

Her
Naughty
Mountain Man

C.L. Cruz

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Chapter 1

Claire

I press my forehead to the cool windowpane of Victor Thorn's luxury car, captivated by the sprawling mountains that rise before us. As Larkspur's skyline, marked by gleaming skyscrapers and the perpetual rush, recedes in the rearview mirror, I'm enveloped by the thick forests and jagged peaks. The serenity of the landscape contrasts sharply with the noise inside my head—the endless ringing phones, demanding emails, and the constant hum of life at Thorn Enterprises.

“We need this,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. This company retreat feels more like a momentary escape from the ever-encroaching confines of corporate life.

Victor glances over from the driver's seat, his usual guarded expression softening for a moment. “You're right,” he says. “Sometimes, it's essential to step away from it all.” His eyes flicker to the backseat, where his fiancée, Sophia, is nestled comfortably, her steady breathing indicating she's deep in sleep. “Especially now, with the new changes coming up.”

Seeing the soft look on Victor's face, I can't help but smile. "Sophia's pregnancy is such wonderful news. You two are going to be amazing parents. Honestly, Victor, it's been incredible watching you evolve over the years."

Victor chuckles, a hint of embarrassment coloring his features. "Thanks, Claire. I didn't realize how much I needed someone like her until she entered my life."

I pull my thoughts away from Victor and Sophia and back to myself. What's my version of happiness? What's my Sophia? The mountains outside have always drawn me in. It's partly why I got that little mountain tattoo on my wrist. A piece of the wild, a bit of freedom.

Growing up in a smaller town, I came to Larkspur for college and stayed because of the job at Thorn Enterprises. Back then, the position seemed like a game-changer. Victor didn't just see a receptionist when he looked at me. He saw potential. Trust grew between us, and over time, I became more than just the face behind the desk.

But in doing all that, in trying to fit into this city life, I feel like I've lost a bit of myself.

When my dad passed away last year, it hit me hard. How unpredictable life can be. It made me wonder if I was genuinely living my life or just going through the motions. The tattoo was supposed to be a reminder of my adventurous side, but most days, it feels more like a nudge about what I'm missing out on.

Would I ever find what Victor found? That clarity, that happiness that seems so obvious now when I look at him and Sophia?

The trees part momentarily, revealing a rustic wooden sign that reads, “Silver Pine Lodge.” We’re close. The lodge’s reputation as a premier mountain getaway is well-known in Larkspur’s elite circles. But today, spotting that sign, a different thought tickles my mind.

“You mentioned once that your brother lives around here?” I ask, recalling a fleeting conversation from months ago.

Victor nods slowly, his face unreadable. “Yes, that’s right. Liam.”

“Oh, Liam,” I echo, the name new yet intriguing. “Is he anything like you?”

A small smile tugs at Victor’s lips. “In some ways, yes. But he prefers the solitude of these mountains to the hustle of the city. He’s a bit of a wild spirit, to be honest.”

It’s strange to think of the polished and always-in-control Victor Thorn having a “wild” sibling. “Sounds interesting,” I muse, curiosity piqued.

Victor chuckles, “That he is. Maybe you’ll get to meet him while we’re here if he comes down from his cave.”

The road expands, giving way to Silver Pine Lodge. It’s impressive—massive logs and stone, with windows that mirror the forest around it. It feels as if the building belongs here, having been crafted from the very mountainside it rests upon.

The moment the car comes to a stop, I'm out the door. The air here is different—crisp, clean, and tinged with the scent of pine. A deep breath in and I immediately feel lighter, like some of the city's constant buzz has been stripped away. There's a simple clarity here that I've been missing, a stillness that, just for a second, makes everything seem possible.

As I take in the lodge, a man in his early fifties, with graying hair and a well-worn outdoorsy look, steps forward.

“Welcome, everyone, to Silver Pine Lodge,” he booms. “I'm Mr. Evans, and I'll be your concierge throughout this retreat.”

He proceeds to detail the upcoming schedule. “We've lined up some rejuvenating activities for you over the next few days. We'll begin each morning with gentle yoga on the lawn to clear your minds, followed by interactive workshops to help hone your leadership skills. There'll be brainstorming sessions in our conference rooms, which I must say, have some of the best mountain views. And, of course, we've scheduled team-building exercises and classes in the late afternoons.”

“But for today,” he continues, “after your long journey, we've planned a free period this afternoon. Take this time to explore the grounds, maybe do a bit of hiking, or just relax in your rooms. We'll gather in the main hall at 7 for the evening mixer.”

Looking around, I can already see varying responses to Mr. Evans' itinerary. Some from Thorn Enterprises, still in their pristine suits and heels, seem less than thrilled at the prospect of physical exertion. Others, however, can't wait to drop their

bags and explore. A few, probably those from the marketing team with their tight-knit camaraderie, are already planning their afternoon escapades.

Without much thought, I find myself walking over to Mr. Evans. “Do you have a map of the trails around here?”

He offers me a friendly smile. “Ah, a nature enthusiast, are we?” Without waiting for my response, he hands over a neatly folded map. “If you’re setting off alone, stick to the green trails. They’re beginner-friendly and well-marked. And always let someone know where you’re headed.”

“Thank you, Mr. Evans,” I reply, tucking the map safely into my pocket.

No need to wait. With the map in hand, I head for the nearest trail, ready to be surrounded by nature, if only for a little while. The sounds of chatter from my colleagues fade behind me, replaced by the calming chirps of birds and the rustling of leaves.

This, right now, feels like a piece of the freedom I’ve been searching for.

Chapter 2

Liam

The weight of the chisel in my hand feels familiar and grounding as I focus on the piece of wood on the bench before me. Its grain and texture demand precision, and every cut I make is deliberate, a testament to the years I've spent perfecting my technique. Woodworking is both my escape and my passion.

In my workshop, constructed in one of the many outbuildings on my mountainside property, aged timber and metal blend seamlessly, creating the perfect balance between old-world charm and necessary modernity. The scent of fresh wood shavings is comforting and natural, enveloping the space. Somewhere behind me, the radio hums a soft tune, its mellow notes barely noticeable amidst the rhythm of my work.

Adorning the walls are wooden creations of various shapes and sizes, each one a marker of a different time in my life—a chair, a bird carving, a detailed wall clock—all the results of countless hours of dedication.

Pausing for a moment, I let out a slow breath, appreciating the stillness before my thoughts inevitably drift back to Victor's message.

He'll be at the lodge this weekend. I can almost see it—him surrounded by his posse of suit-wearing elites, discussing mergers and deals. Everything with Victor is a transaction, a step up the ladder of success. It's not that I'm angry at him; we're just... different.

As different as the city skyline and the rugged mountain peaks.

Growing up, we faced a lot together. We tackled shitty family times, empty wallets, and impossible dreams. Victor thought making big in business was the way out. He chased that dream like a dog after a bone, putting distance between the world he wanted and the life we knew.

When he went off to college, I swapped skyscrapers for tall pines, city noise for mountain silence. It felt right, but it meant Victor and I grew apart. It wasn't drama, just life. That's probably why the thought of running into him at the lodge doesn't sit well. I still don't know if I'm even going to go down and see him.

I let out a frustrated breath. The piece I'm working on isn't keeping me distracted anymore. I need a break, some air. A hike, maybe. Get lost in the woods for a bit. Always helps clear the head.

Pushing away from the bench, I grab my old leather jacket off its hook by the door and step out, letting the shop door

click shut behind me. The immediate freshness of the mountain air fills my lungs. I've always found solace on the trails winding through these woods, so naturally, that's where I head.

I pick a familiar trail that's given me peace countless times before. The path is worn, and the tall trees on either side have seen generations come and go. As I walk, the rhythmic chirp of crickets and the distant call of a bird blend into a calming chorus. Every step I take is echoed by the soft crunch of leaves beneath my boots.

I feel a sense of detachment from my earlier frustrations first. But then, something breaks that detachment—a series of footprints, not the usual deep treads of hiking boots. They're light, delicate—probably a woman's. Not many venture out this far, and those footprints definitely don't belong to the regulars.

My eyebrows furrow, concern inching in. Why would someone unfamiliar be out here? A hint of protective instinct nudges at me. I start following the prints. Over the years, these mountains have sharpened my senses and made me a decent tracker, if I say so myself.

As I follow the footprints off the main trail, worry gnaws at my gut. Quickening my pace, I'm now not only driven by curiosity but also by the hope of ensuring the person, whoever she is, is safe.

The distant thrum of the waterfall gets louder, a sound I've come to associate with solitude. But as I get closer, there's a

different noise mixed in—someone crying. I tense up, not used to finding anyone in these parts.

Pushing through the last bit of underbrush, I'm met with a sight that stops me in my tracks. There she is—a woman sitting on a rock, her head buried in her hands. Even from this distance, I can tell she's been crying. Her dark hair hangs loose, a few strands stuck to her wet cheeks. Despite the mess, there's something striking about her. I notice her curves, how they contrast against the rugged terrain around her. It's an unexpected sight, and for a brief moment, I find myself staring.

I'm not the comforting type. Hell, I avoid people for a reason. But seeing her here, clearly out of her element and hurting, my protective side kicks in.

I take a step closer, and she must hear me because she jerks her head up. Her eyes, red from crying, lock onto mine. There's a flash of surprise, maybe even a hint of fear, in her gaze.

I don't waste time on niceties, my voice coming out gruffer than I intend. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says, then laughs at her own obvious lie. "Everything."

"Are you hurt?" I ask, my eyes scraping over her, trying not to linger too long on the swell of her breasts or the curve of her hip. There's no obvious injury, so I hazard another guess. "Lost?"

Her dark brows furrow. “Both?” she answers, but it sounds like a question.

“How can I help?” I ask, worry coloring my voice.

But she laughs again, wiping an arm across her nose. “My dad died,” she blurts out, her voice barely above a whisper.

I’m momentarily at a loss. “I’m... I’m sorry,” I manage.

She waves me off with a dismissive hand. “It was last year. But... I never got to grieve. City life, you know? Or maybe you don’t know.”

I’m taken aback by her frankness but also by the way she brushes off her own pain. It’s a defense mechanism I recognize all too well. “Loss is universal,” I respond.

She looks up at me, those red-rimmed eyes searching mine. “It’s all so noisy out there. Not just the sound, but the pressure. Everyone wants something from you. Everyone’s got expectations.” She gives a dry chuckle, pulling her knees up to her chest. “I came here to get away from it all, to find some clarity. But all I’ve found is more confusion.”

I nod slowly, every instinct urging me to bolt, but something in her raw honesty keeps me rooted to the spot. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I find myself silently urging her to continue, even though I’m usually one to dodge deep conversations.

“The worst part,” she continues, her eyes glistening with fresh tears, “is the loneliness. Even in a city filled with millions, you can feel so damn alone.”

That resonates. Whether it's the towering buildings of a city or the vast open wilderness, loneliness is another universal beast. I think of the times I've felt isolated up here, the vastness of the mountains both a blessing and a curse. While I've chosen this solitude, her words remind me that a person can feel unseen even in the crowd.

While I'm not great at this emotional stuff, I find myself wanting to reach out. Not just because of her distress but because, in a weird way, I get it.

"Can I sit?" I ask.

She scoots over and pats the flat piece of rock beside her. There isn't much space, so when I do sit, we're pressed together. For a split second, I let myself appreciate how her curves mold to the hard planes of my body and how she smells like vanilla and spices. But then, I brush those thoughts aside, focusing on our conversation again.

"Nature has a way of making things clear," I say, more gently than I thought I was capable of. "But sometimes, it takes a bit. The mountains can't fix everything straight away."

She smiles weakly at that, a genuine spark of gratitude in her eyes. I wonder if anyone's ever really listened to her before. Maybe, like me, she's more accustomed to being overlooked or misunderstood.

"I've been up here for a while now," I begin, looking out over the water. "The mountains... they've been my escape. When things got tough or I needed a moment to breathe, I came here."

“Why did you choose this place? The mountains, I mean,” she asks, her voice curious.

I chuckle, thinking back. “Honestly? The city and all its complications weren’t for me. It felt like a prison. I craved something raw, something real. Here, the mountains don’t care about my past or what anyone thinks. They just are. It’s uncomplicated.”

She nods slowly, absorbing that. “I envy that, you know. The ability to just... walk away from it all.”

I turn my gaze back to her. “It’s not that simple. There’s always a price. But it’s a price I was willing to pay.”

She looks at the water, then back at me, a playful glint in her eyes. “Ever tried skipping stones?”

I smirk. “Been a while, but yeah.” Picking up a flat, smooth stone from the ground, I hand it to her. “You?”

She laughs. “My dad tried teaching me once, but I was terrible at it.”

“Let’s change that.” I show her how to hold the stone, angle it, and release it. After a few failed attempts and some shared laughter, she gets the hang of it. Each successful skip seems to lighten the weight in her eyes, even if just a little.

As the sun begins its descent, we find ourselves talking about everything and nothing. She shares stories about the things she would miss if she were to leave Larkspur—her favorite cafe, the perfect macchiato, the rush of a crowded subway. I find myself trying to convince her that she wouldn’t

miss it, that there are better things, like early morning hikes to watch the sunrise.

“But I’m not a morning person,” she argues teasingly.

I hand her another stone and watch her line up to throw it. “Stargazing, then. You should see the sky without light pollution.”

Before we know it, a few hours have passed, and we’re both more relaxed, the earlier tension and sadness giving way to a comfortable camaraderie. We’re both back on our rock, side-by-side, legs pressed together.

She looks up at me. “Thanks,” she murmurs, “for listening. For being here.”

I nod. “Anytime.”

“You know, I don’t even know your name.”

Leaning forward, I wipe my hand on my jeans before offering it to her. “I’m Liam. Liam Thorn.”

Chapter 3

Claire

“I’m Liam,” my handsome stranger says. “Liam Thorn.”
And I swear my heart leaps into my throat.

Of course, he is. I don’t know how I didn’t put two and two together, but to be fair, I was having a bit of an emotional breakdown when he first appeared. Once the shock fades, I start laughing.

Liam raises an eyebrow. “Did I say something funny?”

I shake my head, trying to organize my thoughts. “No, it’s not that. It’s just ironic, I guess. I work for your brother, Victor. What are the odds?”

Liam doesn’t laugh, though. His eyes, previously a soft hazel, seem to darken a shade. The ever-so-slight tightening of his jaw and the way his shoulders square off tell me this news doesn’t sit comfortably with him.

His fingers brush his scruffy beard, a gesture that feels more reflexive than conscious, perhaps a way to collect himself.

When he speaks, his voice is even, a practiced calm that hints at years of keeping certain emotions at bay.

“That’s... surprising, but not unexpected,” he finally says, meeting my gaze again. “I knew he was here this weekend. It’s not that big of a world, I guess, despite how it feels sometimes.”

I get the impression of a man torn—caught between the walls he’s built around himself and the sudden intrusion of a world he left behind. The mountains might be his refuge, but today, they’ve brought a piece of his past right to his doorstep, dragging with it an overly emotional, blubbery mess.

We haven’t just quietly knocked; we’ve barreled right inside and made ourselves at home.

I decide to lighten the mood a little, motioning to his attire. “Not exactly the wild mountain man I was expecting, though.”

He chuckles, a deep, quiet sound, but doesn’t comment.

“I’m sorry for earlier,” I try again, referring to my emotional moment. “It’s been one of those days.”

Liam’s gaze softens. “No need to apologize. It feels kind of like...”

“It was meant to happen,” I finish for him, smiling sideways at him. “Like the mountains brought us together.”

“Exactly,” he says, his eyes searching my face.

We sit in companionable silence for a few minutes, the beauty of the setting sun and the gentle sound of the waterfall

enveloping us. For the first time in a long while, I feel like I'm right where I need to be.

Liam finally speaks, breaking the silence. "You know, if you're up for it, you could come back to my cabin. I have a workshop there that might give you a taste of the mountain life you were curious about. Plus, a hot tea wouldn't hurt on an evening like this."

For a moment, I hesitate. The thought of following a man I've just met, even one as intriguing as Liam, back to an isolated cabin sounds like the start of every thriller I've ever read. But there's a sincerity in his hazel eyes, a warmth that feels genuine. Besides, my earlier intuition about him had been spot on, so why doubt it now?

Seeing my hesitation, he adds, "It's not far, just up that trail." He gestures to a worn path winding its way through the trees. "You can leave whenever you want. And I promise, the only wild thing you'll encounter is maybe a nosy raccoon that likes to go through my trash."

His attempt to lighten the mood makes me chuckle. I also feel an irresistible pull toward him, an unspoken connection. More than that, I'm curious—not just about the life he's chosen but about the man himself. Why did he turn away from a life in Larkspur and Victor's world to seek solace here?

Taking a deep breath and throwing caution to the wind, I reply, "Alright, why not? I mean, how can I pass up an opportunity to meet a raccoon?"

He grins, and for a split second, I see a glimpse of a boyish charm underneath that rugged exterior. It's as if, in accepting his invitation, I've allowed him to momentarily let his guard down.

Liam leads the way, his tall, broad figure confident against the setting sun. The path is uneven, a test of my own city-slicker agility. But just as I stumble over a hidden root, Liam's hand shoots out, grasping my arm firmly, preventing a fall. My chest collides lightly with his back, and there's this moment where we're close, perhaps too close. Our eyes meet, a mix of amusement and something else, something deeper.

"Careful," he murmurs, a hint of teasing in his voice. "Mountain paths aren't as forgiving as city sidewalks."

I laugh, feeling the warmth of the blush creep up my cheeks. "Guess I'm a bit out of my element."

"We'll make a mountain woman out of you yet," he promises with a smirk, and I can't help but roll my eyes. Despite the playfulness, a glint in his eyes suggests he wouldn't mind that challenge.

We walk for a few more minutes, the silence comfortable but charged with anticipation. Finally, we arrive. Tucked among the pines, the cabin stands grand yet unassuming, its handcrafted wooden façade seamlessly blending with the surroundings. Large windows offer glimpses of the inviting warmth within. There's a sense of solitude, but not loneliness, about the place.

“This is home,” Liam states simply, but there’s pride in his voice.

I’m drawn immediately to the intricate carvings on the porch railings—whorls and patterns, delicately intertwined. Instinctively, I run my fingers over them, marveling at the craftsmanship.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe out, genuinely awed.

“I did those,” Liam says casually, but there’s a hint of vulnerability in his voice.

I turn to look at him, my eyes wide. “You? These are amazing!”

He chuckles softly. “Well, I’ve had plenty of time to hone my skills. And the mountains inspire me.”

Seeing my genuine surprise and appreciation, he points toward a smaller outbuilding not too far from the cabin. “Want to see where the magic happens?”

“I’d love to,” I reply, curiosity lighting up my face.

He opens the door to what appears to be his workshop, and I’m met with a sight that leaves me in awe. There’s a rustic charm that speaks of the mountains, but the pieces he’s crafted tell a story of intricate artistry.

“Wow,” I murmur, tracing my fingers over a beautifully carved wooden bowl. “You made this?”

Liam nods, looking almost shy. “Every piece has its story. This one?” He points to a wooden sculpture of two intertwined

figures. “Was inspired by an elderly couple I met in town. Been together for 60 years. Their love story was something else.”

He moves to another piece, a wooden clock with carved mountain ranges, perhaps mirroring the mountains outside. “This one reminded me of a particularly challenging climb I did last summer.”

I can’t help but glance down at my wrist, at the tiny tattoo of a mountain range that marks my own yearning. “Every piece here tells a story,” I say softly, my heart feeling a strange pull toward this man who carves memories into wood.

Liam nods, looking contemplative. “Woodworking is therapeutic. It’s not just about creating something. It’s about remembering, healing, celebrating.” He picks up a piece of wood and a carving knife. “Want to give it a go? Just a basic technique to start.”

The idea is daunting, but there’s an excitement bubbling within me. “Sure, why not?”

Liam positions me in front of a wooden bench, the tools laid out neatly in front of us. “Here,” he says, placing the knife in my hand. He adjusts the grip, ensuring I’m holding it correctly. I try to focus on his instructions, but my senses are on overdrive, hyper-aware of his proximity.

He steps in closer, his front pressing gently against my back. “Hold it like this,” he murmurs, his fingers guiding mine, showing me how to angle the knife and make a simple cut. His voice is low and soothing, yet every word sends shivers down

my spine. The warmth of his breath on my neck sends goosebumps across my skin.

It's as if the world shrinks to just the two of us—Liam's hands over mine, the soft scrape of the knife against the wood, our mingling breaths. Lost in the moment, I tilt my head slightly, and Liam seizes the invitation. His lips brush against mine, gentle at first, but growing more insistent.

The kiss deepens, driven by the passion of the moment. But as Liam's hands find my waist, a torrent of doubt hits me. My past relationships have all ended badly, and losing my father has made it even harder to let anyone close. And there's the undeniable fact that Liam is Victor's brother. If things go awry, it won't just hurt me personally but professionally as well. The realization hits like a bucket of cold water.

I pull away abruptly. "I'm sorry," I breathe, my chest heaving. "It's not you, it's just... it's complicated."

Liam nods slowly, stepping back to give me space. "I get it. It's okay."

"Is it?" I ask, feeling both guilty and relieved.

Liam runs a hand through his hair, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Look, I wasn't expecting this either. I've lived a pretty solitary life up here. But sometimes, you meet someone, and there's just... something."

I give a half-smile, trying to lighten the mood. "Something complicated?"

He chuckles, a genuine, deep sound that resonates in the quiet around us. “Seems that way, doesn’t it? But, I’ve learned from the mountains—sometimes you take the difficult path, not because it’s easy, but because it leads to the best views.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you calling yourself the best view?”

He laughs again. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m saying life’s too short to not explore the paths that present themselves, even if they seem challenging.”

I think about that for a moment, the weight of his words settling in. “I appreciate your perspective. And for the record, I do believe you’re worth the climb. But I’m not sure I’m ready to take on another mountain right now.”

He nods, understanding written all over his face. “Fair enough. And hey, no hard feelings. Let’s just chalk this up to a surprising day, and I’ll walk you back to the lodge.”

“Thanks, Liam,” I say, the warmth in my voice genuine. “Are you sure, though? What about Victor?”

He shrugs. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

The forest is darker now, shadows growing longer, and the path underfoot feels more treacherous than before. The sounds of the night come alive, with crickets and distant owl calls serenading us as we make our way back to the lodge.

Liam leads the way, but I soon find myself stumbling again over an exposed root. Instinctively, I reach out, grabbing his arm to steady myself. His reaction is immediate, strong fingers curling around my wrist, anchoring me.

He looks down with a hint of concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I swear I’m not usually this clumsy,” I reply with a sheepish grin.

Instead of letting go, he shifts his grip to hold my hand, ensuring I have better footing for the remainder of the walk. His hand is warm and reassuring, and while our earlier conversation explained why we shouldn’t venture further, this small gesture speaks volumes.

We continue our trek, with only the soft crunch of leaves for company. Just as the lights of the lodge come into view, providing a beacon in the growing darkness, a familiar voice breaks the silence.

“Liam?”

We both freeze, turning to see Victor emerging from the shadows, a look of surprise on his face. His eyes dart from Liam to our entwined hands and then to my flushed face, and I decide that maybe *this* is the worst that could happen.

Chapter 4

Liam

The air tightens around us the moment Victor's eyes latch onto Claire and me. There's that brief flash of recognition in his eyes, and I know he's put two and two together by the sly smirk forming on his lips.

"Claire," he begins, voice dripping with a mock reproach. "Missed you at the mixer. But now it's clear what you were up to."

Claire's cheeks redden, but she stands her ground. "It was a spontaneous detour," she says. Her voice doesn't waver, but I sense the faint tremor in her fingers where they brush against mine.

I shoot Victor a look, attempting to bridge the gap between us with an unspoken message. It's been years since we shared anything real, but in moments like this, the shared memories of childhood mischief resurface. He raises an eyebrow, a gesture that says, *You're in trouble, kid*—but with a playful undertone.

“Liam,” he says, his voice softer now, “join Sophia and me. We’re having a late dinner at the lodge.”

I’m about to decline, the reflex of a man who’s spent too long in solitude. But then I see Claire, her eyes pleading silently. She wants to see us reconciled, even if just for a night.

I exhale, my own hesitations melting away. “Only if Claire joins us,” I say, my voice firm.

Victor’s smirk widens. “Deal.”

The restaurant is nestled within the lodge, presenting a rustic charm with its wooden interior. It’s dimly lit, creating a cozy atmosphere, with large windows showcasing the outside.

Sitting by one of the windows is a woman with a gentle glow about her, probably due to her pregnancy. She stands as we approach, a soft smile playing on her lips. Victor, without missing a beat, wraps an arm around her protectively.

“Liam,” Victor begins, “this is Sophia, my fiancée.”

Sophia extends her hand with a welcoming smile, her demeanor kind and open. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Liam. Victor speaks of you, though I understand it’s been years since you two have connected.”

I grasp her hand, the touch brief but sincere. “Pleasure’s mine. Didn’t expect to be meeting you this way, to be honest.”

Victor clears his throat, avoiding my gaze momentarily before admitting, “Neither did I.”

Sensing the delicate moment, Claire steps in, “The place is lovely. The view, especially.”

Sophia nods enthusiastically, “The mountains are magical in the moonlight, don’t you think?”

I can’t help but agree. “They’re even better up close.”

Sophia’s eyes gleam with interest, “You’ll have to tell us some of your adventures later.”

We find our way to a booth, its leather seats surprisingly comfortable. I wind up sitting next to Claire, and I can feel the warmth where our shoulders brush against each other. The table is neatly set with white tablecloths, shiny cutlery, and clear glasses. Soft conversations from other tables fill the room, a mix of soft chatter and the occasional sound of clinking glasses.

Sophia glances at the menu, her eyebrows knitting together slightly. “Everything sounds so tempting,” she muses.

“It does,” Claire agrees, her fingers lightly tracing the descriptions. The slight movement is enough to draw my attention, and I wonder what it would feel like to have them lightly brushing my skin like that.

A waiter approaches, pencil poised above his notepad. As we relay our choices, I catch Claire opting for a salad with grilled chicken. I choose a steak, medium rare, feeling the weight of her gaze as I do so.

They chat about the retreat, and I can’t help but feel a bit out of place. My mind starts to wander, but Claire seems to sense

my detachment. She shoots me a comforting smile and then turns to Victor.

“You two must have had an adventurous childhood. Any stories you’d like to share?”

Victor hesitates for a moment, the memories clearly pulling at him, before settling on one. “Remember that winter when we couldn’t afford a proper sled? But that didn’t stop us.”

“Nothing much does,” Sophia says with a roll of her eyes.

I laugh, the image instantly coming to mind. “The old car hood! We dragged that rusted piece from the junkyard up the biggest hill we could find.”

Victor smirks, continuing, “Didn’t matter that we were freezing. It was the fastest sled on the hill. The other kids couldn’t believe it.”

I add, “Until it hit that tree. Damn, that left a mark.” I unconsciously rub my side, recalling the bruise that had lasted for weeks.

Sophia chuckles, “Sounds like you two were a pair of troublemakers.”

Victor nods, taking a more contemplative tone. “We had to be inventive growing up. Didn’t have much, but we made the best of it.”

Claire looks between us, clearly intrigued. “Any other creative solutions from the Thorn brothers?”

I smirk, remembering another escapade. “The fishing incident. We didn’t have a rod or any bait, but Victor here got the bright idea to use an old soda can and some twine.”

Victor snorts, “It worked, didn’t it? Until you decided to try catching that massive carp with it.”

“And I would have, too,” I retort, “If you hadn’t been laughing so hard and scaring all the fish away.”

As the stories roll on, it’s like looking through a dusty old photo album, each memory a snapshot of two young boys scrapping their way through the rough patches of Larkspur. Every tale carries the weight of those shared struggles, the times we stood back-to-back against the world. No matter how tough things got, there was a bond, and I can feel it rekindling now. Claire’s eyes dart between us, taking it all in, piecing together more of who I am from these fragments of the past.

The waiter brings our food, and the table goes silent as we dig in. After a few moments, Sophia can’t stand it anymore.

“To lighten things up a bit, how about we play a game?” she suggests. “Ever played ‘Two Truths and a Lie’?”

Claire looks intrigued. “I remember playing that back in college.”

Victor nods, a small smile forming. “Alright, I’ll start.” He thinks for a moment. “One, I once tried to start a band with Liam. Two, I’ve never broken a bone. Three, my first job was at a bakery.”

Claire leans forward, pointing to the second statement. “Your first job was at a garage. The third one’s a lie.”

Sophia gapes at her. “How did you know?”

“I’ve worked for the man for a long time. He likes to think he’s a closed book, but,” she stops and shakes her head, making Sophia laugh.

“You and I will have to go for drinks someday.”

Victor chuckles. “Oh, no you don’t.”

Sophia goes next, and then it’s Claire’s turn. “Okay,” she starts, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “One, I’ve gone skydiving. Two, I have a tattoo of a mountain range. Three, I’ve been to all fifty states.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. My gaze locks onto her wrist, the delicate outline of mountains peeking out. “Skydiving is the lie,” I guess.

Claire giggles in confirmation. “You’re right. But maybe one day.”

The game continues, and I’m up next. I lean back, pondering. “Alright, here goes. One, I’ve climbed Everest. Two, I’ve rescued a stranded hiker in a snowstorm. Three, I’ve gone a week without food.”

Victor laughs. “Everest is the lie. You always said it was too commercial for you.”

I nod, laughing with him. “True. But the week without food was by choice, mind you. Wilderness survival training.”

Claire looks over at me, impressed. “You’re full of surprises, Liam Thorn.”

Across the table, Sophia starts chiding Victor about his enigmatic nature, so I turn to Claire, who’s happily munching on her salad. While Sophia is elegant, Claire is a breath of fresh air. Her rosy cheeks and the natural curve of her figure give her a raw, earthy beauty. The delicate waves of her chestnut hair, not painstakingly styled but free, and her deep blue eyes make her all the more captivating.

She’s different. Real. And it’s this very authenticity that has me hooked, making her all the more beautiful in my eyes.

Leaning closer to her, the corner of my mouth quirks up. “Is it your turn again?”

“Just between us?” she asks, her eyes darting to Victor and Sophia, who are still lost in their own conversation.

“Just between us,” I confirm.

Her lips part slightly as she considers her revelations. “One, I’ve never made love under the stars. Two, I had a one-night stand with a stranger at a masquerade ball. Three, I once wore nothing but a trench coat in public.”

I consider her words, my eyes scanning her face for any giveaways. The mention of the trench coat stirs something primal within me. “The lie,” I say slowly, allowing the tension to build, “is the trench coat. That’s too daring for you.”

She leans in, her lips grazing my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “Wrong. It was a dare, and I never back down from

one.”

My heart skips a beat, picturing the scene she described. Claire, with nothing but a trench coat, strolling confidently through public. I clear my throat, leaning in, matching her intimacy. “Alright then, it must be the masquerade ball.”

Claire’s lips curl into a teasing smile. “You’re right. But I’ve always wanted to go to one, just never got the chance.”

My fingers graze her wrist, feeling the pulse quicken beneath her soft skin. “My turn, then?”

She nods, anticipation in her deep blue eyes.

“Alright,” I start, racking my brain for confessions to match hers in boldness. “One, I once let a woman tie me up in bed. Two, I’ve made love high up in the mountains at dawn. Three, I got caught skinny dipping by a group of tourists.”

She tilts her head, her fingers tapping on the table as she deliberates. “Alright, let’s see. The lie is... you got caught skinny dipping by tourists. I can’t imagine you getting caught doing anything.”

I grin. “Wrong. It was right after a long hike, and I honestly thought that lake was secluded. Those tourists got quite the unexpected sight that day.”

She laughs, a light, melodic sound that makes everything around us fade away. “Well, aren’t they lucky? But, alright, if that’s true, then the lie must be letting a woman tie you up in bed. I can’t see you giving up control so easily.”

Her intuition is spot on. I nod in affirmation, “Ding ding, right on target. But who knows, maybe for the right person...”

Her cheeks redden at the implication, and she playfully swats my arm. “But seriously, making love at dawn in the mountains? Sounds cold.”

I lean closer, whispering so only she can hear, “It’s all about finding the right ways to keep warm.”

She blushes deeper, her gaze darting away momentarily before meeting mine with a teasing spark. “Well, that’s one way to start the day.”

“Maybe even better than a macchiato from your favorite cafe?”

She blinks at me innocently. “Maybe with the right person...”

“What are you two giggling about over there?” Sophia’s voice chimes in from across the table, pulling us from our private moment.

“Any of you up for a post-dinner walk under the stars?” Victor asks.

Sophia raises an eyebrow at him, her red lips pulling into a teasing grin. “Astronomy, Victor? Really? Like that time you pretended to be all into star gazing to close that deal?”

Victor chuckles, sheepishly running a hand through his sleek hair. “It was a strategic move, Soph.”

Sophia leans into him, kissing his cheek. “Well, tonight, I’m more interested in spending our time indoors.”

I stifle a laugh, feeling the camaraderie with my older brother for the first time in years. The playful banter and subtle jabs are all too familiar from our youth. It’s comforting to see that despite all the changes and the time that has passed, there are things that remain the same.

Victor stands up, pulling Sophia close. “Alright then, a rain check on the stargazing. Liam, it’s been... interesting.” He gives me a pointed look, which I return with a raised brow. “We should do this more often.”

“Definitely,” I reply, hoping he means it.

Sophia leans over, giving Claire a warm hug. “Take care of our mountain man here.”

Claire chuckles, nodding. “I’ll do my best.”

Victor and Sophia make their way out of the lodge, their voices fading into the distance. Claire and I are left in a comfortable silence, the warmth from our game of truths still lingering.

She hesitates for a moment, glancing up at the canopy of stars visible through the large windows of the lodge. “Shall we?” she asks.

I offer my arm, which she accepts with a soft smile. Together, we head outside. The mountain air is crisp, and a slight chill sends goosebumps racing across my skin. As we walk, the gravel crunches softly beneath our feet, but it’s the

sky above that truly captures our attention. The vast expanse of the heavens, unpolluted by city lights, displays a tapestry of twinkling stars.

“You see that cluster of stars over there?” I point toward a distinct grouping, looking down at Claire to ensure she’s following. She nods, her face upturned, her eyes sparkling.

“That’s the Pleiades. Locals have a legend tied to it. They say that centuries ago, seven sisters were turned into doves to escape a great beast. They flew so high that they turned into stars, and now they watch over these mountains, keeping them safe.”

She tilts her head, examining the constellation with new appreciation. “That’s beautiful. Imagine having that kind of connection to a place.” She shifts her gaze from the stars to me, her eyes probing. “Have you ever felt that way?”

“The first time I came to these mountains,” I confess.

“I know what you mean. Today, with you, this place... it feels special.”

We stand close, the vastness of the night sky making everything else seem insignificant. I lean down slightly, and she tilts her head up, our lips meeting softly. It’s a gentle, almost questioning kiss, as if we’re both trying to figure out the pull we feel toward each other. This time, she doesn’t pull away or make excuses.

This time, she’s mine.

After a lingering moment, she sighs into my mouth as we pull apart. “It’s getting late,” she murmurs, looking slightly dazed.

“I should head home,” I say, though a part of me wishes I could stay in this moment forever.

She nods slowly. “Thank you for tonight. For the legends, the truths, and... everything else.”

I give her a soft smile. “Anytime, Claire. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Liam.”

Chapter 5

Claire

The hum of voices blends with the faint scent of dry-erase markers and stale coffee. Despite the effort put into each presentation, the ideas of scaling profit margins and leveraging corporate synergies blur together in a monotonous drone. By the third workshop of the day, my focus has shifted from pie charts to pine trees.

Every so often, the memory of water cascading down rocks and the warmth of Liam's touch jolts me back to last night. His rugged face, his deep hazel eyes, the intimacy of our shared moment—all of it feels like a dream I'm yearning to relive.

Rachel, my colleague, nudges my elbow, her voice barely a whisper. "Earth to Claire? You've been miles away all day."

I smile sheepishly, forcing my gaze back to the screen where another PowerPoint slide beckons. "Just lost in thought."

The truth is, all I want is the freedom of the mountains, the escape they offer, and the possibility of seeing Liam again.

The moment the final speaker says, “Thank you for your time,” I’m on my feet, notebook and pen already forgotten on the conference table. I make my way to my room, an urgency propelling me forward. Within minutes, the day’s paraphernalia is tossed carelessly on the bed, and I’m back in the lobby.

The lodge’s heavy wooden doors swing open, revealing the expansive view of the mountains, painted gold and crimson by the setting sun. But it’s not the view that captures my attention. It’s him.

Liam stands there, leaning casually against the wall. The scruff of his beard catches the sunlight, and the white of his shirt contrasts sharply with his tanned skin.

I slow my steps, a smile playing on my lips. “What are you doing here?”

Liam pushes off from the wall, closing the distance between us. “I’m here to take you out,” he says. “If you’re free.”

“I just might be,” I reply, intrigued, glancing at my empty hands. “Do I need to bring anything?”

He holds up a basket. “Got everything we need right here. Thought a picnic might be a nice break from all of the corporate bullshit.”

I study him for a moment, my heart warming at his unexpected gesture. “You planned this?”

Liam scratches the back of his neck, his usual confidence replaced by a hint of vulnerability. “I haven’t been able to get

you off my mind.”

I bite my lip, touched by his admission. “Well then, lead the way.”

The world seems to fall away as we wind deeper into the woods, Liam’s hand warm and reassuring in mine. Birds chorus overhead, the sounds of their songs merging with the distant murmur of water. Suddenly, the trees part, revealing a secluded glade bathed in the soft, golden light of the sinking sun. At its center, a large pond reflects the sky, its surface disturbed only by the occasional leap of a fish.

Liam gestures grandly. “Welcome to my secret hideaway.”

“It’s magical,” I breathe, taking in the tranquil scene.

He starts unpacking the picnic basket, revealing a spread that makes my mouth water: soft cheese, crusty bread, fresh grapes, and slices of cured meat. A bottle of wine, its label worn by time, sits nestled among them.

“Thought we’d keep it simple,” he says, looking up to catch my reaction.

I sink down onto the blanket. “Simple and perfect.”

As we eat, our conversation flows naturally, punctuated by laughter and knowing glances. He shares tales of mountain life—of wildlife encounters and navigating treacherous terrains. In return, I regale him with humorous anecdotes of his brother in the corporate world, causing him to chuckle.

As he pops the cork on the wine, I find myself lost in thought. “You know,” I start, hesitating, “Lately, I’ve been

thinking of moving. Starting fresh somewhere.”

Liam raises an eyebrow, seemingly taken aback. “Away from Larkspur?”

I nod, toying with a grape. “Away from the skyscrapers, the traffic, the endless grind. Maybe somewhere closer to nature.” I glance up, meeting his eyes. “Somewhere like this.”

He leans back, studying me. “It’s a big step, especially with Victor and everything you’ve built in the city.”

“It is,” I admit, “but there’s a part of me that feels trapped. I want something more authentic, more... real.”

Liam’s fingers graze the rim of the wine glass, the light catching the amber liquid inside. He seems momentarily lost in thought, the weight of my confession settling between us. Then, with a deep breath, he meets my eyes.

“It’s funny,” he begins, his voice softer now, “how the mountains can be both a refuge and a prison. I came here to find freedom, but sometimes I wonder if it’s all just another way of running.”

He takes a sip, letting the wine linger on his lips before swallowing. “You’re right about the authenticity of this place, about the realness of it all. But facing what you’ve left behind is another kind of realness.”

I swallow hard, taken aback by his vulnerability. “Do you regret coming here?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No. This place healed parts of me I didn’t even know were broken. But meeting you, being

forced back into Victor's orbit... it's made me realize there are still shadows I've yet to face."

His words hit me harder than I expected. We're both a bit lost, aren't we? Here I am, dreaming of the mountains to find myself, and there he is, using them as a hideaway from his past. It's almost like we're two sides of the same coin, both running but in different directions.

It's funny; I thought coming here would be about escaping my life, not comparing notes on soul-searching with a guy who probably knows how to wrestle a bear. But damn, life has a way of throwing curveballs. And if Liam is my curveball?

Well, let's just say I'm up for the challenge.

Glancing at the pond, its surface shimmering in the last dregs of daylight, a bold idea strikes me.

"What do you say to a swim?" I blurt out, my eyes dancing with mischief.

Liam's brows shoot up, his eyes widening. "It's going to be freezing," he warns, but his eyes show a playful glint.

"Well," I shoot back, tossing my hair over one shoulder, "life's about taking risks, right?"

He chuckles, casting a longing look at the water. "You're going to be the death of me, city girl."

I laugh, peeling off my clothes until I'm down to my undergarments. As I glance up, I feel the intensity of Liam's gaze, the heat of it more potent than any sun. His eyes trace

the curves of my silhouette, and a rush of exhilaration mingles with my nerves.

For a beat, he's still, drinking in the sight of me. But then, with that signature smirk, Liam begins to undress. The fading sunlight reveals the hard planes and contours of his body, and I can't help but admire how the shadows play against his muscled frame. He's rugged and undeniably handsome.

Taking a deep breath, I tear my gaze away and race toward the water, plunging in with a loud splash. The cold is a shock, biting at my skin and making me gasp. But it's exhilarating, like a jolt of pure energy.

Liam's a heartbeat behind, crashing into the water with a roar. We both surface, laughing and gasping at the cold. The world feels electric, alive in a way I've never experienced before.

"Okay, okay, you were right!" he admits, splashing water at me, his teeth chattering. "This was a brilliant idea."

I squeal as the water hits me, retaliating by sending a wave his way. Liam dodges my returning splash with an agile twist, and the game is on. We chase each other, darting in and out of the shadows on the water. Every now and then, a hand grasps an ankle or a waist, pulling the other one under, only to be met with laughter and spluttering protests.

The chill, which at first had been biting, starts to become a background sensation as the warmth of our playful exertions takes over. Liam's eyes shimmer with mischief and something

deeper, something that sends a jolt of anticipation right through me.

Suddenly, I misjudge a step, stumbling into a deeper part of the pond. Before I can react, strong arms encircle my waist, pulling me flush against Liam's chest. We're both panting, the cold water making our breaths come out in visible puffs. His gaze is locked onto mine, the playful challenge from earlier replaced with an intensity that makes my heart race.

His fingers trace patterns on my back, sending ripples through the water and shivers down my spine. Our laughter dies down, replaced by the heavy rhythm of our breathing and the soft chirping of nocturnal creatures.

For a moment, we simply float, the water's coolness contrasting with the growing heat between us. Liam's eyes search mine as if asking a silent question. I answer by closing the distance between us, our lips meeting in a gentle, lingering kiss. Liam's hands slide up my back, tangling into my damp hair.

Breaking from the kiss, Liam gazes at me with a raw intensity that sends a thrill through me. "I can't resist you," he murmurs, his voice husky.

"I don't want you to," I reply, my fingers tracing the contours of his chest.

With a fierce hunger, Liam lowers his lips to mine again, claiming my mouth. His kisses are urgent, demanding, and I respond eagerly, my body craving more.

Liam's hands roam down my back, cupping my backside and pulling me closer to him. I moan into his mouth as I feel his growing hardness press against my thigh, sending a shock of desire through me. With one hand on the back of my neck, he slides the other hand between us. His fingers lightly brush my breast, teasing my nipple to a hard peak beneath my wet bra. Then lower, over my stomach and below the waistband of my panties. His skin is warm against my chilled flesh, and I shudder as his fingers probe the soft, sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

My breath hitches as he trails his touch over my folds. I'm already soaking wet and moan openly when he slides a finger inside me. Liam pulls back and looks into my eyes, his lips parting as his gaze rests on the pleasure written all over my face.

A spasm of heat shoots right through me as he starts to move his finger, thrusting in and out of me in a steady rhythm. I roll my hips, riding his hand, and he cups my other breast, tweaking my nipple between his fingers.

My head is whirling, my body on fire. Liam's kisses are like flames, licking at my skin and spreading a delicious heat through my body.

As the heat builds, he thrusts his finger deeper, adding another one as he kisses me with fervent need. I can feel the coil tightening, my orgasm rising like a wave. Liam's tongue delves deep into my mouth as he pumps his fingers inside me,

and I cry out, my body unraveling as my orgasm shatters my very core.

I'm floating in a haze of bliss as Liam pulls his fingers out and lifts me against his chest, kissing me tenderly as we sink into the water. We sink to the bottom, settling on the soft, muddy bottom, our faces just above the waterline. Liam's arms are wrapped around me, holding me close.

"You're not a city girl at all," he whispers, his breath hot against my hair and skin. "You're a wild woman."

I press my lips against his neck, nibbling and playfully sucking on the skin. "Don't forget it," I tease.

With a grin that I feel against my cheek, Liam gently pushes me ahead of him, kissing my neck and shoulders as we make our way to shore.

Dripping and slightly shivering, we sit side by side on the grassy edge of the pond, our legs pulled up to our chests. The cool breeze brushes against our wet skin, causing goosebumps to rise. Liam drapes an arm around me, pulling me close for warmth. I tuck a stray strand of damp hair behind my ear, suddenly self-conscious in the stillness. The delicate mountain tattoo on my wrist feels more pronounced now, as if it's channeling the very energy of the mountains surrounding us.

Liam seems to sense my introspective shift, his hazel eyes flicking to my wrist. "I've noticed that before," he says, nodding toward the tattoo. "What's the story?"

I trace the tiny peaks with my fingertips. “It’s a reminder,” I begin. “I grew up in a small town, and when I moved to Larkspur for college, I thought the city held all my answers. But after my father passed, it made me realize how short life is. This,” I gesture to the mountains, “is a promise I made to myself. To find what truly matters.”

Liam nods, his gaze distant. “You know, it’s funny. I fled to the mountains to escape the pressures of the city, my family, everything I knew. But in the stillness up here, you can’t run from yourself.”

I look over at him, my heart aching at the depth of pain in his eyes. “Victor?”

He exhales deeply, his chest heaving in the dim light. “Among other things. We grew up together, fighting for every scrap, every opportunity. But our paths diverged. He wanted power and status; I wanted authenticity. The mountains were my refuge.”

After a moment of silence, I watch as Liam absently picks up a small twig from the ground, his fingers deftly twisting and turning it. I think of his shop and the beautiful pieces he created.

“Tell me about your woodworking,” I say.

He gives a little half-smile. “There’s something deeply cathartic about taking a raw piece of wood, with all its knots and flaws, and turning it into something beautiful.”

I turn my gaze to him, intrigued. “Is that what drew you to it?”

Liam nods, his eyes softening. “Yeah. The mountains offered me solitude, but woodworking gave me focus. Each stroke and cut became a way to process the chaos inside. To give it shape, purpose.”

“That sounds... healing,” I reply, marveling at the depths of this man beside me.

He smiles a bit sheepishly. “You know, I’ve thought about offering woodworking workshops. A space for others to find that same peace, to channel their own emotions. Maybe it could be a form of therapy. It’s done wonders for me.”

A warmth spreads through my chest, admiration for Liam and his vision. It makes me want to share my own.

“My dad loved the outdoors,” I tell him, a hint of a smile playing on my lips at the memory. “He always believed that if you’re feeling lost, just step outside. Sometimes, I’d find a weird kind of comfort just sitting in a park or going for a long drive through the countryside. It’s those tiny moments, you know?”

He nods. “Yeah, it’s those unexpected things that can make you feel a bit more grounded.”

I pause for a moment, gathering my thoughts. “You know, I didn’t study business to end up just answering phones. Working for Victor is okay for now, but it’s not the endgame. I’ve been toying with this idea of starting something that taps

into nature's therapeutic side—a retreat or center, maybe. Especially for people who've been through loss. Somewhere they can find an outlet, whether it's through an activity like woodworking or just escaping to the mountains for a while.”

Liam looks thoughtful. “You've got passion and the know-how, Claire. I think there's potential in that idea.”

My heart flutters at his words, hope and possibility blossoming inside. Maybe, just maybe, the mountains hold the answers I've been searching for.

“Imagine we do it together,” I say, nudging his side.

Liam chuckles, the sound echoing softly across the pond. “Woodworking and wellness? Sounds like a unique combo.”

I grin. “Well, isn't that the point? Give people something they've never experienced before.”

He raises an eyebrow, playfully skeptical. “So, we'd have them chopping wood in the morning and meditating by the pond in the afternoon?”

I laugh, imagining the scenario. “Why not? Sounds like the perfect day to me.”

He smirks, looking sideways at me. “And what would we call it? ‘From Timber to Tranquility?’”

I giggle at his suggestion. “That's... actually not bad. But maybe something like ‘Mountain Muse Retreats?’”

Liam nods in mock seriousness, stroking an imaginary beard. “I can see it now: sunrise yoga on the mountainside,

mid-morning woodworking, followed by a lunch of locally sourced, organic foods. And to round off the day, a group reflection by a campfire.”

I join in, warming to the idea. “Ooh, and maybe weekend workshops with guest speakers or instructors. Like, a pottery class one weekend and a nature photography course the next.”

He taps his chin thoughtfully. “And every guest goes home with a wooden memento they crafted themselves. A tangible reminder of their journey.”

There’s a brief pause as we both lose ourselves in the fantasy. Then I lean in, bumping his shoulder. “This could actually work, you know? I mean, I know we’re just brainstorming here, but there’s something about this idea.”

Liam shrugs, a slow smile forming. “Who knows? Maybe the mountains are telling us something.”

I smirk, my gaze drifting to the vast expanse around us. “Or maybe we’re both just hypothermic from our impromptu swim.”

Liam laughs, pulling me into a gentle hug. “Either way, it’s been one hell of an evening.”

As the moon rises, casting dappled shadows across the pond, I can’t help but feel like there’s a sense of boundless possibility in the air.

Chapter 6

Liam

The warm, woody aroma of freshly ground coffee fills the lodge's cafe as I settle into a corner booth. The soft hum of hushed conversations around me is a gentle backdrop to my restless thoughts. In front of me, a macchiato sits, steam curling from its surface—Claire's favorite.

Last night's memories surge forward, and I can almost feel the soft weight of her laughter as we talked, the press of her lips against mine, the electricity of our shared dreams. Our bond, formed so rapidly, feels old and timeless, like it's been simmering for years, just waiting to be discovered. But as quickly as the warmth floods in, an icy realization douses it.

She's leaving soon.

The thought gnaws at me, a constant reminder that this brief interlude could be just that—an interlude. That our shared night, the words we exchanged, and the tentative future we painted will vanish like mist under the morning sun.

I tug at the rim of my coffee cup, distractedly swirling the liquid inside. I know she'll be out soon from her workshop. Every time that cafe door moves, my heart races, ready to grasp any extra moments I can get with her before the inevitable goodbye.

The chime above the cafe door rings, drawing my gaze. Claire steps in, her blue eyes sparkling with a mix of excitement and anticipation. She's a sight to behold: her curvaceous figure confidently filling the space around her in a way that captures attention without demanding it. She scans the room and, upon spotting me, her face breaks into a warm smile. Her lips, full and inviting, curl up in a way that stirs something deep within me.

"Hey," she greets, sliding into the booth across from me.

"Hey yourself," I reply, my voice a bit gruffer than intended. "Got this for you," I nod toward the drink.

"Thank you," she says, wrapping her hands around the cup. Her fingers brush against mine, a fleeting touch that sends a ripple of warmth through me. "Is this a macchiato?"

"It is," I say with a nod. "I thought you could see how it compares to the one you get back home."

Smiling, she takes a sip, twisting her face into a contemplative look. "Not bad," she says. "Not perfect, but not bad."

I let her savor the warmth of her drink before asking, "So, how was your day?"

Leaning forward across the table, she says, “I was just in this workshop about scaling innovative projects. And all I could think of was our idea, our center.” She takes a sip, her gaze locked onto mine. “It might have started as a fantasy last night, but now, it feels... tangible.”

I try to keep my expression neutral, but the surge of her enthusiasm, just after my bout of doubt, sends me reeling.

She leans forward, her voice tinged with excitement. “I was thinking about potential funding. If we present it right, get a solid business plan together, we could get this off the ground. Victor could be a great resource, or maybe even Thorn Enterprises could collaborate. The possibilities are endless.”

I blink, trying to process her words. Victor? And Thorn Enterprises, the corporate giant I had so deliberately distanced myself from? The magnitude of her proposal feels overwhelming.

Claire continues, her eyes shimmering with determination. “This feels right, Liam. We could make such a difference, forge a new path in wellness.”

The warmth in the room starts to feel suffocating. Claire’s excitement and belief in this dream are both exhilarating and intimidating. The weight of my own past begins to press heavily on my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

She speaks of forging a new path, but all I can think of are the paths I’ve walked before—the broken bridges, the strained ties with Victor, the rebellious streak that has so often been my downfall.

How do I mesh that with this new world Claire envisions?

“Are you okay, Liam?” Claire’s voice breaks through my spiraling thoughts.

“No.” The word leaves my mouth before I can stop it. It’s harsh, definitive. “This isn’t some business venture you can pitch to Victor and get wrapped up in a pretty corporate package.”

Claire blinks, taken aback. “I thought we were in this together. Why are you suddenly so against the idea?”

“Because it’s naive,” I snap, my voice sharper than I intend. The weight of commitment, of vulnerability, presses in. I’m no businessman. How could I possibly live up to her vision? “It’s not as simple as presenting a plan and expecting it to work.”

“I know it’s not simple, Liam,” she retorts, her voice laced with frustration. “But it’s worth trying, isn’t it?”

I think of the life I’ve carved in the mountains, my sanctuary away from the world’s demands. The thought of merging that with a structured venture terrifies me. And there’s Claire, with all her dreams and hopes, ready to dive headfirst into the unknown. My protectiveness surges, clouding my judgment.

“You don’t get it,” I say coldly. “You’re ready to give up everything on a whim, on a dream we shared for one night. Have you even thought about what you’re risking? You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

Her eyes, moments ago filled with hope, now brim with hurt. “Maybe I don’t,” she replies, her voice quivering, “but at least

I'm willing to try."

She rises abruptly, leaving behind the unfinished macchiato. The sting of unshed tears in her eyes hits me hard, but she's gone before I can find the words to stop her.

I'm still watching the door when someone else approaches the table. Polished wingtips. Perfectly creased pants. A gold Rolex.

Victor.

He sits across from me without being invited. Of course.

"That was... interesting," he says. "You okay?"

I shoot him a glare. "What do you want, Victor?" My voice is sharper than intended, but I can't help it. The rawness of Claire's departure still stings.

He raises an eyebrow, his cool blue eyes studying me. "You're as stubborn as ever, Liam. But you're also being shortsighted. This isn't just about Claire; it's about you too. You can't keep hiding in these mountains, avoiding everything."

I clench my jaw, my resentment bubbling to the surface. "I'm not hiding. I found my peace here."

He leans back, running a hand through his perfectly styled hair. "Peace, huh? Is that what you call it?"

I shoot him a glare, my frustration growing. "Is there something you want to say?"

He hesitates for a moment before his expression softens, and he leans closer. “I just don’t want to see you miss out on something good because you’re too damn stubborn.”

I grunt in response, the tension between us slowly easing.

He takes that as a sign to continue. “My point is, if you care about Claire, if you want to make this work, you’ve got to find a way to meet her halfway. If you don’t want corporate funding, fine. But don’t let your pride ruin a chance you might regret losing.”

I take a deep breath, begrudgingly acknowledging his words. “I’ll think about it.”

Victor nods, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “Good. Claire’s a remarkable woman, and she could be exactly what you need.” He nods decisively, pushing back from the table. “Just remember, no matter our differences, I’m still here for you.”

As he stands, I find myself calling out to him. “Victor?”

“Yeah?” he asks, looking back at me.

“Sophia is incredible. Congratulations.”

He smiles, and with that, he leaves, his polished wingtips echoing on the café floor, leaving me with a swirl of emotions and a decision to make.

Chapter 7

Claire

The cold morning light filters through the expansive windows of the Silver Pine Lodge's lobby, casting intricate patterns on the polished wooden floor. I stand there, gripping the leather handle of my suitcase so tightly that my knuckles turn white. The ambient chatter of other guests is just a distant murmur to my preoccupied mind. The weight of yesterday's conversation with Liam presses down on me like a heavy cloud.

Pulling my scarf tighter around my neck, I instinctively glance toward the entrance, half-expecting to see him. But instead, my gaze is met by the majestic sight of the mountains,

“Hey, you ready?”

I turn to see Sophia, radiant and poised even in pregnancy, but I can detect a hint of fatigue in her eyes. She's not just carrying a child; she's juggling her responsibilities and commitments. I wonder if she senses the emotional baggage I'm carrying right now.

“I’m... yeah, I’m ready,” I respond, my voice betraying a tremble. “Is Victor not with you?”

Sophia adjusts her designer bag on her shoulder, glancing toward the stairs. “He’s just finishing up a call. Business never rests, even on retreats.”

I nod, a wry smile playing on my lips. “That’s Victor for you. Always driven.”

There’s a brief pause, and Sophia’s sharp eyes fixate on mine. “Claire,” she begins cautiously, “you seem distant. Everything okay?”

I consider lying, but having someone to talk to might be nice. “Not really,” I finally admit.

Sophia gestures to the plush seating area nearby. “Come, sit. It looks like Victor might be a while.”

With a hesitant nod, I follow her lead, sinking into the deep cushions of the couch. There’s a brief silence, and I can feel her gaze on me, waiting patiently.

Taking a deep breath, I start, “It’s Liam.”

Sophia nods slowly, unsurprised. “I had a feeling.”

“I just... I’ve never felt this way before. The connection is undeniable. But yesterday, our differences, our dreams—they clashed. And it hurt. I don’t know if I’m brave enough to take that risk.”

Sophia takes a moment, her fingers playing with the silver ring on her finger. “Claire, love is... complicated. Especially

with the Thorns. When I first got involved with Victor, it wasn't smooth sailing."

I watch her closely, absorbing every word. There's wisdom in her eyes, born from experiences I can only imagine.

"But you know," Sophia continues, "what I learned was that love is about taking those risks. It's about pushing past our fears, our insecurities, embracing each other's dreams, and sometimes, even making them our own."

I bite my lip, my heart aching with the weight of her words. "But what if he's right, and I can't handle it?"

She reaches out, holding my hand with a comforting squeeze. "You are stronger than you think, Claire. And so is love. If it's true, if it's real, it will find a way. But you have to be willing to take that leap."

Sophia and I are deep in our conversation when the soft thud of footsteps approaches. I look up to see Victor, phone tucked away, walking toward us. There's a hint of a smile on his face, a certain lightness to his stride that betrays his good mood. He leans down, gently kissing Sophia's forehead, and then turns his attention to me.

"This came for you, by the way," he says, handing me a slightly crumpled envelope. The handwriting on the front is unfamiliar, but something about it tugs at my heart.

With a puzzled glance at Victor, I carefully tear open the seal. Inside is a single sheet of paper; as I unfold it, my heart races.

Claire,

I'm sorry for the way things unfolded yesterday. I let fear get the best of me. Before you go, could you come by the cabin? I don't expect anything; I just hope for a moment to explain and to ask for another chance. Please.

Liam

I can almost hear his voice in those words, feel the weight of his emotions bleeding through the ink.

For a moment, the room fades away, and all I can focus on is the raw sincerity of his words. It's clear he's trying to reach out, to mend what might be fraying.

I slowly fold the note back up, tucking it into my pocket as I gather my thoughts. My feelings for him and Sophia's words weigh heavily on my decision.

Sophia gently prods, "What does it say?"

I smile softly, my decision made. "It says that maybe love is worth the risk after all."



The scent of pine and fresh earth fills the air as I approach Liam's cabin. He left no explicit instructions within his note, but something catches my eye—a trail, newly marked with

small white flags, leading away from the cabin. The flags beckon me forward, guiding me through the lush forest.

Following the trail, the crisp mountain air fills my lungs with each step. The path is lined with pine needles and the occasional bright wildflower peeking between the tall grasses. The sounds of birds and the distant rustling of leaves create a soft soundtrack.

After what feels like an eternity, the trail opens up to a clearing where a large warehouse-type structure stands, slightly incongruous with the natural beauty around it.

Hesitating for just a moment, my eyes adjust to the dimmer light as I approach. It's then that I notice him. Liam steps out from the shadows of the building, looking somewhat different than when I last saw him. There's a blend of vulnerability and determination in his eyes.

“Claire,” he begins, voice shaking ever so slightly, “I wanted you to see this.”

Without another word, he gestures toward the building, drawing my attention to the beautifully crafted sign that hangs over the entrance. Elegant letters carved with precision spell out “Seven Sisters Healing Center.”

My eyes widen in surprise, trying to take it all in. The sign, Liam's presence, the ambiance—it's overwhelming. But more than the sight before me, it's the intention behind it that strikes a chord.

“What is this?” I ask, disbelief evident in my voice.

“My apology,” he answers, nervously rubbing the back of his neck. “And the start of our first venture together, if you’ll forgive me. We talked about blending our worlds, and this…” He waves at the building and the sign, “is my commitment to that dream.”

As grand as the gesture is, I’m still cautious. “You seemed really opposed to it yesterday,” I remind him.

Taking a deep breath, he steps closer, eyes searching mine for understanding. “Yesterday, when I said those things, I was afraid. Afraid of blending our worlds, of not being enough for you.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I process his words. “And now?”

He reaches out, his fingers gently lifting my chin. “I’m sorry, Claire, for everything. For letting my fears dictate my actions. I want to be all in. With you. With us. With this dream. And I want you to be a part of it every step of the way.”

His apology, his vulnerability, and the grandeur of his gesture tug at the strings of my heart. The weight of Sophia’s earlier words echoes in my mind, reminding me of the strength of love and the courage it takes to embrace it fully.

With a deep breath, I find my voice. “When I came here, I was looking for something, even if I wasn’t sure what that was. With you,” I continue, a soft laugh escaping me, “I found way more than I ever expected.”

Liam grins sheepishly, and the mood lightens between us, the tension melting away as our shared laughter fills the

clearing. But then, my expression grows serious.

“What you’ve made here is incredible. But it’s not the building or the business proposal that’s won me over. It’s you—your heart, your ambition, your bravery in facing your fears. I want this dream, too. But more than anything, I want to be by your side as we make it a reality.”

Chapter 8

Liam

I 'm not one for many words or overly emotional displays, but the relief I feel when Claire accepts my apology hits me hard. It's a stark reminder of how important she's become in such a short time. The walls I've built around myself over the years, crafted from estrangement and self-imposed isolation, seem to crumble a bit more with each interaction.

In the middle of this clearing, surrounded by the comforting embrace of the pines, I'm struck by how quickly and unexpectedly things have shifted between us. From a chance encounter by a waterfall to this, our shared moment filled with vulnerability and promise.

For a guy who's used to solitude, the sudden intimacy is both exhilarating and intimidating. Still, I can't deny the pull I feel toward her. It's a raw, unrefined connection that's been building since we met. The kind of bond I didn't think I was capable of forming anymore.

Not wanting to dwell too long in the open terrain of my emotions, I decide to let my actions speak for me. Without a word, I close the distance between us, capturing her lips with mine. Claire responds eagerly, and my hands find her waist, pulling her close. She melts into me with a soft sigh.

Thoughts of yesterday's argument disappear with each passionate touch, replaced instead by visions of a future together—one filled with love, laughter, and adventure. As Claire's lips move against mine with increasing fervor, I can almost taste it.

I push her back against the brick wall of the warehouse-turned-wellness center, moving my mouth to her jaw, her ear, her neck, my hands roaming her curves, tugging at her clothes, searching for her bare skin. Finding it, I pull her shirt off over her head. Her fingers weave through my hair, encouraging me on, as I leave a trail of kisses down her neck and chest, marking her as mine.

Claire's breathing grows heavy, her skin prickling with goosebumps as she arches into my touch. My mouth closes around one dusky nipple, and she lets out a small moan that has my cock straining almost painfully against my jeans. She must feel it because the next thing I know, she's stroking me through the thick fabric.

"Claire," I murmur, grabbing her wrists and trapping her hands above her head. "You're killing me."

She smirks devilishly at me. The woman knows exactly what she's doing.

Releasing her hands, I find the button of her jeans and undo it, then start working them down her hips. I kneel, kissing every inch of her as I go—her stomach, hips, thighs, calves—until she’s standing in the cool mountain air wearing nothing but her sexy lingerie.

Still on my knees, I press my face against her panties, breathing in deeply.

“I knew you’d be wet for me,” I growl. “I can smell it.”

“Liam,” she breathes, her fingers once again running through my hair.

“Shhh,” I say, nipping at her thigh and urging her legs apart. “There’s no rush. I’m going to take this slow. Savor you.”

My fingers slip under the black lace, her dampness seeping through. I pull the fabric to the side, finding her swollen, pink flesh with my tongue.

“That feels so good,” she moans.

I push a finger inside her, and she arches her back in pleasure, pressing her hips forward to welcome me in.

“God, Liam, please,” she says, grinding against my face. “I need you. Now.”

My cock throbs at her words, but I take my time teasing her with my mouth, easing my finger in and out before adding another. Soon, I’m fucking her with two fingers in a slow, steady rhythm.

I need her to come apart for me so that I can taste her release on my tongue.

Claire's hands are running through my hair again, and her hips are rocking in time with my movements. When she begins to pant, I know she's close. I curl my fingers just so, and she cries out as she shudders in release.

My tongue laps at her pussy as she rides the waves of her orgasm, lapping up every last drop of her juices. When my fingers come away covered in her arousal, I bring them to my lips and lick them clean, tasting her sweetness.

My mouth moves back to her clit, and I suck hard, flicking my tongue lightly over the sensitive nub. Claire's body bucks in response, and I continue my assault until her hips are still and she's gasping for air.

"I want to feel you inside me," she pants. "Now."

I stand, yanking my shirt over my head and tossing it aside as I unbutton my jeans and push them down.

Claire reaches for me, but I stop her. "Not yet."

She looks at me for a moment, a flash of uncertainty crossing her face. "You don't want me to touch you?"

"Oh, I want you to touch me. Hell, I need you to touch me." I grin as I push her hands back over her head, pinning her in place. "But not yet."

The desire in her eyes is unmistakable, but she waits for me, her breathing growing ragged again.

I take her hand again and bring it to my lips, kissing her knuckles. “Right now, I want to watch you touch yourself.”

Her eyes widen, and she bites her lip. She’s soaking wet now, and my mouth waters at the thought of tasting her again.

I hold her gaze as I step closer, my erection pressing against her thigh. Claire runs her hands down her body. She reaches for her clit and begins to circle the swollen nub. I stroke my cock against her hip, watching as she dips a finger inside her pussy.

I groan, pulling her hand free and sucking on her wet digit. I continue to stroke myself against her, and I feel her beginning to move against me.

“Do you want me, Claire?”

“God, yes,” she moans.

I spin her body so that her front is now against the wall. I position myself behind her and press my cock against her slick heat.

“God, yes,” she gasps again.

I slowly push myself inside her, closing my eyes as her slick walls envelop my cock in a tight, warm grip.

“Jesus,” I groan. “You feel so fucking good.”

I grab her hips and begin to thrust slowly, softly at first, only increasing my pace when she begins to move against me.

I move one hand to her clit, where she’s already slick and ready for me. She makes a little whimpering noise as my

fingers close around it. The combination of the pleasure I'm giving her and the sensation of fucking her from behind is almost too much.

"That's it," I whisper in her ear. "Come for me."

As soon as her body begins to shudder, her pussy clamping down around me, I thrust deep inside her one last time and come hard.

Unsteady on our feet, we lean against each other, supported by the wall and not much else.

"Oh, wow," she murmurs, her voice muffled. "What just happened?"

I brush her hair back from her face, chuckling lightly. "I think we just agreed to go into business together."

"I've never sealed a deal like that," she admits. "I'll have to add that to my 'Two Truths and a Dare' confessional."

She spins in my arms and kisses me, slow and soft, before I reluctantly pull away and take her hand.

"Come on," I tell her, "there's a bathroom inside."

We're both cleaned up and dressed again a few minutes later, and she's scrutinizing the building. It isn't much, an empty warehouse on my property that used to hold lumber back in the day. Its wooden beams are worn but sturdy, and there's a faint scent of old timber mixed with earthiness. The windows, smudged with years of dust, allow dappled light to stream in, creating a sense of rustic charm.

Claire's fingers graze a beam, her touch almost reverent. "This place has so much potential," she murmurs, her voice filled with wonder.

"Yeah?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious. "I was thinking of an open-concept interior, you know, with cozy nooks, workshop areas, and all the facilities needed to bring healing to those weary city souls."

She nods enthusiastically, her gaze darting around, already forming plans in her mind. "Absolutely. With some renovation, it could become a space where people can come to find solace, to learn, to connect with nature... and with themselves."

I chuckle. "You see all that in this old warehouse?"

She grins back at me, a playful glint in her eyes. "I see it all, Liam. The potential, the future... everything."

I take a moment, letting the weight of her words sink in. Then, with a wry smile, I reply, "Well, I guess it's a good thing we're in this together."

She nods, her eyes softening. "Yes, it is."

With Claire's vision and my expertise, I suddenly feel hopeful about what this place can become. It's not just about the physical renovation of the building; it's about the transformative journey we're embarking on together.

And as I look at Claire, her face illuminated by the soft light filtering through the windows, I realize that this journey is just beginning.

Epilogue

Claire

I make my way toward the familiar glade, the soft rustle of leaves a comforting symphony around me. The note from Liam had been a delightful mystery, nudging me to the special spot where everything changed. You'd think after a year of adventures with him, I'd have fewer butterflies in my stomach, but nope, they're fluttering away like mad.

I pause for a moment, reflecting on the whirlwind year we've had. I'd taken the leap, leaving the corporate hustle of Larkspur and my job behind, trading it for fresh mountain air and life in Liam's cozy cabin. It wasn't easy—adjusting, decluttering, embracing a whole new way of life—but every sunrise I witness from our porch makes it worth it.

The Seven Sisters Healing Center is our shared dream, and seeing it come to life a few months ago was nothing short of magical. Clients come from near and far, each with their stories, looking for a slice of the tranquility we found here.

Business has been booming, a testament to our hard work and the genuine healing space we created.

And then there was the unexpected visit from Victor, my former billionaire boss and Liam's no-longer-estranged big brother. He strolled in, not with his usual corporate entourage, but with his new pride and joy—his baby girl. The way she giggled and reached out for the twinkling lights had us all laughing. It was endearing to see the stern businessman completely wrapped around her little finger.

With the memories of the past year warming my heart, I can't help but be filled with hope and excitement. We'd faced challenges, sure, but we'd also experienced immense joy.

And I can't wait to see what new adventures await us.

The clearing comes into view and, oh my, it's enchanting! Wildflowers are strewn everywhere, and soft lanterns hang from the trees, casting a warm, magical glow. And there he is, standing smack dab in the middle, holding a small box.

My naughty mountain man.

His eyes meet mine, and I can see a mix of love and mischief in them. "Claire," he starts, taking a step toward me, "this spot, remember? It's where I truly got caught in the whirlwind that is you. Where I dared to hope I might have a life filled with your laughter, your quick wit, and those moments when you daydream with that far-off look in your eyes." He goes down on one knee, and I think I might faint. The box opens, and there's a sparkling ring. "Claire Jensen, will you marry me?"

A laugh bubbles up, mingling with the tears threatening to spill. “Yes, Liam, a thousand times yes.”

The mountains around us seem to echo with our joy, marking yet another chapter in our crazy, beautiful adventure.

Epilogue 2

Liam

The morning sun streams through the Seven Sisters Healing Center's windows, casting a golden hue on the wooden surfaces. Claire's fingers slip into mine, her nails lightly teasing my palm. A smirk crosses her lips, probably recalling last night's misadventures. I stifle a chuckle, leaning in for a fleeting kiss.

"Keep it professional," she teases, drawing away just as I'm about to deepen the kiss. I wink at her, the flirtatious banter between us never getting old.

That's when I spot him—Ethan Spencer. The man's military posture is hard to miss, a relic from his soldier days. The same rigid stance he held when he first walked through our doors. He makes his way over, his gaze intent, carrying the weight of a world I can't quite fathom.

"Morning, Spencer," I greet, releasing Claire's hand. "Ready to head back to civilization?"

He offers a nod, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Think I’ve had enough of your mountain therapy for now.”

Claire chuckles, “That’s one way to put it. Hopefully, the fresh air did you some good?”

Ethan’s eyes hold a hint of amusement. “More than you know.” He clasps my shoulder firmly, the unspoken camaraderie clear. “Thanks for this place, Thorn. Wasn’t sure what to expect, but... it’s been enlightening.”

“Anytime,” I reply, meeting his stoic gaze with understanding. “Wherever the road takes you next, remember there’s always a place for you here.”

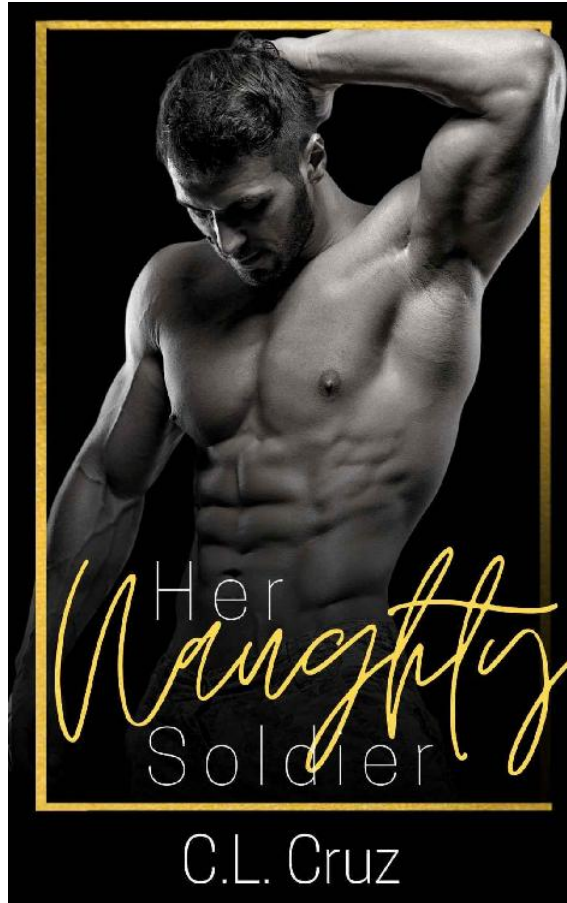
He nods, pulling on his jacket. “We’ll see.”

Claire and I exchange glances as Ethan exits, both sensing that his journey’s next chapter is about to unfold. The soldier may have left the battlefield, but the internal battles?

They’re only just beginning.



Will Ethan find what he’s looking for? Find out in [Her Naughty Soldier!](#)



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