my own thighs.

“Can you feel what you're doing to me? This is the result of just being near you.”

His voice is gravelly, low enough that I feel it in my bones before it even registers in my ears. Goosebumps erupt across my skin, a shiver chasing down my spine as his hips flex instinctively into my touch, betraying just how badly he wants this—wants me.

One little squeeze is all it takes to make him hiss under his breath.

“Does it hurt?” Chewing on my bottom lip, I ignore my curiosity to continue touching.

Shaking his head, he cracks a smile. “I’ve become a master at ignoring it.”

I shouldn’t laugh, but I do. The fleeting sound catches in the back of my throat as he continues.

His hands return to the straps of my overalls, his fingers brushing my sides as he pushes the denim down my hips. The fabric pools at my feet, and I step out of it, suddenly hyper-aware of the cool air against my skin. My shirt follows, fluttering to the floor like a surrender flag.

Now it’s just me—stripped down to cotton and vulnerability.

Dallas goes utterly still. His breath catches, ragged, as his gaze drags over me. For a heartbeat, I brace for hesitation, for the flicker of doubt I’ve imagined a thousand times.

Instead, he releases a rough curse through an exhale before giving me a single nod.. “Perfect. I knew it.”

Then his mouth crashes into mine, hot and insistent, swallowing my gasp as he walks me backward.

My knees hit the edge of the bed, and I sink into the mattress, his body following—a delicious weight pressing me into the sheets.

His jeans are gone somewhere in the tangle, kicked off in a hurry, and now there’s nothing between us but the pesky thinness of our undergarments.

My hands roam, learning the planes of him—the dip of his spine, the flex of his thighs—until my fingers reach the band of his briefs. Before I can pull them down to see what he’s hiding beneath, he’s already moving on.

His lips and teeth nip at my throat, following the dip in my collarbones. Hardly smooth, he buries a hand behind me to unclasp my bra. Once it’s gone, I expect him to take in my breasts with the same adoration he’d given the rest of my body.

The hunger behind his gaze is intense enough to swallow up anything he’d given me in the past.

His gaze drops, heavy and deliberate, and suddenly the air between us is thick enough to choke on. I should feel exposed, trembling under that look—but the hunger in his eyes pins me in place, burning away every doubt.

“Tulip.” His voice is wrecked already, rough as his hands skim up my ribs, thumbs brushing the undersides of my breasts like he’s memorizing the shape. “You’re even prettier than I imagined.”

Then his mouth is on me, hot and insistent, and I gasp. He doesn’t tease—not at first. He devours. His tongue swirls around one nipple, then the other, swapping sides with a groan that vibrates against my skin. When his teeth graze the peak, sharp and sweet, my back arches off the bed.

“Dallas—!”

His palm presses my hip into the mattress, holding me down as he licks a slow, tortuous path down my stomach. Every inch of skin he passes trembles in his wake. The scruff of his jaw rasps against me, marking what his mouth hasn’t yet claimed.

He noses the lace edge of my panties, breathing me in. “I’ve been dying to know how

you taste.”

The confession spills against my skin, searing. I’m panting now, fingers tangled in his hair—not guiding, just anchoring, because the world tilts when his tongue dips lower, just once, just to tease.

“Lift your hips for me,” he orders as he sinks his fingers into my underwear. When I do, he wastes no time pulling the fabric down my thighs.

Cool air hits my flushed skin in a rush and another shiver wracks through me.

“Look at you,” he murmurs, voice thick. “So fucking pretty.”

And then—he looks. Really looks. Like I’m something sacred. He cradles my knees with his palms before he pushes them apart, giving himself a new sight for his hungry eyes to drink in.

My skin flushes everywhere, but there most of all, where I’m exposed and throbbing.

“You’re dripping. ” His breath hitches as his calloused thumb swipes through my folds, and I jerk at the contact, oversensitive. “To think all of this is for me…”

Listening to him mumble like he’s talking to himself, I shiver as he moves back, making enough room so his shoulders can brush my thighs.

Before I can ask him what he’s doing, I feel the first hot lick of his tongue against my clit—slow, deliberate, like he’s savoring the first taste of something forbidden.

My back arches off the bed, a gasp tearing from my throat as his hands clamp down on my thighs, holding me open.

Startled by the foreign sensation, I whimper his name. Despite my efforts being futile, my hips try to jerk, but get nowhere.

Licking a long, torturous stripe up my slit, he circles my clit with the tip of his tongue, using just enough pressure to make my fingers twist in the sheets, and he groans against me—the vibration sending a shockwave of pleasure straight to my core.

“Please,” I choke out, already trembling. Not used to how sensitive I can be when it’s someone else getting me off, it’s no wonder I’m so responsive.

He pulls back just enough to smirk up at me, his lips glistening. “Please, what?”

I can’t think, can’t breathe, not when he’s watching me like that—eyes dark while he’s memorizing every twitch of my body. His tongue flicks over me again, teasing, maddening, and I sob.

“I need—” The words catch in my throat as I struggle to speak. I don’t even know what it is that I want, but I know I need something now.

Much to my dismay, he chuckles as he teases me with the brush of his breath. Amused by my desperation, he’s happy to make it worse.

His fingers prod at my entrance, and he’s the one to groan as he works one in at a time. By his second finger, I’m feeling the stretch.

“Relax for me.” Giving me the order through a low-throated groan, his eyes flick up to mine. “I don’t want to hurt you down the line.”

He’s got a point. Two fingers in, and after feeling his erection earlier, I’m not sure how he intends on putting that thing in me without splitting me in half.

I try to imagine it, to brace myself for the future, but with the curl of his fingers, I'm distracted.

“ Relax, ” he repeats, this time more of a demand.

He sucks my clit between his lips, and my vision whites out. I'm close, so close, but before I can tip over the edge, he pulls away completely, leaving me empty, throbbing.

This man is terrible. By the looks of it, he's nowhere close to being done with me, even if he is taking his sweet time.

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Dallas

Her taste lingers on my tongue—sweet, addictive—and the only thing harder than pulling away is stopping myself from diving back in.

I could worship her for hours, drown in the way her thighs tremble, the broken little sounds she makes when she's near her peak.

But I want her desperate for me, not exhausted.

So I force myself up, my cock straining against my briefs in a way that leaves little to the imagination.

Even when Tulip looks through half-lidded eyes, I know she can see what I can. The damp patch from how wrecked I've become.

Hell, ever since our first kiss, I knew I was in a rough state. This is far rougher than anything in the past. An ache that can't be ignored.

The second I shove them down, I'm already fisting myself, precome slick against my fingers. Fuck. Just the sight of her— spread out on the sheets, skin flushed, chest heaving—has me so far gone.

"I want in," I groan, the words ragged as I drag myself closer, my body thrumming with need. The sheets cling to my knees as I crawl between her thighs, spreading her wider with a grip that's half restraint, half worship.

She's already dripping—her arousal glistening, the scent of her flooding my senses. I tease the swollen head of my cock against her clit, slow and deliberate, just to watch her back arch off the mattress. A gasp tears from her lips, her hips jerking toward me, begging without words.

Fuck. She's so wet I could sink into her in one thrust, no resistance, just heat and velvet tightness swallowing me whole. The thought alone has my jaw locking, my fingers digging into her skin hard enough to bruise.

“Tell me,” I demand, dragging my cock through her slick heat, teasing us both. “Tell me you want it just as badly.”

Her chin jerks in a swift, desperate nod, but, fuck, I need to hear it. I need her voice breaking on it.

I lean down, catching her nipple between my teeth, biting just hard enough to make her cry out. Her back arches, her thighs clamping around my hips like she's afraid I'll pull away. As if I could.

“Dallas, please —”

That's all it takes.

I push inside, slow, so fucking slow, letting her body stretch around me. Her breath hitches, her nails scoring down my back, and I groan against her skin. Tight. So tight. She's a vice, a sweet, suffocating grip that threatens to unravel me before I've even started.

I pull back, just enough to tease, then sink deeper. Her hips jerk, her walls fluttering around me, and I hiss through my teeth. “You're gonna kill me at this rate. If you don't suffocate my cock, you're going to give me a heart attack.”

Slowly, she relaxes. Letting me in, my shallow thrusts grow deeper until the sweet sounds of her moans fill my ears.

I shift, wedging my hand between us, my thumb finding her clit in rough, circling strokes. Her gasp is sharp, her body bowing off the bed, and I take advantage—driving into her faster, deeper, until every thrust punches a broken sound from her lips.

Her legs lock around me, her heels digging into my ass like she's trying to pull me closer, take me deeper. I bite her nipple again, just to feel her clench around me, and her moan is my undoing.

“Look at me,” I grind out, my voice raw.

Her eyes fly open, hazy but holding mine, and I know I'm not surviving this. Not the way she's taking me so well, like her pussy was made for my cock.

I thumb her clit harder, my thrusts turning erratic. “Come for me, Tulip.”

Needing the release as much as I do, I watch as her eyes pinch shut and her brows come together.

Tulip's head tips back into the pillows, her lips parted around a sound I've only ever dreamed of pulling from her.

Every muscle in her body tenses—her thighs trembling around my hips, her fingers clutching at anything she can get her hands on like she's afraid she'll float away if she doesn't hold on.

It's her face that does the final blow, wrecking me completely..

Eyes squeezed shut, then fluttering open, dazed and dark, like she's forgotten where she is. Like the only thing left in her world is this—me inside her, the slow drag of my hips as each pulse of my release coats her walls.

My name fractures in her throat, sounding sore from all the cries that left her lips earlier.

She clings to me, boneless and breathless, and I swear I've never seen anything more beautiful.

"I love you." The words slip out like they've been waiting years to be free. No hesitation, no second-guessing—just pure, stupid certainty. That's the terrifying beauty of it; my heart doesn't need permission anymore. I know.

One day, she'll be my wife.

Her eyebrows nearly disappear into her hairline. "Woah."

My mouth quirks. "Woah?"

We shift apart, the loss of contact drawing twin shivers—but before I can retreat, she's already closing the distance. And there it is, that spark in her eyes, the one that first made me fall for her. The one that says she's happy to push my buttons.

"A love confession and a marriage proposal all in one go?" She tsks , dragging a fingertip down my chest. "A woman needs a warning before you drop the emotional equivalent of a grenade."

A laugh punches out of me. "Wait—did I say that last bit out loud?"

Heat floods my cheeks. Months of carefully banked restraint, gone in sixty seconds

flat. Crazy to think one night can change everything in one go.

“You did.” She swings a leg over my hips, settling into my lap with deliberate grace. The second her skin brushes mine, my body betrays me—a single, lazy roll of her hips, and I’m already hardening beneath her all over again. “If it’s not obvious... Same. Like, a thousand times, same.”

Her words hit me square in the chest, and just like that, the last frayed thread of my restraint snaps.

I crush my mouth to hers before she can tease me further, swallowing her laugh, her sigh, the way she murmurs my name like it’s both a scolding and a surrender. Her fingers tangle in my hair, holding me close, and for the first time in my life, I don’t overthink it.

No more quiet glances in the library stacks. No more biting back words that burned my tongue.

Just this. Her skin under my hands, her breath mingling with mine, the future stretching out before us—wide open and glittering with promise.

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The library is quiet today—just the hum of the AC and the occasional shuffle of pages turning. I lean against the front desk, watching as an older man squints at the library card application in front of him.

“Just need your address there, sir,” I say, pointing to the blank line.

He nods, scratching it in with slow, deliberate strokes. I don’t rush him. These little moments—helping someone get their first library card, recommending a book, seeing a kid light up when they find the next installment in their favorite series—this is why I love this job.

The door chimes, and I glance up as Jamie walks in, shrugging off his jacket. Their hair is windswept, cheeks pink from the cold. Snow must be falling hard with the way it’s clinging to his hair.

“Hey, boss.” Dropping his bag behind the desk, he slides in next to me to clock in. “Careful getting home. The mountain is getting rough.”

While he’s happy to take over my task, I’m not wasting time getting out of here.

Ever since Tulip took over managing the employment, I no longer have to give all of my time to this place. It’s been six months now, and even after all that time, I wish I had done it sooner.

Before her, I didn’t have a reason to worry about what to do with myself to pass the time. Now, I’ve got someone waiting for me.

I grab my coat from the back room, waving at Jamie as I head out. “Call me if you need anything. If it dies down and gets dangerous out there, close early.”

“Go on,” he says, shooing me toward the door as I repeat the same thing every time the weather gets rough. “Your wife’s waiting.”

The cold air hits me as I step outside, but it doesn’t bother me much. Not when I know exactly where I’m headed.

Home. To her. If I have to guess, she’s probably freezing up in our cabin. I need to get up there so I can warm her up.

The tires crunch over fresh snow as I turn onto the mountain road, the library shrinking in my rearview mirror.

Flakes drift lazily in the glow of my headlights, swirling like feathers caught in a breeze.

It’s coming down steadily but not heavily—not yet, anyway.

The wipers keep time, a slow metronome brushing away the gathering white.

I roll the window down just an inch, letting in the sharp, clean scent of winter. The cold nips at my cheek, but the heater hums against my legs, keeping the chill at bay. The road is familiar—every curve, every dip—but the snow softens the edges, turning the world into something quiet and new.

The higher I climb, the thicker the snow clings to the pines, weighing down their branches.

The road curves one final time, and our cabin comes into view—warm light spilling from the windows, smoke curling from the chimney.

I ease to a stop, killing the engine. For a second, I just sit there, listening to the snow fall before I step out into the cold, my boots sinking into the fresh powder.

Once I'm inside and dusting the snow from my shoulders, I hear the soft sound of music flowing from somewhere inside our home. Something soft and old, a record spinning lazy notes that curl through the air like the steam from Tulip's mug on the coffee table.

And there she is.

Draped across my recliner like she owns it, legs tucked under her, a book propped open in one hand. The firelight licks gold over her skin, catching the curve of her shoulder where her sweater's slipped down, the sharp line of her jaw, the dark fan of her lashes as she glances up at me.

I cross the room in three strides, bending to press my cold lips to her forehead. She hisses, swatting at me, but she's laughing, and I catch her wrist, kissing her palm just to feel her shiver.

"You're freezing," she grumbles, but there's no heat in it.

"Warm me up, then."

I don't give her a chance to protest. The book hits the floor as I scoop her into my arms, her indignant yelp melting into a sigh when I settle into the recliner and cradle her against my chest. She fits here, always has—her back to my heartbeat, my chin tucked over her head.

Her fingers lace through mine, pulling my arm tighter around her waist.

"You're gonna make me lose my page," she mutters, but she's already nestling in, her cold toes finding the space between my calves.

The fire pops. The snow falls. The record spins its last few notes into silence.

“We can find it—later. Right now, let’s just enjoy this, hm?”

Her quiet laugh vibrates against my chest, warm and familiar as the hearthlight dancing across our skin. The blanket settles around us like a second embrace. Outside, the winter world keeps turning.

But here, in this chair, with her weight solid against mine—everything feels right.

Not even the weather is going to ruin this for me.