



September
IS FOR
SHAWW

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

EVE LONDON & DYLANN CRUSH

SEPTEMBER IS FOR SHAW

MOUNTAIN MEN OF MUSTANG MOUNTAIN

DYLANN CRUSH

EVE LONDON

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*Thank you so much for your support. We couldn't do what we love without
you!*



Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up this copy of September is for Shaw, book nine in the Mountain Men of Mustang Mountain series! We can't wait for you to meet Shaw and Eden. If you love their story and want to learn more about Mustang Mountain, sign up for our newsletter [here: http://subscribepage.io/MatchOfTheMonth](http://subscribepage.io/MatchOfTheMonth).

XOXO,
Dylann & Eve

September is for Shaw

The heat between them might be the only force that can thaw this mountain man's frozen heart.

Eden

When I was a little girl, my grandfather filled my head with stories about the rugged beauty of Montana. Once I inherited his cabin, I couldn't wait to move out west. Montana is everything I hoped it would be from the stunning sunsets to the perfect peacefulness. There's only one thing, or should I say one person, who's liable to spoil it for me... my new neighbor. He's grumpy and gruff and hotter than a wildfire blazing out of control. He might think he can run me off, but I'm here to stay. At least until my past comes looking for me... then Shaw might be the only one who can save me.

Shaw

The mountains have always been my refuge. Until Eden moves in. The curvy yoga instructor doesn't belong on Mustang Mountain, not with her herd of goats and habit of taking bare plunges in the creek. She thinks she can tame the Montana wilderness with one of her wide, bright smiles, but she's wrong. Until one night changes everything. I'm determined to be the man she needs, even if it means risking my own heart.

Welcome to Mustang Mountain, where love runs as wild as the free-spirited horses who roam the hillsides. Framed by rivers, lakes, and breathtaking mountains, it's also the place the Mountain Men of Mustang Mountain call home. They might be rugged and reclusive, but they'll risk their hearts for the curvy girls they love.

CHAPTER 1

I'D JUST POPPED the cap off a bottle of beer and was about to start working on a classic bike I'd picked up at an auction when the sound of metal scraping over gravel came from my drive. Seemed odd since I hadn't heard anyone pull in.

I set the beer on my workbench and headed out front to see what the hell was going on.

"What the fuck?" My eyes had to be playing tricks on me. I squinted at my Harley sitting on its side in the middle of the gravel drive. I hadn't even had a sip of my beer yet, but I could have sworn there was a fucking goat standing next to my bike.

It lifted its head and looked up at me. Big buggy blue eyes watched me while its jaw slowly moved back and forth. I'd seen strange things happen in Mustang Mountain, but as far as I knew, no one around here had ever seen a goat materialize out of thin air.

I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking maybe I'd been putting in too many hours at the garage. My buddy Owen was always joking that the fumes were going to go to my head. But when I blinked my eyes open, the damn goat was still standing there.

"Where the hell did you come from?" I moved closer, trying not to scrape my work boots against the rocks and scare it away.

Either I'd hallucinated the dumbest goat in the world, or the creature in front of me was used to being around people. The damn animal didn't move an inch while I approached, except to swish its hairy chin from side to side while grinding something between its teeth.

I wondered what it was chewing on. Then it bent down and ripped off a

hunk of the seat of my bike. The strip of black leather hung there for a moment before the goat slurped it into its mouth like a wide piece of spaghetti.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I charged, ready to defend my bike with my life.

The goat lowered its head slightly, but didn’t seem threatened. I’d almost reached it when a woman’s voice came from the other side of the drive.

“There you are! Scapegoat, get over here!” She came through the trees, and I blinked to clear my vision again. My MC brothers would never stop giving me shit if they found out what kind of mindfuck I had going on tonight.

I knew everyone who lived on this remote side of the mountain. My closest neighbor was over half a mile away, and there was only one other cabin higher up the mountain before the road ended. The Sugarman place had been empty for about six months, ever since the old man took an extended vacation to visit his daughter out in North Carolina.

So where the hell did the curvy brunette and her goat sidekick come from?

Twigs and pine needles stuck out of her long brown hair, making her look like some sort of forest fairy. A smudge of dirt stretched across one cheek. When she turned my way, the warmth in her amber eyes made me stop in my tracks.

“You must be my new neighbor. Hi, I’m Eden.” She thrust her hand forward. Dozens of bracelets stacked up her forearm. Some intricate design covered the back of her hand, almost like a tattoo, though I’d never seen anything quite like it. She had on a sheer, flowy top with a tank underneath that showed off some amazing curves. The kind of curves my palms itched to slide over and my fingers ached to grab onto.

Her gorgeous eyes drew me in. Flecks of gold sparkled in the depths of her irises. I even took a step closer before I pulled myself out of the weird spell she must have cast over me.

“Neighbor?” I crossed my arms over my chest, making it pretty clear I wasn’t feeling very neighborly about her goat snacking on a custom leather seat that cost me over five-hundred bucks. I’d deal with that in a minute. First, I needed to find out who she was and what the fuck she was doing in my driveway. “You lost, sweetheart?”

Dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks before she tilted her head back to

meet my gaze. I got the sense she had a backbone of steel under her soft exterior. “The only thing lost around here was Scapegoat. I just moved in up the road. Eden Sugarman. You’ve got a lot of negative energy in your aura. I can help you release that if you’d like.”

I squinted down at her. “What are you, some kind of witch?”

Her laugh was like the sound of a wind chime in the breeze, almost musical.

“Wait, did you say Sugarman?”

“That’s right. My grandfather owned the place up the road.” She hooked her thumb and gestured over her shoulder. “He passed away a few months ago and left it to me, so here I am.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That can’t be right.”

“He talked about Mustang Mountain all the time. Listening to him go on about it, I knew it would be the perfect spot for me and my little brood.” She wrapped her fingers around a collar I hadn’t noticed on the goat’s neck.

“But Leroy and I had an understanding. He was going to sell me his place, along with the building he owns in town, once I saved up for a down payment.” We’d talked about it on more than one occasion. He was ready to leave Mustang Mountain, but said he’d wait until I was able to buy him out.

Eden cocked her head. “My grandfather never said anything to me about that.”

“Why would he?” I funneled both hands through my hair as my future slipped through my fingers. “Based on what he told me, it didn’t sound like he was very close to his family.”

Eden’s eyes narrowed slightly. “There are always two sides to every story.”

“So, what? You’re just moving in and that’s that? I had plans for that cabin and the surrounding land. Not to mention what I intended to do with the building in town.” I’d spent the last five years scrimping and saving so I could afford Sugarman’s asking price, and I was so close to having enough for a down payment, I could taste it. Now this forest nymph was going to swoop in and take it all away with one wave of her bangly, jangly arm?

“That’s the thing about plans, neighbor,”—she tugged the goat away from my bike and toward the break in the trees where she’d first stumbled through—“they change. I’m sorry about your motorcycle. I’ll stop by tomorrow and see if I can patch it up for you.”

“Patch it up? That’s a five-hundred dollar custom leather seat.” My

stomach churned. Heat raced across my chest and straight up my neck to flood my face. I hadn't been this riled up in a long, damn time.

"Anger issues, too, it seems. We'll have to work on that. I'll bring some chamomile tea. Maybe some of my homemade lavender goat milk soap too."

Tea? Soap? Who the fuck did she think she was? I was about to follow her through the break in the trees when my phone rang. My younger brother Caden's number lit up the screen.

"Yeah?" My voice came out rougher than I intended, thanks to my run-in with Leroy's granddaughter. This day had taken a nosedive, and I didn't know how it could get any worse.

"Hey, I just stopped in to grab a pizza before heading home and thought you'd want to know. There's a flyer with your picture on it saying you're the mountain man of the month for September."

"What?" Damn Ruby Nelson. She'd been working her way through the mountain men on Mustang Mountain, convinced all of us were just waiting for the right woman to show up in our lives so we could settle down.

"You want me to rip it off the board?" Caden asked.

I glanced at my bike, still laying on its side. There was no way I'd ride it into town with the seat looking like it did, and I'd let Caden borrow my truck since I had his up on the rack at the garage.

"Yeah, and if you see Ruby, tell her I'll be stopping in at the merc on my way to the garage in the morning. There's no fucking way I'm going to let her fuck around with my life."

"I think I'll leave out the 'fucks,' but I'll tell her, bro." Caden disconnected.

Didn't I have enough problems in my life without having to deal with Ruby and the curvy brunette? Women... they'd never brought me anything but trouble. The sooner I got both Ruby and my new neighbor out of my life, the better off I'd be.

CHAPTER 2

I WAS STILL RATTLED from my run-in with my new neighbor when I entered the Nelson Mercantile the next morning. My grandfather said the merc was the heart and soul of Mustang Mountain, and its owners Ruby and Orville were the best source of information for anything and everything around town. I hadn't expected to need help so soon after moving in, but I'd also expected the cabin to have running water. So far, the only water I could get was through the old-fashioned spigot outside.

Hoping Ruby or Orville could recommend a plumber, I headed to the counter at the back of the store, where an older woman stood talking to a couple of customers. Her eyes lit up when she saw me approach.

"Good morning. You must be Leroy Sugarman's granddaughter. Can I get you a cup of coffee, hon?" She offered a comforting smile and turned toward the coffee machine.

"I'd rather have tea if you've got something herbal," I piped up before she automatically grabbed the carafe of coffee.

She turned around with an even bigger grin splitting her lips in two. "A tea drinker, that's refreshing. Let me get you a mug of hot water. I highly recommend our huckleberry tea. It does have caffeine, but it's amazing."

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you." I slid onto a stool at the counter, figuring the best way to get information would be through a conversation.

"I'm Ruby and I knew your grandfather well," Ruby said as she reached for a mug. "It about broke my heart to hear he'd passed. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." I hadn't spent much time with my grandfather since he and my mom had a falling out when I was a kid. Then he showed up in Asheville,

his body so eaten away by cancer that he hardly had any time left at all.

Hearing that Ruby knew him well ignited a curiosity that begged to be satisfied. Hopefully, I'd have the chance to learn all about the life he had in Mustang Mountain while I was here. I had so many questions, and my mom hadn't been willing to provide many answers.

Ruby set the mug in front of me, along with a dish holding a few huckleberry tea bags. "How have you been settling in? I heard you brought a trailer carrying some goats. It's all anyone's been talking about in here for the past couple of days."

My eyebrows lifted. I hadn't expected to be a topic of conversation so soon after my arrival. "Oh. I keep a few goats to make soap and other body products."

"Bring in a few samples. I love to stock items made by local artisans." Ruby leaned toward me. "I'm assuming you'll be interested in joining our local small business association if you're an entrepreneur."

"I'd love to." I'd been part of an organization like that back in Asheville and it had been a big boost to my business, at least until things went south and I'd jumped at the chance to move away. "Where can I find more information?"

She grinned and handed me a paper cup with a lid. "Our meeting starts in about ten minutes. Transfer your tea into that to-go cup, and we'll walk over together."

"Um, okay." It didn't seem like turning her down was an option, so I poured my tea into the paper cup and made sure the lid was on tight.

Ruby rounded the counter and handed me a big box of muffins. "You don't mind carrying this over to the meeting, do you? The best way to meet people in town is to get involved. Our next big event is the Harvest Festival in October. We could really use some help."

She kept up the conversation on our short walk to City Hall. By the time we entered the building, I'd somehow agreed to help out with the kiddie carnival during the festival. Ruby convinced me it would be a great way to showcase my business since I could bring a few of the goats into town and set up a milking demo.

"You can set the muffins down there." Ruby nodded to a table in the back of the room that already held a variety of baked goods and a big coffee urn. "I need to go check in with a few people, but feel free to take a seat anywhere."

"Thank you." I set the muffins down and turned around, so busy thanking

my lucky stars for running into Ruby on my first venture into town that I wasn't paying any attention to my surroundings.

"Hey, watch it." The man in front of me jumped back, almost avoiding the splash of hot tea that spilled from my cup.

"I'm so sorry." I apologized to the front of his flannel button-down shirt as I reached for a stack of napkins. It wasn't until I pressed the wadded up napkins against his chest that I looked up at him. My heart froze.

"You again." My new neighbor snagged the napkins from my hand. "I don't need your help."

A current of electricity shot up my arm from his touch. I pulled back and tried to force my heart to resume a slow, steady beat.

"I said I was sorry. It was an accident." I bit down on my lip as he tossed the damp napkins into the trash.

He lifted his head, meeting my gaze. Dark green eyes, the color of the pine trees at the top of the mountain, stared down at me. Mesmerized, I studied the flecks of lighter green and even a few shades of brown that rimmed his pupils.

"First my motorcycle seat, now my shirt. You seem to have a knack for ruining things, Eden Sugarman." His lips twisted into a scowl.

The need to defend myself against the grumpy mountain man rose. "I said I'd repair your seat."

"It can't be repaired. It needs to be replaced." He stepped around me and filled a paper cup with coffee.

"Then I'll replace it." Somehow. The move had wiped out my savings, but I had a good feeling about Mustang Mountain. At least I had until I met him.

"Great. I'll bring over the receipt when I order a new one." His lips flattened into a tight line. It was probably the closest he could get to a smile.

"I see you met Shaw." Ruby came out of nowhere and put a hand on the man's shoulder. "He's our Mountain Man of the Month for September."

Shaw tensed and took in a measured breath. "Ruby..."

She ignored the growl in his tone and linked one arm with Shaw and one with me. "Don't let him scare you away, Eden. He's all bark and no bite."

Looked to me like Shaw was all bite, but I didn't plan on finding out. Based on our short interactions so far, it would be in my best interest to stay as far away from my new neighbor as possible.

"I think I'll grab a seat over here. Since I don't know anyone, I'll be more

comfortable in the back.” I slipped away from Ruby and turned to make a beeline for the back row.

Ruby didn't let me go so easily, though. “Don't be silly. You can sit by Shaw. With the two of you in charge of the kiddie carnival, I suspect you'll be spending quite a bit of time together.”

CHAPTER 3

DAMN RUBY NELSON and her ulterior motives. She knew exactly what she was doing when she conned Eden into helping with the kiddie carnival this year. Someone needed to set her straight about keeping her nose out of everyone's business. My other MC brothers hadn't had much success since they'd all succumbed to her fucking matchmaking efforts. Looked like it would be up to me to put an end to her meddling once and for all.

That's what I kept telling myself as I slid out from underneath the ancient Oldsmobile I'd been working on. My back screamed in protest as I got to my feet. This day was going from bad to awful. The meeting this morning couldn't have gone any worse. I had no idea how I was going to handle working with Eden. She was a hot mess—one I didn't want any part of.

I wiped my hands on a shop towel. No matter how many times I washed them, I could never seem to get rid of the stains that had permanently discolored my skin. That was part of the territory of being a mechanic. I'd learned to live with that and all the other baggage that came along with quitting college and moving back to Mustang Mountain.

Sighing, I took a swig from my bottle of water. The other guys had gone to lunch, leaving me behind to keep an eye on things. I didn't mind—actually enjoyed the peace and quiet. That's what I'd been most looking forward to about my plan to buy Sugarman's building. I wanted to open my own garage and do the kind of work I loved like work on vintage vehicles, not the boring day-to-day stuff like oil changes and swapping out transmission fluid.

While I thought about what could have been, the bell over the front door rang. I headed into the office, ready to make small talk with one of our regular customers. Instead, Eden Sugarman stood at the counter with a

cellophane-wrapped basket in her hands. My pulse spiked at the sight of the curvy brunette. Despite her being a giant pain in my ass, I couldn't deny my attraction. Especially when she had on another one of those flowy see-through tops over a tight tank that molded to her figure.

"What can I help you with?" I asked as I pushed through the door from the garage to the office.

She drew her bottom lip into her mouth as she looked me up and down. For a split second, I wished I wasn't covered in grease stains and stinking like exhaust. Fuck that. It shouldn't matter what I looked like or smelled like. There was no need to make a good impression. I needed to keep my distance from my new neighbor.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot,"—she slid the basket across the counter—"both times we've met so far. Consider this a peace offering?"

"What is it?" A big purple bow held the cellophane closed. I squinted at the contents of the basket, trying to figure out what the hell she'd consider a peace offering.

Her hand shook as she untied the bow. "Just some of the stuff I make and sell. I brought you some goat's milk soap and lotion, along with a few loaves of homemade bread."

The scent of something freshly baked made my stomach rumble. I didn't want her peace offering any more than I wanted her as my new neighbor, but the manners my mama instilled took over. "Thanks. I'm sure the guys will enjoy it."

"It's unscented...the soap, I mean. So you won't have to worry about smelling like lavender or jasmine or anything." Her fingers lingered on the edge of the basket. She wore a ring on every one of them, including her thumbs. Stacks of bracelets covered her wrists. Most of them appeared to be crystals, confirming my initial assessment that Eden was one of those free-spirited hippie-wannabees that thought the Montana mountains would be a good place to connect with their spiritual side.

"Great." I forced an almost smile, hoping she would head out now that she'd made her delivery, and I'd offered up the appropriate gratitude.

"I also wanted to see if there might be a time we can sit down and talk about the harvest festival." Her chin tilted up, and she met my gaze. "I'm looking forward to getting involved. Being new and all, it seems like a good way to meet some of the other business owners in town."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Damn Ruby and her thinly veiled

matchmaking attempts. “You know, I’m not even a business owner. I just manage this place. As for the kiddie carnival, I’ve been handling it on my own for the past couple of years. Maybe there’s another part of the festival you can help with.”

“Ruby told me they’re set with everything else.” Her forehead creased, forming a tiny wrinkle between her brows. It shouldn’t have bothered me, but knowing I was the reason behind that tiny wrinkle made a funny feeling swirl through my gut. “I’ve actually worked on quite a few events back in Asheville, including a couple of school carnivals. There’s got to be something I can do to help.”

I had two choices: either turn her down and have to deal with Ruby’s wrath, or give her some piddly piece of the carnival to take charge of so I could pacify her and get her out of my hair. Knowing how intense Ruby could get, I chose the latter.

“If you want to do something with the goats, like maybe set up a kid-size petting zoo, I can handle the rest. How does that sound?”

Damn if her smile didn’t transform her whole face. She beamed up at me like I’d just handed her the world in a gift box.

“That would be great. Thanks so much, Shaw. You won’t regret it.”

“Won’t regret what?” My younger brother, Caden, picked that moment to stride into the office. He was a senior in high school and sometimes stopped by during his lunch hour.

Eden turned toward him, and I felt the loss of her warm smile, like a cloud had just passed in front of the sun.

“Eden, this is my brother, Caden.” I had no right to feel the pang of jealousy that pinched my belly when Caden wrapped his hand around hers.

“You just moved in up the mountain from us, didn’t you?” Caden asked. He was too fucking friendly. He’d probably invite her over to dinner if I didn’t watch out.

Eden nodded as she released his hand. “Yes, and I’ll be helping your brother with the kiddie carnival for the harvest festival next month.”

“Really?” Caden’s nose wrinkled as he shifted his gaze from Eden to me. “That ought to be interesting.”

“Why’s that?” Her head tilted slightly and the long crystal earrings she had on caught the light. A rainbow prism reflected onto the wall next to me.

The need to get back to something I knew—like the undercarriage of Orville’s Olds—swept over me.

“Just because your granddad promised to sell his place to Shaw since he ___”

“That’s enough.” I put my hands on Caden’s shoulders, leaving two paw-sized dark smudges, and pushed him toward the backroom. “If you’re looking for lunch, I’ve got leftovers in the fridge.”

“Hey, I was just being neighborly,” he protested.

Leveling him with a don’t-fuck-with-me glare, I waited until he disappeared into the backroom before turning my attention toward Eden.

“What was he saying about why my grandfather was going to sell you his place?”

I shook my head and dropped my gaze to the basket she’d brought. She was bound to hear it from someone in town sooner or later. I wasn’t going to be the one to spill the beans and give her any reason to feel sorry for me. “Nothing. Caden likes to stir the pot.”

“Are you sure?”

I almost caved and told her everything as she studied me through long, dark lashes. Her gaze didn’t drill into me so much as it seemed to warm me from the inside out. The last thing I needed was to fall under her spell.

“Yeah. I really ought to get back out to the garage. I’ve got a transmission repair waiting on me that’s going to take all afternoon.” I gestured to the door behind me, grimacing as a sharp twinge shot across my back.

“Are you okay?” Eden asked. “I’ve got a liniment at the cabin that could help whatever’s going on with your back.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.” I shifted my gaze toward the door, hoping she’d take the hint. “I’ll check in with you in a couple of days about the festival. How does that sound?”

She hesitated, like she knew I was full of shit. Then she shrugged her shoulders and gave me a half smile. “Sounds good. Let me know if you change your mind about that liniment.”

“I won’t,” I said, offering her a matching half smile in return.

She held my gaze for a long moment before she turned and headed out the door.

“What the hell was that all about?” Caden asked as he came back into the office. He held a plastic container of leftover spaghetti in one hand and a fork in the other.

“Don’t get me started.” My brother didn’t need to know what kind of effect Eden had on me, though based on what he’d witnessed, he probably

already had a good idea.

“She’s hot.” He shoved a forkful of spaghetti into his mouth, then set the container down so he could rifle through the basket. “And she bakes.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Caden broke off a chunk from one of the loaves. “I know Mr. Sugarman said he’d sell you that place, but it might not be so bad having her as a neighbor if she brings us bread.”

I shook my head. Caden didn’t get it. Not even a lifetime supply of fresh-baked bread could make up for what Sugarman had taken from me.

CHAPTER 4

I'D TRIED BEING NICE. I'd tried baking bread. Nothing I did seemed to break through the fortress of ice surrounding my new neighbor. I could understand his initial anger since Scapegoat destroyed his seat, but even after I told him I'd pay for that, he still gave me a cold shoulder. How was I supposed to work with a man like that? How was I supposed to live by him?

I parked in the drive and carried the groceries I'd picked up in town into the cabin. Moving to Mustang Mountain was supposed to be a step in the right direction. So far, it felt like I was moving backwards. I needed a fresh perspective. As I shoved vegetables into the crisper with one hand, I dialed my bestie back in Asheville with the other. If anyone could help me get refocused, Alana could.

She answered on the first ring. "Are you tired of Montana already?"

"Maybe. Give me three good reasons I shouldn't load everything up and head home."

"That bad, huh?" Alana had been the one to encourage me to leave. She knew I needed to get out of Asheville. "What happened?"

"I should have thought this through. Maybe come out to visit before deciding to move my entire life all the way out here sight unseen. I've got no running water inside the cabin, haven't had a real shower or bath in days, and my new neighbor is a lumberhottie who's a major grumpasaurus." Saying it out loud made me feel a tiny bit better. Until Alana let out a loud laugh.

"A lumberhottie? Tell me more."

"Did you miss the grumpasaurus part? He looks like he could tear a tree in half with his bare hands. Actually, I think that's what he does for fun. And we're supposed to work on some harvest festival together, but he's

cockblocking me from doing any of the real work.” My frustration poured out in a torrent of words. “I even baked bread for him. He looked at it like I’d poisoned it with pokeweed or something.”

“Did you?” Alana asked.

“Of course not. Pokeweed doesn’t even grow in Montana.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you to stock up before you left town.” She let out an exaggerated sigh. “Let’s break this down one issue at a time. First, what’s up with the water?”

Alana was all left-brained. She never let her emotions get the best of her, which made us almost exact opposites. It also made her the perfect person to talk me down when I got all worked up over something. I appreciated the way she approached problems with logic and reason.

“If I knew, I’d fix it. I’ve left messages with two different places, and I’m still waiting to hear back. I’m tempted to take a bar of soap down to the creek and clean up the old-fashioned way.”

“That’s an excellent idea. Go do one of your forest baths. Maybe it will wash away that bad attitude, too.”

“Forest bathing doesn’t involve actual bathing.” I rolled my eyes. “You’d know that if you’d ever taken me up on it when I invited you.”

“Fine. Creek bathing. Whatever. I know you like those cold plunges. Maybe a quick swim in the creek is just what you need until you get someone up there to fix the water. What’s next on the list? The neighbor?”

“He’s awful. We started off on the wrong foot. Scapegoat got out and made a snack out of his motorcycle seat.”

Alana snort-laughed. “What the hell? That goat’s caused you more trouble than a herd of elephants would. How did the lumberhottie react to that?”

My cheeks flamed as my mind flashed to an image of Shaw standing in his driveway, his heated gaze running over me as I stumbled out of the woods. “He wasn’t happy about it. I told him I’d pay for it. Then I saw him again at a small business owner meeting this morning. He looked at me like I was a stink bug he wanted to step on.”

“If he’s any kind of outdoorsman, he’d know better than to step on a stinkbug unless he wants to attract more.”

I groaned. She was missing the whole point. “Okay, a cockroach then.”

“Do they have cockroaches in Montana?” she asked.

“Does it matter? The point is, he can’t stand me.” While I appreciated her

ability to keep her emotions in check, sometimes she got too caught up in insignificant details. “What am I supposed to do?”

“What kind of bread did you make?”

Again, with the details. “Why does that matter?”

“If you want to win him over, you need to make the brown sugar bread. My mouth’s watering even just thinking about it.”

“He doesn’t even look like he eats sweets. I didn’t have any molasses, so I made banana nut and zucchini bread.”

“You’re not going to win over a lumberhottie with zucchinis,” Alana said. “You’ve got to give him something sweet and sugary, Eden. Trust me on this one.”

“I don’t want to win him over,” I argued. “I just don’t want him to hate me.”

“Bake the brown sugar bread. It’s a sure thing.”

“I thought you said there was no such thing as a sure thing.”

“That was before I tasted your brown sugar bread. Do I have to come out there and bake it myself?”

“Please don’t.” Alana might be a genius with numbers, but she didn’t belong anywhere near a kitchen. I’d learned that the hard way when I tried to teach her how to make my three-ingredient peanut butter cookies once.

She snort-laughed again, making me erupt into a fit of giggles. I knew she’d be able to get me out of my funk.

“You’ve got to let me come visit you, eventually. I need to meet this grumpasaurus for myself. Once you’ve had a chance to de-grumpify him, of course.”

“If you wait that long, you might as well never come.”

“It’s going to be fine. We both know there’s nothing for you back here. Go take your forest, nature, creek bath. You’ll feel better afterward. Call me after you take him the bread?”

“Fine. Thanks for cheering me up.” We said our goodbyes and ended the call. Alana was right, as always. Going back to Asheville wasn’t an option. The only thing waiting for me there was a reminder of how I’d failed to stand up for myself. I wouldn’t let that happen again.

I’d feel better after a quick dip in the creek, especially once I’d had a chance to wash my hair. I grabbed a bar of my favorite soap, a thick towel, and my bathrobe. Then I slid my feet into my waterproof hiking sandals and headed toward the creek a couple hundred yards from my back door.

I set my towel and robe on a large flat rock at the edge of the water. The sun was on its way down, but still sat high enough in the western sky that I wasn't too chilled when I lifted my shirt up and over my head. I tossed it onto the rock, then kicked off my sandals so I could slip off my pants. My undies followed, then finally my bra.

With my bar of soap in hand, I stepped into the creek. The water was cold, but refreshing. At least that's what I told myself as I moved to the middle. I gasped and let out a shriek as it reached the apex of my thighs. Then I took another step. The creek wasn't deep, but my foot landed on a rock that shifted out from under me. I lost my balance and screamed as I went under.

It only took a second to regain my footing. At least I hadn't dropped the soap. It was my last bar of vanilla-almond, my favorite. I rubbed the bar between my hands to lather it up before swiping it over my hair.

It felt so good to be submerged in the water instead of taking sponge baths like I had over the past couple of days. The scent of almonds and vanilla filled my nose, and I laid back to rinse my hair.

"What the hell are you doing?" A deep, gruff voice echoed from the bank of the creek.

I immediately ducked under the water, then poked my head up to see who had called out. Shaw stood on the bank. He was shirtless, and based on the way his chest heaved, also out of breath. Hot prickles danced across my cheeks. Had he seen me floating on my back? The thought made my stomach bottom out.

"Eden, are you okay?" He stepped closer to the water, like he was about to dive in and rescue me.

"Of course, I'm okay. What are you doing here?"

"I was chopping wood when I heard you scream." He tilted his head back and looked up at the sky. "I thought you were hurt or in trouble."

"I'm just taking a bath." A shiver ran through me. Even though I was ninety-nine percent sure he couldn't see me under the water, being this close to him with no clothes on made me jumpy.

"Do you always bathe outside?" He squinted, making him look even grumpier than usual.

"What is this, twenty questions?" The moment had lost its magic when Shaw burst onto the scene. I'd felt daring before. Now I felt silly for standing in the middle of the ice-cold creek naked.

“Is there a reason you can’t take a bath inside?” He crossed his arms over the expanse of his bare chest like he wouldn’t even think of budging until I answered his question.

With my lower legs going numb from the cold water, I was eager to climb out and wrap up in my towel. There was no way I’d be brave enough to do it with Shaw watching. Since he showed no signs of leaving, I figured it would be better to answer his question than to try to wait him out.

“My water doesn’t work,” I finally said. “It comes out like a trickle, so I haven’t been able to take a shower since I got here. All I wanted to do was wash my hair.”

He lowered his chin. “Did you turn on the pump?”

“What pump?”

“Leroy had a pump for the well. You have to make sure it’s on or there won’t be enough pressure to get the water to the house.” He shook his head as he walked over to where I’d left my towel and robe. “Come on, I’ll show you where it is.”

“I’m not getting out until you go.” Shaw didn’t strike me as the type to take advantage of a naked woman in the woods, but I wasn’t about to put him to the test.

He stared at me for a long moment, then turned his back. “Fine. I’m not looking. I’ve got my eyes closed and promise not to move unless you need help. Be careful, though. The rocks are slippery when they’re wet.”

They weren’t the only things that were slippery. As I moved toward the bank, the soap slid from my hand. I reached for it, but the current caught it and carried it too far away. It probably wasn’t fair to blame Shaw, but I added “responsible for losing my favorite soap” to the growing list of reasons not to like him that I had stacking up against him.

CHAPTER 5

I WAITED, my back to Eden, while she splashed through the water to get to the edge of the creek. Why the fuck had I dropped everything to come to her rescue? I thought something bad had happened to her. Then I found her floating on her back, naked, her tits pointed toward the sky. I swiped my hand over the scruff on my jaw. If I lived to be a hundred, I'd never get that image of her out of my head... her dark hair floating around her head, her body relaxed in the water, her curves tempting me to reach out and skim my palm over her skin.

“You can look now,” she said.

I turned around slowly, my breath catching at the sight of her wrapped up in her robe. The tie knotted at her waist, and she rubbed the towel over her hair. Knowing she didn't have anything on underneath made my cock twitch. The woman might get on my nerves, but there was no denying how stunning she was.

“You sure you're okay?”

“I'm fine. What were you saying about a pump?” She bent to pick up the clothes she'd discarded.

Watching her pick up her panties and bra sent blood racing toward my dick. The urge to draw her into my arms and kiss her washed over me. I fought it, taking in deep breaths through my nose until I could look at her without wanting to shred her robe and run my rough hands over every inch of her.

“Shaw? The pump?” She gestured toward the cabin.

I refocused, feeling like a complete jackass. She brought out a side of me I wasn't used to handling, along with some primal instinct to tame her, toss

her over my shoulder, and claim her like an animal might claim its mate. Fuck that. I could control myself. Eden Sugarman wasn't the only woman gorgeous woman I'd ever met.

But—an annoying voice popped into my head—she was the only woman who made me feel like I was lost by just looking at her.

“The pump needs to be turned on to get any kind of water pressure in the house.” We'd made it back to the cabin. I wrapped my fingers around the door handle and glanced at Eden for a sign that it was okay to enter the cabin.

She nodded, so I held the door open and let her go first. Immediately, I regretted it. The scent of vanilla flooded my nose. She smelled good enough to lick from top to bottom. My mouth watered as I imagined what she would taste like—or even better—what she'd look like straddling my face and riding my tongue.

“Where's the switch?” She stood in the middle of the small family room, her clothes abandoned on the couch, her hands on her hips.

The sooner I got away from her, the sooner I'd reclaim my self-control. “It's on the electrical panel in the bedroom.”

“Will you show me?” She padded across the hardwood floor on bare feet.

I couldn't think of a reasonable excuse as to why I couldn't follow, so I reluctantly entered her bedroom. My gaze swept over the full-size bed. The covers were pulled back and the pillow still held the indent from her head. Being in this room felt too intimate, like I was invading her privacy by seeing her personal space.

“It's probably in the closet.” I crossed the room and stepped into the small walk-in. The scent of vanilla was even stronger here. I closed my eyes and breathed it in.

“Is that it over there?” Eden followed me, so close that her breath brushed over the back of my neck.

Dammit. I fumbled with the latch to release the panel. Leroy's shaky handwriting indicated the breaker for the water pump. I reached out and flipped it.

“Want to go check the water to make sure that was the issue?” I asked. My pulse raced at having her so close. I didn't trust myself to brush past her to go check the faucet myself. She darted out of the closet, leaving me alone with my inexplicable and unwanted reaction.

“It works!” Excitement over running water raised her voice a whole octave. “Thank you so much. I can take a bath now.”

Thank fuck. I shut the panel and retreated out of her bedroom as quickly as I could.

Eden met me by the front door and threw her arms around my neck. “Thank you! You have no idea how much I’ve been craving a long, hot shower.”

I caught her against my chest. Even through the thick robe, I could feel her curves mold to my body. Her scent surrounded me, tempting me to lower my mouth and capture her lips in a hungry kiss. I was too damn old to lose my self-control around a woman. With my hands on her hips, I nudged her backward, desperate to put some distance between us.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her eyes flashed with regret. That tiny wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows again.

I hated being the reason to make her frown, but I didn’t have a choice. If she’d spent another second pressed up against me, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from plunging my hand into her hair and tilting her head back so I could suck that full bottom lip into my mouth and...fuck! What the hell was wrong with me?

“Nothing to apologize about. You just caught me off guard.” I rolled my shoulder, wincing at the sharp pain that sliced across my back. Chopping wood hadn’t been the best way to take out my frustration, but I’d needed some kind of outlet.

“Hey, let me get that liniment for your back.” Eden spun around and disappeared into the kitchen.

“No need. I’ll be fine.” I reached for the door, eager to put some distance between us.

“Hold on a second.” She caught me halfway out the door. “It’s the least I can do. Obviously, it’s bothering you.”

Before I had a chance to blow her off, she popped the lid off the metal tin and scooped out whatever was inside.

“Turn around.” She didn’t seem to be asking. It was more like she was issuing a command she expected to be obeyed.

“I told you, I’m fine. It’s just an old football injury that pops up every once in a while.”

She cocked a hip. The robe opened in front, revealing a length of leg. Dammit. Rather than wait for my cock to strain against my zipper, I wheeled around.

Her finger skimmed along my shoulder blade. “Tell me where it hurts the

most. Here?”

“Yeah, sure.” I couldn’t focus on anything but the feel of her touch.

“It won’t help unless I rub it exactly where you need it.” She rested her entire palm on my back.

Damn, I wanted to tell her exactly where I needed her to rub me. Instead, I shifted so her palm rested under my right shoulder blade. “Right there.”

She rubbed the liniment into my skin, her fingers gently working the muscles underneath. I bit back the urge to groan. It had been years since someone had touched me like that. I closed my eyes and focused on the pressure of her fingertips on my skin.

“How’s that feel?” The warmth of her breath sent a chill down my spine.

“Amazing.” Immediately, I wished I could swallow my response. I didn’t want to risk her thinking she had any kind of hold over me. I’d spent my whole life making sure I didn’t allow myself to get into anyone’s debt. Even though I could have stood there for hours, savoring the feel of her hand on my skin, I forced myself to step away. “Thanks. I need to get going. I’ve got a lot of wood left that I need to handle.”

Her eyes widened and she bit back a smile.

Jesus, I was a moron. “I mean, that wood pile isn’t going to chop itself. I’m glad you’re okay. Let me know if that pump gives you any trouble.”

“Here, take this with you.” She put the lid back on the metal tin and held it out to me.

“That’s okay, I can’t reach that spot under my shoulder, anyway.” There was no way I’d ask Caden to do it. He’d never let me live it down if I told him the goat stuff really worked.

“I’ll stop by tomorrow to help you, then.”

Fuck. The last thing I needed was to have Eden come over and start rubbing my back. I’d barely survived it once.

“That’s not necessary. I’m not even sure it helped.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know my stuff is good, Shaw. But if you want to tell your grumpasaurus self that your back doesn’t feel better, go right on ahead. Good luck with your wood.”

My face burned. Everything about our interaction was fucked up. “See you around.”

Her fingers fluttered in a feminine wave.

I turned my back on her, leaving her standing on her porch in that bathrobe that left little to the imagination. Hell, I didn’t need to imagine what

she looked like underneath because I'd seen her. The memory would be seared on my brain for eternity. Thanks to Eden, I knew exactly what I'd be doing for the rest of the night—beating off to that vision of her floating on top of the water.

CHAPTER 6

THANKS TO MY GROWLY, grumpy neighbor, I had water. Having him see me bathing naked seemed a small price to pay for being able to access running water whenever I wanted. I spent the next few days getting settled, unpacking the rest of the few belongings I'd brought with me, and securing the pen where I kept the goats to make sure Scapegoat wouldn't be able to get out again.

I hadn't seen Shaw since that night, though I hadn't stopped thinking about him. There was something about him that made me curious to learn more. I'd started to think that maybe he wasn't as hard and rough as he wanted people to believe. Underneath that gruff shell, I got the sense he'd been hurt and was just trying to protect himself, but I could have been way off base.

Alana spit out her coffee when I told her what happened. I partially blamed her for suggesting I bathe in the creek, but she didn't seem to care. We'd just hung up when I stepped out onto the front porch.

The sun had gone down, and the first stars were starting to dot the dark sky above. I loved everything about living on the mountain, but this time of day was becoming my favorite. The birds were quiet, and a comfortable stillness settled over the cabin like a fluffy, favorite blanket.

I eased onto one of the lounge chairs and tilted my head back to look up at the sky. There was still so much to do to get my business up and running. I had big dreams, but also had the drive and determination to make them happen. I'd met a contractor at the building my grandfather left me downtown. He was working on plans to transform it into the retail space and wellness retreat area I'd envisioned. There would be plenty of room for the

yoga classes I wanted to teach as well. Things were moving along, and I was starting to think of Mustang Mountain as home.

A sharp snap of a twig disrupted the peacefulness. I sat up, immediately alert. Though I hadn't seen any bears or other wildlife since I'd moved in, there were warnings all over town about being bear aware. The goats had been herded into their shed for the night. That meant I'd be the most appetizing creature on the menu if some wild animal was looking for a late dinner.

A man's voice mumbled something too low for me to hear. My heart hammered faster and harder until I thought it might burst right out of my chest. I slid off the chair and crouched low. If I could make it inside the cabin, at least I could lock the door and call for help.

But who would I call?

I'd moved to the top of a mountain. It took me a good half hour to make the drive into town. Even if I called the police, it would probably take fifteen minutes to get to me.

I turned to face the direction of Shaw's cabin. A soft, distant light filtered through the trees. Whether I liked it or not, he would be my best bet.

A dark shape slipped past the edge of the porch. I saw a flash of white teeth and the glimmer of two yellow eyes. With my heart in my throat, I crept toward the front door. Inch by inch, I eased the screen door open just wide enough to slip inside. I didn't dare turn on any lights since I wasn't sure if whoever was out in the woods was after me or just looking for a cabin to rob.

I closed the front door and flipped the deadbolt. Then I rested my back up against it and fired off a quick text to Shaw.

I didn't keep track of how long it took him to get there, but it seemed like only seconds before the front door shook as he pounded on it and called my name. "Eden, are you okay?"

I'd never been so happy to see someone in my life. I got up and flung the door open. He stood there in a pair of gray sweats that hung low on his hips. His chest was bare.

"What happened?" Concern etched parallel lines into his forehead as he studied me with those dark, pine-colored eyes.

I pushed the screen door open enough for him to come inside, then fought the urge to bury myself against his chest. "Did you see anyone? I was sitting out on the front porch, and I heard someone walking around the cabin. Then there was some animal. I swear it must have been a bear or a lion."

“Stay here. I’ll go take a look.” His hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed. He probably intended for his touch to bring me comfort, but I was too on edge.

“Be careful.”

He nodded and pulled the door closed, leaving me standing in the darkness alone. I kept an eye on him through the windows, traveling from room to room to track him around the perimeter of the cabin. When I heard him step back onto the porch, I opened the front door and flipped on the outdoor lights.

“Did you find anything?”

He filled the doorway, so tall the top of his head almost brushed the frame. “There’s a set of fresh footprints leading to the creek. They were almost as big as mine, so I’m assuming they weren’t yours.”

I followed his gaze down to my feet. “No, not mine.”

“There have been a few break-ins around the area. Unless you can think of a reason someone would be snooping around looking for you, I’d assume that’s what they were up to. Hades probably scared them off.”

“Who’s Hades?”

Shaw whistled and patted his leg. A huge gray animal hopped onto the porch and nuzzled his cheek into Shaw’s hand. I backed away, terrified of the giant beast.

“It’s okay, he won’t hurt you. My friend Jackson saved him as a pup and now Hades is more town mascot than wild wolf. He keeps an eye on things around here.” Shaw bent down and ruffled the fur behind the wolf’s ears. “You can pet him if you want.”

I shook my head.

“Maybe next time.” Shaw stood and Hades bounded off into the darkness. “Let me get you a glass of water or something. You’re as pale as a ghost.”

I’d felt the blood drain from my face and could only imagine what I might look like. Following Shaw toward my kitchen, I tried to swallow the lump that had lodged in the back of my throat. “These break-ins, have there been a lot of them?”

He pulled open a couple of cabinets until he found where I kept the glasses. “A few. The sheriff has a couple of leads, but none of them have turned up anything yet. Do you want water or something a little stronger? I’m pretty sure Leroy used to keep a bottle of whiskey around here.”

“I think something stronger,” I said, slumping into a chair at the kitchen

table.

Shaw took the seat next to me and set two tumblers and a bottle of whiskey on the table. He poured a finger's width into each glass, then handed me one.

"Here, take a sip of this." He held up his glass and tilted it toward me before taking a long drink.

"If there *was* someone looking for me..." I started.

Shaw lowered his glass, his eyes locking onto mine. "Are you running from something, Eden?"

"Maybe. I had a partner back in Asheville. We started the company together, but when things started going well, we couldn't agree on how to move forward, so I left." That was the best way to condense a very complicated history. Shaw didn't need to know any more. "I can't imagine he'd follow me all the way to Montana, though."

"What kind of partner?" His voice came out low and gruff.

"Business. He wanted more, but that wasn't going to happen." I lifted the tumbler to my lips and poured a generous amount of whiskey down my throat. It burned, almost as hot as my face. Seemed I was always blushing around Shaw.

"Do you think it might be him?"

I shook my head. Cory seemed content to run me out of town. I doubted he'd come after me.

"Okay then. Let's assume it was whoever's been orchestrating the break-ins around town. I'm pretty sure they won't be back tonight. Do you have any security cameras around here?"

"No." I kept my gaze trained on my glass, refusing to look at him.

"I'm sure one of the guys at the club has something I can set up to keep an eye on things."

"What club?"

"I'm in an MC. We make a habit of looking out for our neighbors and the other folks around Mustang Mountain."

"Even the ones whose goats eat your motorcycle seat?" I risked a glance at his face.

Shaw's features softened and his lips curled into an almost-smile. It was probably the closest I'd ever see him get. "Even those. Think you'll be okay the rest of the night?"

Fear wrapped around my chest, tightening its cold grip until I could

barely suck in a breath.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I lied. There was absolutely no chance of me falling asleep. Not with the threat of strangers spying on me, just waiting to break in.

“Do you want me to stay for a while?” He relaxed against the back of his chair. “Caden’s out of town, so I was just watching a movie when I got your text. If you want, I can hang out here for a bit and make sure nothing else happens.”

“That would be okay with me if it would make you feel better,” I said.

“Yeah, okay, if that’s the way you want to frame it. Sure would make me feel better about things if you let me hang out on your couch for a bit.” He arched one brow. “How does that sound?”

“I suppose that would be okay.” Grateful, but unwilling to show it, I pushed back from the table but held onto my glass. Spending the evening with him would take all the courage I could muster, especially the liquid kind. “If you want to move to the couch, I’ll see if I can find a movie we can agree on.”

He got up, his broad, bare chest filling my vision. “Lead the way.”

CHAPTER 7

MY COCK HAD BEEN hard as a fucking steel pipe for the past half hour. Being this close to Eden was the worst form of torture. She'd fallen asleep as soon as the movie started and had somehow slid down the couch, so her head rested between my chest and my crotch. I didn't dare move because I didn't want to wake her, but damn, I'd never spent so many days in a row with blue balls.

I couldn't even focus on the movie—some chick flick she'd picked out. There had to be something else on that would provide a distraction. I reached for the remote and flipped through a few of the channels. Leroy had never gotten around to getting rid of satellite, so instead of a full on-demand catalog to choose from, I was limited to whatever happened to be playing.

Images flipped past as I surfed through the channels. No horror. No NASCAR. No hunting shows. I finally settled on the opening credits to some movie I didn't recognize. No telling how long Eden would sleep. With my luck, I'd end up on her couch all night long. I set the remote down on the cushion next to me and stretched to see if I could get my hand on my drink. The remote slid off the cushion and onto the floor, but at least I got my glass. I downed the last bit of whiskey as the opening scene played across the screen.

It didn't take long to figure out what movie I'd settled on. As soon as the main character introduced himself as Christian Grey, I knew I was fucked. There was no way I'd be able to sit through *Fifty Shades of Grey* with Eden Sugarman's mouth so close to my cock. I stretched out my fingers, trying to reach the remote. It wasn't happening.

My options were limited: either suck it up and try to zone out as two

characters had kinky sex on the nineteen-inch Toshiba, or take my chances on waking Eden when I made a grab for the remote. A third option popped into my head, but I wasn't sure I wanted to entertain it. Maybe I could get one of my MC brothers to come up and rescue me. As soon as that thought entered my head, I shot it down. I'd never hear the end of it if one of them had to save me from myself in a situation like this.

I stared at the ceiling, at the hand-carved cuckoo clock on the far wall—anything to keep from letting my gaze rest on the screen. Forty-five minutes later, I'd had about all I could take. The two people on the tiny screen collapsed on the bed, their bodies entwined.

Eden moved, her head sliding down even farther to rest on my lap. She mumbled something too soft for me to hear, then tucked her hand under her cheek, brushing my cock in the process.

I jumped up like she'd just lit a fire in my crotch. She startled awake, landing halfway on the couch, halfway on the floor. Sleep clouded her eyes as she switched her gaze from me to the TV and back again.

“What are you watching?”

“Hold on a sec.” I scrambled for the remote but accidentally kicked it under the couch instead.

“Are you watching porn?” She squinted at me as she dragged herself to her feet.

“No. This came on and I dropped the remote. I couldn't reach it and didn't want to wake you up. Dammit, where did it go?” I got down on my knees and peered under the couch, desperate to stop the moaning and groaning coming from the TV.

The noise came to an abrupt halt. I looked over to see Eden standing in front of the now dark television. Thank fuck. As casually as I could with a full-blown hard-on raging out of control in my loose sweats, I got to my knees. The coffee table provided a much-appreciated shield.

“I'm sorry I fell asleep.” She tugged her hair free from the clip she'd been wearing. It floated around her shoulders, temporarily distracting me from my issue.

“You were tired.”

“Yeah, but I'm surprised I fell asleep that easily, especially with what happened tonight.” She picked up the empty glasses and carried them to the kitchen. “Can I offer you anything else?”

What a loaded question. There was so much she could offer me, so much

I wanted from her. “Um, I’m good.”

I shifted onto the couch and covered my crotch with a pillow. There was no way I could stand up without her getting an eyeful. I needed a few minutes to convince my cock to disengage, at least until I got home.

“While you’re here, I should put some more of that liniment on your shoulder.” She came back into the living room with another metal tin.

“That’s okay. It’s fine. Much better than it was the other night.” I couldn’t handle her touching me right now.

“Don’t be silly. Turn around.” She scooped some of the cream onto her fingers and sat next to me.

With no other choice, I twisted my torso. “If you insist.”

“I do. You might not want to admit it, but I know it works wonders.” Her palm smoothed over my shoulder.

Any part of me that wasn’t already boiling with desire heated under her touch. “Eden, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” She continued to rub, her hand making small circles under my right shoulder blade.

I couldn’t take it. Turning around, I faced her. She hadn’t had a chance to move her hand, so it slid across my arm and landed on my pec. My nipples were already hard, just like the rest of me.

“What’s wrong?” The concern in her eyes gave the impression she cared. Her palm flattened against my chest, right over my heart. “Your heart’s beating so fast.”

Fuck it. I slid my hands up, cradling the back of her head between my palms. Searching her eyes, I looked for signs of resistance. All I needed was a slight indication that she didn’t want me to kiss her.

But her lips parted.

She inched closer.

Her free hand slipped behind my back, urging me toward her.

I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and brushed the corner of her mouth with my lips. Her fingers dug into my back, and she shifted even closer. The sudden urge to claim her—to mark her as mine—swept over me. I tilted her head back and slanted my mouth over hers. She yielded to me, her lips as hungry for mine as I was for hers.

The kiss went on for a lifetime. My hands slid into her hair, eager to feel the soft, silky strands slip between my fingers. Eden settled herself in my lap, sucking in a breath of surprise when she realized what I’d been trying to hide.

CHAPTER 8

HIS MUSCLES RIPPLED under my palm. Shaw's body was an absolute work of art. The kiss had caught me by surprise, but I wanted it. We had the kind of chemistry I was eager to explore. The kind of chemistry I'd never experienced with anyone before.

He leaned back on the couch, pulling me with him until the entire length of my body pressed against his. Our mouths stayed connected, his tongue prodding past my lips, sliding against mine. The taste of whiskey lingered.

I wanted to feel him skin-to-skin, so I slid the hem of my shirt up, exposing a sliver of my belly. He took it a step further, his palm skimming up my side. Goosebumps exploded across my back, skittering over my skin from my head to my toes.

Hooking up with my grumpy neighbor was a bad idea. Even knowing that, I couldn't stop. I craved his touch, desperate to relieve the hollow ache that pulsed between my legs. Based on the thick ridge along the front of his sweats, he appeared more than willing to help.

Even on his back, Shaw was in control of everything—the depth of our kiss, the angle of his hips. Though I was eager to take what I wanted, being handled by him was a huge turn on. My head swirled, trying to make sense of the sensations rocking through my body.

He pulled back, depriving me of his lips. His eyes sought mine—a quick check-in to make sure we were both still on the same wavelength.

“Is this okay?” Rough and low, his tone added fuel to the fire that burned inside me.

“Yes.” I emphasized my point with an enthusiastic nod. “Is it okay with you?”

His lips curled into a grin. “Do I seem like I’m okay with this?”

He was cute when he wasn’t scowling at me. My hand slid down his chest. I could have counted each ridge as my fingers trailed over his abs, but I was too focused on getting to his waistband.

“Let me check.” I moved my hand over his cock. It tented the front of his sweats. Even through the fabric, I could feel his swollen head. “Yeah, seems like you’re okay with this.”

He hissed in a breath. “You’re killing me, Eden. The other night, seeing you in the creek, do you have any idea what I wanted to do to you that night?”

A thrill raced through me. Thinking about Shaw thinking about me, made me even hotter for him. “What did you want to do? Tell me.”

“I wanted to climb into the water and wrap your legs around my waist.” His smile faded. Heat replaced the humor in his eyes.

I shifted to kneel on top of him, straddling his hips with my legs. “Like this?”

His hands went to my waist, and he adjusted the angle of my hips so my pussy rested right on top of the bulge in his pants. “More like this.”

Ohhh. My eyes rolled back in my head as he held me over his cock, slowly brushing back and forth underneath me. It took a few passes for my breath to settle. He felt amazing, but I needed more.

“But I was naked in the creek.”

His hips stilled. He shifted his hands from my waist to slide my shirt up my stomach. His gaze held mine, searching for consent. I jerked my shirt up and over my head, then reached behind my back to unclasp my bra.

“Not yet.” His hands caught mine. “I want to look at you first. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The softness in his voice surprised me. I could have blown off the comment with a one liner, but I wanted to believe him. I wanted to be the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Wanted it more than anything.

Shaw set his fingertip at the base of my throat. Then he slowly trailed it down my breastbone. He sat up, shifting me onto his lap as he cupped my breasts. His beard tickled as he moved between them, kissing his way across the fabric, scraping his teeth over my hardened nipples until they were two tight, aching buds.

I slid my fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, eager for something to hold on to, to keep me grounded while he continued to explore with his

tongue. When I didn't think I could take any more, he got up from the couch and carried me into the bedroom.

He set me on the bed, and I shifted to the center. His fingers slipped under his waistband, and he tugged his sweats down his thighs, freeing his cock. Thick and hard, it bobbed up and down as he climbed onto the bed and bent over me. I worked my leggings past my hips. Shaw took over, his lips following the path of my pants all the way down my legs.

Naked, he hovered over me. "Take off your panties, Eden."

My fingers couldn't move fast enough.

"And your bra."

I pulled my arms free from the straps and flung my bra onto the floor.

Shaw lowered himself down to mumble into my ear. "I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I don't have a condom with me, baby, but I'm going to take care of you."

"I trust you." Twisting my head to the side, I caught his gaze. "I haven't been with anyone in a long time either, and I'm on the pill."

"Are you sure about this?" His cock rested on my thigh.

"Yes." I moved underneath him, eager to feel him inside me, aching to be filled.

"Not so fast. I want to take my time with you, Eden." He kissed down my neck and stopped to suck a nipple into his hot, wet mouth.

Groaning with pleasure, I forced myself to lie still. Anticipation would make my eventual release so much better. So, I fisted my hands in my comforter while he explored my body, taking his time to taste every part of me.

I almost lost it when he nudged my thighs apart with his shoulders. He might not have been with anyone in a long time, but he knew exactly how to handle me. And when he circled my clit with his tongue, I did lose it. My orgasm swept over me, leaving me shaky and trembling in its wake.

That's when Shaw climbed up my body, trailing kisses over my belly and between my breasts until he stared into my eyes. I spread my legs underneath him. The tip of his cock nudged against my entrance. Angling my hips, I tilted them up, holding his gaze as he entered me.

I didn't think I'd be able to come again, but I was wrong. As Shaw rocked into me, mumbling sweet, low words into my ear about how amazing I made him feel, heat unfurled through my system.

And when he slipped his hand between us, adding pressure to my swollen

clit, I shattered around him. In that moment, I gave myself to him—body, mind, and soul.

CHAPTER 9

THE NEXT WEEK passed in a blur of working in the garage during the day and spending every night with Eden. With Caden out of town to go look at some sled dogs with Mack, I didn't have any responsibilities beyond work and keeping my woman satisfied. We even found time to talk about the kiddie carnival. Once I gave up resisting her and started listening to her, I realized she had some really good ideas.

Tonight would be our last night together before Caden came home, and I wanted it to be special. I'd packed a picnic dinner and tossed a few blankets into the saddlebag on the back of my bike. Since Eden hadn't seen much of the area, I planned on taking her up to Bliss Lake to sit on the shore and stare up at the stars.

She looked good enough to eat when she bounded across the drive to climb onto the new custom seat on my bike. If I had my way, I'd be doing plenty of that later. She had on a pair of tight leggings that clung to her hips and had swapped her trademark flowy top for the sweatshirt I'd left at her place a few nights ago.

"When are you going to tell me where we're going?" she asked.

"When we get there." I leaned toward her for a kiss. "Did you have a good day?"

She took the helmet I handed her and buckled it under her chin. "Pretty good. I met with the contractor downtown again. He made the changes I asked about, and I think we're ready to start construction once he pulls the permits."

"That's great." I'd resigned myself to the fact that my plan to open my own garage in Mustang Mountain would never come to fruition. There

weren't any other buildings in town that would work, so unless I was willing to expand my search to western Montana, I'd have to let go.

It didn't matter though, because I had Eden. I always thought once Caden was out of high school, I'd be free to focus on my own plans. I'd put my life on hold to make sure his would get off to a good start. But with Eden in my life, I was willing to trade that dream for another. One that focused on her and me and a future I'd never envisioned.

"Hold on, baby. This is your first time on my bike, and I want to make sure it's memorable."

She laughed as I gave the bike some gas and the gravel sprayed behind us. Then her arms tightened around my waist and she pressed her front against my back. I could ride forever like this—with the late afternoon sun filtering through the treetops, the scent of pine rushing past my face, and a woman who'd brought me back to life sandwiching me between her thighs.

I pointed out some of the sights along the drive, like the old mill Jackson's family used to operate and the commune where Jensen and Jonas were raised. Too soon, we arrived at the shore of the lake. I pulled the bike to the side of the road and grabbed what we'd need for our special evening.

My favorite spot on the lake was a short hike from the road. The small beach sat on the eastern side, far enough away from the resort that there was minimal boat traffic. Tall pines grew right to the edge of the water, ensuring plenty of privacy.

We came out of the trees, and the lake glistened in front of us. Eden's eyes widened, while a huge smile spread across her lips.

"You like it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I love it. How did you find this place?"

I twined my fingers with hers and tugged her toward the water. "I grew up around here, remember?"

We spread out the blanket and sat down on the beach. Eden pulled off her boots and socks to dig her toes into the rocky sand.

"This would be a great place to do yoga. So grounding." She tilted her head to face the sun, then closed her eyes.

"That sounds fun, but I have something else in mind."

"Oh, I bet you do." A soft laugh bubbled up from her chest. "You'd better feed me first."

"Don't worry. I've got you covered." I set down the cutting board and spread out the slices of meat and cheese I'd prepped earlier.

“When did you have time to do all of this?” She picked up a piece of cheddar.

“Before I went into work today. You like it?”

Nodding, she straddled my thighs and picked up another piece of cheese to offer to me. “I like everything about this place. I like everything about you, too.”

It was my turn to chuckle. “You obviously don’t know me very well, baby.”

Her arms circled my neck, and she held my gaze. When she looked at me the way she did, it seemed like she could see beyond the front I put up for the rest of the world. Like she could see the man I was all the way down to my core. It was liberating and terrifying at the same time. I’d been putting Caden first for so long, I wasn’t even sure I knew who I was deep down inside.

“I know enough to know you’re not like anyone I’ve ever met.” Her hips shifted forward, creating the perfect amount of friction between us.

“That’s because you’ve been hanging out on the wrong mountain range. Out here in Montana, we’ve got real mountain men,” I teased.

“Is that what you are?” Her chin tilted up, and she studied me with those amber eyes that could see everything.

“I suppose. Though it’s not what I always set out to be.”

“What do you mean?”

I broke eye contact and focused on the way the surface of the lake sparkled. “Once upon a time, I thought I wanted to go into business. I was going to get a degree, something white collar where I wouldn’t have to get my hands dirty every day.”

Eden smoothed her palm under my flannel shirt and let her palm rest against my heart. “What happened?”

“My parents got in a car wreck. Mom died at the scene, but Dad held on for a couple of days before we lost him.” Talking it about it now, I was numb. Everyone in town knew what had happened, so it had been a long time since I’d had to share my past with someone new.

“I’m so sorry.” Eden moved closer, resting her chin on my shoulder. “How long ago was that?”

“Eight years. I was a sophomore at Montana State. Caden was in fifth grade. They were going to send him off to live with our aunt in Bismarck. I couldn’t let that happen, so I came home to take care of him.” It wasn’t like me to talk so much, especially about my past.

Her fingers brushed along the nape of my neck. “That must have been so hard. You were just a kid yourself.”

“We made it work.” I slid my hands under her ass and picked her up. The mood had shifted, and I didn’t want to drag us down any further. Being around Eden made me forget about the rough hand life had dealt me. “Enough about me. You ever dip your toes into a cold Montana lake?”

She held on, wrapping her legs around my middle as I carried her toward the water. “No. Don’t you dare toss me in there. I’ll take you with me if you do.”

“Come on, baby. I just want to get you a little wet.”

She tossed her head back and let out a throaty laugh. “I’m already there, my Montana mountain man.”

“I’m not sure I believe you without proof.” I shifted direction, heading away from the water and back to the blanket. “Are you going to show me, or do I need to go looking for it myself?”

Eden pulled me down on top of her and guided my hand past the waistband of her leggings. “Please, go looking for it yourself.”

Within minutes, I knew exactly how wet she was. Her leggings flew over my shoulder and her panties ended up at the water’s edge.

CHAPTER 10

I HELD on tight to Shaw as the bike carried us up the mountain. I'd had such a good time with him this afternoon. I wasn't ready to say goodbye. He wasn't going anywhere, but with Caden coming home, things would change between us. He wouldn't be able to spend the night every night, but he'd promised we'd still get enough alone time. I wasn't sure where things with my mountain man were headed, but I was ready to find out. He drove the final few yards up the road and pulled into the drive.

His back tensed against my cheek. Something was wrong.

He cut the engine. "You expecting someone, Eden?"

"No." The light had faded, but I could make out the small sedan parked in front of the cabin.

"Eden, it's me, Cory." A man-sized shape moved across my porch.

"Cory? What are you doing here?" I climbed off the bike and tugged the helmet off as I headed his way. He had no right to be here. I'd left him and all of his demands back in Asheville—even traveled across the country to get away from him.

He tried to draw me into a hug, but I pushed him away. "It's so good to see you. I was starting to think maybe I'd come to the wrong place."

"Everything okay?" Shaw asked. I could sense his presence behind me before he uttered a word. Knowing he was there, ready to back me up at the first sign that I needed him, gave me the confidence I needed.

"It will be once my ex-business partner leaves." I moved past Cory and up the steps onto the porch so I could turn on the outdoor light. Whatever he wanted to say, he could say outside in front of Shaw. There was no way I'd invite him in.

He blinked against the brightness as the light flooded the porch. “Can we talk for a few minutes?”

“Sure.” I crossed my arms under my chest. “Start talking.”

Cory’s gaze darted to Shaw, who matched my stance. “In private?”

“No, thank you.” I lowered myself down to perch on the edge of a lounge chair. “Why are you here?”

“It’s all gone to shit without you.” Cory sat down on the chair closest to mine, still casting nervous glances at Shaw, who stood as still as a mountain.

It gave me an immense amount of pleasure to hear him admit that. “You want me to feel bad you ruined everything I left you?”

“No.” He reached for my hands. Shaw made a noise that sounded like a cross between a grunt and a growl. Cory clasped his hands together instead. “I want you to come back.”

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. It seemed to go into a freefall with no end in sight. “I drove across the country to get away from you. Why in the world would I consider going back?”

“I need you, Eden. You were right about not getting too big too fast. Sales are down, and I’m not going to be able to make payroll this month.”

“That really sucks,” I said, feeling more for the part-time helpers who’d be going without a paycheck than I did for the man sitting in front of me. “It’s too bad you didn’t listen to me when you had the chance.”

“You’re right. I’ll give you whatever you want if you’ll come back. I can’t fix this on my own.” It wasn’t like him to beg. He must have really screwed things up to come all the way to Montana to find me.

“Seventy-five percent ownership of the business?” I didn’t have any intention of going back, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy testing him.

His jaw tightened. “Would you settle for sixty?”

“You really are in trouble, aren’t you?” I studied the two or three day’s worth of scruff on his chin. He looked stressed—more on edge than I’d ever seen him before.

“Please, Eden? Think about it. I booked a place in town overnight. You can let me know for sure in the morning.” He gave me a smile full of hope. “It would be like you never left.”

“You should go, Cory.” I stood and walked toward his rental, stopping next to Shaw.

“Sure. You’ve still got my number. We can work out all the little details later. It would be great to have you back.” He paused next to me like he

wanted a parting hug but thought better of it when he glanced at Shaw. “I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

I didn’t say anything until he’d gotten in his car and the headlights had disappeared down the mountain. Then I turned to Shaw. I owed him an explanation.

“I’m sorry about that. Cory’s my ex-business partner.” I wrapped my arms around his middle and buried my face against his chest.

“I figured.” His thick arms held me tight. “Are you okay?”

“I will be.”

Smoothing his palm over my hair, he looked down at me. “I hate to do this, but I’d better go. I need to head over to Mack’s to pick up Caden.”

We’d had such a great time together. I didn’t want it to end on a bad note. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“That’s okay.” He pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “Sounds like you might have some thinking to do?”

I shook my head. “There’s no reason for me to go back. Not when everything I want is here.”

“That’s funny. Everything I want is right here too.” Shaw pulled back enough to meet my gaze.

“You say the nicest things.” I fluttered my lashes, not even trying to mask my flirty tone.

“There’s something else I want to say, and I hope you’ll think it’s nice, too.” His eyes softened at the corners, and I got the sense another layer of his protective shield had peeled away. He looked at me with raw, honest emotion reflecting in his eyes.

Nervous with anticipation, I locked eyes with him. “What?”

“I’m falling for you, Eden.” He looked away and took in a breath. “No, that’s not right.”

My heart sank.

His palm cupped my cheek, and he turned back to face me. “What I meant to say is that I’ve already fallen for you. I love you, baby.”

“You do?”

He nodded, a shy smile spreading across his lips. “I do. You don’t have to say it back. I know it’s too soon, but I wanted to tell you how I—”

“I love you too,” I blurted.

His nose crinkled. “You sure?”

I tilted my head. “You need proof?”

“No,”—he shook his head and pulled me close, his scruff scraping my cheek—“I just find it hard to believe someone like you could love a man like me.”

“Well, you’d better get used to it. I’m not going anywhere.” I held tight to his shoulders, hoping he could feel how much I meant what I said.

“Do you want me to come back after I take Caden home?” Shaw slid his hand through my hair and tucked it back behind my ear.

“That’s okay. I’ve got an early morning. I told Ruby I’d bring some soap and lotion down to the merc. She said she might know of a place I can rent to start teaching some yoga classes too. At least until I get the building ready.” I relaxed my grip on his shoulders and rose to my tiptoes to give him a kiss. Right before our lips touched, I paused. “You never did tell me what you were going to do with that building my grandfather owned.”

“It’s not important.” Shaw leaned forward and crashed his mouth down on mine. There was no need to talk. Not when all I could focus on was the feel of his tongue sliding against mine.

I wanted to freeze time and stay there forever with the sounds of the night filling my ears. Too soon, Shaw broke the kiss.

“Stop by the garage when you’re finished with Ruby tomorrow?”

I nodded.

“The guys are getting together at the clubhouse tomorrow night. I want to introduce you to everyone.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“My MC brothers and their better halves. It’s about time they meet the woman I love.” He smiled, the light in his eyes leaving no doubt in my mind that he meant what he said.

“I’d love to.”

“Good. It’s a date.” He slid his hands under my arms and carried me up onto the porch. With the moon at his back, he kissed me again. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Eden.”

I closed the door, listening to the sound of his heavy boots moved across the porch then onto the gravel. The engine of his bike revved, then faded into the night as he drove away.

CHAPTER 11

NOTHING WOULD PUT a damper on my good mood this morning, not even seeing Ruby gloat. She was bound to take credit for me and Eden getting together, even though she had nothing to do with it. I didn't even care. The only thing that mattered was that, despite the odds stacked against me, I'd found my perfect match.

I loved Eden Sugarman, and she loved me back.

"Good morning, Ruby." I made an effort to widen my smile as I sat down at the back counter and waited for her to bring over a cup of coffee. It had been almost twelve hours since I'd last seen Eden, and I wasn't willing to wait for her to stop by the garage. She said she'd be meeting with Ruby this morning, so I'd hoped to catch her on her way in or out of the merc.

"Shaw, it's good to see you." Ruby slid a mug filled to the brim onto the counter in front of me. Her eyes twinkled, a sure sign she'd already seen Eden. "Things at the garage slow this morning?"

"Slow enough that I figured I'd hop over and pick up a cup of the best coffee in town." Flattery would get me everywhere with Ruby.

Her lips split into a wide grin. "Voted best in town since they started keeping track."

I nodded and lifted the mug to take a sip while I tried to come up with a way to ask about Eden.

"Sounds like you and Eden Sugarman are getting along better now." Ruby straightened the napkin dispenser that didn't need straightening. Anything to avoid looking into my eyes.

"Oh yeah? Where did you hear that?" I played along, waiting for her to drop a hint as to where Eden might be this morning. My whole body ached to

feel her close again. Love was turning me into a pathetic, needy version of myself I hardly recognized. I didn't even care. All I wanted was to have Eden in my arms, in my bed, and in my life.

"She stopped by earlier. We had a nice little chat over a cup of tea. You know she's really come to love the huckleberry tea I stock in the shop. If you ever need a gift idea for her, you might consider a box or two of that." Ruby moved a few feet down the counter to pick up a discarded coffee cup. "I knew the two of you would hit it off and told her so."

"Mmm hmm." I nodded along, encouraging her to continue. It would have been easier to pick up my phone and text Eden to ask where she was, but I wanted to surprise her. Running into her as a convenient coincidence would be so much better.

"I also told her how nice it was to see your two families getting along after all these years." Ruby set the mug in a bin and clasped her hands together.

Alarm bells went off in my head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the accident, of course." Her forehead creased. "I know you're not the kind to hold a grudge, but everyone knows Leroy was to blame for the accident that took your parents, honey."

Tension worked its way up my spine, knotting my muscles together in a tight web. "Please tell me you didn't say anything to Eden about that."

Ruby tipped her chin down. "She didn't know?"

"She doesn't know," I corrected her. "Unless you said something. Did you tell her, Ruby?"

"Well, I might have mentioned—"

"Mentioned what?" I jumped up from my stool, my palms flat on the counter like I was about to leap over it.

Ruby patted her hair, obviously flustered. "I think maybe you should go check on her. After our tea, she said she wasn't feeling well and thought it would be best to reschedule the rest of our plans."

Dammit. I'd planned on telling her about the accident. I just hadn't found the right time. Things between us were so new, and I didn't want her to get the impression that I held her responsible for her grandfather's actions. I tossed a couple of bucks on the counter and raced back to the garage. I'd ridden my bike into town that morning, so I fired it up and rolled out of the parking lot without even taking time to let anyone know where I was going or when I'd be back.

The only thing that mattered was getting to Eden. If Ruby had said something to scare her off, something to change her mind about staying in Mustang Mountain... I wouldn't let myself consider the possibility.

Eden's place was with me. We'd both been through too much on our journey to find each other. I couldn't let her go without a fight.

Every mile seemed to take forever. When I finally came to a stop at the top of the mountain, it felt like we'd been apart for days, not hours.

Her SUV sat in front of the cabin, the small trailer she'd used to haul the goats attached to the back. She wasn't in the trailer or the car. I headed toward the front door next, hoping she was still inside. An envelope with my name scrawled across the front hung from a nail on the door.

She couldn't have left already. With my heart about to explode, I slid my finger under the edge of the envelope and pulled out a thin stack of papers.

"Shoot. I was hoping I'd be gone by the time you found that." Eden came around the side of the cabin, leading the big goat with the buggy blue eyes.

I abandoned the envelope and jumped over the railing on the porch to stand in front of her. "What's happening, baby? Tell me what's going on."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me my grandfather killed your parents?"

My heart cracked in two at the pain in her voice. I reached for her, but she stepped back. "It was an accident, that's all."

"Yeah, that's what Ruby said. But then I looked it up online. He'd been drinking. Ran them right off the road, didn't he? That's why he and my mom didn't talk for so long. Because he was in jail." She brushed the back of her hand across her cheek, then barreled past me.

"I'm not going to lie. I blamed him for a long time, Eden, but he got sober after that." Memories of that night flooded back...the helplessness I felt when I got the call...how I'd dropped everything to head home...those first few days after losing my mom while my dad still clung to life...trying to cope with my own grief while still being there for Caden.

"And he blamed himself. That's why he promised to sell you his cabin and that building downtown, isn't it?" She turned on me, her grief dragging me right down with her. "I found a note in his kitchen drawer this morning. He wanted you to have it."

"I don't want it, baby. All I need is you."

Her head shook from side to side. "How could you possibly love me? How could you look at me every day knowing that I'm a living reminder of

everything you've lost?"

Seeing her in so much pain slayed me. She was wrong. I just needed to find the words to tell her that.

"I was so stupid to think I could make a life out here." Her hands shook as she led the goat into the trailer.

"So what? You're going to go back to Asheville? Take Cory up on his offer to rejoin the business you left behind?"

She finally stood still and faced me. "I don't know, but I want you to have what he promised. The paperwork is in the envelope. It's yours—the building downtown and the cabin."

"No. I don't want it."

Her shoulders sagged. "Yes, you do. At least you did before I got here. Ruby told me you wanted to open up your own garage. I'm the one who's standing in the way of your plans."

"A really smart woman told me once that plans change." I smiled as I thought of the first night we met when she'd said those exact words to me.

"I was awful to you then."

"No, baby. You were exactly what I needed." I reached out and took her hands. "Plans do change, and you've changed mine for the better. I don't need my own garage or to own the top of the mountain. I've said it before, and I'll keep saying it until you hear me. All I need is you."

She shifted, but didn't pull her hands away. "How can you say that after everything you've lost?"

"If I could have my parents back, I'd choose that in a heartbeat, but I can't. My dad once told me that unless you've experienced darkness, you'll never be able to appreciate the light. You're my light, baby. I love you. Stay with me, Eden."

Tears flowed down her cheeks, and she flung herself into my arms. I held her tight, afraid if I loosened my grip, she'd disappear. We stood like that for a long time. Long enough that the damn goat got bored and started nibbling on the edge of my flannel shirt.

Eden pulled back. Her eyes were rimmed in red and tears stained her cheeks. "I don't want to go."

"Then don't." I brushed the pads of my thumbs over her cheeks to wipe away her tears.

She sniffled, then nodded. "I'll stay under one condition."

"Okay."

“You haven’t heard it yet.” Her eyes went soft and the promise of a smile teased the edges of her lips.

“Whatever it is, yes.” If it meant she’d stay, I’d agree to anything.

“You take the building,”—she held up her palm as I shook my head—“and the cabin.”

“I’ll take the building and the cabin under one condition,” I volleyed back.

“That’s not how this works.” She wagged her pointer finger in front of my face. I hooked it with mine and spun her around so her back pressed into my front.

“We’ll live in this cabin.” Nuzzling my cheek against hers, I turned us to face down the mountain. “And I’ll build you a place to run your yoga studio and goat stuff store and whatever else you want to do down on my property.”

Her chest rose as she drew in a breath. “Living together? That seems serious.”

“That’s right. It means not leaving when things get tough.”

“It also means no secrets,” she said. “Are you sure you’re up for being serious?”

“I’m all in.” I smiled against her cheek as I nibbled on her earlobe.

“I’m going to have to come up with a new nickname for you now. You smile too much for me to keep calling you grumpasaurus.”

“You want something to smile about, baby?” I slipped my hands under the tank top she had on. “Let’s take this inside, and I promise I’ll have you smiling in no time.”

“Let me put Scapegoat back in his pen.” She was already reaching for the rope that secured the sneaky goat to the inside of the trailer.

“I’ll help. Then we can head into our new home together.”

“Our new home... I like the sound of that.” She smiled up at me as our hands twined together.

I was no longer alone. Love had found me, or I’d found love. Didn’t matter. Either way, with Eden by my side, I was finally truly happy.

EPILOGUE

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED the mountains. The more I can get into nature, the better. I love the solitude, the fresh air, and the views.

Every chance I get, I take the trail out the back of my property to the mountain lake that only a few locals know about. I camp out there for days and just live off the land.

It's always been a retreat, but this time it's an escape. I'm avoiding Ruby and her latest scheme to get the last few of us mountain men to the altar, starting with making me Mr. October and including the town's Harvest Festival.

Thankfully, Nate found out what she was up to and gave me a call. He and Dean decided to go fishing to get out of town for a few days. We wasted no time getting out of Ruby's way.

I round the corner of the trail, ready to set eyes on the lake for the first time in two months, but what I see stops me dead in my tracks.

There's another tent set up in my spot. Maybe this is where Nate and Dean decided to go fishing. That wouldn't be too bad.

As I get closer, I can tell there's a woman at the campsite so that rules out Nate and Dean. Dammit. Who else knows about this place other than the park rangers? I always file a permit before I come up here so they know when to expect me back. It's a precaution in case something bad were to happen.

Great. My options are to turn back and head home or camp with a stranger. It took me two days to get here, and I'm not turning back now. I know there is another good place a little further up the shore to set up a tent, and I hope whoever this is will just leave me alone.

I head up shore, making some noise to alert the other camper I'm here. As

I get closer, I notice a woman lying on a towel by the water just reading. Great, a couple. The last thing I need is to hear them going at it all night.

Suddenly, the thought of someone going at it with the curvy brunette who's reading makes my gut twist. It's a reaction I've never had before, so I just blow it off. I really should get laid when I get back to town.

I set my stuff down and get to work setting up the tent. As I work, I feel eyes on me and every time I look over toward the other tent, the woman is watching. She averts her eyes when I catch her.

So far, no sign of her partner. Is he out trying to find something for dinner? Does he know how dangerous it is to leave her alone, unprotected like this?

Once I'm all set up, I decide to go over and introduce myself before I start dinner. It's the right thing to do as much as I want to be left alone.

The woman is up and moving about the campsite as I walk over. I clear my throat to get her attention.

"Oh! Sorry, I was just in my head. Is everything okay?" She stops fussing around and looks at me.

Suddenly, nothing is okay. Her eyes seem to pin me in place and look right into my soul at the same time. My heart races and my gut says she's the one.

She's mine.

"Are you okay?" she asks, and I realize I've been standing there just staring at her for way too long.

"Sorry, yes. Just wanted to introduce myself. I've never had someone up here when I camp. But I'm Owen." I stick my hand out.

"It's nice to meet you, Owen. I'm Kennedy. I've never been up here before, but it's where my grandfather proposed to my grandmother, so I wanted to be here for their anniversary. My sister was supposed to come with me, but she bailed. I guess I shouldn't be telling a stranger I'm up here alone."

She takes my hand, and when her skin touches mine, it's almost like I've been burned, but the feeling is a good one. I stare at our hands, mesmerized by the feeling of her skin on mine. It's a sensation I've never felt before, and judging by the dazed look on her face, neither has she. Then her words hit me.

"You hiked up here alone? I'm sure your boyfriend is thrilled," I say. She looks younger, much younger than my thirty-five years, so I doubt she has a

husband. The thought makes me want to rip some imaginary guy's head off.

She laughs, and the sound is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. It's soft, sweet, and innocent. Everything I'm not.

"Why don't guys just ask if I have a boyfriend or husband instead of the roundabout hint like that? No, I'm single, Owen. How about you?" she asks with a twinkle in her eyes.

I do something then that I haven't done in a long time. I can't even remember the last time I did it.

I smile. A full-on genuine smile.

"I'm single, too. I guess now is also a good time to ask how old you are." I decide to be straightforward because she doesn't even look twenty-one. I just pray she's at least eighteen. I don't think she could get a permit to camp alone under eighteen, but strange things happen all the time.

"Twenty two. Now your turn, same question."

Fuck, she is still much younger than someone like me should be attracted to.

"Thirty five. Kennedy, would you like to have dinner with me? I'm going to catch some fish and we can grill it up over the fire," I tell her.

"Oh, good luck. I tried to fish yesterday and got nothing," she says, waving me off.

"Well, you don't know the lake like I do. I'll get us dinner." I head back to my campsite to grab a net and my fishing supplies.

I set up at a spot along the shore with a lot of vegetation where I know the fish like to hide out. Half an hour later, I have several fish for us for dinner.

I head back to her campsite and start getting the fish ready as she gets a fire going. We talk over dinner, and I find that I like her company more than the solitude I was planning to find out here.

When she laughs, there's a spark there that I can't seem to ignore, and I'm looking forward to spending more time with her.

"It's getting late, and you really should get some sleep. Daylight comes early," I tell her once I realize it has to be well after ten. I don't remember the last time I got wrapped up in a conversation like that.

I help her put all the food away and make sure that her tent site is secure and that she's safe inside the tent before heading to my campsite. Sleep is the last thing on my mind. I keep playing over every minute of our conversation tonight, committing every facet of her to memory.

The way she looked in the firelight, her laugh, and the way she would

tuck her hair behind her ear as she talked are all things that run over and over in my head as I lie there alone in my tent.

I recalled her smile and the slight blush on her cheeks when she admitted that she was happy her sister hadn't joined her.

I'm looking forward to spending tomorrow with her. Now I just need to convince my dick she isn't ours... yet.

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ABOUT DYLANN CRUSH

USA Today bestselling author Dylann Crush writes contemporary romance with sizzle, sass, heart and humor. A true romantic, she loves her heroines spunky and her heroes super sexy. When she's not dreaming up steamy storylines, she can be found sipping a margarita and searching for the best Tex-Mex food in the Upper Midwest.

Dylann co-hosts Romance Happy Hour (<https://www.romancehappyhour.com/>) with live episodes every 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month and is the founder of Book Box Babe (<https://www.BookBoxBabe.com>) where readers can find hand-curated, romance novel themed subscription boxes, and specialty items.

Although she grew up in Texas, she currently lives in a suburb of Minneapolis/St. Paul with her unflappable husband, three energetic kids, a clumsy Great Dane, a lovable rescue mutt, a very chill cat, and a crazy kitten. She loves to connect with readers, other authors and fans of tequila.

You can find her at www.dylanncrush.com.



ABOUT EVE LONDON

When Eve London was a girl she wanted to be a trapeze artist. Instead, she grew up to be like most women—a juggler—trying to keep bunches of balls in the air.

Now she spends her days writing about the kind of men she likes – sexy, shameless, and just a little bit sarcastic.

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