

TIED UP IN TINSEL

With the Nanny



M. HARTLEY

Tied Up In Tinsel (with the nanny)

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**TIED UP
IN TINSEL**

With the Nanny

M. HARTLEY



*To the readers who have always
wondered how strong tinsel actually
is...*



Content Warning



This book contains explicit scenes and language intended for readers 18+. There is a discussion of parental death (not on the page), alcohol consumption, and tinsel used as a teammate (ikykyk).

Annie



“Keep screwing me over, please, Harley.”

Get married, they said.

It’ll be fun, they said.

Liars. Every single one of them.

I listened to the advice. I married the man I’d known for over a decade—hell, we’d even had a child together—and we still ended up divorced. Turns out, he was about as reliable as a cheap umbrella in a snowstorm, or next-day shipping the week before Christmas, or that one grocery cart with the squeaky wheel you can’t exchange because there’s no other carts left.

Five years of marriage, and every time I needed him, he was either hanging out with friends, glued to his video games, or “working late.” Anything to avoid being here for Ruby or for me.

It took me an embarrassing amount of time to finally say enough is enough. I packed my things, took Ruby, and left. Decided I’d make it on my own without his help—which, honestly, wasn’t much help to begin with.

Fast-forward three years, and here I was, still dealing with his inconsistent, shiny-new-marriage-prioritizing ass.

“An opportunity like this only comes up once in a blue moon, Annie. You’ve got to understand.”

“No, I don’t,” I said, voice scratchy as tinsel. “And I won’t even try to understand how you could possibly choose your new trophy

wife over your daughter.”

A groan came through the phone, followed by a long, dramatic pause. I could practically see his eyes roll back in his head. I’d been on the receiving end of that look more times than I could count.

“Her name is Emmie,” he said. “Please refer to her as that.”

“Only because you said please,” I muttered sarcastically, already flipping through the town directory.

It was the holiday season in Snowberry Peak, our little slice of winter wonderland. Trying to find a reliable babysitter during the busiest time of year was like trying to snag a parking spot on Main Street during the Christmas tree lighting. Between events, contests, and parades, everyone was booked solid. But I needed someone. Badly. I was desperate.

“Ruby won’t miss me,” Harley continued. “I’ll make it up to her when I get back. I’ll tell her I met Santa in Hawaii and he delivered gifts to her there.”

In the background, I heard luggage zippers and the thud of suitcase wheels hitting the floor, clearly packing mid phone call for his tropical getaway. Must be nice.

Ruby, for her part, had long stopped caring whether her dad showed up for the holidays—or any day, for that matter. At seven, she’d figured out it was just the two of us. She was whip-smart, hilarious, and had a way of looking at you with her big brown eyes that made you question your life choices... right before she said something that burned hotter than a shot of peppermint schnapps. A sweet-and-sour patch kid in human form.

Unfortunately, that combination also made her hard to babysit. She had a reputation. The last sitter I hired practically sprinted out of town, and I’m not entirely convinced she didn’t leave the entire state.

This time, I didn’t just need a sitter for a couple of afternoons. My catering schedule for the next few weeks was all over the place. I needed someone who could be here around the clock until the season wrapped up.

“You can never just be here for your family,” I told him, slamming the directory shut with one hand while pinning the phone between my ear and shoulder. “There’s always something shinier, something more exciting than your daughter.”

“That’s not true,” Harley argued. “This isn’t something I can pass up. I’m sorry.”

“You know what? It’s not okay.”

I hung up before he could lob another one of his wobbly, meaningless apologies.

This was supposed to be *my* season. My big break. My catering business had landed the single most important gig in town: the mayor’s annual Christmas gala at the ski lodge. Every year it drew celebrities, politicians, and more than half the population of Snowberry Peak. And this year, I was the one ensuring their bellies stayed full and their canapés remained perfect.

When I left Harley, I’d taken that leap of faith and started my business. I hustled, sacrificed, and it had paid off. I had two employees, a growing reputation, and, most importantly, the freedom to be the kind of mother Ruby deserved.

The one time I actually needed Harley to step up?

I smacked the heel of my hand against the countertop. “Stupid. Men. I *hate* men.”

With nowhere else to turn, I pulled out my laptop and opened the Snowberry Peak posting board. Around here, it was the Swiss Army knife of community life—part classifieds, part gossip hub, part matchmaking service for anyone who needed anything from a handyman to a magician for a birthday party. And in my case? A miracle in the form of a nanny.

The beauty of our little mountain town was that recommendations came with built-in references. If someone vouched for you here, you were solid. No background checks, no awkward interviews, just trust, baked in like cinnamon in a holiday pie.

I cracked my knuckles, fingers flying across the keys while my frustration bubbled hot in my chest. “Hi there,” I typed, each strike of the keys a little sharper than it needed to be. “I hope the holiday season is treating you all well! I’m in a bit of a pinch and desperately need a nanny. Something fell through, and with my busy schedule this year, my daughter Ruby will need someone to be with.”

If I didn’t have a reputation to uphold as owner of one of the busiest catering businesses in town and sister to the sheriff, I’d have written the post in all caps, complete with a colorful rant directed squarely at my ex-husband. However, this was Snowberry Peak, and I had to keep things sugar-and-spice polite... at least in public.

Any other time of year, I could've leaned on my brother, Ollie. But December in this town was its own kind of chaos, and the sheriff's schedule was packed tighter than Santa's sleigh.

Ollie and I had been all each other had for years now. Our parents died in a car accident—on a snowy night, just days before Christmas. Up until that point, I'd been the kind of person who counted down to the holiday, who strung lights in November, who kept a closet just for gift wrap. Now? December carried a shadow. The twinkle lights and carols came wrapped in grief.

I shook off the heaviness and kept typing.

Live-in nanny. Experience with kids preferred. Must be fun, energetic, and willing to stay through New Year's.

Satisfied, I dropped in the application link, hit post, and prayed someone in town—or at least within driving distance—was willing to rescue me from my impending holiday disaster.

That was a problem for tomorrow. Tonight, I needed a drink.

Thankfully, I'd already arranged for Ruby to spend the night at Ollie's weeks ago, knowing he had the night off. She'd be curled up on his couch, covered in a fleece blanket, working her way through a stack of princess movies while consuming her body weight in candy. If there was one man in Ruby's life who never let her down, it was Ollie. Tender-hearted, endlessly optimistic, and entirely too kind for his own good.

I headed to my room and dug out my favorite red dress, the one that hit just above the knee and hugged in all the right places without making me feel like I couldn't breathe. A quick sweep of blush over my cheeks, a gloss of cherry red across my lips, and my red hair smoothed into a sleek ponytail. Low heels for comfort, a little shimmer for confidence.

Snowberry Peak was already glittering outside, the snow catching the glow of Main Street's twinkle lights as I stepped out the door. For the first time all day, the thought of a cold cocktail in a warm bar made me feel like maybe the holidays could surprise me yet.

Annie



The bar was humming with holiday cheer—string lights draped across the rafters, the faint scent of cinnamon and pine drifting from the mulled wine steaming on the counter. The hum of conversation mixed with the soft croon of a Bing Crosby song playing over the speakers, and I let the warmth from the fireplace soak into my bones as I sipped my cranberry mule.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't check my phone, but promises to myself usually had a short shelf life. I pulled it from my bag and opened the posting board, half-hopeful, half-dreading what I'd see.

Three responses.

The first one? From Marla. Sweet woman, beloved in Snowberry Peak... and about seventy-four years old with a bad knee. She'd be fantastic for reading bedtime stories, but probably not so great for chasing Ruby through the snow or surviving one of her "let's make a slime volcano" afternoons.

The second was a guy who, based on his profile picture, looked like he might still need a nanny himself.

And the third—oh, the third—was just a single line: "*How hard could babysitting be*" with no punctuation. No experience listed. Probably a serial killer.

I groaned, shoving my phone back into my purse. "That's it," I muttered to myself. "The internet has failed me. This was pointless."

I refused to let myself think about what the alternative might be if I wasn't able to find a nanny.

The door opened, and a swirl of cold air curled around my ankles. I looked up... and immediately forgot about my nanny crisis.

Tall. Broad shoulders. Muscles that pulled at the sleeves of his flannel in a way that should be illegal in at least twenty-two states. Dark hair dusted with snow, a jawline that looked like it had been carved by someone with an unhealthy obsession with perfection. And those eyes—sharp, curious, locking onto mine like he'd just spotted the one person he was hoping to find.

My cheeks warmed, but not from chestnuts roasting over an open fire.

He took a few steps toward the bar, giving me the once-over with a smile that was equal parts charm and trouble. "You look like you're plotting something," he said, voice low and warm.

I arched a brow. "And you look like you've just stepped out of a lumberjack calendar."

His grin widened. "Which month am I?"

"December," I said without hesitation. "Because you look like you'd chop down a Christmas tree for someone... but only after making them think you forgot just to add a little extra spice and drama."

He chuckled, leaning on the bar beside me. "That's oddly specific. Should I be worried?"

"Probably," I replied, sipping my drink.

He flagged down the bartender, ordered something dark in a lowball glass, then turned back to me. "So, do you come here often, or am I about to sound like the guy in every bad Hallmark movie?"

"I'm not sure yet," I said. "Do you own a struggling bakery or a small-town inn?"

"No, but I can fake it for the right woman."

I laughed, the tension I'd been carrying all day loosening just a bit. "Wow. That was smooth."

"I try. Name's—"

"Don't tell me," I interrupted, holding up a hand. "Let me guess. Something strong. Classic. Definitely not 'Todd.'"

He tilted his head, eyes dancing. "You're good."

"I'm rarely wrong."

"Hmm. Dangerous combination...smart and confident."

We both sipped our drinks, that easy, playful energy sparking between us. I wasn't thinking about work, or my ex, or my looming childcare disaster. I was thinking about how this stranger had walked in from the snow and made the whole room feel warmer.

And I had a feeling he knew exactly what he was doing.

"You're not from here," I said, studying him over the rim of my glass.

God, he was so attractive it was unfair.

"Noticed that, did you?"

"I've lived in Snowberry Peak my whole life," I replied. "I know everyone here. Even the mailman's second cousin."

He smirked. "Maybe I'm just good at hiding."

"Or maybe you're trouble."

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Would that be a dealbreaker?"

I didn't answer right away. I just smiled and took another sip.

He leaned back, one arm draped along the back of the chair, his body turned toward me like he had all the time in the world.

I waved at the bartender to replace my cranberry mule with something stronger. While I was at it, I also ordered a couple of tequila shots to down with a complete stranger.

My new male friend eyed them up and I smirked, pushing the ones I'd ordered for him in his direction.

Just as I thought from his confidence alone, he smiled back and took them.

"Cheers," he said, holding his first shot glass up to me.

I repeated the motion back and sent him a wink.

I was the kind of woman who often went after what she wanted. I wasn't shy, wasn't bashful and always was down to bring a man to their knees.

With synchronized movements, we both tilted the first one back.

"You always this forward with strangers?" he asked, his voice low and just a little rough.

"Only the ones who look like they could split firewood with their bare hands," I murmured. And probably split me in half, too.

That made him laugh, which was quiet but genuine.

I decided to lean in, propping my chin on my elbow and immediately reached for the second shot glass.

"Again?" He asked, brows raised high.

"Are you afraid you can't keep up?"

The man scoffed, lifted and drank the next shot without even waiting for me to join in.

Then, he leaned in too, and that's when I felt the heat of his leg brush against mine.

Oh, he was playing the same game I was. I could feel the tension, the desire practically radiating off my skin. Or maybe it was the heat from the liquor now swimming through my veins.

The dim lights of the bar caught the sharp line of his jaw as he swirled the amber liquid in his glass.

"So," I said, tilting my head. "What brings you to Snowberry Peak? And don't say the skiing, everyone says that, and I'll know you're lying."

I reached out, running a finger along his arm.

He took a slow sip, watching me over the rim of his glass. "Change of pace." His voice hit a lower, more sultry tone.

I raised a brow. "That's vague."

"Maybe I like vague."

"Or maybe you're hiding something," I countered, pulling my hand back and pressing my knee closer to his under the bar top. "Let me guess... divorce?"

A smile tugged at his mouth. "Nope."

I sat back and tapped a finger to my chin. "Okay, then. Ex-convict on the run?"

He chuckled low in his throat. "Would that make me more interesting?"

"Depends. Did you do it?" My eyes narrowed in mock suspicion.

He leaned forward, closing the distance between us just a little. "What if I told you I was innocent?"

"What if I didn't believe you?" I murmured, my hand sliding under the bar until it landed on his upper thigh.

His gaze dropped briefly to the contact, and I felt the faintest shift as he moved closer to me.

I was bold, brazen. I prided myself on my ability to flirt, though I never got to let this version of me out to play.

"I'm starting to think *you* might be the trouble," he said, voice warm and teasing.

"I've been told that before." I let my fingers trail back toward my drink, slow enough for him to notice the absence.

His smirk deepened. "So, no questions about whether I'm married? Or secretly engaged? I said no to being divorced. You're skipping the important stuff."

I shrugged, sipping my mule. "If you were, you wouldn't be here sitting in a bar, drinking with a woman whose name you don't even know. At least I'd hope you wouldn't be."

"Maybe that's exactly why I'm here," he said, his voice dropping an octave, that hint of heat making the air between us feel heavier.

I laughed softly, leaning my elbow on the surface so we were almost level. "Careful. You keep talking like that, and I'll start thinking you came here for me."

He held my gaze, a small, knowing smile tugging at his lips. "And if I did?"

My pulse kicked up, but I didn't break eye contact. "Then I guess you're not as vague as you think you are."

The rest of the bar faded into a blur of holiday chatter and clinking glasses. Just his eyes on mine, and the unspoken awareness that we were playing a game neither of us wanted to end.

His eyes then fell to my lips and on instinct, I ran my tongue against the bottom one before pulling it between my teeth.

The desire was there, humming between us, but neither of us moved to cross the line. Maybe it was because we didn't know each other's names. Perhaps it was because the not-knowing was the fun part.

Or maybe it was because, deep down, I knew that if I kissed him, I wouldn't want to stop, and I wasn't one to indulge in the first meeting.

It was more fun to tease and play, make them want more, and they always did.

As much fun as I was having, I'd only come here for a quick drink—not two drinks and a couple of shots with a total stranger, no matter how ridiculously good-looking he was.

Still... if fate happened to toss him back in my path, there was no telling if I'd pass up the chance to climb him like a fir tree in Rockefeller Center.

I drained the last of my glass, the tart sweetness of cranberry lingering on my tongue, and set it down on the polished bar. Sliding my phone and gloves into my bag, I started to gather my things.

“Leaving so soon?” His voice carried that warm, teasing drawl that made me want to stay. “We didn’t even get to do the cliché small-town bar dancing... or kiss outside under the snowfall.”

I couldn’t hide my smile as I ran a hand down the length of my ponytail. “I don’t kiss on a first date.”

His brows lifted, his mouth curving into a slow grin. “This is a date?” He sipped from his still mostly full glass, peering at me over the rim like he was testing me.

“It can be,” I said, meeting his gaze. “So next time I see you around town, maybe I’ll give you that kiss in the snow or a spin to some upbeat country twang.”

“Then this is most definitely a date,” he said without hesitation.

He stood, his height stealing a bit of my breath, and offered me his hand. I scoffed softly, but slid mine into his, letting him help me down from the stool. My heels hit the worn wood floor, and I became fully aware of how much space he took up—broad shoulders, solid frame, muscles that made him seem two, maybe three times my size. A real-life teddy bear... if teddy bears had forearms like carved oak.

He didn’t let go. Instead, he lifted my hand slowly, deliberately, and pressed his lips to my skin. The heat of the gesture sent a rush to my cheeks, and I knew he caught it from the way his eyes flickered with something smug and satisfied.

Those eyes—warm whiskey brown, steady and unreadable—held mine for a beat longer than was necessary.

“Hopefully I’ll see you around,” I said softly.

“Likewise,” he murmured, still holding my hand. “I’ll be eagerly waiting for date two.”

Annie
❧

From: AnniesArtisanCatering@gmail.com

To: Brooks.Bennett97@gmail.com

Hi Brooks,

My name is Annie, and I just saw your application for the live-in nanny position for my daughter, Ruby. Your resume was impressive, and I'd love for us to meet before I introduce you to her, just to make sure you're the right fit. Let me know a time and date that works best for you.

You're a lifesaver!

Annie Cringle



From: Brooks.Bennett97@gmail.com

To: AnniesArtisanCatering@gmail.com

Hey Annie,

Awesome! I'm available whenever. I have a lot of free time on my hands since my last job wrapped

up.

Feel free to text me the location, and I'll be there. Here's my number.

See you soon,
Brooks B



From: AnniesArtisanCatering@gmail.com

To: Brooks.Bennett97@gmail.com

Thank you for responding so quickly! How about you come by tomorrow? We can meet and then we can meet with Ruby.

Thanks!
Annie



From: Brooks.Bennett97@gmail.com

To: AnniesArtisanCatering@gmail.com

I'll see you then!

Brooks



The next morning started the way most of my mornings did—half-asleep, clutching a mug of coffee like it was my lifeline, and hoping I

didn't have to referee any more dramatic battles between Ruby and her cereal box.

It was still snowing outside. Thick flakes drifted down past the kitchen window, swirling in that lazy, hypnotic way that made you think of holiday movies and perfectly frosted sugar cookies.

The kitchen smelled like peppermint coffee and toast, and the only sound was the quiet hum of the fridge, until I opened my laptop and saw the little notification that would change the entire holiday.

There was a new notification about a response to my post on the Snowberry Peak discussion group.

I clicked on it, not expecting much. My last applicant for the nanny posting had been another sweet eighty-four-year-old woman, this one named Florence. While lovely, she had admitted she hadn't been around children in "about five decades" and couldn't guarantee she wouldn't "nap mid-shift."

Snowberry Peak did have a rather large elderly population.

But this one...

The name at the top read: Brooks Bennett.

Short. Simple. Clean. I liked it already.

I scanned the resume. It wasn't overly formal—no stiff corporate jargon—but it was packed with relevant experience. Birthday party host. Summer art camp leader.

Under their special skills it had *balloon animal artist* listed. Even a line about being *highly skilled in glitter clean-up*, which I personally believed should qualify anyone for sainthood.

For the first time since posting the job yesterday, I actually exhaled.

This could work.

They could actually *be good*.

I got sophisticated but fun young woman. The resume felt warm and playful, or maybe I just wanted another woman in the house for the holidays.

I clicked over to my email and sent a quick response, my fingers flying over the keys. A friendly "Thanks for applying! I'd love to chat!" kind of note. Professional but warm. Not desperate. Even though, if we were being honest, I *was* desperate.

Typically, I'd vet someone more if they were going to be meeting and spending time with my daughter, but I was in a pinch. Plus, the

few emails I had exchanged with them were pleasant. I knew I had a bunch of questions but, I had to get this ball rolling.

Leaning back in my chair, I sipped my coffee and let out a long, relieved sigh.

I didn't even realize I was smiling until I caught sight of my reflection in the darkened microwave door.

"Ruby!" I called toward the living room, where I could hear the opening lines of *The Polar Express*, her latest animated obsession. "Pause your show and come in here for a sec!"

From the other room came a groan of pure, tragic suffering. "Mooooom! It's the good part!"

"Pause it. It'll still be there."

Footsteps padded reluctantly across the hardwood, and then Ruby appeared in the doorway. Her hair was sticking out in three different directions, and her fleece pajamas—blue with tiny snowmen—were slightly twisted from her morning couch sprawl.

My brother dropped her off first thing this morning, looking like she'd just come from a pillow fight warzone. Immediately, she curled up on the couch and fell right back asleep until waking up just a few moments ago to watch her movie.

Of course, the first thing she asked me when I saw her was, "What did you do last night, mommy?"

Well, I lied of course. I wasn't going to tell her about the outrageously good-looking man I ran into at the local bar, the same one I couldn't stop thinking about. Secretly, I hoped I would run into him again so I could make good on what I was willing to do on a second date.

"If this is about brushing my teeth," she announced before I could even speak, "I'm on break from that until after Christmas."

I blinked. "That's... not a thing."

"It could be a thing," she muttered, climbing up onto one of the counter stools. She rested her chin in her hands and gave me the kind of look that suggested she was tolerating this conversation out of the goodness of her heart. "Okay. What's up?"

I wrapped my hands around my mug for warmth, bracing myself. "So... I talked to your dad."

She gave the world's most exaggerated eye-roll. "And?"

"And... he's not going to be here for Christmas this year."

Ruby's expression didn't change much, but she did shrug one shoulder. "Okay."

The sarcasm was so deadpan it almost made me choke on my coffee. "Glad to see you're coping well."

She tilted her head. "We still doing presents?"

"Yes."

"Still doing cookies?"

"Obviously."

"Still doing my Christmas Eve hot cocoa buffet with Uncle Ollie in the morning?"

"Of course."

She gave a small nod, satisfied. "Then I'm fine."

"Glad we could get through that emotional hardship together," I said dryly, taking another sip of coffee.

She grinned, and I felt a flicker of that bittersweet ache I always did this time of year. My girl was resilient—sometimes more than I was—but there was still a part of me that hated she had to be.

"Well," I said, trying to shake off the heaviness, "lucky for you, I have a backup plan."

Her little head tilted. "Does it involve pancakes? Because that's the only backup plan I care about."

I laughed. "No pancakes...yet. But I found someone who's going to come stay with us through New Year's and help out while I'm working."

Ruby perked up. "Like... a live-in elf?"

"Sort of," I said, unable to hide my smile. "Their name is Brooks. They have a lot of experience doing fun things. Sound good?"

Ruby narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Brooks... is this a boy or a girl?"

"Girl, I'm pretty sure," I admitted. Suddenly, I was unaware if I made the right assumption or not. What man would apply to nanny a seven-year-old girl around the holidays and agree to live here?

"Does it matter?"

"Only if they're a boy," she said seriously. "Because then I'm gonna make them play princess tea party every single day until they cry."

I laughed so hard I had to set down my coffee before I spilled it. "You're something else."

She responded with a smirk, running her small hands over her crazy auburn hair. Hair that matched mine identically.

In fact, she was a spitting image of me. People who saw us together never would've guessed someone else was involved in making her, well, besides the basic understanding of reproduction.

I closed the laptop, feeling the first real spark of holiday relief. "So you're okay with Brooks staying here?"

Ruby hopped down from the stool, clearly over the conversation now that she'd secured her cookie and cocoa guarantees. "Yep. As long as they're ready for slime, glitter, and me winning at every game we play."

Something told me Brooks Bennett had no idea what they were in for.

I watched Ruby disappear back into the living room, the faint sound of a train horn picking back up as she unpaused her movie. My mind was already spinning with possibilities. Maybe this was the little holiday miracle we needed—someone fun, dependable, and willing to dive into the chaos that was our December.

If I were being honest... maybe it wasn't the worst thing in the world that *I'd* have another adult around too. Even if it was just to have someone to talk to who didn't try to negotiate bedtime like it was an international peace treaty.

I pulled my mug closer, staring at the little snowflakes melting on the windowpane, and let myself hope that this holiday might not turn out to be a total disaster.

Brooks



The low rumble of my truck's engine carried me through the winding main street of Snowberry Peak, past storefronts frosted with real snow and trimmed with glittering garlands.

This place didn't just *do* Christmas—it lived it. Garlands wrapped around every light post like emerald ribbons. Wreaths hung from doors, shop windows, and even the old lamppost at the corner of Main and Pine. A faint scent of cinnamon drifted through the air from the bakery two blocks back, and everywhere I looked, people wore smiles that felt... permanent.

It was the kind of town that made you believe in Hallmark movies.

I'd been to just about every state with a rodeo worth riding in—my work had taken me to some pretty remote places—but nothing compared to the way this little mountain town seemed to hum with holiday magic.

And the best part? I'd managed to find a job *and* a place to stay in one stroke of luck.

Annie Cringle, single mom and catering business owner, needed someone to watch her seven-year-old daughter during the season. Schools were out, daycares closed, and from the tone of her email, she needed help yesterday.

I'd spent most of my adult life keeping an eye on bull riders, being in the ring with them and making sure they stayed out of

trouble. If I could handle a six-foot-two cowboy with a concussion and an ego, I could handle one kid. Besides, kids usually liked me—something about the mix of my size, my patience, and the fact I could juggle.

Not that you'd guess that by looking at me.

Six foot four. Built from years of manual labor. Tattoos covering almost every inch from my collarbones to my ankles. I wasn't exactly the picture of "Mary Poppins."

The road dipped through the valley before curling up toward the neighborhood Annie called home. Her place was easy to spot—a bright Christmas-red cape cod, its green shutters dusted with snow, bushes trimmed neat under a frosted blanket.

It was charming. The kind of place you could picture in a snow globe.

I killed the engine and hopped down, my boots crunching into the fresh powder. In my two days here, I'd already figured out that snow in Snowberry Peak was like oxygen—everywhere, constant, and taken for granted.

Hands tucked into my jacket pockets, I made my way to the front door. The overhang shielded me from the lazy snowflakes drifting down. I pressed the doorbell, and a cheerful chime rang inside.

I turned slightly, taking in the neighborhood. Warm golden light flooded from the windows, accompanied by a pine tree in everyone's front yard.

The sound of the door creaking open spun me back around.

And there she was.

Five foot two, standing barefoot in the doorway like she'd just come from the kitchen. Auburn hair pulled into a messy ponytail. Big eyes I swear I'd recognize anywhere.

She looked at me like she'd seen a ghost.

Her lips parted, then curved—not in a smile, but in something halfway between shock and disbelief.

"How the hell did you find where I lived?" she asked.

I smirked.

The woman from the bar last night was now the woman I'd be living with, at least through the holiday season—the same one whose daughter I'd be looking after, too.

"You gave me your address," I said, my voice steady despite the fact that the cold was cutting through my flannel and straight into

my bones. My arms crossed instinctively, trying to trap some heat against my chest. The air here wasn't just cold, it was small-town-mountain-town cold. Sharp. Icy. The kind that made your nostrils stick together when you breathed in too deep.

I really hoped she'd invite me in before I froze into a statue on her porch. No way was I going to let her see me shiver, though. I had a reputation to uphold, even if it was only in my own head.

How she could stand there in the doorway looking unfazed in nothing but a thin cream sweater and black leggings was beyond me. Her auburn hair was put into a messy ponytail, a few wisps rebelliously curling at her temples. Glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, catching the soft sunlight. Her cheeks were flushed pink—not from blush, but from the bite of winter—and even the tip of her button nose was tinged red. She was... something. The kind of something you notice and keep noticing, even when you tell yourself not to.

"I don't remember giving you my address last night," she said sharply, leaning out just enough to glance left and right, as though she was making sure the whole neighborhood wasn't watching.

Before I could answer, she grabbed a fistful of my flannel and yanked me inside. The door slammed shut behind us, sealing out the frigid air.

"You can't just show up here," she said, voice pitched low but urgent. "I have a daughter, and you're lucky she isn't home right now. If she were—"

Annie broke off, letting out a disbelieving laugh as she shook her head. "She would be eating this up right now."

"I know you have a daughter," I said evenly. "That's why I'm here."

Her eyes narrowed. "You sicko!"

Before I could explain, she lunged, smacking me square in the chest.

"She's seven, you buffoon!"

"Jesus!" I caught her wrists mid-swing, half-laughing, half-trying not to get another jab to the ribs. "Calm down. I'm Brooks."

She froze. The fight drained out of her shoulders. Her jaw slackened as her gaze ran over me—less assessing, more trying to reconcile a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit. In her flurry, strands of

hair had slipped free from her bun, falling in loose curves around her face.

"You're Brooks?" she said slowly, as if saying it out loud might help her make sense of it.

"That's me," I said, loosening my grip on her wrists. "Here to be the nanny."

Her eyes swept me from my snow-dusted cowboy boots up to the brim of my hat, and back again. It was a slow, deliberate path—one I felt all the way down to my spine.

"I know you're undressing me in your head," I said lightly, "but maybe we should wait until after I meet Ruby."

She huffed and crossed her arms. "I am not."

"Are too."

"I thought you were a woman," she blurted.

I raised a brow, glancing down at myself. "Really? Even after that stare-down just now? Pretty sure no one's ever confused me for a woman before."

"I meant through email," she shot back, her voice tight. "Your name. Brooks, it sounded... female."

"Funny," I said. "Guess I should start putting 'rugged manly man' in my signature line to avoid confusion."

She muttered something under her breath about not being able to believe this and took a step back. "I have so many questions."

"Fire away."

"Follow me first."

She spun on her heel and strode toward the kitchen. I lingered a second, glancing at the melting snow clinging to my boots, then bent down to tug them off. They landed by the front door with a soft thud, snow pooling on the mat beneath them.

Her house was small and warm, the kind of cozy that felt instantly lived in—scents of cinnamon and coffee drifting in from the kitchen. A small Christmas tree glowed in the corner of the living room, strung with mismatched ornaments, some clearly hand-painted by small, messy hands. The walls were dotted with framed snapshots—sunlit summer days, snowy sled rides, a little girl with a gap-toothed grin holding up a gingerbread house. That must be Ruby.

"Can I get you coffee? Hot chocolate?" Annie asked, her voice brisk but carrying that faint warmth I'd noticed last night.

"Hot chocolate's good," I said.

She let out a short scoff, though there was the ghost of a smile tugging at her lips as she moved toward the counter.

"You and Ruby will get along fine. You like hot chocolate, that's an automatic win with her."

"You said she's not home?" I asked, watching her work.

Annie poured milk into a mug and slid it into the microwave.

"Nope. She's out with my elderly neighbor, helping gather gifts for her grandkids. I wanted to meet you first before I introduced you to her. She's a bit..." Her voice drifted off as the microwave dinged.

She turned, pulled the mug out, and got busy stirring cocoa into the steaming milk. When she slid it across the island toward me, I wrapped my hands around the ceramic, letting the heat soak into my cold fingers before lifting it to my lips.

"She's...?" I prompted.

"A bit much," Annie admitted. "She's fiery, judgmental, and has been known to pull pranks on people that have made grown men cry."

"Well, lucky for you, I can take it. Plus, I don't cry."

That earned me a smile—small but genuine—before she leaned her elbows on the island and fixed me with a curious look.

"First, I've got a round of rapid-fire questions for you."

I set the mug down and gave her my full attention. "Shoot."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

"Why are you in Snowberry Peak?"

"I love Christmas and wanted to spend the holiday in a magical place."

Her brows arched. "Your resume said 'entertaining experiences.' Please tell me that doesn't mean male stripper."

"Nope. Rodeo clown."

She paused, tilting her head like she wasn't sure if I was serious.

"Are you joking?"

"Nope," I said with a grin. "It's a real job. I entertain the crowd and help keep the riders safe. It's equal parts comedy and chaos."

Her gaze swept over me, slow and deliberate, before meeting my eyes again.

"I just didn't think rodeo clowns were so... good-looking."

“Well,” I said with a shrug, “being unattractive isn’t in the rule book.”

That drew a laugh from her.

“Are you on the registry?” she asked, smirking.

“My God, no.”

“Can you really make balloon animals?”

“Yup.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You already asked me that at the bar. So, that question feels more for you than for Ruby.”

“Possibly,” she said, her smile sharpening. “Or maybe I just don’t want any crazy women showing up at my house unannounced.”

“No crazy girlfriends. No wives.”

“Boyfriends?”

“Nope. I love pus—”

“I’ve heard enough,” she cut in quickly, though I caught the faintest blush creeping into her cheeks.

I hid my grin behind the mug, taking another slow sip of hot chocolate.

“So, do I have the job?”

“Considering I’m in a bit of a pinch...” She extended her hand. “You’re hired.”

Her hand was small in mine, her fingers warm despite the winter chill still clinging to my skin. We shook, but the way her eyes—assessing, lingering just a little too long—told me she might be imagining more than just childcare in my future here.

“Since I’m officially on your payroll now,” I said, my mouth curving into a slow grin, “does that mean date two is out of the question?”

Brooks



I'd been in plenty of situations that involved moving my life from one place to another—cattle ranches, rodeo circuits, even that one summer where I lived in a camper behind a state fairground—but none of those moments came with the added pressure of meeting a pint-sized firecracker who might just decide whether I got to keep my new job.

Three duffel bags. That's all I had.

It felt almost too small a pile for something as big as moving in with someone—well, not *someone* exactly. Annie. And her daughter, Ruby. A package deal, she'd made that clear from the jump.

I stepped up onto Annie's front porch, snow dusting my shoulders, and rapped on the door with my knuckles.

It swung open faster than I expected.

Annie stood there, cheeks pink from the cold, hair loose and a little wind-tousled, looking every bit like the kind of woman small-town Christmas songs were written about. A sweater the color of green, soft and cozy, draped over her frame. She had this way of smiling like she knew exactly how much of it to give before leaving a guy curious for more.

"You made it," she said, stepping aside.

"Unless I accidentally walked into the wrong house, yeah."

She rolled her eyes, but there was a twitch of a grin there, too.

I dropped my bags by the door and rubbed my hands together.
“So, where’s the boss?”

“The boss?” Annie echoed, one brow arching.

“Ruby. I know she runs a tight ship.”

“She’s in her room. Let me go tell her you’re here—”

She didn’t even get the sentence out before a stampede of tiny feet came pounding down the hall.

A blur of red plaid pajamas and wild, curly hair rounded the corner and came to an abrupt halt in front of me.

“You’re the clown,” Ruby said, her tone so matter-of-fact it made me laugh.

“Rodeo clown. Big difference.”

I was more than just a clown. I’d started on the back of the bulls, riding the wild animals as my full-time job. It wasn’t until I decided to retire that I started the second gig.

She tilted her head, clearly weighing whether to believe me. “Do you wear the face paint?”

“Nope. Not today. This is my day-off face.”

Ruby’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t *look* like a clown.”

“Guess I’m just gonna have to prove it to you,” I said.

She crossed her arms. “Do a trick.”

Annie made a quiet noise of warning from behind her, but I was already pulling a balloon from my back pocket.

“You came with balloons in your pocket?” Annie asked, sounding half impressed, half incredulous.

“Never know when you’ll need one,” I said, blowing it up with practiced ease. My hands twisted it into a lopsided dog, which I held out to Ruby like it was a prize.

She stared at it. “It’s ugly.”

“Good thing you’re brutally honest. Keeps me humble.”

Her mouth twitched, like she was fighting the urge to smile, but she tucked the balloon under her arm anyway. I saw the flicker of amusement from her face and noticed the way she patted the top of the balloon dog’s head, indicating she didn’t really think it was ugly. I knew I’d find it in her room on display later.

“So... do you sleep in a bed or a tent?”

“A bed,” I said.

“Do you snore?”

“Sometimes.”

Ruby turned to Annie. "Where's he gonna sleep? In the attic? In the garage?"

"Guest room," Annie said firmly, but I caught the hint of a smile she tried to hide.

Ruby's gaze flicked back to me. "Do you eat vegetables?"

"Only the ones shaped like french fries."

That got me my first honest laugh from her, and I silently chalked it up as a win.

Annie leaned against the kitchen counter, watching us with that look again—half amusement, half something warmer.

I reached for one of my bags and swung it over my shoulder. "Mind showing me the guest room, kiddo?"

Ruby tapped her chin dramatically. "Do I get paid?"

"Nope."

"Then no."

I chuckled. "Tough negotiator."

"Ruby," Annie warned. "Be nice."

"I *am* being nice," Ruby said with exaggerated innocence. "I didn't even tell him about the haunted closet yet."

I froze mid-step and my jaw dropped in shock. I had to play into every one of her bits. That's how you win them over.

"Haunted closet?"

Ruby's eyes widened in mock seriousness. "Oh yeah. The last babysitter who stayed in there ran out screaming."

I shot Annie a questioning look, but she was biting her lip to keep from laughing. "You're just gonna let her scare me off?"

"She's testing you," Annie said. "If you can survive her, you can survive anything."

I followed Ruby down the hall, her curls bouncing with each step. She pointed at the guest room. "Good luck."

The room was cozy—small bed, warm blankets, a dresser, and a window that looked out over a backyard where snow was already piling high. I set my bags down and turned toward her.

"So, Ruby... are we cool?"

She tapped her chin again. "We'll see. You might be okay."

"Guess I'll have to earn my place."

Her footsteps pattered away, and I was left grinning like an idiot.

Annie appeared in the doorway, arms crossed, leaning her shoulder against the frame. "She's... a lot," she said softly.

“She’s great,” I replied without hesitation. “Sharp kid.”

“She’s sharp enough to scare off half the people who’ve ever tried to babysit her.”

I shrugged. “I’m not most people.”

Her lips curved just slightly, and for a second, the air between us felt warmer than the rest of the house.

“Dinner’s in an hour,” she said finally. “We’re having chili.”

“I like chili.”

“Good. Because Ruby’s the one who picked it.”

I laughed. “Guess I’ll tell her it’s the best chili I’ve ever had.”

“You might actually mean it,” Annie said, pushing off the doorframe and heading toward the kitchen. “She’s surprisingly good with a crockpot.”

I watched her go, noting the way her sweater brushed against her hips, the sway of her ponytail.

Maybe I’d signed up for a temporary holiday gig. But standing there, in a warm little house that smelled like Christmas, with a stubborn kid who called me a clown and a woman who smiled like she was holding back secrets... I was starting to think this might be the best bad decision I’d ever made.

Annie



It was day one with Brooks on the job and the first day of what I already knew would be the busiest two weeks of my life.

Normally, being an early riser was my thing. I loved getting up before the sun, savoring those rare, quiet moments before Ruby woke up and launched into her day with all the sass of a stand-up comedian and none of the caffeine.

But today wasn't about peace and quiet. Today was about hitting the ground running.

I swung my legs over the edge of my bed, the cool air nipping at my skin, and sat up straight with a long stretch. My cow-print slippers waited faithfully on the floor. The second my toes slid into their fuzzy warmth, a smile spread across my face. Running my small business was my pride and joy—well, second to Ruby—and even though the holiday rush was chaotic, it was the kind of chaos I thrived in.

Shuffling to the door with a yawn, I grabbed my robe from its hook and wrapped it around my matching silk pajama set. My brain was already building my to-do list for the day: inventory, invoices, shipping orders, prep for the Christmas party in a little over a week. But before any of that, there was one crucial step—coffee. Always coffee.

The hallway was still and hushed, the winter light barely spilling through the frosted windows. I peeked into Ruby's room as I passed,

just to be sure she was still asleep. Sure enough, there she was—arms thrown above her head at odd angles, sleeping on her stomach with her mouth wide open like she was trying to catch snowflakes in her dreams.

A quiet laugh escaped me as I eased the door shut.

The second I stepped toward the kitchen, though, something was... different. The usual cozy scent of cinnamon and spice that clung to the house had been replaced by something richer, darker, more tempting.

Coffee. Freshly brewed coffee.

That stopped me in my tracks. I was always the one to brew the coffee, and I definitely hadn't done it last night—unless I'd reached a new level of autopilot I didn't know about.

Following the aroma, I rounded the corner into the kitchen. And froze.

Brooks was there.

Shirtless.

Broad shoulders, toned chest, tattoos sprawling across every inch of tanned skin. Plaid pajama pants hung low on his hips like they were barely clinging to the job of staying up. He leaned casually against my counter, one hand wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee, the other braced on the edge like he belonged here.

Lord. Have. Mercy.

I'd noticed he was good-looking when I met him—twice, fully clothed. But this? This was an entirely different level of temptation. His tattoos disappeared beneath his waistband, and my brain immediately decided it wanted to know exactly where they ended.

What the hell had I been thinking, bringing a six-foot-something, fully tattooed smokeshow into my house?

My libido was already drafting its resignation letter.

I swallowed hard, trying to drag my gaze back up from his very distracting torso. His eyes—whiskey-colored and entirely too observant—were locked on me. And unlike him, I wasn't exactly serving Greek-goddess energy. My hair looked like it had been in a wrestling match with my pillow. There was probably drool on my chin. I hadn't even glanced in a mirror.

Meanwhile, Brooks looked like he'd stepped out of some glossy holiday calendar where the lumberjack takes off his flannel in front of a roaring fire.

“Morning,” he said, a slow, knowing smirk tugging at his mouth. I gave a stiff nod, pretending like my pulse wasn’t doing sprints. “So... you’re an early riser too,” I managed. Not a “good morning,” not a “how’d you sleep.” My brain was too busy protesting the fact that I hadn’t had a chance to mentally armor myself before walking in on... *this*.

Finding out Brooks was the same man I’d flirted with at the bar the other night—the one I’d secretly wanted to climb like a tree—hadn’t been on my holiday bingo card. Seeing him at my front door the next day had been... complicated.

At first, panic.

Then... desire.

For a split second, I’d thought he’d tracked me down to finish what we’d started at the bar. Then he dropped the bomb that he was the person I’d been emailing for the nanny position.

Now here he was, in my kitchen, shirtless and tattooed and making coffee like he owned the place.

Professional and platonic. That was what it should be. That was the smart choice.

But standing there in plaid pajama pants and giving me that damn smirk? Yeah, my ovaries were writing their own set of rules.

“Always,” he replied, voice low and certain. “Early mornings are my favorite time of the day.”

“Me too,” I murmured, though mine were usually filled with coffee and silence rather than conversations with men who looked like they’d stepped straight out of my most dangerous daydreams.

I opened the fridge and grabbed my favorite creamer, the vanilla-bean one Ruby said made the whole house smell like sugar cookies. Brooks was already reaching for a mug, then he held it out toward me.

When I took it from him, my fingers brushed his. The contact was brief—barely a second—but it was enough. A jolt of electricity shot through me, sharp and unrelenting, rushing up my arm and pooling low in my stomach before settling in a place that made my knees feel a little unreliable.

“Thanks,” I said softly, my voice catching in the middle.

His gaze lingered on me a beat too long. “So, will you be home in time for dinner?”

I nodded, clutching the mug like it was the only thing keeping me steady. "Should be, as long as everything goes to plan."

Leaning back against the island, I put a safe foot or so of distance between us. I lifted the mug to my lips and blew across the surface, watching steam curl away.

"Then I'll make sure to set a plate aside for you, too."

The words startled me—gentle and domestic in a way I hadn't heard in years. "Do you cook?" I asked, my tone casual, though my heart was suddenly racing.

Brooks nodded, the corner of his mouth tipping into something almost shy. "I love to cook. I don't get to do it often, living on the road most of the time, but since I'm here, I might as well feed you two ladies while I can."

That statement shouldn't have made my chest tighten, but it did. It had been a long, long time since anyone had wanted to take care of me in even the smallest way.

"Honestly, it's been too long since I've had a home-cooked meal I didn't make myself." I laughed lightly and took a small sip of my coffee, the warmth spreading through me in more ways than one.

"Anything you don't like to eat? How about Ruby?" he asked.

"I'm not picky. Ruby's hard no's are mushrooms, bananas, spinach, and... oddly enough, macaroni and cheese."

Brooks let out a low whistle. "What kid doesn't like mac and cheese?"

"The kind who ate it every day for a month when her mom was going through a divorce and barely had two nickels to rub together," I said before I could stop myself. The words came out too sharp, too revealing.

His jaw shifted slightly, eyes flicking away. "I didn't mean—"

"I know," I sighed, cutting him off. "That wasn't fair. I'm sorry. Old scars."

He gave me a single, understanding nod, his mouth pressing into a tight line. "No mac and cheese. Got it."

He finished his coffee in a slow swallow, then turned to rinse the mug in the sink. Brooks' back muscles flexed with the movement, the ink on his skin shifting over the play of muscle, and I couldn't not look.

God help me, I wanted to run my hands over every inch of him, trace each tattoo, learn what they meant. I wanted to know what it

felt like when that strong hand wrapped around my throat or braced on the counter beside me.

Instead, I bit the edge of my knuckle and silently screamed.

When he turned back around, I had just enough warning to collect my composure by taking a massive sip of my coffee—too big, too hot. It burned all the way down, but I managed to keep my face neutral.

One of his eyebrows ticked upward, a knowing glint in his eyes, and then he laughed. The sound was deep, rich, and sent another shiver through me.

“I should get going,” I said, tossing a thumb over my shoulder toward the hallway. Step by step, I eased backward, putting space between us before I did something reckless.

“Ruby’ll be up in about an hour,” I added. “Enjoy the peace while you can.”

His grin told me he didn’t mind the idea of losing it.

Brooks



Letting Ruby dress herself before we left to go shopping might have been the best decision I could've made.

I wasn't just walking down the street in Snowberry Peak with a seven-year-old. I was walking with a pint-sized elf in a glittery green dress, striped red-and-white tights, and fuzzy reindeer slippers with tiny jingle bells on the toes. Each step made her feet chime like a holiday parade.

The only input I had was the puffy jacket I'd made her wear, and judging by her scowl when I zipped it up, you'd think I'd committed some crime against childhood.

"Are we going to my Tinsel & Tots?" she asked as we neared the row of little boutiques that made up Main Street.

"That's the plan," I said.

I'd figured checking out her go-to spot would be a good way for me to learn more about town. Maybe even earn a point or two in her very serious, very unspoken ranking system of people she approved of.

She pushed open the door without hesitation, the bells above jingling as we stepped inside. The place was... an explosion of pinks, purples, and sparkles. Unicorns wearing Santa hats danced across the walls in framed prints. Racks of sequined jackets, tutus, and themed pajamas filled the space. I felt like I'd just stepped into the brain of a glitter-obsessed seven-year-old.

Ruby tugged on my hand, craning her neck to look up at me. "What's my budget?"

"Budget?"

"Yeah," she said matter-of-factly. "Mom always gives me a limit when she takes me here. What is it?"

I blinked. In my mind, this had been a quick, harmless outing—window shopping, maybe grabbing a hot chocolate after. Buying things hadn't crossed my mind.

"I don't... I thought we were just window shopping," I admitted.

She narrowed her eyes, still holding onto my hand but with a suspicious new grip like she was squeezing to inflict pain so I'd say the right answer. "What's window shopping?"

Jesus.

I sighed, let go of her hand, and pulled my wallet from my back pocket. I held up a crisp hundred-dollar bill. "Is this enough?"

Her eyes lit up like someone had just plugged in the town's Christmas tree.

"It's enough," she declared, snatching it from my hand. "Best. Nanny. Ever." And with that, she bolted.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—" I started, but she was already darting between racks. I gave chase, but she jukeed right at the last second, and I lost sight of her.

"Welcome in," a teenage girl behind the counter said, blowing a bubble with her gum before it popped.

Next to her, an older woman folded clothes with quick, practiced movements. She glanced up and immediately smiled like she knew exactly who I was.

"Ah, so you must be Ruby's new nanny," she said.

The teenager's eyes went wide, and she muffled a laugh behind her fist.

"That's me," I confirmed, stepping forward and offering my hand. "Brooks."

The woman's handshake was firm, her gaze sharp as if she were sizing me up. Then she nodded, apparently deciding I passed whatever test she'd just run in her head. "Nice to meet you, Brooks. I'm Sloane. And that's my granddaughter, Madeline."

Before I could say more, Ruby's voice cut through the store.

"Brooks! Come find me! Don't you know how to play hide-and-seek? What nanny doesn't?"

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