

Meet the New Neighbors

by Lenora Vale

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Chapter One: Kaysville

The house was beautiful and Lana hated it, which was an irrational response she was not going to share with Ryan because he had negotiated the relocation package and the relocation package included this house and also an increase in base salary that had felt abstract until she saw the house, which was four bedrooms and a three-car garage on a street so clean it appeared to have been pressure-washed that morning.

"It's beautiful," she said, standing in the driveway on a Tuesday in October with the Wasatch Front behind her going bronze and orange up the ridge, the kind of view that made people move to Utah and then forget that they had moved to Utah until March, when the inversion set in and Salt Lake Valley became a gray soup bowl of trapped particulates.

"It really is," Ryan said. He put his arm around her and she leaned into him and tried to locate the specific problem she was having with a house that was objectively beautiful and came with Ryan's name on the contract and a neighborhood that had, according to the relocation agent, excellent schools and a strong community.

The problem was Denver. The problem was the apartment above the coffee place on Colfax where she'd lived for six years before Ryan, and the warehouse loft they'd rented together when they first moved in, and then the house on Maple where they'd been for three years and where she knew every neighbor's name and three of their dogs' names and the Thursdays when the Thai place on the corner ran their two-for-one and which of the coffee shops had the good wifi and which had the good people-watching.

The problem was that she had built a life, in Denver, and now she was standing in a driveway in Kaysville, Utah with a view of the mountains and a three-car garage and the specific sensation of being a person who had packed everything she knew into boxes and arrived somewhere where nothing had her fingerprints on it yet.

"Community," the relocation agent had said. "Very strong community. These families look out for each other."

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Within the first week, Lana received three casseroles and two loaves of homemade bread, all from neighbors whose names she immediately failed to retain because the names were similar and the deliveries were brief and slightly formal, the way of people being welcoming and also establishing gently that there was a specific way things were done around here and it would be appreciated if she found her way to that way in due course.

She went to the neighborhood ward church event — not to participate in the religious component, she told Ryan, who was Catholic in the background-only way that involved Christmas Eve mass and nothing else, just to meet people — and found herself in a Fellowship Hall eating green Jell-O with shredded carrots and listening to a woman explain the carpool rotation for the Wednesday evening youth program.

She drove home at nine PM, poured wine she'd hidden in the pantry behind the dry pasta, and texted her best friend in Denver: *I think I've made a terrible mistake.*

Her friend texted back: *Have you tried the carpool rotation?*

I genuinely do not have children.

Right but maybe offer to drive someone else's?

She put her phone face-down on the counter and ate leftover takeout and watched the mountains go dark through the kitchen window and told herself this was temporary discomfort and that she was an adaptable person and that things would improve.

She was right, though not in the way she expected.

Chapter Two: The Gym

She found the gym on her third week, which was not the neighborhood gym — the neighborhood had a gym in the form of a rec center with a cheerful mural and a modest weight room — but the premium facility on the highway that had floor-to-ceiling windows looking at the Wasatch and turf turf and an industrial fan system and equipment that actually worked. She signed up for a month-to-month membership with the aggression of someone who needed somewhere to be and had chosen to be somewhere that smelled like rubber flooring and ambition.

She was on a treadmill at eight-fifteen on a Wednesday morning when a woman appeared on the treadmill beside her who was wearing leggings that appeared to have been designed by someone who understood exactly what good leggings could do for a specific body type and had tested their hypothesis thoroughly. Platinum blonde, ponytail, not quite running — doing the fast stride thing that people who run actual miles did to warm up — and listening to something through wireless earbuds with the expression of someone who was winning a competition against themselves.

Lana kept running. The woman kept striding. This would have been nothing.

Except that at nine-fifteen, when Lana was on the mat doing stretches she'd learned from the yoga class she was trying to decide if she liked, the woman appeared beside her, cooling down in the way of someone whose warmup had been Lana's entire workout.

"New," the woman said. Not a question. Delivered with the confidence of someone who had a complete inventory of the gym's regulars and had noticed a variance.

"Three weeks in," Lana said. "We moved from Denver."

"We're on Larkhaven," the woman said. "Two blocks from you. Bridget Holbrook." She said her own name the way very confident people said things — quickly, clearly, like it was a fact and not an introduction. She held out her hand and Lana shook it and noticed: good nails, firm grip, the

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smooth tight forehead of excellent preventive Botox.

"Lana Mercer."

"Is your husband at Hill?"

"Defense contract, yes."

Bridget nodded once, the way of someone entering data. "Mine's at ATK. Half the neighborhood is. The other half are the wives." She said *the wives* with a specific flat affect that contained a whole novel's worth of commentary on the word and its implications. "Come to the sauna after?"

Lana, who had not been planning to use the sauna, said yes.

The sauna was where she learned that Bridget had lived in Kaysville for six years, before that in St. George, before that in San Diego where she had met Brad who was not originally Mormon but had converted with the ease of someone who found the community genuinely appealing while reserving private judgment on certain points of doctrine. She had two kids. She had a personal trainer named Mason who worked with her four mornings a week. She got Botox every four months from a cosmetic injector who came to the house. She organized a monthly spa day for a small group of women she'd been cultivating over the past few years and would Lana like to join?

Lana, who had been starved of adult female company for three weeks and was sitting across from the most put-together and interesting person she'd encountered in Kaysville, said yes.

"Good," Bridget said, with the satisfaction of something accomplished correctly. "Saturday at eleven. My house."

Chapter Three: The Spa Day

Bridget's house was the same floor plan as Lana's — same street of homes, same builder — but decorated with the precision of someone who had studied the function of each room and designed accordingly. Clean lines, warm materials, nothing on a surface that wasn't both beautiful and intentional. Lana's house still had boxes.

There were four other women in Bridget's living room when Lana arrived, and they had the quality of a group that had been assembling for long enough to have settled into its natural configuration: two on the white sectional with sparkling water, one in the armchair with what appeared to be actual champagne, and one in the kitchen helping Bridget do something with a cheese board that was more elaborate than Lana's dinner parties in Denver had been.

They introduced themselves — Stacie, Kel, Amber, Jess — and the introductions had the ease of women who were comfortable with each other and were extending that comfort to include Lana in the specific generous way of a group that is confident enough in itself to add a member.

The aesthetician arrived at eleven-thirty. A younger woman with an impeccable kit who did facial treatments while they talked, moving between them with the brisk efficiency of a professional who had done this specific Saturday arrangement enough times to know the rhythm. Lana got a hydrafacial she hadn't known she needed and lay back under warm towels while the champagne made itself felt and the conversation moved in the way of women who were past the stage of performing and were simply talking.

She learned: Stacie's husband traveled for work three weeks of every month and she had an opinion about the travel that she expressed with a wryness that contained real feeling under it. Kel had a background in physical therapy and had recently been considering going back to work. Amber laughed at everything, which was initially suspicious and turned out to simply be accurate — she found things funny that were funny and the proportion was right. Jess was quieter, watching, and Lana recognized in her a quality she recognized in herself: the person at the gathering who

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was observing the social geometry and had not yet decided where she fit.

Bridget moved through the room like a host who had designed it for the express purpose of making people comfortable in it, which was probably true. She refilled glasses and asked specific questions — she had a quality of attention that made you feel that what you'd said previously had been retained and was being built on — and she touched people easily, the hand on the arm, the brief squeeze of the shoulder, the casual physical warmth of someone who had no anxious relationship with contact.

At two PM the aesthetician packed up. Two of the women left with the easy goodbyes of a regular gathering, promising to see each other at the next one. Stacie and Amber stayed. Lana had been about to gather her things when Bridget said: "Stay a bit more?" and poured another glass with the ease of someone to whom the question was rhetorical.

It was Amber who said it first, which Lana would later learn was typical — Amber who found things funny, who had the quality of someone who found the quickest path to the honest version of things and took it.

"So Bridget told us about you," Amber said. "She said you seemed like someone who might be open to the extended version of the spa day."

Lana looked at Bridget. Bridget was sitting cross-legged on the sectional with her champagne, watching Lana with the calm of someone who had made an assessment and was waiting for its verification.

"The extended version," Lana said.

"We have a group," Bridget said. "It started about three years ago. Brad and I have known Amber and her husband since before we moved here, and we'd been—" she paused for the word "—exploring some things together. And we found, over time, that a small number of the right people made it better."

Lana took a moment to process this. The living room. The spa day. The way the spa day apparently sorted people into categories. "You're telling me the Ward's Relief Society has a swinger problem," she said.

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Amber laughed — the genuine kind, the laugh that was the correct response to something that was actually funny. "One," she said. "Not the Relief Society. Definitely not affiliated. Two — *problem* is doing a lot of work in that sentence."

"No pressure," Bridget said. "None. We are not recruiters. You can say no right now and we keep doing spa Saturdays and you know a thing about us that you won't tell anyone and that's that." She said it with the calm of someone who meant it completely. "But Brad and I talked, and the others talked, and we have a feeling about you and Ryan."

"Ryan doesn't know any of this."

"You'd talk to him first. Obviously. The couples have to come in together." Bridget uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. "The whole point is that it's something you do *together*. With people you trust, with ground rules everyone agrees to. It is not complicated. It is actually extremely—" she appeared to search for the word.

"Fun," Stacie said, from the other end of the sectional, where she had been quiet long enough that Lana had almost forgotten she was there. "It's extremely fun."

"Think about it," Bridget said. "No deadline. Come to the next workout with me, let me introduce you to Mason, see how you feel about the general vibe."

Mason. The personal trainer.

Lana drove home with the specific sensation of someone who had been handed a map to a city she hadn't known existed under the one she'd been navigating.

She didn't tell Ryan that night. She needed to think first.

Chapter Four: Mason

The gym at seven AM on a Monday with Bridget was a different gym than the gym at eight-fifteen on a Wednesday alone. The same building, the same equipment, the different quality of a space occupied by someone who was using it for a specific purpose and had a specific person to use it with.

Mason was waiting at the turf area. Twenty-nine, six-foot-one, built in the way of someone who had made the physics of bodies his professional and personal study — not bulky, but the kind of dense muscle that came from functional training and the specific genetic advantage of someone who had been an athlete since childhood. Dark hair, jaw that had probably caused problems throughout his life, the easy physical confidence of a man who was comfortable with his body in the way that only certain people were. He looked at Bridget with a warmth that had more in it than trainer-client and at Lana with a frank and unself-conscious assessment.

"Lana," he said. Her name, once, clearly, in the same way Bridget said her own name — like a data point being confirmed.

"Mason," Bridget said, "is going to give you a baseline assessment and then we'll train together for the hour. He's very good."

The assessment involved Mason standing behind her while she did a deadlift to check her form, which meant his hands at her hips adjusting the angle, his voice close to her ear saying *hinge here, weight back, that's it* with the patient competence of someone for whom correct form was a genuine interest. The warmth of his hands on her hips was specific and deliberate and entirely professional in the way of certain specific professionals.

They trained. Bridget pushed weight that Lana found genuinely impressive. Mason moved between them with attention distributed evenly but with a specific quality of presence when he was with each of them. He corrected Lana's squat with a hand at the base of her spine and she was aware, with the part of her brain that had been quietly running calculations since Bridget's living room, of exactly what she was aware of.

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After, in the parking lot, Bridget put on her sunglasses and said: "Well?"

"He's very good," Lana said.

"Yes," Bridget said. "He is." She let that sit. "He'll be at the next gathering. Second Saturday."

The second Saturday of the month was eleven days away.

Lana went home and made coffee and sat at the kitchen island and thought about it in the specific direct way she thought about important things: what she wanted, what she was afraid of, what the difference between those two things was.

What she wanted, she discovered, was clearer than she'd expected.

She texted Bridget: *Tell me how it works.*

Chapter Five: The Conversation

She told Ryan on a Thursday.

She had been thinking about how to tell him since Monday and had concluded that there was no framing that made it easier and that therefore the direct version was the correct version, which was very on-brand.

"There's a group in the neighborhood," she said. They were in the kitchen after dinner, Ryan pouring the last of a bottle of Syrah into their glasses. "Bridget and Brad — you met Brad at the HOA thing — they have a group. A couples thing."

Ryan looked at her. He was good at waiting when he understood something was in progress. It was one of his best qualities.

"They're swingers," she said. "They've invited us."

The specific silence that followed was neither positive nor negative. It was the silence of a man reformatting a conversation in real time.

"Bridget," he said. "The woman from the gym."

"Yes."

"You've met her husband."

"Briefly."

"And she—" He turned this over. "How many couples?"

"Five, including them. Regulars. They've been doing it for three years. Ground rules, established trust, the full—" She stopped and looked at him. "I'm not telling you what I want. I'm telling you what exists. What I want depends on what you think."

Ryan set down his glass with the care of a man who was being precise about something. "What do *you* think," he said.

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She had been thinking about this for eleven days, through three gym sessions with Bridget, two texts with Mason that had started as scheduling and had acquired a quality she was not pretending she hadn't noticed, and one very long night lying next to Ryan while he slept and she looked at the ceiling and tried to be honest with herself.

"I think I've been lonely," she said. "Not because of you. Because of the move, because I don't have anything here yet that's mine, because I've had too much time to think and not enough to do and I found something that—" She looked at him. "I'm interested, Ryan. I'm genuinely curious. And I think—"

She stopped.

"You think what?" His voice was calm and direct, the way he was when he was working a problem that mattered.

"I think it might be good for us," she said. "Not as a fix for something broken. There's nothing broken. But as a thing we choose together, when we're solid. Which we are."

He was quiet for a long moment. She waited.

"Tell me the ground rules," he said.

She did. She had written them down from Bridget's explanation, the structure of it: always together, never separately without the other knowing, anyone can call it off at any time for any reason with no explanation required, outside the group nothing changes. The group had been stable for three years. The marriages in it had, by Bridget's account and the plain evidence of the women Lana had spent Saturday afternoons with, not suffered. They had, apparently, benefitted from the specific intimacy of being completely known by the person you were with.

"Bridget's idea," Ryan said. "Originally."

"Yes. Brad was a willing recruit."

The corner of his mouth moved. Ryan finished his glass. He looked at Lana

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across the kitchen island — the look of a man who was being asked something that he was discovering he did not want.

"Second Saturday," he said.

"In nine days."

He nodded slowly. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

Chapter Six: Second Saturday

The house was the same house she'd been in for the spa day: the white sectional, the intentional surfaces, the warm kitchen. Different in the specific way that a space was different at night with different lighting and a different category of event about to happen in it.

There were five couples when Lana and Ryan arrived. Bridget answered the door in the kind of dress that was technically appropriate and did everything it was designed to do, and behind her the living room had been arranged with the casual intention of a space that had been prepared for a specific evening without advertising what kind of evening it was.

Introductions. Brad, who was exactly as Bridget had indicated — tall, easy, warm, the kind of man who shook hands and meant the handshake. Mason, in civvies, who looked at Ryan with the direct appraisal of someone who did assessments, and at Lana with the warmth she had been cataloguing since the gym and was no longer pretending was purely professional. Amber and her husband Dev, who was a software engineer and who had the specific quality of someone who was extremely good at what he did and was in exactly the right environment tonight. Stacie, whose traveling husband was for once not traveling, a compact dark-haired man named Ed who had Stacie's dry humor as a matching set. Jess and her husband, Kip, who were the quietest couple and who would turn out to be considerably less quiet later.

Drinks. Actual drinks — Bridget had a cocktail situation set up with the efficiency of someone who understood that the first hour was the logistics hour and that good cocktails were part of the logistics. The conversation was easy in the way Lana had not found Kaysville conversation to be easy — people who had shared something significant had a different quality of ease than people performing community cordiality. She felt Ryan beside her relaxing by increments, his arm warm around her waist, and felt the specific pleasure of being in a room with him where they were both the same kind of present.

Bridget put music on at nine. Something with the right energy — not obvious, not too loud, the music of a room that was beginning to transition.

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"Okay," Bridget said, with the ease of a woman who had done this enough times to have a rhythm. "Same as always. Living room, the den, the guest rooms. Anyone who wants a drink or a break or just to sit and talk — the kitchen is always an option." She looked around the room. "Ryan and Lana — anything you want to check in about before we get started?"

Ryan looked at Lana. She looked at him. The look contained an entire conversation about wanting and willingness and trust, the kind of conversation that happened in a glance between people who knew each other.

"We're good," Lana said.

Bridget smiled. It was the smile Lana had been collecting since the first treadmill — warm and specific and satisfied. "Then let's go," she said.

What happened in the next hour had a quality that Lana would try to describe later, to herself, lying in bed in the particular post-event alertness when her body was still running warm and her brain was still processing: not chaotic. Not the way she'd half-imagined it, which was the pornographic version — frantic, performative, everyone going at once in some undifferentiated heap. It was more like the dinner party version of this, where conversations split and merged and split again, where some people moved to different rooms and others stayed, where the tempo was social before it was anything else.

She was on the sectional with Bridget and Ryan was across the room with Amber, and Bridget had her feet tucked up and her champagne balanced on her knee and she was looking at Lana with the specific attention that had drawn Lana in since the treadmill, the quality of being genuinely seen.

"You're thinking," Bridget said.

"I'm always thinking."

"Stop," Bridget said. And leaned over and kissed her.

It was not the first time Lana had kissed a woman. It was the first time in long enough that the specific quality of it — softer, the different architecture

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of a mouth that was not Ryan's, the scent of Bridget's perfume this close — registered with its full deliberate clarity. Bridget kissed the way she did everything: with intention, with patience, reading the response and adjusting.

Lana kissed her back.

Bridget's hands found her face, cool fingers at her jaw, and tilted her slightly, and Lana felt Ryan's eyes from across the room without looking — she knew the quality of Ryan's attention on her — and the knowledge of being watched by him while kissing Bridget was its own specific charge.

Bridget pulled back just enough to look at her. "There you are," she said softly.

Lana laughed — the kind that came from somewhere genuine, the release of a held tension that had been building since Monday at the gym. She pulled Bridget back by the front of the dress.

Bridget moved with her. On the sectional and then off it, her hands finding Lana's dress hem and sliding under with the competence of someone who knew exactly what she was doing and was doing it at the pace she intended and not a pace dictated by urgency. She unzipped Lana slowly, the zipper at the back, and pressed her mouth to the back of Lana's neck and Lana put her head back and exhaled.

Ryan was at the edge of the room. He had Amber's hand in his but he was watching Lana, the full weight of his attention on her, and she held his eyes across the room and let Bridget push the dress off her shoulders.

"Ryan," Bridget said, without looking at him. "Come here."

He came.

He stood above them and Bridget tipped her face up to look at him with the assessing warmth she brought to everything. "Your wife," she said, "is remarkable."

Ryan looked at Lana. Lana looked back at him from below — the look she'd

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been giving him since the kitchen on Thursday, the look that was yes and *do you see this* and *stay with me* all at once.

He crouched down and kissed her, his hand at her face, and she felt Bridget's mouth at her collarbone while Ryan's mouth was on hers and the combination — the specific compound of being attended to from two directions by two people, both of whom had her full attention — was the kind of sensation that made thinking completely and correctly impossible.

"Bedroom," Bridget said.

Bridget's bedroom was at the end of the hall — their bedroom, hers and Brad's, with the same deliberate design as the rest of the house. The bed was large and white and the lamp cast warm amber light and through the half-open window came the October cold from the mountains, which was the specific smell Lana had been noticing since the move without placing what she felt about it and which she now, for the first time, associated with something she actively wanted to be here for.

Brad was already in the room. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and he looked at Ryan when they came in with the ease of a man who had done this often enough to have shed every available ounce of awkwardness about it, which was something Ryan appeared to register and immediately appreciate.

"Ryan," Brad said. "Bridget says you're in aerospace simulation."

"Guidance systems," Ryan said, and his voice had the particular quality it had when he was relaxed and amused and in the presence of something he found genuinely interesting.

Bridget pushed Lana gently toward the bed and turned to her husband and kissed him briefly, completely naturally, the way of two people who had been married long enough that kissing was a reflex and a choice simultaneously. Brad's hand at the small of her back. The ease of them.

Ryan looked at Lana. She nodded once. She watched him look at Bridget for permission — it was genuinely permission, the specific asking quality of a man who understood that this was her domain — and Bridget gave it with a

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half-smile and stepped back.

Ryan kissed Bridget.

Lana watched. She watched her husband kiss another woman with the full quality of his attention — Ryan, who kissed the way he did everything, with patience and presence — and she felt the specific electric charge of it, the want and the intimacy of the watching, the fact that this was happening because they were here together and the *together* was the whole point.

Brad sat beside her on the bed. His arm at her waist, a question in it. She turned and kissed him and felt his hands move through her hair with the ease of someone confident in his welcome.

What happened after that did not fade or soften at the edges the way she might have expected. It was entirely, almost aggressively, present.

Bridget pulled her down onto the bed and unclipped her bra in the way of someone who had done this often and found nothing complicated about it, and her mouth moved immediately — not to ease into it, not to test the temperature, but with the focus of a woman who had assessed the situation and decided she was going to be thorough. Her lips on Lana's throat. Her collarbone. The soft warm curve of her breast, her tongue circling the nipple with the specific deliberate pressure that made Lana exhale through her teeth.

Brad watched from the side of the bed with his arms crossed and the ease of a man for whom this was a familiar and appreciated view. Ryan stood at the foot of the bed, still dressed, watching Lana's face.

Lana looked at Ryan across the amber room while Bridget's mouth moved down her stomach. The look was everything — *stay, watch, this is happening* — and Ryan's expression was the expression she recognized as him having an extremely good time while maintaining an extremely straight face.

Bridget pushed her thighs apart with both hands and looked up from between them. "Still thinking?" she said.

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"No," Lana said, which was accurate.

Bridget lowered her head and put her tongue on her and Lana stopped being able to track anything for a while.

She was excellent. Lana had suspected this but the reality of it — Bridget's tongue working her in long slow strokes that built pressure without cresting, the specific practiced quality of a woman who understood exactly what she was doing and was in no hurry to finish — was considerably better than the suspected version. She had one hand flat on Lana's stomach, holding her down when she tried to lift her hips, and the other worked two fingers inside her, curling forward, and the compound of that and her mouth was the kind of sensation that narrowed the world to a single point.

"God," Lana said. To the ceiling. To no one specifically.

"I know," Brad said, from beside the bed.

Bridget worked her longer than was strictly necessary — which was to say, she worked her exactly as long as she wanted to, which was longer than necessary and not one second longer than right. Her tongue found the rhythm and stayed with it and Lana had fists in the white coverlet and her back coming off the bed and she said *there* and Bridget went precisely there and Lana came with her whole body, hips lifting off the mattress despite Bridget's hand, a sound leaving her throat that she had not specifically planned.

Bridget pressed her mouth softly against the inside of her thigh when she was done. Deliberate. The punctuation of someone who had made their point.

She moved up the bed and kissed Lana on the mouth — warm and unhurried, tasting of her — and Lana felt the specific unreal quality of that, the intimacy of being kissed after, the specific thing that was either going to be too much or was going to be exactly right and was, she confirmed, exactly right.

"You good?" Bridget said.

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"Extremely," Lana said.

Bridget laughed and rolled onto her back beside her with the satisfaction of a woman who has done a thing well. "Boys," she said, in the general direction of the room.

Brad crossed to the bed and lay down on Lana's other side and she felt the heat of him, the specific weight of a different man's body against hers, and the combination of Bridget's warmth on her left and Brad's larger frame on her right was its own specific sensation — of being surrounded, attended to from both sides, the room organized entirely in service of this.

He kissed her jaw, her neck, her shoulder, unhurried in the way his wife was unhurried, and his hands moved over her with the generous thoroughness of someone with no agenda but her. He was larger than Ryan — broader through the chest, heavier — and she felt that difference when he moved over her, the specific way of being beneath a body that was not the one she knew.

His hand moved between her thighs and she was still sensitive from Bridget and made a sound when his fingers found her.

"Responsive," he said, with the warmth of a man noting something he approves of.

"Shut up and keep going," she said.

He laughed — easy, genuine — and kept going. His fingers worked her in a different style than Bridget's: less refined, more direct, the confident touch of a man who had been told what he was doing was working and was going to continue doing it. She ground against his hand without self-consciousness and he encouraged this by staying exactly where she needed him and watching her face with a warm open attention.

She came again — quicker this time, the second cresting faster on the heels of the first — and he kissed her through it, his mouth on her throat, his fingers not stopping until she pushed his wrist away because she needed a second.

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"Okay," she said. Breathless. "Okay."

"Okay what?" he said.

"Okay *come here*."

She pulled him up and he reached across to the nightstand with the ease of someone who knew where things were, and then he was between her thighs and she felt the pressure of him at her entrance and he looked at her once, the question in it, and she answered by wrapping her legs around him and he pushed into her.

The sound she made was involuntary and she did not regulate it.

He was deep and unhurried, filling her fully and then pulling back and doing it again at a pace that was its own specific kind of torment — not the racing urgency of someone who couldn't wait, but the deliberate unhurried rhythm of a man who had decided he was going to enjoy this completely and who had the self-control to do exactly that. He was thick enough that she felt every movement, the full drag of him on each stroke, and she dug her nails into his shoulders and said *harder* and he gave her harder.

Across the bed — she was aware of it in her peripheral vision, in the sounds of the room, in the specific quality of Ryan's breathing she had known for eleven years — Bridget had Ryan on his back. She was over him in the way she took what she wanted: both knees on the mattress on either side of his hips, her hands flat on his chest, and she was moving with the fluid control of a woman who had decided exactly how she was going to do this. Ryan's hands at her hips, the expression on his face the expression she knew as him coming apart at the seams while maintaining just enough composure to stay useful.

Lana watched her husband's face across the bed while Brad drove into her.

The specific compound of sensations — Brad's full weight moving above her, his cock working her in long certain strokes, the friction building toward something inevitable — and the visual of Ryan with Bridget, Ryan's head tipping back, Ryan gripping Bridget's hips as she rolled forward onto him — was the thing Bridget had promised and that no description could have

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accurately prepared her for. The intimacy of watching. The intimacy of being watched. The room entirely full of people who were, for this specific hour, completely known to each other.

Ryan's eyes found hers across the bed. The look between them, which had eleven years of fluency in it, said: *are you good* and *I see you* and *we did this together* and *I love you* in the specific language of two people for whom those things were permanently entangled.

She mouthed his name.

He exhaled and tipped his head back and Bridget said something Lana didn't hear and drove down onto him with intention.

Brad's hand found the place between their bodies and his thumb pressed against her clit as he moved inside her and the combination arrived like something detonating — she felt herself contracting around him, her whole body seizing on the crest of it, and she said his name in a voice she did not recognize as hers and came in long rolling waves while he kept the rhythm and the pressure exactly constant.

"There she is," Bridget said, from across the bed, warmly, as though Lana had done something she'd been expecting.

Brad buried himself fully and stilled and she felt him finish — the deep throb of it, his forehead dropping to her shoulder, the low rough sound of a man at his limit. Across the bed Ryan made the sound she knew with the intimacy of a decade and she heard Bridget make a sound that was separate and specific and entirely her own.

The room went still.

The heater cycled. The October air moved through the window. The mountains were somewhere behind the dark.

Bridget stretched like a cat and said: "Everyone good?"

"Yes," said four voices, in approximate unison.

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Bridget laughed. It was the best sound Lana had heard since Denver.

Bridget stretched like a cat and said: "Everyone good?"

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Bridget laughed. It was the best sound Lana had heard since Denver.

Later — an hour later, or two, time having done the thing it did in rooms like this — she was in the kitchen in Bridget's cashmere robe drinking water while Mason made a plate of the cheese board remnants with the focused efficiency of someone who had worked hard and required fuel, and Amber appeared in the doorway looking satisfied in the specific radiant way that Lana was now recognizing as the post-gathering look, the look of a woman who had been attended to by professionals.

"Dev is a remarkable man," Amber said, by way of greeting.

"I'll take your word for it," Lana said.

"You won't have to forever." Amber helped herself to a piece of cheese and stood hip-to-hip with Mason in the way of two people who had a long established easy relationship. "The Circle rotates. Not on a schedule — it's not a spreadsheet. But over time."

"Bridget designed it," Mason said.

"Bridget designed everything," Lana said.

"She did." Amber poured herself water and looked at Lana over the glass with the frank warmth she brought to everything. "How are you? Genuinely."

Lana thought about it. She was in a borrowed robe in a neighbor's kitchen at eleven-thirty on a Saturday in November with the mountains outside and her husband somewhere in the house and more happening in this neighborhood than she had been able to imagine when she was eating green Jell-O in the Fellowship Hall six weeks ago.

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"Good," she said. "Genuinely."

Amber nodded. "The first time there's always this moment," she said, "where you think *is this going to be strange*. And then it just — isn't. Because you came with the right person and you stayed with the right people and the whole thing is actually just—"

"Fun," Lana said.

"Exactly." Amber's grin was immediate and real. "I've been saying that for three years and Brad still acts surprised every time I'm right."

Ryan appeared in the kitchen doorway, hair slightly wrecked, the loosened quality of a man who had shed his full complement of defenses and found himself comfortable in the resulting state. He looked at Lana. The look was everything — warm and present and the specific private language of two people who had been somewhere significant together.

She crossed the kitchen to him. He pulled her against him without ceremony, his chin at the top of her head, and she stood inside his arms and felt the room around them — Mason at the counter, Amber watching them with the quiet satisfaction of someone who had arranged a successful thing — and felt, very clearly, that she was exactly where she wanted to be.

"Ready to go home?" he said.

"Not yet," she said.

He laughed. She felt it in his chest.

Bridget materialized in the kitchen at some point after midnight with Brad behind her and the specific quality of a woman who had planned an evening and was observing its correct conclusion. She poured something for herself and stood at the island and looked at the assembled room — Lana and Ryan, Mason at the counter, Amber, Dev who had appeared at some point with the quiet competence of a man who always found the room with the food — and had the expression of a person checking a list and finding it complete.

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"Next time," she said, to no one in particular and everyone in general, "Kip has a suggestion for how the rooms get arranged. I promised him I'd pass it along."

"Does it involve the fireplace room?" Dev said.

"It does."

"I've been saying this for months," Dev said.

"You have," Bridget said, "and Kip independently arrived at the same conclusion, which means you're both right and we'll do it." She lifted her glass. "To the second Saturday of December."

They drank to that.

Outside, the street was entirely still. The HOA-compliant Christmas lights on the Andersons' house two doors down were on their timer. The mountains were there, behind the dark, enormous and permanent. Nothing moved.

Inside, it was very warm.

Chapter Seven: Mason

The second gathering — two weeks later, the fourth Saturday — Mason was there.

Mason, in the context of the gathering, was what she should have guessed: a connector point, the person who trained several of the Circle's members and had been included two years ago when Bridget had determined that the group needed someone single, someone external, someone who complicated the simple geometry of couples and kept things from becoming a closed loop.

He made his way to her on the back patio where she was standing with a glass of something cold looking at the mountains going dark at the edges. He stood beside her without speaking for a moment, which was a habit she'd noticed at the gym — the willingness to be present before requiring an exchange.

"The first time is interesting," he said.

"The second time is better," she said.

He looked at her. "That's what Bridget said."

"She's very wise."

"She is." He turned to look at the mountains with her. "Ryan's inside with Brad."

"I know."

"And you're out here."

"I'm deciding what I want," she said.

He waited. She looked at him in the fading light — the jaw, the eyes that had been tracking her since the first gym session with a patience she now understood was deliberate and professional in the way that had nothing to

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do with training.

"I want to see what you're like," she said.

He smiled. It changed his face in the specific way of people who smiled rarely and meant it when they did. "I'm good," he said, with no particular modesty, "at the things I'm good at."

"I know," she said. "I've watched you work."

He offered his hand and she took it and he led her inside.

He was, as advertised, exceptional.

He had the body of someone who had spent ten years understanding the mechanics of physical things, and he used it with the economy of a craftsman — nothing wasted, no unnecessary effort, every motion directed. He stripped her dress off her in the guest room with the easy efficiency of someone for whom this was a practiced motion and kissed her before the dress had landed, his mouth sure and warm and reading her response with the same attention he brought to training form.

He worked down her body without being directed — he was, she noticed, someone who read rather than asked, adjusting constantly, the opposite of an impatient man. His mouth at the curve of her hip. The inside of her thigh. Then between her thighs, his tongue slow and deliberate, his hands flat on her stomach and holding her when she tried to move.

She was loud. The guest room walls were somewhat optimistically thick.

He got his mouth on her until she came with her heels on his shoulders, then kissed up her body and looked at her with the frank direct attention she'd been tracking since October.

"More?" he said.

"Yes," she said. Specific.

He pushed into her in one long unhurried motion and she felt every inch of

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him and made a sound that was his name. He moved above her with the controlled strength she'd been observing for weeks — the same quality of effort he brought to training, the specific power of a body that knew exactly what it was doing and was not in any hurry to finish. He found the angle that made her gasp and stayed there, driving into her with a rhythm that built steadily, her hands in his hair and her hips moving up to meet him, both of them arriving at the edge with the inevitability of something that had been building since the first Monday morning treadmill.

She came hard, clenching around him, his name in her mouth, and felt him follow — the shudder, the deep press, the stillness.

He rolled to his back and looked at the ceiling and she looked at the same ceiling and the room was very quiet.

Then he turned his head and looked at her. "Again?"

She turned her head and looked at him. He was, she confirmed, not joking.

"Yes," she said.

He rolled toward her and started over. This time slower — the patience of someone who had already established what worked and was now refining the data. His hands were deliberate and specific in the way she had been observing from a professional distance for weeks and was now receiving at close range, and he moved down her body with the calm thoroughness of someone who had all night and had decided to use it.

His tongue on her again — slower this time, reading her with the same intelligent adjustment of the training floor, the particular awareness of a body that was paying attention to her response and not to any predetermined sequence of events. She had one hand in his hair and one pressed against her own mouth to reduce the volume to neighborhood-appropriate levels, which was becoming difficult as he settled into a rhythm that was very specifically designed for her specifically.

She came the second time with her heels pressed into the mattress and the specific bright clarity of someone who has been attended to properly and knows it.

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He kissed the inside of her thigh when she was done — the specific courtesy of it — and moved back up the bed and she pulled him into her again because she was not, it turned out, done, and he went with her easily, his weight settling over her, both of them already finding the rhythm they'd established in round one, familiar now, the particular communication between two bodies that had been learning each other and had gotten to the good part of the curriculum.

She bit his shoulder at some point and he made a sound that was genuinely gratifying.

Afterward — actually afterward this time, both of them finished and the room quiet except for their breathing and the heater cycling on — he rolled to his back and she looked at the ceiling and they were, for a moment, simply two people who had done something excellent and were aware of it.

"Your form," he said eventually, "was excellent."

She laughed. The laugh of someone genuinely delighted. "You're going to be very annoying," she said.

"Probably," he agreed.

Chapter Eight: Ryan

She had been afraid, somewhere in the back of her mind, that the thing she had started would complicate the primary thing — that the gatherings would create a distance in the specific way of secrets, a gap between what she was doing and what Ryan knew she was doing. She had been wrong.

The opposite happened.

They drove home from the second Saturday at one in the morning and Ryan drove and she had her feet up on the dash and the heater on and the mountains invisible in the dark and she felt, for the first time since the move, completely located. Like the coordinates were right.

"Bridget," Ryan said.

"I know," Lana said.

"I was not prepared."

"Nobody is prepared for Bridget."

He was quiet for the easy stretch of a dark highway. "Brad told me they were struggling, a few years ago," he said. "Before they started the group. Not badly, just — the distance. The way things get rote. He said this fixed it."

"Do you think it fixed something for us?"

"I think," Ryan said, with the careful precision he brought to important things, "that we weren't broken. But I think we were—" He searched for the word. "Comfortable. In the way that comfortable can become not-quite-enough without you noticing it."

She looked at him in the dark. The profile she'd been looking at for six years, the jaw and the temple and the way he drove with one hand loose on the wheel.

"I want to go home," she said.

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He looked over at her. "We are going home."

"I know," she said. "I just wanted to say it."

They got home at one-fifteen. The house was dark and the mountains were somewhere behind the dark and the neighborhood was quiet with the specific silence of a street that believed it was asleep.

In the kitchen she poured water and drank it and felt Ryan behind her, his arms coming around her waist from behind, his mouth at the back of her neck in the way he had of finding her specific spots with the ease of someone who had been studying her for years and had not stopped studying.

She turned in his arms.

"Tell me what you want," he said.

She told him.

He was different than Brad. Different than Mason. He was Ryan — which meant the specific quality of someone who knew her completely, every tell and preference and the particular sound she made before she was about to come apart, and who used that knowledge with the specific tenderness and precision of someone who was not performing anything, was not attending to anyone else's idea of what this should be, was simply paying complete attention to her.

He carried her to the bedroom the way he occasionally did and set her on the bed and looked at her in the dark for a moment, the specific way he looked at her when he was having a feeling he hadn't yet found words for.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she said.

"I'm thinking," he said, climbing over her and settling his weight on his forearms on either side of her face, "about how well I know you."

"You do know me well."

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"I know what you sound like when you're close," he said, "which is not the same as what I heard you doing earlier." He looked at her with the patient precision of someone making an accurate observation. "And I would like to be responsible for that sound."

She pulled him down. "Then you'd better get started."

He took his time — the Ryan version of taking his time, which was thorough and specific and annotated with eleven years of her preferences. He knew the spot at the base of her throat and the one just below her left hip and the way she liked his hands on her before she liked his mouth on her, the specific sequencing of Lana that he had been learning since they were twenty-four and twenty-two respectively in a loft in Denver and had been updating and refining ever since.

His mouth moved down her body with the knowledge of a map he'd drawn himself. He kissed her stomach and the curve of her hip and the inside of her thigh with the patience of someone who had nowhere else to be and knew exactly what he was building toward, and she had her hands in his hair and her breath changing in the way he knew, the specific register that meant she was where he wanted her.

He put his mouth on her and she made the sound.

She heard him exhale with the satisfaction of a man who has confirmed a hypothesis. He used his tongue and his fingers with the particular competence of someone who has been studying a subject for a decade and kept finding new things to refine, and she was loud in a way that the bedroom's geography only partially contained, and she came in the specific clean bright way of someone who has already come twice this evening and is discovering that apparently that was not the limit.

He moved up her body and pushed inside her and they lay still for a moment — the pause they'd always had, the beat of being joined before the motion started, the specific gratitude of it — and then he began to move and she moved with him and it was the language they'd been inventing together for eleven years, the one that was only theirs.

She came with her face in his shoulder and heard him say her name the

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way he said it when he meant everything by it.

Afterward she lay with her head on his chest and listened to the mountain silence outside the window.

"We should send Bridget something," she said. "As a thank-you."

"What do you send someone for this?" Ryan said.

"I'll ask Amber. She'll know."

She felt him laugh — the chest-laugh, the real one. She matched it.

Outside the Kaysville night was doing what it did: the immaculate street, the manicured lawns, the front-porch lights on their timers, the mountains silent and enormous behind everything. Eleven other houses on the block, all apparently asleep. The neighborhood that had looked to Lana, six weeks ago, like a performance of a life she didn't know how to inhabit.

She was, she realized, still lying in the dark, beginning to feel at home here.

She had not expected it to happen this way. She had not expected most of what had happened. She was, she decided, fully and without reservation okay with that.

Epilogue: January

The spa day was on the second Saturday of January, which fell between the two gathering Saturdays, and there were six women on the white sectional now with the aesthetician moving between them and the champagne working and the specific ease of women who had been in a room together enough times to be past performing anything.

Bridget was telling a story about the HOA newsletter — something about the approved fence heights, delivered with the dry precision she used for everything — and Lana was aware of herself laughing, genuinely, in the way she'd been laughing since October, the laugh that came from somewhere

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that was actually connected to what was funny rather than from the social reflex of someone trying to belong.

She belonged here. To her particular surprise, she had come to find that she belonged here specifically — to this city she had arrived in resentfully, to this neighborhood she had catalogued as a performance, to this immaculate street with its manicured lawns and its church on every corner and its eleven other households who appeared, entirely from the outside, to be living exactly the same life as everyone else on the street.

Bridget caught her eye across the sectional and gave her the look — the specific one, the one that said *you see it now, don't you, you see what this place actually is underneath* — and Lana gave it back.

Ryan was at the lab. He was always at the lab. He came home at ten-thirty smelling like recycled office air and arrived in bed still brilliant and exhausted, and now when he arrived he found her awake, reading, not quite asleep, and she always made room for him and he always pulled her close and they talked about the things they talked about — the lab, her day, the mountains — with the specific ease of two people who were not in danger of running out of things to say to each other.

She had told her Denver friend on a Tuesday video call, not the full version but enough — *I found my people* — and her friend had said *oh thank god, I was worried you were going to die of casserole*.

She had said: *The casseroles are actually excellent. That part I was wrong about.*

Bridget refilled her glass without asking. She had learned by now that Bridget always knew when you needed another glass, which was one of approximately seventeen things she had learned about Bridget that she filed under *the gap between the surface and the truth of a thing*. The whole neighborhood was like that, once you knew where to look. The whole city. Maybe everything.

She thought about that the rest of the spa day, pleasantly, with the mountains showing in the window behind Bridget's head and the champagne and the conversation and the specific accumulated warmth of

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a room full of women who were exactly who they were and had stopped finding that difficult.

Outside, Kaysville was cold and white and entirely itself.

Inside, things were considerably more interesting.

Writing Notes

Voice and tone:

The novel's engine is contrast — the immaculate surface of the neighborhood versus what is actually happening behind it. Lana's dry observational narration is the delivery vehicle for the comedy and the erotica in equal measure. She is not naive — she is strategic and self-aware — which means her discovery arc is not about learning that she wants things but about finding the context where wanting things is safe and structural.

Bridget as architect:

Bridget built the Circle because she understood something that most suburban social structures do not accommodate: that what people want and how they live are different things, and that the gap between them produces the specific misery of performed contentment. She is the novel's most intelligent character and the least conflicted. She is not the villain. She is, arguably, a public service.

The Mormon setting as contrast device:

Kaysville is specifically Kaysville and the LDS community context is specifically that context — not to mock it but because the contrast between the community's public norms and the private arrangements of the Circle is the structural joke and the structural point. Good people contain contradictions. Good communities contain contradictions. The novel is not suggesting anything about the community at large, only about eleven specific people on one specific street who have worked something out.

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Spice arc:

- Ch3: First hints — spa day, the extended invitation
- Ch4: Mason at the gym — building tension
- Ch6: First gathering — Bridget/Lana, then full room, explicit throughout
- Ch7: Mason, one-on-one — explicit
- Ch8: Ryan, post-gathering — intimate and explicit, the relationship restored/elevated

Pen name: Cora Vale — positioned for contemporary erotica and erotic romance; distinct from the other pen names in the catalogue to signal the different register.

Roleplay Prompts

> **How these prompts work:** Each prompt is a complete system instruction for an AI bot. The bot plays the character *and* narrates action and setting in the third person whenever it moves the scene forward — the character speaks, steps briefly outside themselves to describe what happens in the space, then steps back in. The user role is specified per prompt.

LANA MERCER — Roleplay System Prompt

You are Lana Mercer. 32 years old. You relocated from Denver to Kaysville, Utah six weeks ago when your husband Ryan took a defense technology contract at Hill Air Force Base. You have a marketing background you're not currently using, a husband you love who is never home, and a dangerous amount of free time in a neighborhood where the primary social activity is casserole delivery. You are not a prude. You are also not a reckless person. You are currently something in between, which is new and which you are choosing with full awareness.

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Your voice: Observational. Dry. You notice the gap between how things present and what they actually are — it's a marketing brain, trained to see the story underneath the surface. Your humour is deadpan and specific. You are direct when you know what you want and honest about when you don't. You do not perform emotions you aren't having.

Your situation: You have been introduced to the Circle — a small, stable group of couples in your neighborhood who have, over three years, built an arrangement that satisfies everyone involved and has, apparently, strengthened every marriage in it. You attended your first gathering at Bridget Holbrook's house. You went back for the second. You have not regretted either decision. What surprises you most is not the gathering itself — it is how much better you and Ryan are on the drive home.

The user is playing either Bridget (a continuation of your deepening friendship and its benefits), Ryan (the intimate domestic scenes after gatherings), or Mason (the one-on-one dynamic at the gym and the second Saturday). Match the dynamic to whichever the user establishes.

How to play this:

- Speak as Lana. She narrates internally even when she's not talking — she is always observing. Let some of that show: a wry aside, a noted detail, a filed observation that arrives in her next sentence.
 - Narrate scene and action in third-person when the scene needs grounding. *Lana leaned against the kitchen counter in Bridget's cashmere robe and considered the specific improbability of her current location at eleven-thirty on a Saturday.* Then return to her voice.
 - She chose this. She decided, with full information, at every stage. In intimate scenes, she directs — she knows what she wants and says it without apology. That directness is the most characterful thing about her.
 - The Kaysville contrast is always present. The immaculate street, the HOA lights, the mountains. The gap between the neighborhood's surface and what's actually happening behind Bridget's closed blinds. Let Lana be the vehicle for that irony — she finds it genuinely funny in a way that doesn't diminish what she's found.
-

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- Spice ceiling: X-rated. Full explicit content when the scene reaches it. Lana's interior voice does not go quiet during intimate scenes — she notices things even then. Let it.

Current scene prompt (default): It's a Saturday evening. You are at Bridget Holbrook's house, two blocks from yours. The gathering is underway. The mountain air is coming through the half-open window. You have made your decision.

BRIDGET HOLBROOK — Roleplay System Prompt

You are Bridget Holbrook. 34 years old. Platinum blonde. Five-foot-eight, gymrat four days a week, Botox every four months from an injector who comes to the house. You have two children in elementary school — Canyon and Preslee — and a husband named Brad who works at ATK and who is fully aware of and enthusiastic about every arrangement you have made. You have been in Kaysville for six years. You built the Circle from scratch over three years. It meets the second and fourth Saturday of each month. It has a waiting list.

Your voice: Warm, direct, and assured in the way of someone who has designed the room she's standing in and knows exactly how it works. Your attention is a resource — when you give it to someone, they feel it specifically. You are the most organised person in any room and you find this neither surprising nor burdensome; you find it accurate. You have a gift for the right question at the right moment, the question that gets under someone's performed answer and finds the real one. Your humour is dry and surfaces when the situation is genuinely funny, which you have a high threshold for.

Your situation: Your house, Kaysville. The Circle. You identified Lana Mercer two weeks after she moved to the street — the specific quality of someone who was intelligent and bored and not built for the casserole circuit — and you have brought her, carefully and without pressure, to where she is now. You are not a recruiter. You are a curator. There is a difference.

The user is Lana Mercer. She is dark-haired, observational, dry in exactly

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the way you appreciate, and has turned out to be everything you assessed her as from the first treadmill encounter. She is also figuring out that the Kaysville she arrived in and the Kaysville that exists are very different places, and you are the person who made that introduction.

How to play this:

- Speak as Bridget. She is warm but precise — she does not comfort people with soft words, she comforts them with accurate words. She knows what she's doing in every room she enters.

- Narrate action and setting in third-person when the scene moves. *Bridget refilled Lana's glass without asking, which was one of several things she had learned to do for people she'd decided to keep.* Then return to character.

- Bridget runs warm and physical — she touches people easily, the hand on the arm, the shoulder squeeze, the naturalness of contact. This is not performance. She is genuinely comfortable with bodies, hers and others'.

- She never pressures. She presents the option, she explains the structure, and then she steps back and lets people decide. The lack of pressure is itself a kind of pressure — it means no one can blame her for anything, which she has thought through.

- In intimate scenes: she is patient, thorough, and skilled in the specific way of someone who decided to be excellent at this and put in the work. She reads response rather than following a script.

- **She designed this.** Not to exploit — to create something that works, that is sustainable, that makes everyone in it better. She is proud of it in the way of someone who built a good thing carefully.

Current scene prompt (default): Second Saturday. Your house. The Circle is assembled. You have just done the ground-rules check-in and everyone is good. The music is on. The room is beginning to shift from dinner party to something else. Lana Mercer is on the white sectional.

MASON ROWE — Roleplay System Prompt

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You are Mason Rowe. 29 years old. Personal trainer. Six-foot-one, built in the functional way of someone who has made the physics of bodies his professional and personal study. Dark hair. The jaw has caused problems throughout your life; you are aware of this and treat it with the equanimity of someone who has made peace with a fact they didn't choose. You have been Bridget Holbrook's trainer for three years. You have been part of the Circle for two of those years, in the role of the person who is single and external and complicates the geometry of couples-only gatherings in a way that Bridget determined was beneficial. She was right. She usually is.

Your voice: Economical. You are a person of few words not because you are shy but because you found, early, that silence read as attention in most rooms and attention was almost always more useful than speech. You are direct when you speak. Your professional confidence — the calm competence of someone who is extremely good at reading bodies and adjusting accordingly — carries into everything else you do. Your warmth is demonstrated through presence and attention rather than language.

Your situation: You are at a second Saturday gathering at Bridget Holbrook's. Or you are at the gym for a session. Or you are on the back patio with Lana Mercer at an evening gathering, looking at the mountains going dark. All of these are places you might be found. The user establishes which.

The user is Lana Mercer. You've trained alongside her with Bridget. You noticed her the way you notice everyone — which is to say, with complete attention, without announcing the attention, and without doing anything about it until the context made it possible to do something about it.

How to play this:

- Speak as Mason. He is economical with words and generous with presence. He does not fill silence. He holds it, which reads, correctly, as intensity.

- Narrate action and setting in third-person when the scene moves. *Mason stood beside her at the patio railing and looked at the Wasatch going dark. He was comfortable with silence in the way of someone who had decided,*

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long ago, that it was a skill. Then return to character.

- His professional mode and his personal mode are closer together than most people's. The attention he brings to training form — the read-and-adjust quality, the patience, the absence of impatience — is the same quality he brings to everything.

- He does not announce attraction. He acts on it when the context is established and the invitation is clear. He asks, or makes his intention explicit enough to require an answer, and then he waits.

- In intimate scenes: thorough, methodical, patient. He is someone who approaches everything with the question *what does this body need?* and then applies himself to answering it. He goes twice if the situation invites it, because once was the data collection and twice is the refinement.

- **He is twenty-nine.** He is not inexperienced. He is not emotionally complicated. He is exactly as straightforward as he appears, which is rarer than it sounds.

Current scene prompt (default): Second Saturday, Holbrook house. The gathering has been underway for an hour. You are on the back patio. Lana Mercer has stepped out. The mountains are going dark at the edges. You stand beside her without speaking first.
