



THE *BOSS* OF THE

MOUNTAIN

TESSA KLEIN

THE BOSS OF THE MOUNTAIN

TESSA KLEIN

CONTENTS

1. Lizzy
 2. Chase
 3. Lizzy
 4. Chase
 5. Lizzy
 6. Chase
 7. Lizzy
 8. Chase
- Epilogue
- Epilogue
- Also by Tessa Klein

LIZZY

I wonder if he watches me.

I glance at the camera in the corner of the kitchen, blushing at the idea of Chase Beckett on the other end of the feed. His big hand stroking his thick... beard. His eyes fixated on me as I bend over the stove, tasting and seasoning dishes.

It's not the first time I've had this thought. Although it tends to be a little less tame. A smidge more *risqué*—especially after a long day's work at the Whispering Winds Inn.

His Inn.

Usually, I'd pad up to my room, body aching as thoughts I shouldn't be having about my boss swirl in my head. Images of those big hands. Those big muscles. That thick... beard. The things he does to me in my head are filthy and dirty but never fail to ease my tension.

I shouldn't think about my older brother's best friend like this, but I can't help it.

I've been stuck on Chase for as long as I've known him. I can still remember the first time he showed up at our house. He and Aiden were covered in sweat from football practice. Couldn't keep my eyes off Chase as my stomach twisted into knots and my chest tightened. Never felt anything like that before. And no one's ever made me feel like that since.

Only Chase.

It's a fitting name because I've been chasing him around Whispering Winds for years—along with every other girl in town. There's not a single woman in this town that hasn't fallen under his captivating spell.

My teeth graze my lower lip as I trace his image in my head.

Thick, dark hair paired with discerning, hazel eyes and a megawatt smile that makes my insides melt. Muscles as big as the mountains surrounding this town. And a face that makes my chest flutter and stomach clench every time I see it.

The man's basically bearded Captain America but with bigger muscles. A body that was built from years of professional football and braving the rugged wilderness. Splitting logs. Felling trees. Fighting off grizzlies or whatever mountain men do.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, exhaling as I try to settle the tension rising inside me. My wild mushroom soup is almost done. It's the last batch before I have to brave the mountain and forage for more mushrooms. It sounds more daunting than it is. I've done it so many times now that I have a well-trodden circuit I follow.

It's the first dish on the menu that I added when I started working here. It's my mother's recipe. She'd make it often and Chase would devour a few bowls whenever he was over. I hope he likes it as much as he did when we were younger.

I wouldn't know.

I've been working here for over a month and I've yet to see Chase. I should've seen it coming. I can't believe he offered me the job after our last meeting nearly four and a half years ago.

Embarrassment covers me like a steaming, wet blanket as I remember the one-sided kiss.

"How's the cobbler faring?" Mom asks as she shuffles into the kitchen. "Better than you, I hope," she says as she presses the back of her palm against my forehead. "You're burning up, Dear."

“I’m fine,” I say. “It’s a little toasty in here.”

Mom plants her hands on her hips and then blows a tuft of her gray hair out of her face, clearly not believing a word coming out of my mouth.

She’s a fixture of Whispering Winds—lived here longer than most anyone else. So long that I’m not sure anyone knows her real name. I don’t. She’s just Mom to everyone in town—Mama Bear when something or someone works her up into a fit. It’s best to stay out of her way, then.

“Soup’s about finished,” I say, trying to direct the conversation away from me. “Figured I’d give some to Penny for her hike.”

Mom sighs. “I don’t know about her. With the storm coming and those trails the way they are...” She shakes her head.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” I say, peeking inside the oven. “Cobbler’s ready,” I say, grabbing an oven mitt before taking it out. Mom’s blackberry cobbler is another fixture of Whispering Winds and for good reason. It’s the best dessert around. Heck, there’s hardly a dessert I tasted throughout my entire stint at culinary school that holds a candle to it.

“But if you’re that worried,” I say, wiping my brow after setting the mitts down. “Just fill her up with cobbler. She won’t make it out the door, let alone to the trails.”

Mom winks at me. “Good idea.”

She carves a huge portion out of the pan, sets it on the plate, and then heads out of the kitchen to deliver the goods to Penny.

Penny rolled into town yesterday, although sputtered might be a better word. I could smell the smoke and hear the grating noise of her car from the Inn’s kitchen. She’s lucky that her clunker gave out when it did. There’s not much between here and the next town.

No cobbler, either.

I turn off the heat to the big pot of mushroom soup simmering on the stove. I take a big whiff of it as I give it another stir. It's no wonder Chase loves this stuff. It smells heavenly and tastes even better. I ladle a portion out for him like I always do. Once it cools, I'll put it in the refrigerator, and it'll be gone by the time I wake up.

I've considered hanging around to catch him in the act but decided against it. If he wants to keep his distance, I'll do the same.

I take another look at the camera. A thrill races across my spine almost instantly, but I shake it off. He's not watching. Why would he?

He made his stance clear four and a half years ago.

"Is that Mom's cobbler?"

I jerk my head toward my brother's gruff voice.

"Aiden? What in the world are you doing here?"

The man rarely leaves his fortress of solitude on the mountain. We've had coffee a few times since I've come back. And I made the trek to his cabin a few times for dinner, but that's about it.

"Been a while since I've checked in on my little sister," he says, pulling me into a hug. "Wanted to make sure Chase hasn't been riding you too hard," he says gruffly.

I swallow hard as my skin flushes. I think we have different ideas of what that means. If Chase were riding me hard, Aiden would be the last to know.

"No. Not at all," I say. "I haven't even seen him since I've been back, actually. Keeps to himself. Seems to be a bit of a recluse, much like yourself."

Aiden pulls back. "Not once?"

I shrug. "Mom says he takes care of the business remotely. Only drops in when it's necessary."

Or wants a top off of mushroom soup...

Aiden's jaw tenses and flexes. "You feel welcome though, right? I don't want you running out of town again."

I laugh. "I didn't run out of town. I went to culinary school and worked in a few kitchens. How else am I supposed to open up my own restaurant?"

That's the dream, at least. But he's not entirely wrong about me running out of town. Chase is a big reason why I stayed away. Scratch that. He *is* the reason.

It was the summer before I left for college. He had recently come back to Whispering Winds after a recurring ACL and MCL injury ended his professional football career. We were at my family's cabin. Everyone was inside while he and I were watching the sunset on the back porch. It felt romantic and I did something stupid.

I leaned over and kissed him.

He didn't kiss me back. He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to—his face said it all: *What are you doing? You're my best friend's little sister.*

I booked it out of there and haven't seen him since.

Aiden grunts. "I'll talk with Chase."

I shake my head. "There's nothing to talk about. He gave me this job. He doesn't need to hold my hand."

"Okay," Aiden grits out.

I know my brother. He's not going to drop it. To say he's protective of me would be an understatement.

"Why don't you grab some cobbler?" I say as I turn my attention back to my soup.

Aiden sighs contentedly as he pats his stomach. "It's been far too long."

"Maybe you should leave your cabin more than once in a blue moon."

"Maybe," he says, carving a slice the size of my face. "That's actually one of the reasons I came down here."

“Cobbler? Not your little sister?”

Aiden groans. “I’d leave my mountain for you anytime, Lizzy. Even if there wasn’t any of this in it for me,” he says, holding a massive forkful in front of his face.

“Quite the compliment, Aiden.”

He grins, taking a bite. His eyes roll into the back of his head before he closes them and groans. “That’s some *damn* fine cobbler. How in the hell does Mom do it?”

“Keep cursing and that’ll be the last bite of my cobbler you’ll ever take,” Mom says from behind us.

Aiden pales.

I snort, grabbing a thermos from a shelf and ladling some soup into it. Mom might be slight and bony, but she’s fierce enough to handle the burliest of mountain men.

“Mom,” Aiden says. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—“

Mom clicks her tongue. “The only apology I’ll accept is a hug,” she says smiling. “Get over here, Aiden. It’s been far too long.”

They chat as I fill a thermos with soup for Penny. I glance at the camera again, nerves swelling inside my chest. I can’t help but wonder why he wasn’t shown his face once.

Aiden takes a few bites of cobbler. Apparently, he’s made amends with Mom. She heads to the freezer and grabs a heaping scoop of vanilla ice cream and leaves the kitchen.

Aiden swallows, and then turns to me. “So, as I was saying. I left my cabin because I wanted to ask you a favor.”

I raise a brow. “Aiden asking for my help?”

He smiles. “I have to leave town for a little bit. Would you mind watching my place while I’m gone?”

“Seriously?”

He nods, taking another bite of cobbler. “Have a few things I need to take care of.”

“Cryptic much?”

He smiles, taking another bite of cobbler.

“That’s going to be quite the trek for me.”

“I’ll leave you my truck. And it’s not like you have to be there every day. Just enough to make sure a bear hasn’t wandered into my living room or fallen asleep in my bed.”

He’s only half joking. It’s rare but there have been a few residents of Whispering Winds who have come back to their cabins ransacked by a bear.

“Well, let me know when you figure it out,” I say, grabbing the thermos of soup. “I have to go, but it was great seeing you. Don’t be a stranger...”

Aiden nods, swallowing another bite. “We can schedule a coffee date soon.”

“Sounds great,” I say, heading for the door.

I pause, eyeing him as he glances at the casserole dish. “Don’t eat anymore of that cobbler. You’ve already had enough for three people.”

Aiden answers with a smile, shoveling another forkful into his mouth.

I watch him, half listening to the conversation on the other side of the door. Penny’s asking Mom about the recipe for the cobbler. There’s no real secret—sugar, butter, blackberries, and sugar. Then more sugar. And then all the fixings for a delicious crust, of course.

“I’m not sure you’d want to know,” Mom says as I open the door.

Penny’s seated at the end of a table, and she looks like she’s in heaven. It’s always fun to see people’s expressions when they taste Mom’s cobbler for the first time.

“Sugar,” I say with a smile. “Lots of sugar. Lots of Butter. And lots of fresh blackberries.”

Penny glances up at me with a big grin. I set down the thermos next to her.

“When you think you’ve added enough sugar, add another cup,” Mom says.

I lean in and whisper into Penny’s ear. “One-way ticket to type-two diabetes.”

I’ve sworn off the stuff. I can’t eat just one slice so I don’t eat any at all. I take a seat next to Penny and then blow a tuft of hair out of my face. It falls exactly in the same place. Whatever.

“Wild mushroom soup,” I say, nodding to the thermos. “Picked the mushrooms yesterday. It should help counteract the sugar rush. Wouldn’t want you to crash somewhere on the trails, especially with the storm coming soon.”

The trails through the mountains are mostly well-maintained, but it’s not uncommon for people to miss a marker and find themselves lost in the woods. Sometimes, they leave the trail to view one of the falls and can’t find their way back. The forest rangers have their work cut out for them during the tourist season.

“Thanks,” Penny says, smiling up at me before poking at her cobbler absently.

Mom groans next to me. “The storm’s nothing to worry about. I’ve been through plenty of ‘em and I’ve lived to tell the tale.”

But Penny’s a city girl. She hasn’t spent her life in the mountains like Mom.

I lean toward Penny. “Just be careful and get back before nightfall. Wouldn’t want to be out on the trails at night time during the best of conditions. Mountain lions. Bears. All sorts of dangerous things out there.”

“Mountain men?” she blurts, eyes widening as she stares at me.

Mom and I can’t help but laugh as Penny quietly eats some of the cobbler and ice cream.

Mountain men. Whispering Winds is full of them. Some of them are friendlier than others.

I can't help but let my thoughts drift to Chase. I wonder how long his beard has grown. How thick his hair might be. Does he still have that megawatt smile? Nerves swell in my belly as I chew on my lip.

"Least of your concerns, Dear," Mom says. "They're there, but you'll never see 'em. Stick to themselves, mostly. Might catch a glimpse around town when they're restocking."

"Or if they want some fresh mushroom soup," I mutter, thoughts still swirling around Chase.

There's a brief silence before a loud shriek echoes in the lobby next to us and Mom leaps to her feet and breathes, "Jack..."

I shake my head. Jack's cabin is being renovated right now so he's been holing up at the Inn for the past month. You'd think he'd bring the wild game he hunts elsewhere. Not the lobby of a small inn filled with tourists who don't routinely see lumbering men carrying dead rabbits over their shoulders.

Mom pushes through the door and lays into him. Her voice is mostly muted by the wall but I can still make most of it out. Something about skinning and tanning his hide like the animal he's carrying. His mama being ashamed. Fairly tame for a Mama Bear dressing down.

I can't help but laugh as I imagine the shock on his face.

"Second time this week," I say, turning to Penny. "I have no idea what Jack's thinking, bringing his game back here. Then again, he's not exactly the sharpest hunting knife."

There's a scuffle and a few sharp *thwacks*. Probably a rolled-up newspaper or brochure from the stand connecting with the back of Jack's head.

Penny swallows hard and then pushes her plate away. "Mom seems pretty fierce."

"She can be when she needs to, but she's a real sweetheart." I sigh and then say. "I need to prep for dinner. Enjoy the soup."

I stand and make my way to the kitchen. “Good luck with your hike,” I say, smiling at her before pushing through the door.

Hopefully, she won’t need it. I’m not usually concerned with tourists—they know what they’re getting into when they come to Whispering Winds. But Penny’s not a tourist. She’s only here because of her broken-down car.

I glance at my basket of wild mushrooms. I’ll need to restock soon, but with Penny out on the trails alone, maybe I could join her.

Mom pushes through the door, gives me an exasperated look, and then laughs.

“I think I scared the devil out of that boy,” she says.

I shrug. “At least for another week.” I bite my lip. “Do you mind if I head out to restock on mushrooms? I should be back before dinner.”

“Thinking about Penny?” Mom asks.

“That obvious?”

She smiles at me and then places a hand on my shoulder. “You have a good heart, Lizzy.” She pats me a few times and then adds, “Jake and Neil will be here soon, and we’ve had a few cancellations from the storm.” She leans in toward me and whispers, “We’ll be fine.”

I smile, thanking her.

“Now get on out of here,” she says, shooing me away before disappearing into the lobby again.

I grab the container of soup I left for Chase and then hold it up to the camera, shaking it gently in my hand.

I doubt he’s watching, but a girl can wish.

I place the container into the refrigerator, grab my bag, and then head for the trails.



I'VE BEEN on the trails for a few hours now, and my bag is nearly full of wild mushrooms. I left the trail for a brief moment when I spotted a good patch of mushrooms near a fallen log, but when I came back, Penny was gone.

I'm slightly worried, but I'm sure she'll be fine. I'll catch back up with her soon.

But first... morels.

I take a slight detour to my favorite spot to collect them. I haven't visited in a while, so I'm sure there will be plenty for me to pick from.

And I'm in luck: Jackpot.

My bag's already bursting, so I have to leave most of them. I make a mental note to come back later and then head over to the clearing a few feet away. It's my favorite spot to watch the falls crash into the river.

I take a few tentative steps because there's a short, but sheer drop into the river, and I'd rather not fall in and get swept away.

Unfortunately, I don't have a choice in the matter because I step on a patch of slick mud and banana peel over the edge.

The river swallows me up and carries me downstream.

CHASE

I take a deep breath as I cast my line, savoring the earthy scent of the woods and mountains around me. I exhale with a sigh as my lure hits the water. There's nothing better than the smell of an impending storm. This one's going to be big—I can feel it. In my knee to be more precise. It tends to act up when a storm's brewing. I give it a light squeeze as I watch my lure bob in the water.

Seems like the animals know it's coming too. My lucky fishing spot has been a bust. I've hardly caught more than a couple of trout in the few hours I've been out here. I'm usually on my way back to my cabin by now.

No matter. Fish or no fish—I'm out here to clear my head. Unfortunately for me, I'm not having much luck on that front either.

Lizzy.

She's all I think about—even more now that she's working for me. Can't seem to shake her no matter how hard I try. Then again, I'm not trying that hard. I can't stop watching her on the camera in the kitchen—cooking, cleaning, and chatting with Mom.

Can't keep my eyes off her.

It's fucking crazy how much I crave seeing her face. Those auburn curls and freckles across the bridge of her nose. Those irresistibly plump lips. Eyes so intelligent and piercing that I swear she can see me when she glances at the camera.

I'm hooked—have been for a long time now.

She was talking with Aiden before I left to come here. He'd kill me if he knew I had an entire monitor on my desk dedicated to watching his sister. And if he peeked inside my head and saw everything I'd like to do to her? He'd find a way to resurrect me and kill me all over again.

It's painful keeping my distance from Lizzy. But I'm sure I'm the last person she wants to see after...

Fuck. I can still see the pain in her eyes after she kissed me and I didn't reciprocate. Not a single day goes by when I don't replay that moment.

I wish I did something different, but what did she expect? She's my best friend's little sister. She was leaving for college, and I was still reeling from my NFL career ending prematurely because of my knee injury.

Football was my entire life, and I was trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do without it. I was in no shape to be in a relationship with anyone, let alone my best friend's sister.

But fuck, I regret not kissing her back. Watching her leave was more painful than losing my career.

I can't believe she wanted to work for me after that. Maybe she's over it—over me. It's probably for the best.

I've been hoping that the distance settles my feelings, but it's done nothing to curb them. I want her more. And I know as soon as I see my off-limits girl in front of me, what little restraint I have left will crumble. Something else will take over and I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her.

And if I had the chance to taste her lips one more time, I wouldn't fucking stop until I devoured her whole.

The handle of my fishing rod begins to crack under my grip as the possibility runs through my mind. I take in a deep breath, relax, and try to focus on the mountains around me.

Looks like I'm not going to shake her.

My phone rings, ripping me out of the moment.

I'm surprised I have cell service out here. Must be the clearing. Good to know...

Aiden. Must be important if he's calling me.

"What's up, Aiden?" I ask, repositioning my lure.

"You're giving Lizzy the cold shoulder. What's your deal?"

"Straight to the point. I like it."

I glance upstream. The rapids are crazy right now. Good thing this spot is enclosed with boulders and logs.

"So?" Aiden nudges.

"Cold shoulder?" I say with a sigh. "No idea what you're talking about."

Aiden makes a throaty sound and then, "When's the last time you saw her?"

Today—on the monitor, but I know that's not what he's getting at.

When I don't respond, Aiden says, "That's what I thought. Cold shoulder. Trying to run her out of town again?"

I grit my teeth as my jaw flexes. "I never ran her out of town."

But a part of me knows I might've played a role.

He sighs. "Look. I don't know what's going on with you, but could you at least make an effort to make her feel welcome? I'd like her to stick around. And she wants your help."

"What do you mean?"

"She wants to open up her own restaurant. Been her dream forever. When I hyped this job up for her, I figured you'd help her out. Give her some guidance. Teach her a thing or two about running a business."

Yup. Feeling like a huge fucking asshole right now. Should've swallowed my feelings. Can't believe I hurt her again. I'll make it up to her.

“You’re right,” I say, sighing. “I’ll help her out. You have my word.”

I glance upstream at a strange sound I can’t place. It’s not an animal as far as I can tell. I reel in my line and then head back to shore.

“Thanks,” he says. “She means a lot to me.”

Me too is what I want to say. Instead, I say, “You’re a great brother. A great friend too. I...”

The rest of my words fade away as I realize the noise is someone screaming—the sound is unmistakable. My heart slams in my chest when I see her.

“I have to go,” I say as my gaze fixates on auburn curls trying desperately to remain above water for off in the distance.

I rip off my shirt, take off my boots and pants, and then jump into action. My fishing hole is protected by an alcove of boulders, so I wade through the water with my fishing net until I reach the rushing rapids and then dive in.

Lizzy screams for help as I swim towards her. She’s just out of my reach by the time I make it to her. I guide the net toward her as I try to stay afloat.

“Grab it,” I growl.

She’s flailing, her head bobbing in and out of the water as she tries to find the net. Adrenaline spikes through me as I see her sink beneath the surface once more. I’m not letting my fucking girl drown.

I kick towards her, propelling myself just enough that I snag her with my net before the current sweeps her past me. I pull the net toward me, dropping it once she’s in my arms.

“Hold on tight,” I say, guiding her arms around me.

She’s cold, shivering, and disoriented but she holds on to me as I swim back to shore. Once we cross into the pool, the current settles and it’s no longer a fight. I find my footing and carry her to shore, setting her down on a fallen tree.

She's trembling and shaking, nearly folded in on herself as she gasps for air, her eyes focusing on the ground in front of her.

I kneel down next to her, scanning her body for injuries as some primal instinct screams through me. I've never felt so protective over anyone before. I'm a few seconds away from slinging her over my shoulder and carrying her to my cabin to make sure she gets all the care she needs and deserves. And she deserves the best.

But as my gaze rakes over her body, I'm not sure if I'm that person.

I shouldn't be looking at her like this. I shouldn't be staring at her body, hardly covered by her soaked shirt and tiny shorts.

The thoughts that are raging through me aren't kind or caring. They're filthy. They're not the thoughts a man should have for his best friend's little sister.

My hands gripping her thighs, feeling her soft porcelain skin under my calloused hands. Peeling those shorts off before claiming her with my mouth, tasting heaven.

My gaze drifts slowly upward as my throat constricts. Her chest heaves with every deep breath, and I can hardly breathe as every muscle in my body tightens. Lizzy's white shirt is stretched and tattered—covered in mud and grime, and at this angle, I can't help but stare at the swell of her tits.

Fucking hell, she nearly drowned and all I can think about is how they'd feel in my hands. Against my mouth, tongue swirling over those pebbles. I'm a fucking beast. A monster with urges and needs that I shouldn't be entertaining.

She deserves better than this.

I suck in a harsh breath, attempting to refocus my attention on her wounds. She has a few scratches and cuts but nothing too bad. The protectiveness wells up inside me. She's coming back to my cabin—there's no question about it. And she's not leaving until I know she's fit to.

She's not leaving—ever, something else screams inside me. Fuck... now that she's here, I don't want to let her go.

My body is on fire as I draw my gaze upward, past the hollow of her neck and along the slender column of her throat until I reach her lips. So full and red and irresistible. The urge to cup her cheek, brush her lip with my thumb, and then taste those lips is unrelenting.

“Chase?” Her voice is painfully soft and fragile and hearing my name on her lips is dredging up memories.

I can feel her eyes on me like a brand, searing my skin. It feels like my lungs have been crushed when our eyes meet after four and a half years. I can't fucking breathe. Can't fucking think. She's even more gorgeous than I remember. The cameras are painfully inadequate at capturing her beauty.

Those lips. Those fucking eyes. I want to kiss her. I want to taste those lips again.

“Lizzy,” I finally rasp, giving into the urge and cupping her face. She's so soft, but she's freezing. I need to get her out of here. I need to warm her up, clean her up, and feed her.

Make her mine, that urge screams again.

Her eyes flutter closed as she eases against my hand.

“What happened?” I ask.

Her eyes open, and the moment dissolves as she stands up. “It was an accident,” she says, moving toward the edge of the water, her arms folded against her waist. “Embarrassing, really.”

She's safe now and that's all that matters.

Lizzy pulls the strap of her crossbody bag over her shoulder and sets it down.

“I was restocking,” she says, turning back to me. “Used up most of my mushrooms for today's soup.”

The sky's cloudy and gray, but Lizzy's radiant as she looks at me. Never seen anything or anyone more gorgeous. Those freckles across the bridge of her nose are so perfectly placed

that they seem almost painted on, but I know they're not. Lizzy always sunburned easily, even with a thick layer of sunscreen.

I swallow hard as I remember the day she kissed me.

The lake.

I hadn't seen her in a while because I was in the prime of my professional football career and rarely made it back to Whispering Winds. But With my career-ending injury, it wasn't an easy homecoming. But when I saw Lizzy, a few months away from college, my world crumbled once again.

Up until that moment, I'd never seen her as anything other than Aiden's little sister. She was far too young for me, and I never reciprocated her flirty advances. But seeing her in that bright yellow bikini, the triangles of fabric leaving nothing to the imagination, my image of her shattered.

She wasn't little Lizzy anymore. She was a woman with curves to match. *Dangerous* curves because she was still my best friend's sister.

She strutted over to me, clutching a bottle of sunscreen in her hands, and looking so angelic in the sunlight. Lucky for me that I was still wearing my sunglasses because my eyes were not fixated on hers. Couldn't stop staring at her fucking body. And I couldn't believe I was having these feelings for her. It was wrong but I couldn't help it.

I can still remember how her body felt. Her scent. The way she glanced shyly at me over her shoulder, telling me I missed a spot as I rubbed sunscreen all over her. My hands edged dangerously low until Aiden appeared out of nowhere, and Lizzy leaped up from the chair and scurried off.

I sigh, closing my eyes for a brief moment.

"Any of them make it?" I ask, not really caring about the mushrooms, but trying to shift my thoughts to safer territory.

She kicks at the bag and it falls open. "Enough for a batch," she says, eying the bag.

"Good," I say as I rise to my feet. "Your soup is killer."

Lizzy lets out a light gasp, spinning around to face the water. “You’re-y-you-Where are your clothes?” she finally says.

I glance down. Completely forgot I’d stripped down to my boxer briefs to fetch her.

A smile creeps onto my lips. “Must’ve forgotten them at home. No better way to commune with nature.”

“Sorry I interrupted your bath, then.”

I take a few steps forward, grabbing my fishing pole and flannel shirt before erasing the gap between us. I stand the rod next to her. She glances at it and then over her shoulder at me. She was cold before, but I can feel the heat from her body.

“I was fishing,” I say, letting the pole drop.

“Catch anything?” she breathes.

“Yeah,” I whisper, my gruff voice grazing against her neck as I lean in and wrap my flannel shirt around her. “A real prize.”

She sighs, clinging onto my shirt as she turns her head and glances at the sky. “The storm’s coming,” she says. “I should get back before it hits.”

“You’re not going to make it back in time,” I say, grabbing my pole and her bag. “You’re coming home with me.”

She spins around, and I can feel her eyes on me.

“It’s not that close,” she says. “I’ll make it back.”

I set the stuff down on the ground and then pull on my pants. “Just look at those clouds move,” I say as I slide a boot on. “We’ll be lucky to make it back to my place, and I’m only a ten-minute hike away. You’re coming with me, Lizzy,” I say, my eyes snapping to hers as I tighten my laces.

I might be imagining it, but I swear her eyes dip to my chest. “Okay,” she says, as redness creeps across her chest and neck.

“Okay,” I mutter to myself as I put on my second boot and lace it up.

I stand up, collecting my stuff as I watch Lizzy walk over to me.

Her shoes are soaked and make a squishing sound with every step. She pauses in front of me as I square my body to hers.

“Thanks,” she says after a few moments. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if you weren’t here,” she says, worrying her lip as her eyes meet mine.

My gut clenches with uneasiness. I’d rather not think about what could’ve happened.

“You’re safe,” I rasp, resisting the urge to brush the back of my hand against her cheek. “And that’s what matters.”

She smiles, blushing as she looks down.

“You should get out of that wet shirt,” I say. “Just wear my flannel. It will keep you warm until I get you home and into a hot shower.”

The idea of her in my shower. In my shirt. In my cabin. It’s dredging up some feelings I’ve never had before. Possessive. Obsessive. Protective as fuck.

Lizzy smiles at me as her eyes meet mine.

“Promise you won’t look?” she says, playfully.

I exhale sharply. “Promise,” I say, turning around and heading for the trail.

I glance over my shoulder. Heat rises in my chest as our eyes meet for a brief moment before she lets my shirt fall to the ground. I turn around just as she begins to tug the hem of her shirt up.

I close my eyes as my mind fills in the gaps.

Dangerous.

LIZZY

“**A** hhhh,” I squeal as we start running toward the cabin. “You were right!” I shout as rain pummels us and wind whips against our faces. I can hardly see Chase lumbering in front of me, and he’s bigger than the broad side of a barn.

Can’t help but notice his slight limp though. But even with it, I can hardly keep up with him. He tosses his fishing pole aside and then turns so quickly that I crash into him. Good lord, he feels as solid as a barn too.

He catches me before I collapse against the ground, sliding me over his shoulder before charging back to his cabin.

“Almost there,” he growls.

Maybe he’ll take a detour. I hope he takes a detour because I could get used to the feel of his strong arm wrapped around me. The warmth of his back, still deliciously bare and muscled beneath my fingertips.

It’s raining so hard that I could probably lick his hard muscles and he wouldn’t notice.

Yikes. The thoughts I’m having are crazy.

But I can’t help it when the man I’ve been crushing on forever is carrying me like a rag doll up a mountain in the midst of torrential rain and screaming wind.

Gripping my legs.

I'm no longer freezing—haven't from the moment he brought me out of the river and wrapped me up in his flannel. I'd taken a huge whiff of his scent when I first put it on, and it made my entire body melt as everything tingled.

This wasn't how I expected our first meeting to go. I'd assumed it would be some brief encounter in the kitchen. A short but polite conversation. Platonic and professional. Definitely expected less naked mountain man chest.

Abs.

Thighs.

Lord, the thighs on this man.

I never knew I was attracted to legs until I saw Chase's tree trunks.

"We're here," he says as he takes the steps to his porch two at a time. He makes everything look small. It's like I'm a doll he's bringing back to his dollhouse cabin.

A role I'll gladly accept if it means he holds me like this for a little while longer.

He sets me down gently and then opens the door, warmth spreading through my core as he tells me, "Everything will be okay now, Lizzy. You're safe. We're safe."

He reaches toward me and my breath catches in my chest as I anticipate his hand brushing against my skin again. It's crazy how much my body craves it. It feels so good, feeling those big, strong, calloused hands against my skin.

But instead, he grabs his cooler of fish and heads inside, my bag still strapped against the wide plane of his back.

"You coming?" he calls back to me as I stand outside, face dripping with water as I look out at the storm.

I hope Penny's okay.

There's nothing I can do now. I'll give Mom a call to check in and see how things are back in Whispering Winds. I would've been back by now if it wasn't for a single misstep.

Although, that misstep carried me to Chase... so not a bad trade after all.

I step inside, and it's like I'm walking into a thick cloud of Chase. His scent is overwhelming and so, so delicious. Like cedar and spice and man.

Chase is kneeling in front of the wood stove, arranging firewood for the already burning fire. God, he's just tossing them in the flames, reaching in and rearranging them without a second thought. The fine hairs on my arms are being singed just watching him.

He closes the door to the stove as he stands. Yikes, he just keeps going, rising higher than the mountains around us. When he spins around and his eyes meet mine, everything inside me flutters, and I have to hold onto the bench next to the door so I don't faint.

The man is gorgeous. Not that I didn't already know that. But after seeing him again after all these years, it's like the first time I laid eyes on him.

"Let's get you out of those clothes, Lizzy," he rasps as he moves toward me.

Thud. Thud. *Thud.*

Every step he takes reverberates in my chest as he closes the gap between us. I'm in his cabin. Alone. And he isn't wearing a shirt.

"I don't want to see you shivering and trembling anymore," he says when he reaches me.

I wouldn't mind it.

So long as it happens when he's looming over me. Or behind me. Gripping a fistful of my hair as he drives his thick

Yikes.

There are the thoughts again.

"Sit," Chase says, beckoning me to the bench next to me. I can hardly think with him this close to me. Hardly breathe.

And with his shirt still off and those soaked jeans clinging to his thighs like paint, I'm all sorts of mixed up.

"Okay," I breathe as I sit down. It's less a response and more like the beginning of a pep talk for me.

Okay... get it together... He's not that—

Our eyes meet and the thought dissolves because yes, he is *that* attractive. And when he kneels down and peels my shoe off my foot, I feel like I'm about to explode. His hands feel so good against my wet skin as he carefully removes my sock.

"Are you hurt?" he asks, glancing up at me. "Is it painful anywhere I should know?"

I swallow hard. It's painful alright—the throbbing between my thighs, deep in my belly. It's been pooling and building and swirling from the moment I laid eyes on Chase. Saw his thick muscles. The thick outline in his boxer briefs as we stood on the shore.

"I'm a little achy," I manage to say, pressing my thighs together. "I scraped my hands and arms trying to grab onto rocks and roots." I hold out my hand to show him the biggest scrape on my palm. "Legs too," I breathe.

Chase's eyes narrow for a brief moment before he drops his gaze and takes my hand. He holds it in front of him as he inspects it. I'm surprised those big hands of his can be so tender and caring as he spreads my fingers, carefully looking at my hand from all angles.

"No swelling," he whispers, eyes still on my hand. "This one will need a bandage," he says, drawing the tips of his finger around the outline of my palm.

With his hands on me and his fingers caressing my skin, I'm feeling much better, but a little achier.

I take in a sharp, shaky breath as Chase slides his hand over mine and then up my arm. My already pebbled nipples tighten as goosebumps flare under his touch.

"Not too bad," he says, eyeing my arm. "Legs too," he adds as he stares at my thighs. Every muscle in my body is

coiling tight as my body aches with need. He has no clue what he's doing to me right now.

I'd risk a kiss, but I know the outcome already, and I'm not letting that happen again.

He sets my hand on my lap and then removes my second shoe and sock as I turn my head away for a much-needed breath.

It does nothing to still my hammering heart, but I can't expect it to with Chase touching me like this. He *has* to know what he's doing to me. Caring for me like this. I've never felt more protected in my life.

He rises to his feet and extends his hand. "Let's get you a hot shower," he says.

I reach out to him and he folds his hand around mine, pulling me to my feet. I'm not that small, at least I never thought I was, but Chase is making me feel so tiny.

I don't even have a chance to look around because all my attention is focused on him. I'm having difficulty believing this is the same man who shot me down years ago. The same man who never reciprocated my flirtatious advances. My kiss. Then again, It's probably better that he didn't. I was too young for him. Inexperienced and off limits. Too blinded by a silly little crush for an older boy.

I swallow hard. Chase was never a boy. He's always been a man, through and through. It was silly for me to think he'd entertain advances from his best friend's little sister when he had the entire female population of Whispering Winds bowing at his feet.

But the way he's looking at me. The way he's touching me and caring for me. I can't help but feel there's something else burning behind those dark eyes. Something hiding beneath that thick beard and hulking chest.

I've changed a lot since our last meeting, and I can't help but wonder if he's noticed.

"Towels are in here," he says, opening up a cabinet in the bathroom.

His deep voice rattles me out of my thoughts, and I finally look around. The bathroom is small, hardly big enough for both of us, but I don't mind. He could've told me to shower outside in the rain or dump a bucket of water over my head and I'd have done it. This is much better though.

I'm in the same space as Chase.

Alone.

And he's still not wearing a shirt.

"It's not much," he says, rubbing the back of his neck as he looks around.

"It's perfect," I say. "Thank you." I sigh. "For everything."

He brushes past me, his warm torso grazing against my arm, and then places his hand on the nape of my neck.

"I'm just glad you're safe," he whispers, his warm breath kissing my skin as he leans in.

The faintest touch turns my body into a pile of molten goo. Goosebumps flare again. Everything tingles.

"I'll lay out some clothes," he says, as he leaves me in the bathroom.

I hardly hear a word he's saying as I stand with my back to him and breathe in his heady scent. I can't imagine he's wearing cologne, but he smells so good. Maybe he rolls around in branches full of pine needles to get that intense coniferous forest smell. Maybe he pulverizes bark or wood or pine cones with his bare hands and dusts himself with the powder every morning. I guess if you spend this much time in the mountains, the smells of the forest will cling to you.

"Lizzy?" Chase says.

I'll never tire of hearing my name on his lips. I know he's not trying, but it sounds so sensual rolling over his tongue in that deep baritone of his.

"Yeah?" I say, shaking myself out of it as I turn.

I laugh when I see the smile on his face and the shirt he's holding out in front of him.

“The only size I have.”

“Are you sure that’s not a blanket?”

“Might double as one for you.”

“Or as a sail for a makeshift raft.”

Chase laughs and it makes my chest clench.

“Maybe once the storm passes, we could test it out,” he says. “Have a raft ready to go in case you get the urge to jump in a river again.”

I groan. “That was an accident.”

A happy little accident that brought me to him, so I’m okay with my little bit of clumsiness.

He sets the shirt slash blanket slash sail onto the bed and for a moment, I think he’s going to cross the room and capture my lips with his. It’s a silly little fantasy, but I swear it’s not feeling so silly anymore. The air is thick, crackling like the thunderous noises outside.

“I’ll fix us up something to eat. I’ve got trout. You’ve got mushrooms. I think it’s the perfect combination.”

“I can do it when I’m done with my shower,” I say. “I’m the chef at your inn after all.”

He takes a few slow steps toward me as a half-smile forms on his lips. It’s happening. The fantasy is *happening*.

He pauses in front of me. His. Shirt. Is. Still. Off. And I can’t stop staring at that massive chest. Those rows of abdominal muscles, stacked like bricks one on top of the other.

Chase brushes away the matted hair on my cheek, pinning it behind my ear. I can’t help but tremble under his touch, relishing the warmth spreading all over my body.

“You’re in my cabin, Lizzy. You’re under my roof. A guest. I’m going to take care of you now. Completely,” he adds gruffly.

His fingers twirl a strand of my hair as his gaze sears my skin.

“Relax, Lizzy,” he rasps. “I’ll take it from here.”

I meet his eyes. They’re so kind and caring as he looks at me. Searing, too. No one’s offered to take care of me like this before. No one’s ever made me feel this... special?

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he says, twirling my hair once more before letting it fall away.

He turns around and walks away, the muscles in his back flexing with every step he takes. If I’d known wearing shirts was optional, possibly frowned upon, I’d have visited earlier.

I no longer need a shower to warm me up, Chase managed to do that with ease. But as I peel my clothes off, turn on the shower, and step in, all I can think about is the way Chase’s fingertips felt on my skin.

I can’t help but wonder how they’d feel brushing against other parts of my body.

CHASE

Torrential rain batters the walls and windows of my cabin. Thunder cracks and lightning illuminates the dark sky as the wind, howling like a freight train, whips through the trees before shaking the walls. The storm is unrelenting—one of the fiercest to hit this mountain in years—but it pales in comparison to the one in my head.

Lizzy.

My Lizzy.

Seeing her in front of me, wet and trembling. Battered and bruised. She's breaking something inside me—a dam I've built up around my heart. She has no idea that she's been poking and prodding at it for years, ever since that kiss. It's on the verge of collapse. A gentle touch could cause it to crumble.

There'd be no holding back, then.

I stir the mushrooms, sprinkling in a little salt. A dash of thyme. The fish is crisping up nicely and should be done by the time Lizzy finishes her shower. It's a miracle that I haven't burned the food with my mind this messed up.

I close my eyes and see her. Those lips, red and plump and irresistible, taunt me as damp hair clings to her porcelain skin. I wanted to kiss her. Thought about kissing her as I curled a wet tangle of her hair around my finger. I should've kissed her.

The risk. The complications. The fallout.

But as I'm standing here in the kitchen, my mind reeling, it's clear that ignoring these feelings won't work any longer. I

can't pretend anymore.

I want everything with Lizzy.

I've known it from the moment her lips met mine years ago, but I was a broken man then. I couldn't drag her into my chaos. She deserved more than that. She deserves the fucking world, and I'm not going to stop until she holds it in her hands.

Floorboards creak behind me in the bedroom. The thunder and rain are deafening but I can trace every delicate step Lizzy takes. I can picture her, hands clutching my towel tightly against her body as she pads out of the bathroom. I can see her fingers delicately tracing the collar of my flannel shirt laid out on the bed. The swell of her breasts as they rise and fall with every breath.

I can't help it. I can't stop thinking about Lizzy's supple body. How pliable she'd be under my grasp. Under my control. Legs spread. Hands pinned above her head. Screaming my fucking name.

I have to grip the counter as my fantasies of Lizzy unfold in my head. I've kept them caged for years. Locked away, only to be let out at night when I can't resist any longer, playing in my head as I fist my cock, stroking it to her.

I haven't touched a woman since our lips met. Not even a fucking glance because I know Lizzy's the only one I want. I've spent the years after our kiss working on myself, coming to terms with the end of my career, and making myself a better man for her.

It's all for fucking her.

I don't know how to handle Aiden but he'll have to come around. I'm making Lizzy mine, and there's not a damn thing he can do to stop me. His sister can make her own choices. She doesn't need his protection. I'm her protector. Her fucking man.

I take in a ragged breath as I hear the towel fall to the ground. I close my eyes as I turn off the flames to both burners. She's naked. In my bedroom. And I'm losing all my self-control.

I press my palm against my cock, aching and throbbing beneath my pants, as I remember the small patch of her stomach when she brought her shirt over her head. She wanted me to see. And I wanted to see so much more.

The door creaks open and I force myself to move. I gather plates and utensils and set them on the counter next to the stove as I listen to the slow, tentative steps moving closer to me.

I don't have to look to know she's watching me. I feel her eyes burning against my skin.

"Smells good, Chase," Lizzy says.

I close my eyes and take in a deep breath before turning and looking at the fucking goddess gracing my presence.

"Looks even better," I say, staring at Lizzy in my flannel shirt.

She's a sight—like the first dusting of snow on the mountains. Like a deep, cool lake after a long, grueling hike. She's everything I want and more and she's not leaving my cabin until she knows it.

She's tied her slightly damp hair into a loose braid behind her head, and I can't help but imagine how it would look wrapped around my fist.

"Thyme and garlic and..." she says softly as she pads over to me.

"Butter," I say. "Lots of butter."

Lizzy smiles, laughs softly, and then says, "Mom would be proud."

"She goes through butter like water," I say. "I know because I'm the one ordering it."

"Must be a quarter of your expenses," she says.

"If you include the sugar and flour, too," I say as Lizzy moves in next to me and glances at the stove.

"A fair exchange for cobbler," Lizzy says.

I smile. Can't help it because joking around with Lizzy feels so natural and easy.

"I don't know why you hired me," she says. "Looks like you could handle my job with ease."

Lizzy turns to me and it's taking every bit of restraint inside me not to touch her. Her scent is so fucking irresistible and that smile on her lips... fuck me.

"And not see you every day?"

It comes out without hesitation or thought about the implications.

"I've been at the inn for over a month, and today's the first time I've seen you." Her eyes narrow for a brief moment before widening. "You watch," she says.

It's less a question than a realization.

"Of course," I say. "Need to make sure everything is running smoothly."

"Is that the only reason?" she asks, her tongue slipping across her bottom lip.

I swallow hard as I look at those lips, her freckles, those eyes.

Fucking gorgeous.

"Among others," I say. The words crawl out of my throat. Harsh and muted.

"Good to know," Lizzy says before grabbing a plate. I watch as she spoons some mushrooms onto her plate. "I can't remember the last time someone cooked for me."

"No boyfriend to take care of you?" I say.

Possessiveness like I've never felt before tears through me at the thought of someone else with Lizzy. I can't believe I never thought to ask her. She's a once-in-a-lifetime kind of girl, so of course she's dating someone.

But she deserves someone better. Someone who would let her wander into the woods alone before a storm like this

doesn't deserve Lizzy.

"No boyfriend," she says as her neck reddens.

"Good," I growl as she drops the metal spatula in her hand.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I say as I place my hand on the small of her back.

I take the spatula, grab a filet, and place it on her plate. "It's not culinary school good," I say, "but it will fill you up."

She lets out a small moan as I gently stroke her back.

"Looks perfect," she says, turning to me.

I step back and then guide her over to the table, pulling out a chair for her. She seems surprised as I push it in for her when she sits.

"Quite the fine dining experience," she says, "but I think I'm overdressed." She nods to me, and I look down. Completely forgot about my shirt.

"Didn't want to bother you while you were showering," I say. "I'll go grab one real quick." I start for my bedroom, but Lizzy stops me.

"That's okay," Lizzy says, taking a bite of a mushroom. "No need to dress up for me."

"My shirt looks better on you anyway," I rasp.

The top two buttons are unfastened, and she's very clearly not wearing a bra. Her nipples, like small beads, press against the fabric on my shirt. She's cuffed the sleeves below her elbows. Can't help but wonder if she's wearing anything under that shirt at all.

"Can't fill it out like you," she says. "But it is comfortable."

"I think you fill it out just fine, Lizzy," I say, heading for the stove.

She doesn't respond, but when I glance at her over my shoulder, she's looking down at her plate, grinning to herself.

Gorgeous.

I set my plate down next to her, sit down, and ask, “How’s the job? Hope it’s not too much to handle.”

“Not at all,” she says, taking a bite of the trout. “Wow,” she says, chewing. “This *is* good.”

I take a bite myself, and she’s right. My best showing yet. “Helps when it’s fresh,” I say.

Lizzy nods, spearing a mushroom. “That’s why I like it here,” she says. “The food, the air, the...” She glances at me for a brief moment before shrugging. “Everything’s fresher. Wholesome. It’s completely different from life in the city. I missed it here. I didn’t think I would.”

If she knew the thoughts in my head, she might think differently. Watching Lizzy eat my food is nothing short of sensual. The way she delicately guides each forkful into her mouth. The way her lips wrap around a mushroom.

The way her lips would look wrapped around my cock.

“I’m glad you came back,” I say.

It’s true, even though she may not think it is.

Lizzy doesn’t respond. She prods at her plate, rearranging mushrooms as she mulls something over—the kiss, maybe. I can’t stop thinking about it either. I can still feel the way her lips felt against mine—so soft as her tongue swiped against my lips. The coconut and cream scent of her body. Her heat.

How she crumbled when I didn’t kiss her back. The pain in her eyes before she disappeared into the house.

It hurts to remember that moment, but if I had to do it all over again, I’m not sure if I’d have done anything differently. Sometimes we cross paths with a person at the wrong time. Say the wrong thing. Do the wrong thing.

I’m not sure how we’d have turned out if I relented to the voice in my head that wanted to claim those lips. I couldn’t do it though. Both of us were at a crossroads, trying to figure things out. I went left and she walked right out of my life.

Now? If our lips touch, I'll never break that fucking seal. She'll be mine forever.

“Aiden told me you're interested in opening your own restaurant.”

Lizzy frowns. “You talked with Aiden about me?”

I snort. “Of course. He pointed out that I haven't been the most welcoming. I'm a horrible boss,” I say, taking a bite of mushrooms.

She shakes her head. “I've had tons of bad bosses. You're not even on the list.”

I smile as I swallow. “Good to know.”

“Mainly because I never see you.”

Lizzy's not even half my size, but she can land a gut punch like no one else.

My jaw tenses and flexes. It's my turn to jab at my food absently. I should've realized that keeping my distance wasn't going to help anyone. Hell, all I did was piss off Lizzy and put a target on my back for Aiden. His attention will be on me, dissecting every interaction I have with his sister, complicating an already complicated situation.

“That's going to change,” I say.

Her eyes meet mine and my heart skips a beat. Even in the dim light of the kitchen, Lizzy shines brightly.

“I'd like that. I have no idea what it takes to open a restaurant, let alone run a successful business like the Inn. But I can cook some great food,” she adds with a smile.

“The best around,” I say.

She blushes as she looks down at her food.

I can't help but stare at Lizzy. She blends in perfectly—like she was meant to be here. With me. My girl. I exhale as I lean back in my chair—my mind drifting as I fantasize about my future with her.

Marriage. Kids. A growing family filling out this cabin. I'll have to add another story and a couple of wings.

I've built myself back up, piece by piece for this moment. I'm ready and I hope she is too. If not, I have no problem waiting for her. I'll wait a thousand lifetimes if I have to because there's no one in this world that I want except for Lizzy.

It's always been Lizzy.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Lizzy asks, her voice hardly above a whisper.

"Like what?" I rasp.

She shakes her head. "Never mind."

The wind and rain lash against the window. Lizzy turns her head, frowns, and then looks at me.

"I always thought Whispering Winds was a terrible name for this town," she says.

I smile, raising a brow. "How so?"

She tilts her head toward the window. "Does that sound like the wind is whispering? *Does* the wind even whisper? Like, what does that even mean? And seriously, I swear storms are constantly rolling through this town." She shakes her head and then takes another bite of food.

I lean forward, smiling as I look at her. "I see you've given this a lot of thought, Lizzy."

She shrugs. "Not really, it's just—"

Lizzy jumps in her seat as lightning strikes nearby, rattling the cabin walls. A tree cracks, splinters, and then crashes to the ground somewhere off in the distance.

"It's alright, Lizzy," I say, grabbing her hand. "You're safe."

Her tension seems to melt, and even though I'd prefer to keep my hand on hers, I pull back.

“I’m not usually this jumpy,” she says, glancing at the window, “but the storm is intense. I hope Penny’s okay.”

“Penny?” I ask.

“A guest at the inn. Her car broke down yesterday, and Mom and I were a little worried about her hiking on her own. I followed her for a bit, got distracted by a good patch of mushrooms, and by the time I made it back to the trail, she was gone.”

“Then you hopped in the river.”

She snorts. “Yeah. Then I hopped in the river.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I say, trying to comfort her. “Probably back at the Inn.”

She jerks her head up. “I should check in with Mom,” she says, setting down her fork and standing up. She groans. “My phone is at the bottom of the river.”

“I’ve got a satellite phone here you could use. Should work fine, but it might be a little spotty.”

“You don’t mind?”

I shake my head. “Not at all.”

“Thanks,” she says, scooting away from the table and then sliding past me.

She smells like heaven and feeling her body brush against mine makes my cock lurch against my pants. Probably shouldn’t be indulging in these thoughts right now, but I can’t help it.

Never seen anything sexier than Lizzy in my flannel shirt. Nothing underneath it. Her tits bouncing with every step. The sway of her hips as she walks to my desk. That fucking braid at the back of her head that I want to grip.

How the fuck am I going to sleep tonight when there will be an angel in my bed? And she will be sleeping in my bed—I’ll take the couch. I want Lizzy’s scent permanently etched onto my pillows and sheets.

I want to rip that flannel shirt off her body, buttons popping off and scattering across the floor. My hands all over her body. Cupping. Holding her in place as I claim her lips. Grip her hips. Drive into that sweet pussy again and again until she understands the fucking truth.

She's fucking mine.

There's no other outcome to this.

I'm vaguely aware of Lizzy's conversation as my fantasies of her unspool in my head. My cock has never been more rock solid than right now as I imagine sliding into her as she moans. My hand wrapped tightly around that braid. Not even the thunderous sounds of the storm outside will be enough to drown out Lizzy as she screams my name.

I turn my head and see Lizzy staring at my computer monitor.

Fuck.

LIZZY

Chase doesn't watch the cameras to keep his eyes on his business. He watches them to keep an eye on me.

The camera in the kitchen is fullscreen—a still image now because the feed must be frozen from the storm. No other cameras are on the monitor. Not the ones in the lobby. In front of the hotel. In the hallways, basement, or storage areas.

None of them—except for the one aimed directly at me.

My skin prickles as goosebumps rise all over my body at the thought of Chase watching me. I thought he saw me as nothing other than his friend's little sister—an annoyance. But I'm thinking I might have it wrong.

The ache between my thighs throbs as I imagine what he might be doing while he watches.

Would he?

I'm not sure if Chase is the type, but the possibility of it ignites something inside me. Because *I* might ignite something in him.

I've been chasing him for most of my life. I had no idea that we'd been chasing each other around in circles, neither of us pausing for a moment to let the other catch up.

Until now.

I'll stop running. I'll let Chase slam into me with that thick, muscular body of his. Again. And again. And a—

“Lizzy?” Mom’s voice is broken and fuzzy as it comes through the receiver. The call has been dropped multiple times. With a storm of this magnitude, I was afraid I wouldn’t have any luck.

“I’m here,” I say, turning away from the monitor, my cheeks, neck, and chest aflame. *Everything* aflame, really.

“...okay? Where—” The static is making it almost impossible to have a conversation, so I just start talking and don’t stop, hoping that it’s clearer on her end.

I tell her I’m fine. How I lost Penny. Had a little mishap but I’m with Chase now. We’re fine. Waiting the storm out. And then I ask about Penny.

“Riding it out... still on... no Penny.”

I latch onto her final words, reverberating in my head through the static. My stomach drops as I imagine Penny lost in the woods in this storm. I close my eyes as uneasiness wells up inside me.

“We’ll search for her in the morning,” Mom says, her voice finally clear.

“We’ll be down there as soon as we can,” I say, but the line goes dead halfway through.

I sink into Chase’s chair, taking a deep breath as I close my eyes. Every breath I take is filled with his scent, and after a few deep inhales, I can feel my uneasiness begin to settle.

But when I open my eyes, adrenaline spikes through me. He’s standing next to me. I smile when I notice that the monitor’s no longer on.

Your secret’s safe with me.

“Could you get ahold of Mom?” Chase asks with an edge of tension in his voice.

“Kind of,” I say, sighing. “The call kept dropping. It was all staticky and garbled. But...” I say, taking in a deep breath. “The town seems to be faring okay so far, but Penny never came back.”

I lean back against his chair. “What if she’s out there, Chase? What if she’s hurt? What if—”

Chase rests his hand on my shoulder, and immediately, my voice is strangled in my throat. I tilt my head, leaning against his forearm.

“We’ll find her,” he says. “I promise you, Lizzy. First thing tomorrow, we’ll get out there.”

My muscles relax. The tightly corded tension in my stomach uncoils as Chase soothes me. I believe him.

“Thanks,” I say. “That means a lot to me.”

“You have a good heart, Lizzy. A beautiful soul.”

Chase brushes his thumb across the nape of my neck as he comforts me. My heart might be good, but the thoughts I’m having right now aren’t. They’re a little bad. A lot dirty. They revolve around Chase’s hands gripping me. Touching me in places no one’s ever touched. Never wanted anyone to touch me like that—no one except for Chase.

He can touch me anywhere.

And I want him to.

My teeth scrape against my bottom lip as the fantasies dance in my head. As Chase’s thumb strokes me, searing my skin like a brand.

I’ve never wanted anyone so much before. No one has ever made my body scream like this before. I want to spin around, grab him, and pull him on top of me so I can finally feel the weight of his body on me.

His lips against mine again.

He wants it too—I know that now. All he needs is the green light. I’ll paint my body green if I have to. I’ll toss limes at him. Wave neon-green flags and lights. Whatever it takes to give him the go-ahead.

MY. BODY. IS. READY.

I exhale as he says, “Now let me take care of those cuts. I’ve neglected my duties as your boss, but I won’t neglect my

duties as host.”

His hand leaves my shoulder and he spins me around his chair. I’m face to face—*no*—face to bulge. Big bulge. In my face. Lord have mercy. I swallow hard as I look up once again at his naked torso.

The man has no shame. No idea what his body is capable of doing to a girl. It’s taking every bit of effort on my part not to drag my hands across his body.

My tongue up his abs as I stand...

He takes my hand and pulls me up. Thankfully, he has a hold of me because I’m more than a little lightheaded.

“This way,” he says.

As though I have a choice in the matter.

He guides me to a couch in front of the wood stove. I sit down, sinking into the comfortable cushions.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he says, smiling as he turns around.

“That won’t be a problem,” I mutter to myself as I watch him disappear into his bedroom.

I glance at the wood stove. The fire’s beginning to die out, so I head over and grab a few logs to help revive it. Not that I need the warmth. I can’t sit still and need some kind of distraction.

I toss a couple of logs into the stove, close the door, and then turn, finding Chase staring at me. The same look on his face that I saw earlier. We’ve already eaten, but he looks starved for dessert.

For me.

“I thought I told you not to go anywhere,” he rasps, taking a few steps forward.

“I’m not the best at following directions. Boss,” I add as I take a seat on the couch. My shirt flutters up as I sit, air nipping at my most sensitive parts.

I wonder if he noticed.

Chase takes a few steps forward, setting the first aid kit onto the couch next to me as he leans in.

“Boss?” he says gruffly, his voice crawling over my skin.

I nod because my throat is closing up with him this close to me. His eyes rake across my body as I curl my fingers into fists against the couch.

He grunts before turning his attention to the kit. The sharp sound of the zipper rings in my ears.

“Did you get cold?” I ask, finally forcing myself to speak.

He turns to me, eyes narrowed.

I pinch the thin cotton of his shirt and then snap it back.

He snorts. “Figured it was about time to change out of my damp clothes.”

Unlucky for me.

Chase takes my hand in his and I gasp.

“Are you okay?” He asks, looking at me with earnest concern.

“Fine. Just a little tender.”

My hand’s fine. I gasped because the moment Chase touched me, I felt an electric current race up my arm and down my torso before settling between my legs.

I squirm but I can hardly move. Chase is in front of me, obstructing my movements with his body as he tends to my scratches carefully.

“Let me know if it hurts,” he says, applying a salve to my wound before retrieving a bandage.

“Okay,” I say with a nod.

The only thing that hurts is not being able to kiss the gorgeous mountain man in front of me. The forbidden crush I’ve had for years. He’s caring for me in ways I never thought he would. Touching me tenderly with those big hands. Making me feel so cared for and protected.

Making my body go haywire from his scent.

I can hardly take it any longer. He has to feel the storm raging inside me. With him so close to me, there's no way I can mask it. It's on my face—the way I'm looking at him, begging him with my eyes to just kiss me. Take what's his.

Take. Me.

“There,” he says as he applies the bandage to my hand. “That should help.”

When his eyes finally meet mine again, everything inside me bursts. He hasn't even kissed me but I'm seeing fireworks, feeling them flare across my skin and singe every fine hair on my body.

He has to see it painted on my face. Feel it as the air between us crackles with electricity.

“Lizzy,” he rasps, cupping my face with his hand.

I let out a shuddering breath as I close my eyes, savoring the feel of his hand on me. His scent.

“My sweet Lizzy,” he says, brushing his thumb against my cheek. “What am I going to do with you?” he asks. It's less of a question than him thinking out loud.

“I think you know,” I say, opening my eyes to meet his searing gaze. “I saw the monitor.”

Chase smiles. A smile that rises only after a weight has been lifted. “I guess my secret's out,” he says, his thumb still brushing against me. “Can't hide it any longer, anyway.”

“I've already shared mine with you,” I say, my heart hammering. “Four and a half years ago.”

Chase closes his eyes with a sigh, but when he opens them, I hardly recognize him. There's a primal look in his eyes that's making my body react in a way I've never felt.

He's looking at me the way every woman wants a man to look at her. Like I'm a present he's been waiting to unwrap. Like there's no one else in the world. Like I'm the only person he wants to see when he wakes up in the morning. The last thing he sees before he closes his eyes. Loved. Completely.

“Re-do?” he growls.

I swallow hard as I glance at his lips briefly before meeting his smoldering gaze again.

“Re-do,” I say with a nod.

Chase crushes his lips against mine as soon as the word leaves my mouth. The kiss is urgent and messy and wild—the kind of kiss that only four and a half years of longing could create.

He grips my head as he guides me onto my back, never once breaking the seal of our lips as I moan against him. His lips feel so good, but they taste even better. I hold onto the wide plane of his back, nails digging into him as he presses his immense body against mine.

“Lizzy,” he growls against my lips as I finally gasp for air. His lips find mine again as he slips his hand beneath my shirt, cupping my breast. Nothing’s ever felt this good before.

“Lizzy,” he growls again, breaking the seal again as he dips his head and nips at my neck. “So gorgeous,” he moans against my skin as I try desperately to fill my lungs with air. “So perfect.”

His lips caress my neck as he kisses a line down my throat and then drags his tongue across my collarbone before nipping at my shoulder.

“So. Fucking. Mine,” he bellows, rearing back as he grabs the collar of the shirt and shreds the front of it open.

Buttons fly through the air and scatter across the floor as I look up at the man above me. Possessed. Obsessed. Chase looks more like a beast than a human in the flickering light of the living room, limned by the flames burning next to us.

“Can’t control myself,” Chase says, his voice harsh and low as he drags his fingertips down my sternum. “Been holding back for too long.”

I had no idea that Chase felt anything for me. I always thought it was one-sided. It seemed that way, except for that day four and a half years ago. I felt something, and I thought

he did too. That's why I kissed him. We'd spent most of the day together, and it felt right. But when he didn't kiss me back I felt so stupid.

"I wanted to kiss you back that day," he says, his eyes glazing over as though remembering it. "But I didn't want to bring you into my chaos. I was lost, and you deserved more."

I shake my head. "I could've helped you," I say. "Could've shown you the way out of the darkness."

Chase smiles. "You were always a little light, Lizzy. Shining so brightly."

"I'm not little anymore," I say.

"No, you're not," he says as he pulls me up and removes the ruined shirt from me.

I lean back, elbows pressed against the couch behind me as Chase looms over me like a mountain peak.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, Lizzy."

I close my eyes as I smile. It's hard to believe him. He was a professional athlete for years. Had women lining up for him for even longer.

"It's the truth, Lizzy," Chase says, cupping my face. "I'll never lie to you. Never touched a woman after our kiss. I only had eyes for you. I wanted only you, Lizzy. There's no one else and will never be anyone else. I love you, Lizzy."

The emotions rushing through me are almost too much for me to handle. I can hardly believe the words coming from his lips.

I've loved this man for years. I've wanted this man for years. I never thought I'd hear those words tumble out of his mouth.

"I-I love you, Chase," I say, eyes watering.

"And now I'm going to make it official, Lizzy. I'm going to make you mine, sweetheart."

I'm not sure what he means, but the way my body is reacting to his words, I want to find out.

I nod. "Okay."

Chase grabs the hem of his shirt with two thick hands. I can't think of anything sexier than the way his muscles flex as he pulls his shirt over his head.

I finally indulge my fantasies and drag my hands along his torso. Big. Hard. Hairy. Chase looks every bit what I'd expect an ex-football pro slash mountain man to be. Shoulders like bowling balls. Arms and legs like tree trunks. Abs. That irresistible V as it disappears underneath his pants.

I swallow hard when I consider what he'll look like completely naked.

First times are supposed to be awkward. They're supposed to be with boys—all gawky limbs and soft muscles, fumbling in the dark. First times aren't supposed to be with men as tall as trees and as hard as granite.

Guess I'm the lucky girl.

"No panties," Chase says, his eyes dropping to the seam between my legs.

"They were soaked. And not just from the river," I say, dragging my hand down his abs.

Chase makes a throaty noise. "Lizzy," he moans. "Fuck," he says, shaking his head before swallowing hard. "Saves me the trouble. Because if they were still on you, they'd be ripped in half by now."

I believe him.

"I'm going to kiss you again, Lizzy. Would you like that?"

I nod. "Yes."

"I'm going to kiss you..." His finger grazes my slick folds as he finishes his sentence. "Right here. Is that okay?"

I gasp, grinding against him. "Yes, Chase."

"Good," he growls, lowering himself.

He kneels next to me, and then grabs my legs, repositioning me effortlessly so I'm squared to him, his face between my legs.

He moans. "Lizzy," he growls. "Such a sweet, perfect pussy." He presses his lips against me tenderly, sending an electric pulse through me that I've never felt before.

"Who's pussy is this, Lizzy?"

"I-I don't. Who's?" I don't know what to say.

"It's mine, Lizzy. Isn't that right?"

A huge puff of air escapes my lungs as he kisses me down there again—this time with his tongue. "Oh, fuck," I moan. "Chase."

My thighs clamp around his head as he sucks and licks me.

"Tell me," he growls. "Tell me whose pussy this belongs to."

"Y-yours," I manage. I can hardly breathe as Chase's breath dances over my sensitive nub, and his beard prickles against my wet folds.

"Say my name, Lizzy. Tell me."

"It's yours, Chase," I moan as I grind against his face. "My pussy belongs to Chase Beckett."

Chase growls and then dives back in, his hands gripping my belly, holding me in place as he devours me.

Licking and sucking. Licking and sucking. I've never felt anything like this before as I rear my head back, arching against the couch as I try desperately to find purchase on anything.

"So fucking good, Lizzy. You have no idea how long I've wanted to taste your sweetness."

Every word from his lips vibrates against me, reverberating all the way to the crown of my head as he continues to consume me like I'm his last meal.

I can feel something building inside me. Achy tension corded into a thick knot, begging to snap. Release.

“Chase,” I cry out. “Chase.”

I have no idea what Chase is doing to me. It’s masterful and feels unbelievably good. I can hardly contain myself as noises I’ve never made before tumble out of me with ease. Moans and groans and shrieks of pleasure.

“Sweet girl,” he moans against me. “Sweet fucking Lizzy.”

I grip Chase’s hair, clenching against him as I feel something inside me open up.

“Come for me, Lizzy,” he snarls before licking me with even more urgency, sucking my sensitive nub.

“I-I-Chase,” I scream as I feel my orgasm crest, rolling through me for what feels like an eternity as Chase’s mouth never breaks the seal.

I laugh because I don’t know what else to do. I’ve never felt anything like this before.

“Chase,” I moan as I finally come back down to reality. “What the hell was that?”

“No one ever made you come like that before?” Chase asks from between my legs.

My eyes flutter open and closed as he continues to lick.

“That tongue,” I moan. “That tongue is dangerous.”

Chase pulls away and begins unbuckling his belt.

“I’ve never...” I whisper. “I’ve never been with anyone like this before, Chase.”

Chase pauses and looks down at me with an expression I can’t place.

I said something wrong. I shouldn’t have...

Oh, no.

CHASE

L *izzy...*

My sweet, perfect, innocent Lizzy. I should've known or asked before I mauled her body like an animal. Consumed her like a beast. She deserves a tender touch. A gentle caress. A careful and caring hand to guide her through this.

Not like this.

Not like the thoughts I have in my head. The things I want to do to her. The things I was going to do to her before she let slip she was a virgin.

I couldn't help myself—not anymore. The thin restraint I had left, tethering my baser instincts inside me, snapped the moment I saw her react to my touch. Goosebumps spread on her skin as tiny little noises escaped her lips. Her eyes. Her fucking eyes sealed my fate—sultry and heated as she melted against my touch. There was no holding back after that.

I'm a monster with an insatiable need to claim her as my own, and I make no apologies for that.

I want Lizzy.

I need Lizzy.

And as I stroke her belly, thoughts of filling her with my seed flood my mind. There's no one else in this world that I want by my side. She's the one and always has been. My heart's always known it, but my mind took its sweet time to catch up, making flimsy excuses for why it wouldn't work.

Why we shouldn't be together. None of the excuses matter. The only thing that matters is Lizzy.

My world. My girl. Mine.

"Lizzy," I rasp, gently stroking her as she writhes under me.

"I-I'm sorry," she says, in a tremulous voice.

"Lizzy," I rasp again, pulling her onto my lap. I cup her face in my hands, stroking her cheeks with my thumbs, urging her to look at me.

"What do you have to apologize for, sweet girl?"

"It—" She opens her eyes and glances at me briefly before shaking her head. "It's silly." She sighs and then finally looks at me. "It seemed like you were disappointed when you found out I was a virgin," she says, fiddling with my chest hair absently. "You're used to girls with more experience. Girls who know what to do."

I shake my head, brushing her lip with my thumb. "Lizzy," I say. "There's no one else I'd rather be with than you. You make me laugh. You make me smile. You make me fucking happy. You're kind and caring and fucking gorgeous." I have to pause, letting my eyes rake over her face and down her body.

"And Lizzy, you have it wrong. I don't want someone else. Someone with more experience. None of that matters. I want you and only you. I've known it since the moment our lips touched. I haven't been with a single woman since. Not so much as a glance because I knew you were the one. Haven't been with many women to begin with."

Lizzy's mouth parts slightly before she swallows. "I find it hard to believe that Chase Beckett, the golden child of Whispering Winds, hasn't slept with many women. There wasn't a single woman in this town that wasn't head over heels in love with you."

"Are you?" I ask, my pulse pounding at the thought because I feel it. I'm hooked on Lizzy. Completely hers.

“Yes,” she whispers. It’s so light and delicate but clear.

“Good,” I say. “Because I’m in love with you, Lizzy. You’re the most important person in my life. My light. The only person I want to grow old with. Fish out of a river,” I add with a smile.

Lizzy groans slightly as she shakes her head, her fingers still toying with my chest hair.

“Not going to drop it, are you?”

“Last one, I swear.”

I take in a deep breath of her.

“I mean it, Lizzy,” I say, tilting her head so I can see those pale eyes staring back at me. They’re so clear and piercing that I swear she’s peering inside my head and reading my thoughts. “And I meant that there weren’t many other girls. Football was my focus—the most important relationship in my life. Never had a spark with anyone until you.”

I dip my head, brushing my lips against her collarbone as she gasps. I kiss her throat and the slender curve of her neck and her jawline as I breathe her in. I can’t help myself when she’s this close to me.

“You’re not a spark, Lizzy,” I rasp against her skin. “You’re an unrelenting wildfire, turning forests into ash and cinder.” I nip her ear as she digs her nails into my chest. “You make me burn hotter than a thousand suns, and every time I see you, I can hardly breathe. You crush my lungs with a single glance. You squeeze my heart with a brush of your fingertips. You’ve etched yourself onto my fucking soul with your lips. Now tell me that you’re mine, Lizzy,” I growl.

I press my palm against her chest as I pull back and look at my sweet, innocent, fucking gorgeous girl. Her heart thuds against my hand as she bites down on her lip, nodding.

“Tell me, Lizzy. I need to hear it.”

“I’m yours, Chase.” Her smile flutters like her eyelids as she breathes in. “I love you,” she says, pressing her palm against my heart, feeling how it beats for her. Only for her.

I crush her lips against mine, kissing her like she's my wife. Claiming her like she's my wife. Devouring her like she's my wife. Because she will be my wife.

She fumbles with my belt as the seal of our lips breaks, both of us sucking in ragged breaths. My hands are roving all over her body, urgently feeling her soft skin.

My cock is painfully hard as Lizzy slides my belt off, tossing it as our lips meet again. She holds me tightly as I wrap my arms around her, feeling the sensual curve of her back as she grinds against my cock.

The need to claim her screams through me as I stand up, her legs wrapped around my body as I reposition her on her back.

She huffs a breath as I slide down her body, kissing her sternum as I cup her gorgeous breasts.

"Oh my god," she moans as I lick a line from her lower belly to her navel.

"Can't get enough of you, Lizzy," I snarl against her belly, kissing her again as I press my hands against her thighs, spreading her legs again. "Your pussy needs to be kissed again. Needs to my lips, my tongue, my fingers," I snarl, rubbing her sensitive nub as she shudders against me.

"Chase," she moans, quivering against me as I slide a finger into her hot, tight hole.

I watch my girl, relishing the feel of my thick fingers inside her, drawing her closer to the edge. There's not a prettier sight than Lizzy coming. I need to see it on her face. I need to see her chest and neck and cheeks painted red as she gasps for air, eyes focused on me.

I need...

I pull my finger out, savoring the taste of her on my tongue before bending down again and tasting her honey. Fuck, I'm hooked. There's nothing better than this.

Lizzy grips my hair as she curls her body toward me, looking at me between her thighs. She's so close. I can see it

washing over her as her brows push together, eyes glazing over as she tries to keep our searing eye contact.

“Come,” I growl against her pussy. “Fucking need to feel you come against my lips.”

I slide a finger inside her, curling against her as I continue to lick and suck her.

“I-I—”

Her hands fall from my hair, trying to find purchase against the couch as she grinds against my mouth. Her hips buck against me, but she’s not going anywhere.

I’m not relinquishing my seal on her pussy until I feel her come. Until I hear it tearing through her.

“COME,” I bellow, my voice vibrating through her as she arches into me and screams.

There it is. I hold her body down as she shudders, her orgasm rolling over her as she moans my name and speaks in fucking tongues.

“Pretty girl,” I grunt into her pussy. “Perfect girl,” I growl against her folds. “My fucking girl,” I snarl, my tongue lashing her hot hole.

She pulls back, but I grip her thighs, riveting her in place. “I’m not fucking done yet, Lizzy,” I snarl, diving back between her thighs. “This is mine,” I growl as my tongue rolls over her pussy. “And I’m not leaving until I’ve devoured every last drop.”

She writhes, grinding against me as my tongue rolls over her clit. My fingers dig into her skin as I lick and suck. “So sweet, Lizzy. So good,” I moan.

“Chase,” she cries out. “Oh-fuck I’m coming again,” she screams.

I slide between her legs, repositioning myself over her as I grab her by the nape of the neck, watching my sweet girl come. “Seeing you come is my favorite thing in the world.”

I kiss her harshly before I pull away, rearing back as I urgently remove my pants. I need to claim my girl. Lock her the fuck down so every man knows who she belongs to.

Lizzy's writhing beneath me, cupping her breasts as she looks up at me with flushed skin, damp with sweat.

"Gorgeous," I say gruffly as I look down at her and slide my pants off. My cock is already bursting out the top of my boxer briefs, aching to be inside my girl as it leaks pre-cum all over my stomach.

When Lizzy spots it her eyes widen and she stops writhing.

"What the—"

She pushes herself up, a mere couple of inches from my cock. I squeeze and it jumps, Lizzy jerking back with surprise before her eyes snap up to mine.

"Wh-how?"

I smile as I pull my boxers off my hips and then kick them off when they reach my ankles. "Don't worry about it," I say. "It likes you."

Lizzy laughs and then sucks in a ragged breath as she stares at it. Her teeth scrape against her bottom lip. "I like it too," she says, sliding a single finger along the tip, making it jump again as an electric current races through me.

I moan. She's hardly touched me, and I feel like I'm about to come. I've been waiting to fuck this sweet girl for so long. Anticipating what she'd feel like.

A virgin.

Untouched.

Waiting for my cock.

Made for my cock.

Lizzy leans forward, pressing her lips against the head of my cock, sending another jolt through me as I relish the feel of her.

She presses one of her palms flat against my stomach as the other grips my shaft. "I've never done this," she says. "I'm not sure I'll be any good."

She pushes my cock up as she licks the underside.

"Fucking hell, Lizzy."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes. "I-I—"

"No, Lizzy. That was..." I shake my head as I tilt her chin toward me. "I have a feeling you'll be a quick study. That was... keep doing that."

She smiles at me. "Do you like my tongue on your cock, Chase?"

Lick. Swipe. Pump.

Her eyes locked on mine, gauging my reaction.

I moan as my legs nearly give out.

"Is it warm?" she asks, taking my cock in her mouth, her tongue swirling around the tip. Her cheeks hollow and then pop when she pulls back. "Is it soft and wet?"

Her innocent eyes betray the dirty fucking girl clawing at the surface. I had no idea Lizzy was hiding another side of her. How fucking lucky am I?

She pumps my cock as she looks at me, her free hand roaming over my stomach.

"Do you like my small hand wrapped around your big cock? Stroking... milking... urging you to—"

My hand snaps to her wrist, holding her tightly. "Lizzy... you swear you've never done this before?"

She smiles, her tongue pressing against her cheek before relaxing. "Never."

I let go of her wrist, and she immediately starts stroking me again. She's far too good at this.

"How am I doing?" she asks sweetly as she tongues the tip of my cock.

“I think you know,” I groan, gripping her braided hair in my fist.

“Tell me, Chase.”

I shake my head. “Too fucking good, Lizzy. Unbelievable. I’d imagined your perfect fucking lips around my cock so many times, Lizzy. Stroked myself as I watched you in the cameras. Couldn’t fucking help myself.”

“Everything you imagined?” she asks, taking my cock into her mouth before I can respond.

“Fuck,” I moan, gripping her by her braid, eyes wrenched shut as I focus on not spilling into her sweet mouth.

Her head bobs back and forth as her tongue slides along my length. She grips my ass with one hand as the other pumps. Her nails bite against my flesh as she sucks.

I can’t fucking speak. Good? Lizzy is fucking phenomenal. Too fucking...

I pull back with a pop as Lizzy gasps for breath. “I’m not coming unless it’s inside you, Lizzy.” I stroke her cheek with the back of my fingertips. “I’ve waited for too long for this.”

“You’re not the only one,” Lizzy says, leaning back onto her elbows as her knees knock together.

I fist my cock and start pumping as I look down at Lizzy’s lithe body. She slides a hand down her belly as the other cups her breast, her nipples perfect, pink buds begging to be sucked.

“I’ve touched myself to you so many times I’ve lost count. Too many fantasies.” She shudders as her finger finds her sensitive nub. “So many nights lost to images of you in my head. Kissing me.” She bites her lip. “Pinning me down with your body.” She extends her leg, placing her foot on my thigh, those toes edging closer to my root as I stroke myself harder.

“No need to imagine anymore,” I rasp, grabbing her by the ankle. I kneel down, kissing the sole of her foot, her heel, and then drag my tongue along the slender curve of her calf, biting at it before pressing my lips against her skin.

There won't be a single inch of her body left untouched by my tongue.

"No need to touch yourself anymore." I let go of her ankle and her leg falls to the side as I slide between her thighs. "I'm here now, Lizzy, and I'm not going anywhere. I'll keep you satisfied," I say, guiding the head of my cock to her seam, dipping it in her wetness. "You'll never need to touch yourself again. Your pleasure is my priority—my singular fucking focus."

"Mmm..." Lizzy moans as I stroke her slick folds with my tip. So wet and warm and ready to be fucked. I'm going to claim this sweet girl's cherry once and for all.

"Would you like that, Lizzy?"

She nods, shuddering as I press gently against her.

"Use your words. Tell me what I need to hear."

"I want your cock, Chase. I need it inside me. I want you to fuck me."

"Good girl," I moan. "Know that there's no going back after this." I grip her thighs, feeling her softness as my cock slides against her folds, rubbing her clit. "You're mine."

"I'm yours," she moans, cupping her tits, rolling her fingers over her nipples as she rears her head back.

I thumb her clit, rubbing her with firm strokes as she writhes in pleasure, bliss painted all over her pretty face.

"I'll try to make it easy for you, Lizzy, but I can't make any promises. You're... so fucking tight," I groan, gently pushing the head against her opening. "And once I'm inside you, sweet girl, I might lose control."

She dips her finger into her mouth. "I hope you do, Chase. I don't want you to hold back," she says grinding against me as I hold her legs in place. She moans, her breathing fast, heavy, and deep as pleasure floods her face. "I want you to show me what you've always wanted to do to your best friend's little sister. "

I fucking moan. It's deep and guttural and animalistic as I push past the slight resistance of her opening. She shudders, sucking in a sharp breath before exhaling.

"Lizzy, I fucking adore you. I fucking love..." I close my eyes as I savor the feel of her pussy clamping down on my cock. "You feel so good. So tight and wet and fucking mine," I growl as I plant my hands on either side of her, caging her beneath me as I push inside her, retreating, doing it again until she takes more of me.

It's insane how good she feels.

"Are you okay?" I ask, brushing her cheek.

She nods, biting down on her lip as she grips my forearms.

"Words," I rasp against her neck, nipping at her ear. "Tell me."

"You feel good, Chase. Never felt..." Her sentence catches in her throat as I push deeper inside her.

Lizzy moans as her nails dig into my skin and she closes her eyes, relishing the feel of my cock inside her.

I bite the inside of my mouth, trying to hold back because it feels like I'm on a precipice. Once I fall, there's no stopping me. I won't be able to control myself. My cock will split my sweet girl in half.

She exhales as she looks at me. "I thought I told you not to hold back, Chase. I want *you*," she says, reaching up to touch my face. "I want *all* of you," she rasps, dragging her hand down my chest.

I moan deeply, pressing my palms against her belly as my fingers wrap around her waist. She has no idea what she's asking for—the rabid, caged animals she's begging me to release.

She wraps her legs around me, her heels digging into me as she urges me on.

"Make me yours," she says.

Something snaps inside me, and I lose all control, breaking the last bit of resistance as I thrust deep into her.

Hard.

Pumping my cock in and out of my sweet girl as she gasps and moans, her hands running along her body.

“Hold your tits,” I growl and she obeys, her eyes flooded with desire as she presses her fingers against those tight buds.

I wrap my arms around her legs, pulling her up as I slam into her, unable to contain myself. The couch shifts and groans against the floor with every thrust. We’ll be at the front door by the time I’m done fucking my girl.

“Been waiting for years to fuck your pussy, Lizzy.”

I’m desperate and needy, driven by the primal urge to spill my seed inside her.

The sound of skin against skin echoes in the air as I rut Lizzy like an animal. Her first time was supposed to be sweet and gentle. But when she begged me, used that dirty, filthy, fucking beautiful mouth...

Game fucking over.

“You like my cock, Lizzy?” In and out. In and out. “Because I fucking love the feel of your pussy. So wet and tight and hot for me. Don’t want to stop fucking you.”

She lets go of her tits as her hands snap to mine, grabbing me as she arches her back, shoulders bearing down into the couch as moans my name.

“Don’t stop,” she begs. “Never...”

“All fours, sweet girl. I want you on all fours.”

I’ve been waiting to grab that braid, wrap it around my fist...

Lizzy gasps as my cock slides out of her as she repositions herself.

“Fuck,” I moan, bringing my hand down on her ass.

“Harder,” Lizzy pleads over her shoulder. “I want your hand imprinted on my ass, Chase.”

Motherfu—

I grip her braid, wrapping it around my fist as I slide my cock back inside her and bring my hand down with a commanding slap.

She’s fucking mine.

LIZZY

My body is electric, a flailing live wire arcing with a fiery hot current as Chase brings his big hand against my ass again and again.

“This is mine,” he growls, squeezing my ass with one hand as the other holds me in place, gripping my hair. “Fuck,” he growls, his cock sliding in and out of me, feeling so good as his balls slap against my clit.

Each thrust sends me closer to the edge, electricity pulsing through me.

I thought my first time was going to be awkward. Not like this. I never could have imagined losing my virginity to Chase—the man I’ve been pining for years. The gruff mountain man that’s using my body for his pleasure.

Who am I kidding? I’m loving every second of this.

“You feel so good,” I moan, each word punctuated by a thrust from Chase.

He tugs my hair, pulling me back so I’m flat against his chest. “You’re going to make me come, sweet girl,” he moans against my ear as he grips my throat. “Your tight pussy is milking me, swallowing my cock.”

A deep, guttural noise is strangled in his throat as he lets go of my hair, leaning back as he wraps a thick arm around my chest while the over rubs my clit, thrusting inside me even more urgently than before.

“Gonna make me come.” His voice is strained and low and it’s turning me on, knowing what I’m doing to him. Making him feel as good as he makes me feel.

“I want to make you come, Chase,” I gasp over my shoulder. “Need to—” I bite my lip hard as his cock slams into me. “Feel you come inside me,” I finish as he keeps pumping.

He grabs my neck, kissing me fiercely. I clamp my eyes shut as a kaleidoscope of colors explodes against my eyelids. I’ll never get enough of his taste—the way his tongue urgently strokes mine, hungry and searching. Needy.

He breaks the seal and then pulls me down on top of him.

“Need to see your gorgeous face,” he rasps, spinning me around while I’m still inside him. “Make me come, Lizzy.”

He grips my hips as I ride him, knees digging into the couch as my clit rubs against him.

“Like this?” I ask, planting my hands against his chest.

He cups my cheek, wrapping his fingers around my skull as he stares at me, his eyes filled with heat and need and desire—all for me. It’s making my insides twist and coil into a delicious knot.

“Just like that, sweet girl. You’re so fucking good. So fucking—”

He damn near bucks me off the couch as he thrusts into me, but his hands clamp down onto my thighs, riveting me in place.

“Can’t fucking... can’t—fuck, Lizzy you’re making me come.”

Oh my fucking god is all I can think of as the man of my dreams unleashes inside me, his face contorted in pleasure as he stares at me. Noises I’ve never heard before scream from his lips.

He pulls me into a kiss, still thrusting inside me as his lips crush mine. My entire body shakes and shudders as my muscles begin to seize up after that marathon.

That was not what I expected to happen to me when I strolled into the forest.

Chase Beckett is no longer my forbidden crush.

Chase Beckett is mine.

“Lizzy,” Chase rasps as we break our kiss, his hands cupping my cheeks as our noses touch. I want to stay like this forever, breathing in the same recycled air, breathing him in. His warm breath against my lips. His eyes on mine, peering into my soul. I love this man with all my heart, and there’s no question that he feels the same.

I see it in his eyes.

I feel it in his touch.

Everything about Chase makes my body cry out.

“Was it worth the wait?” I whisper, nipping at his lips.

It was for me. I’ve been pining for Chase for so long, craving for him to look at me like this. Touch me like this. I never thought it was going to happen. Never thought he’d look at me like anything other than his best friend’s little sister.

Too young. Too innocent. Too forbidden.

His thumbs brush against my cheeks. “More than worth it, Lizzy. Fucking fantastic,” he rasps. “Fucking phenomenal. Fucking...”

“Finally,” I say, brushing my lips against him as I breathe him in.

“Finally,” he says, inhaling me deeply.

Chase’s cock finally slips out of me as I slide away, resting my head against his chest as I listen to the rhythmic beat of his heart.

“I love you Lizzy,” he says, wrapping one arm around me as he strokes my hair with the other.

I smile against his chest, still in complete disbelief that this happened, and I’m not dreaming.

“I love you more than you’ll ever know,” I say with a sigh as I watch the flames of the wood stove lick against the glass.

The rhythmic beating of Chase’s heart, the rumbling of thunder in the distance, and the pitter-patter of rain against the roof lull me into a state of complete relaxation.

I’ve never felt more loved and protected than in Chase’s arms. And with my body completely at ease against his warm, firm body, I fall asleep in record time clinging to my favorite person in the world.



I WAKE up to the sound of a chainsaw revving in the distance.

The sun’s already up as I rub the sleep from my eyes, roll over, and reach out for Chase. I feel nothing but a cold sheet, and for a brief moment, I consider that I dreamt everything up.

But this isn’t my room. This isn’t my bed. And I’m *way* too sore. *Oh, god.* My vagina is screaming at me... For more, I think.

Chase could kiss it better, that’s for damn sure.

I crawl over to Chase’s side of the bed and shove my face into his pillow, inhaling deeply like a mad woman. A woman who’s completely and hopelessly obsessed with her older brother’s best friend.

I thought I was under Chase’s spell for years, but what I’m feeling now is on an entirely new level. It’s bone-deep and wider than the mountain range around me. It’s unbreakable and inescapable.

I scream into the pillow, low and strained because I can hardly breathe with the emotions racing through my skin, prickled with goosebumps and burning with so much love for him.

I love him.

And he loves me.

I thought I knew what it meant to love and be loved but I clearly missed the mark until now.

A sad thought rises in my head, but I push it back down. Chase wouldn't regret what we did, would he?

I sigh as I finally pull myself out of bed. I can't help but smile when I see my clothes from yesterday, dry and neatly folded on a chair next to the bed. After putting them on, I find one of Chase's flannel shirts. I pull it on, tucking the front into my shorts, and then head out of the bedroom as I breathe in his scent.

I'll never get enough of it.

I pass by his desk and can't help but smile as I remember his little secret. I turn back around after noticing a picture frame on his desk. It's a picture of me and Chase at the lake—sometime before I kissed him. I'm wearing the bikini I hand-picked for that day—for him—and he has his arm wrapped around me.

I don't remember posing for this photograph at all. Probably way too nervous, focused on the way his big, muscly arm was wrapped around me. His *naked* torso.

I burst into laughter when I notice my brother in the background, scowling at us. For some reason, I think that won't be the last scowl he levels at us.

He'll have to get over it because Chase is mine, and I'm his.

I set the frame down with a big grin on my face as I head to the kitchen, hoping to find my man waiting for me there. Unfortunately, when I round the corner, I come up empty—except for a handwritten note on the counter.

My lovely Lizzy,

Must've spent an hour watching you sleep this morning. Couldn't keep my eyes off of you. You're gorgeous, sweetheart, and I'm the luckiest man in the world. You're the last thing I see before I close my eyes. The first thing I see when I open them.

I. Love. You.

Bolded. Underlined. Italicized if I could.

Hope you can feel it bleeding through the page because it spills from my heart every time I see you.

If I'm not here when you wake up, the roads must not be clear. Follow the sound of the chainsaw... Figured I'd get a head start on our search for Penny.

Breakfast's in the oven and coffee's on the stove. I'm sure you're starved after last night. I know I was.

Still am. For you. Can't wait to taste your lips again.

Love, your man.

That's one way of saying breakfast's ready.

I sink into a chair before my legs give out. How the hell can this man be so... perfect? There has to be some catch. Something that will shatter the image I have of Chase and bring everything back to reality.

But I don't think there is. I know Chase. He's not hiding anything insidious behind that thick beard of his. The only thing he hid was the depth of his heart. How deep his love for me really is.

It's... overwhelming, but I don't want a love that isn't.

The chainsaw screams off in the distance, and I don't think about my next move. I'm on my feet and heading for the door without so much as a glance at the breakfast Chase left for me. I'm starving but this is one hunger that only my man can fill.

I slip on my shoes and am out the door in no time, rushing toward the sound of a chainsaw chewing through wood.

Muddy water splatters against my legs as I race toward Chase, pumping my arms and legs like I'm some Olympic athlete on the verge of winning gold.

Narrator: She was not, and she did not.

I've hardly made it a hundred feet and my chest is burning, screaming at me to stop. Pleading for me to stop. *Begging me*

to come to my senses and realize that my cardio is severely lacking and that I need to slow it down right now lest I drop dead of a heart attack at the ripe old age of twenty-three.

I cough and sputter as I pause, bent over with my hands on my knees as I try to catch my breath.

Get it together, Lizzy.

It takes a few minutes but I finally get moving again. It's not long until I see something big rising over the horizon. Looks like a tree. It *is* a tree—the trunk of a tree without branches.

And Chase is carrying it on his back.

Holy crap. The man's lugging a tree trunk the length of a car on his back up a hill, and here I am, struggling to run for more than a few minutes.

Looks like we'll have to spend more time working on our cardio together...

I start jogging because I suddenly feel weightless seeing Chase. And when he sees me, he slides one arm out a rope loop and then lets the trunk roll off the side of his body and off the road. It thuds so hard that I can feel it as I quicken my pace.

His strides are more than twice the size of mine as he rushes toward me.

Shirtless.

Again.

Swoon...

Because what mountain man wears clothes when he's in nature? Mine certainly doesn't.

Chase catches me in his big arms as I jump onto him, wrapping my legs around him as our lips meet. I moan against him as we spin, my fingers threaded into his hair as I pull him closer. Kiss him harder.

“Good morning to you too, Lizzy,” Chase rasps when we finally break our kiss. “I missed you terribly.”

I nuzzle against his neck, breathing him in. “Missed you too,” I whisper, kissing his throat.

“You get my note?”

My body tingles all over as I remember the note. “Yes,” I say. “Quite the note, Mister.”

I tilt my chin up, looking at Chase and he kisses me again.

Sparks. Electricity. Fireworks. *The works.*

Every time I kiss this man, I feel it all over my body—from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head. It’s insane how my body reacts to him and continues to react to him. I never want it to end. I want each and every one of our kisses to be this electric.

“You can leave me as many love notes as you want.”

“I’ll write you one every day,” Chase rasps against my skin. “I’ll write them until there’s no ink left in the world.”

“I’d like that. A lot.”

Our lips meet again. My body reacts—*again.*

“I’m not sure we’ll find Penny if we keep this up,” he says, brushing his fingertips against my cheek.

“Probably not.” I rest my head against him again, smiling as I shake my head. “I’m surprised you remembered Penny.”

“Couldn’t forget,” he says. “Not after seeing you that distraught, yesterday. Got out here early to check the roads before we left. A couple downed trees, but I made quick work of them.”

“Carried them on your back, too.”

He snorts. “I was running low on firewood.”

Lordy.

“Truck couldn’t handle them?”

“Needed a morning workout,” he says.

“If you wanted a workout, you could’ve woken me up.”

He grips my ass and begins walking back toward the cabin. “I’m down for some cardio,” he says.

“Some stretching would be nice too,” I say. “My vagina has been a little crampy, and I was hoping you could massage it out.”

Chase throws me over his shoulder and books it up the hill.

This is what an Olympic athlete on the verge of winning gold looks like.

Or an obsessive mountain man about to claim his woman.

“Consider it done, Sweetheart.”

God, I love this man.

CHASE

It's a miracle we made it back down the mountain to Whispering Winds. And not because of the dangerous, washed-out roads.

Couldn't keep my hands off Lizzy. I'm a lucky fucking man to have her, and there won't be a day that goes by that I'm not worshipping her.

Every irresistible inch of her.

Lizzy turns her head toward me as we come to a stop at an intersection a few streets down from the Inn.

"What?" Lizzy asks, blushing. She brushes at her face. "Do I have some crumbs on me?"

"You're gorgeous, Lizzy. That's what. Can't keep my eyes off you."

She sighs, shaking her head as she glances out the window before meeting my gaze again.

"You're not so bad yourself."

I grunt. "I'll take it," I say as I turn onto Main Street.

"Damage isn't too bad," I say, surveying the street as I find a place to park. "Maybe Penny made it back after all."

"I hope so," Lizzy says, wringing her hands.

I slide my arm behind Lizzy as I parallel park, turning off the engine before I look at her again.

“We’ll find her,” I say, placing my hand on hers. “I promise.” I bring her hand to my lips and kiss it. Lizzy smiles, redness spreading across her neck.

There’s a knock on my window, and Lizzy’s eyes flare when she looks past me, over my shoulder. I let go of her hand as I turn and find Aiden staring at us.

“Aiden,” I say, opening the door, expecting to get a fucking earful, possibly a swift right hook to the jaw.

Neither happens, somehow.

“It’s a fuckin’ miracle you found Lizzy, man. Mom filled me in. Said you fished her out of the river?”

Apparently, he hadn’t noticed my lips against his sister’s skin.

“Saved my life,” Lizzy says, popping her door open and scooting outside.

I hop out, shutting the door as Lizzy walks around the front of the truck.

“You alright, Lizzy?” Aiden asks, pulling her into a hug.

Lizzy’s eyes are on mine as she says, “I’m great. Chase took excellent care of me.”

They break the hug as Aiden fingers my flannel shirt on Lizzy. “Gave you the shirt off his back, I see.”

He turns around and I expect a fierce gaze but it’s the complete opposite. “Thanks for keeping her safe,” he says, pulling me into a quick hug.

I swallow hard as my mind wanders to last night. I doubt he’d be thanking me if he knew what I did to his little sister. What I did to her this morning.

I’m not going to hide it though. Lizzy’s not little anymore. She doesn’t need his protection anymore. She’s mine to protect, and I’ll keep her safe until there’s no more air in my lungs.

“No problem. So what’s the status?” I ask, breaking away and diverting the conversation for the moment.

Aiden gives us a rundown of the storm damage to Whispering Winds as we head to the Inn.

Half the town is without power but a crew's already out working on it. Phone service is spotty, but that's not uncommon here in the best of times. There are uprooted trees and downed branches all over town but they'll be cleared within the week—plenty of chainsaws and able-bodied men in this neck of the woods. Some roads are impassable and flooded but everyone in town seems to be safe.

All in all not too bad for a storm of this magnitude.

“No word on Penny?” Lizzy asks as we head into the Inn.

“Heading up to Beau's place to see if she wandered up that way,” Mom says as we cross paths at the door. “Right, Jack?” she says, glancing at a glum-looking Jack over her shoulder.

“Yes, Ma'am,” he says, his hands shoved in his pockets as he looks at the floor.

“Kind of him to offer his truck,” Mom says, pulling Lizzy into a hug.

Jack wanders over to me as he glances at Mom. “Chase, you've got to get me out of here. Pretty sure her license expired a few decades ago.”

“You'll be fine,” I say. He lurches forward a few inches as I pat his back. “She knows these mountain roads better than anyone.”

“And from what I heard,” Aiden adds, stepping beside Jack, “you owe her. Scared a couple of tourists out of here the other day.”

“You did what?” I growl, hand gripping the nape of Jack's neck.

Aiden laughs, folding his arms across his chest as he glances at Mom and Lizzy. “Heard Mom complaining about it earlier. Stumbling in here a bloody, filthy mess. Stunk up the place. Dead rabbits slung over his shoulder. She had to comp them a few nights to get them to stay. Newlyweds,” he adds with a snort.

“Chase, I swear—” Jack says, trying to duck out of my grip.

Lucky for Jack, Mom snatches him away. “No lollygagging, Jack. Hand over those keys now, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Yes, Mom,” he says, fishing them out of his pockets.

She grabs them, nods to us, and then disappears out the front of the Inn, Jack reluctantly in tow.

Aiden sidles up next to me as Lizzy walks toward us. “Think he’ll make it back here alive?”

I grunt in response. Should be more annoyed at Jack than I am, but as soon as my eyes land on Lizzy I no longer care. All I want to do is take Lizzy up to her room here and spend the day in bed.

My chest tightens when I see that smile of hers, and when she stands in front of us, I want to reach out, pull her close, and claim her lips.

I hold back for now. It’s not the time or place to tell Aiden. Should be focused on finding Penny.

Lizzy and I have the rest of our lives.

“So,” Lizzy begins, clasping her hands in front of her, bobbing as she animatedly fills us in on what Mom told her about the search for Penny.

Should be listening to her. Should be taking mental notes on what everyone is doing and where we should be heading. Should be doing a lot of things right now, but I can’t concentrate on anything but Lizzy.

“Sound good?” she says after some time.

“Great,” Aiden says. “I’m going to head to Windy’s and grab us some coffee.”

He claps me on the shoulder and then heads out.

Lizzy closes the gap between us, smiling up at me as she reaches for my shirt, clutching the fabric as she pulls me against her.

Fuck...

I finally understand the meaning of breathtaking beauty. I can't fucking breathe as I stare at my girl. I could gasp for air and I wouldn't be able to fill my lungs because it feels like they're being squeezed in a vice.

"I thought we'd never—" she breathes against my skin.

I wrap my hands around her skull and capture the rest of her sentence with my lips, filling my lungs with her breath as I savor the softness of her lips and the sweetness of her taste. She moans against my lips, hands balled against my chest as I wrap my arms around her, lift her up, and then carry her into the supply closet next to us.

The door slams against a shelf as I kick it open and stumble inside with Lizzy wrapped tightly in my arms.

I shut the door behind us as I set her down, the room blanketed in darkness for a few brief moments as I search for the switch. When I find it and a flickering light fills the room, Lizzy's staring at me wildly. Her chest heaves as she braces herself against the shelf on the back wall.

"Chase," she whispers.

"Lizzy."

"What the hell was that?"

"That," I say, taking a few slow steps toward her, "is what happens," I continue, taking another step to erase the gap, "when I go too long without..." Lizzy's eyes flutter shut, taking in a shaky breath as I drag the back of my hand across her cheek. "Tasting your fucking lips," I rasp, gripping her hair at the base of her skull.

Lizzy opens her eyes, flooded with need as she lets out a low, mewling noise. I'm so close to her that I swear I can hear her heart thudding against her chest.

"Well," she whispers, "what are you waiting for?"

I kiss her in the only way I know how.

Wildly. Madly. With my entire being. Like I'm trying to brand my lips onto her soul, matching the indelible mark she's etched onto mine.



I HOLD Lizzy's hand the entire drive up the mountain. Can't help myself. Aiden leans against the window, staring at the trees passing by as we make our way to Griff's cabin. Mom suggested we check in with him.

Doesn't matter where we look. The only thing that matters to me is seated next to me, clutching my hand as she leans against me. Aiden's noticed, but he's kept his cool.

We'll see how it plays out when we're alone.

Aiden snorts, breaking the silence. "You know I saw Beau at Windy's."

"And you didn't tell Mom?" Lizzy says, turning to him.

He shrugs. "Didn't have the chance." He glances at my hand wrapped around Lizzy's, looks at me with an expression I can't place, and then turns his attention back to his window. "She was burning rubber down Main Street."

"Has he seen Penny?" Lizzy asks.

"Don't think so. You know Beau," he adds with a shrug.

"Grumpy," Lizzy says with a sigh.

"Seemed to be taken with the new barista at Windy's though."

"Yeah?" Lizzy asks.

"Doodling a picture of her."

Lizzy laughs. "I feel bad for her."

I squeeze Lizzy's hand. "He's not that bad."

She turns to me, leaning her head on my shoulder. "Probably right. Tough to read, that one."

We drive on for a few minutes before we're forced to stop.

“Should’ve packed my chainsaw,” I say as I park.

“Too sore?” Lizzy asks. “I watched you carry a log twice that size on your back. Think what two mountain men could accomplish.”

“Definitely wasn’t twice that size,” I say, laughing.

“And I think I’ll pass,” Aiden says as he opens the door. “We can continue on foot. Not much further to Griff’s.”

I watch as Aiden heads for the downed tree and then grip Lizzy’s thigh as I lean toward her. “Can’t wait to get you home,” I snarl against her neck. “Fucking need you.”

She moans, nuzzling against me. “Think how much better it will be,” she says. “The waiting. The pining. The build-up,” she says with a pop.

“I fucking love you, Lizzy,” I say, stroking her cheek.

Lizzy sighs. “Love has nothing on what I feel for you, Big Guy.”

I hold her gaze for a few brief moments. Any longer and Aiden would come back to something he wouldn’t want to see.

“Let’s go find Penny,” I say, kissing her forehead before hopping out of the truck and helping her down.

Aiden’s already maneuvered around the tree, heading down the road toward Griff’s cabin.

“Think he knows?” Lizzy asks, grabbing my hand.

I snort. “He knows,” I say as we approach the tree. I let go of her, hop over the tree, and then help Lizzy up. I hold onto her hips as she steps onto the other side.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Lizzy says when her eyes meet mine, feeling the desire flooding through me. “Actually,” she says, “save them for later.”

I growl, smacking her ass as she walks in front of me.

“Best fucking view on the mountain,” I call after her.

Lizzy begins to say something but stops when she hears Aiden yelling ahead of us. We catch up to him in record time,

and I snatch Lizzy's wrist, pulling her behind me as I see a fucking mountain lion pacing in front of us.

"Fucking shit, man," I yell, reaching for a piece of firewood on the ground.

"Mountain lion? Thought there weren't any left here," Aiden says, voice strained as he tosses a piece of firewood at it and yells, "Back!"

"Stay behind me, Lizzy," I say.

The beast paws at the piece of firewood Aiden threw and then sniffs the air.

It takes a few steps toward us, growling as something else takes over me. I chuck the firewood in my hand and it grazes its side. I grab another, lunging at the beast as something animalistic tears through my throat.

Motherfucker has another thing coming if it thinks attacking my girl is a good idea.

It cowers away as I cross the span between us. I'm maybe six feet away from it when it spins, tail tucked between its legs, and then books it across the clearing.

I rear back, launching the piece of firewood toward it for good measure.

"Still got that arm I see," Aiden says, hands on his hips.

I turn around and let out a breathy, "What the fuck?" I wipe my forearm as I walk back to Lizzy, giddy and smiling at me.

My heart's pounding as adrenaline spikes through my veins. "You okay?" I ask.

She rolls onto her toes and whispers into my ear. "I want to rip your clothes off."

"I guess I should fight off mountain lions more often."

"You should see me after you wrestle a bear for me," she says, rolling back on her heels, biting her lip as she waggles her eyebrows.

“I’ll pencil it in for Tuesday,” I say, smiling at my girl.

She’s not the only one ready to rip some fabric.

“He’s not here,” Aiden calls back to us from Griff’s front porch.

“Truck’s here,” I say. “Must be out on the mountain.”

“Maybe she’s with him,” Lizzy says, following next to me as we approach the cabin.

Aiden’s hands are cupped around his face as he looks inside.

“Possibly, but who knows when he’ll be back. We can come back tomorrow. Help with the tree back on the road,” I say.

“Could have Mom ramp right over it,” Aiden says.

I snort. “Jack would love that.”

“Don’t think he’d have a choice,” Lizzy says.

“Well,” Aiden says, “Not much else we can do here. Why don’t we head back to town? See if anyone else needs help.”

“Maybe she’s back,” Lizzy says.

I place my palm on her lower back reflexively. Aiden stares at my arm on his sister before meeting my eyes.

“We should all have dinner later,” he says. “Think we have some catching up to do.”

“Sounds good,” I say.

He grunts and then heads back toward the road.

Lizzy rests her head against me as I hold her. “He’ll come around,” I say.

“He doesn’t have a choice,” Lizzy says. “You’re mine and I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

“I thought I was the possessive one,” I say, squeezing her.

Lizzy steps in front of me, grips me by my collar, and tugs me toward her. “You have no idea,” she says before kissing me.

Fucking hell, this woman is perfect.



“WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH LIZZY?” Aiden asks the moment she disappears into his kitchen to heat up some leftovers we brought up from the Inn.

The ride back down the mountain to Whispering Winds was silent and awkward but I didn’t care. Lizzy was at my side, our hands entwined, and that’s all that mattered.

Penny’s still M.I.A., but we’re not losing hope. There’s still more mountain left to be searched, and with Mama Bear on the case, the entire township of Whispering Winds has been enlisted to help.

Penny’s sister, Evie, showed up just as Lizzy and I finished up dinner service for the Inn and everyone else that returned after the search. She and Mom seem to be two peas in a pod. No doubt they’ll find Penny before lunch tomorrow.

I lean back in my chair, meeting Aiden’s searing gaze. I get it. He’s protective over his little sister. Always has been and always will be.

“I love her, Aiden. Can’t be more straightforward than that.”

His jaw flexes as his knuckles turn white, gripping the armrest of his chair.

“She’s my sister,” he growls.

“And I’m your best fucking friend,” I snarl back. “You know the kind of man I am.”

Aiden’s grip loosens as he leans back in his chair, eyes still fixed on mine.

“I love Lizzy,” I say, my muscles beginning to relax. “And she’s a grown woman who can make her own decisions. I know you want the best for her. I know you want to protect her. I want the same. I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure she’s protected and cared for. I promise you that.”

Aiden folds his arms across his chest, eyes still fixed on mine. We've been through so much together. He knows I'd never commit to Lizzy unless I was serious.

"Okay," he says after what feels like an eternity. "But if you ever..." He shakes his head. "Don't break her heart," he says. "I know she's had a thing for you for a while. Hard not to notice."

"I promise."

"You guys done beating your chests?" Lizzy asks, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen.

I nod at Aiden and he nods back. Nothing more needs to be said. We have an understanding.

Lizzy walks over to her brother and whispers something in his ear. He stands up, gives her a hug, and then excuses himself to the kitchen.

Lizzy walks over to me, shimmering like a constellation of stars as I drink in her gorgeous curves.

She slides onto my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Did you mean what you said?" she asks.

"You heard it?"

"Kind of hard not to," she says, nudging my nose with hers.

"Every word," I say. "And even more I left unsaid. You're the fucking one for me, Lizzy. There's no question in my mind."

"I know you mean that," she says, "but it still feels like this is a dream. I've been chasing you for years... Chase," she adds, smiling.

"And I have a lot to make up for. Don't mind chasing you around, Lizzy."

"You don't have to chase me. You've already caught me. I'm yours."

“And I’m yours.”

I kiss her, savoring the warmth and softness against my lips. I’ll never get enough of them or her. Never knew I could love anything this much ’til I met her.

“It’s too bad,” she says.

“What?”

“That we can’t skip dinner. I want my dessert right now.”

I smile. “Just like you said. The wait will be worth it because as soon as we’re done here, I’m throwing you over my shoulder and racing back down the mountain to the Inn. You’re not going to sleep at all tonight.”

“Promise?”

“I fucking guarantee it.”

“Could you two not?” Aiden asks as he comes back into the room with a couple of plates in his hands. “At least wait until you’re home.”

I kiss Lizzy, and whisper, “Soon,” against her lips.

“Soon,” she whispers back before hopping off my lap.

Fuck, I love this girl, and I can’t believe how lucky I am to have fished her out of that river.

She’s a catch I’m never going to fucking release.

All mine.

Forever.

EPILOGUE

LIZZY - ONE YEAR LATER...

“Penny!” I squeal as she pushes through the door to the Whispering Winds Inn kitchen. “What are you doing down here? I thought you’d be off on your honeymoon by now.”

We found Penny. Griff found her, actually. Put a ring on her finger too. Chase did the same to me the following day. Apparently, the storm had quite an effect on the mountain men of Whispering Winds.

“I’m in the middle of med school applications right now. Griff and I have been working hard at Windy’s to get them all prepped.”

I smile as I wipe my brow. Lord, it’s hot in this kitchen. I think. After getting pregnant, I feel like I’m always hot and sweaty.

Chase doesn’t seem to mind. I swear ever since I began to show I can’t keep him off me. Not that I couldn’t keep him off me before. Or tried to. I love Chase and his insatiable hunger for me.

I love that man.

And there’s not a day that goes by that he doesn’t make it known how much he loves me. He never broke his promise to me. Every single day there’s a love note waiting for me. Sometimes it’s short—*I love you*. Sometimes it’s a full-blown poem about my ass.

Framed that one.

Today's is on a Post-It note above the stove: *Can't keep my eyes off you, my love.*

"I have no doubt you'll get in, Penn. You guys are two smart cookies."

Penny laughs, shaking her head. "We'll see. Speaking of cookies," she says. "Happen to have a sweet treat? Windy's ran out and I'm hoping to get a fix to help me get through these apps."

"Cobbler?"

Penny's eyes widen. "You have some?"

I grab a mitt and open the oven. "Fresh batch," I say.

"Oh my god it has been ages. Griff is going to flip his shit if I come back with some of that."

"All yours," I say.

"How can I repay you?"

"Get into med school, come back, and open up a practice here. This town needs it. It's hell driving nearly an hour for all of my appointments," I say, rubbing my belly.

"Oh my god, Lizzy! I had no idea."

I smile. "Not your fault. We've only just started telling people. Only recently started showing too. Chase's flannel does a great job at hiding the bump," I add, pulling it back so she can see.

"Wow," she says. "I'm so happy for you. Can I?"

I laugh. "Of course."

Penny places her hand on my belly. "Do you know the gender?"

"No idea."

"You guys are going to be amazing parents," she says.

A lump forms in my throat. "Thanks, Penn," I say.

She's so nice, and I'm glad her car broke down in our town. She's one of my best friends now.

“I’m surprised Chase hasn’t run you out of this kitchen.”

“He’s tried, but I’m not leaving until I can’t stand any longer. I love cooking, and I have no idea what I’d do with myself if I couldn’t work anymore. I’d go crazy. Drive Chase crazy too.”

“If he’s like Griff, I’m sure he’d love to have you all to himself at home.”

I laugh. “Probably right. Mountain men...” I add with a contented sigh.

“They’re the best.”

“I should head back,” Penny says. “But I want you to keep me updated, okay?”

“Of course. And enjoy your honeymoon. Once you finish those apps.”

“That won’t be a problem,” she adds with a wink.

I carve out a few slices of cobbler for her and Griff, packing them away in a to-go container.

“Thanks again,” she says.

“No problem.”

When she leaves, my mind drifts to my own mountain man. The one who, in his own words, can’t keep his eyes off me.

I wonder if he still watches me.

I glance at the camera, wondering how I could lure him out of his office. He wrote a poem about my ass... so...

Oops, my oven mitt fell to the ground. How clumsy of me. Looks like I’ll have to bend over and pick it up. I tease him for a little while, making sure all of my assets are on display.

He makes it to the kitchen in record time. Glad he no longer works from his cabin.

“Lizzy,” he says, panting, “what the hell are you trying to do to me?”

“Just checking to see if you meant what you wrote this morning.”

Chase walks over to me. “I think I’ve made it clear to you every single day how completely fucking obsessed I am with you. I’m all in,” he says, placing his hand on my belly. “One hundred percent yours, Lizzy.”

“I know,” I say. “I just missed you.”

“Missed you too, sweet girl. That’s why I’m always watching you on the camera. Can’t get enough of you.”

I smile. I love hearing him tell me how much he loves me.

“I think it’s time for your lunch break,” Chase says, pulling me against him.

“It’s not even 10 o’clock,” I say as he brushes my cheek with his fingers.

“I’m the boss, remember? I make the rules. And I think we’re both starving right now.”

I suck in my bottom lip. “You’re right,” I say. “Guess I am a little hungry. What’s on the menu?”

“You, sweet girl,” he says before kissing me in the only way he ever kisses me.

Like a man possessed.

A man obsessed...

With me.

Every time his lips touch mine, he makes me feel so loved and protected and cared for that it feels like I’m going to burst.

I hope that never changes.

EPILOGUE

CHASE - TWELVE YEARS LATER...

I laugh, watching the kids running toward Penny and Griff's cabin.

"I love you guys, too," I mutter to myself as I hop out of the truck. I swear they tucked and rolled out of the truck before I parked.

Can't blame them, though. Been a while since they'd had a sleepover with their friends. I grab their sleeping bags and backpacks and trudge on up to the cabin as Penny opens the door and Jo and Finn come barreling out, screeching a greeting to Sadie and Luke.

Griff wraps an arm around Penny as I spin around, trying to dodge the kids racing by me in all directions.

"You two are saints for doing this," I say, finally making it onto the porch.

"You get them next weekend," Griff rasps, squeezing Penny's shoulder. "Got some plans in the works for this one."

Penny glances up at Griff, smiling wide before turning to me. "It's no trouble, really. The kids are wonderful together and to be honest, they take care of themselves. So long as there's pizza ready for them at will."

"Finn," Griff growls. "Put the axe down, man," he adds a little softer, lowering his hand in front of him.

I turn around and find Jo and Sadie sitting on the ground, threading wildflowers into each other's hair, while the mini-mountain men shave a couple of years off all of our lives.

Luke is climbing a cord of precariously stacked firewood while Finn drags an axe the size of him across the ground.

“On second thought...” Penny says, smiling at me.

“At least there are two doctors on call,” I say with a sigh, dropping my kids’ stuff inside the door. “In case a tourniquet needs to be applied,” I add as my eyes drift back to Luke throwing a hatchet into a stump.

“They’ll be great,” Griff says before leaping off the front porch. “Alright, all done with the sharp axes.”

Penny sighs, stepping next to me. “You mountain men are a different breed,” she says.

I bump her shoulder. “So are the mountain women who put up with us.”

“Speaking of... Where’s Lizzy?”

“Asleep,” I say. “Hopefully. I wanted her to sleep in and have a relaxing morning. She’s been putting in some long hours at the restaurant and deserves the rest.”

But knowing her, she’s probably already whipped up a full breakfast. The woman can’t sit still. I love that about her—chasing her around this mountain.

“I don’t doubt it. She deserves all the success and rave reviews. Her food is out of this world.”

I’m proud of Lizzy and all she’s accomplished, and I can’t help but smile when other people praise her and find joy in what she does. She puts her heart on the plate, a little piece of her in every single dish.

The world deserves to know how wonderful my woman is.

“I’ll let her know,” I say, rubbing my neck. I’m itching to get back to my woman. Can’t wait to slide under our sheets and worship her.

“You’ve got the same look in your eyes that Griff does,” Lizzy says.

“What look?”

Penny shakes her head. “Go tend to your woman,” she says, backing into the cabin. “I’ve got some pancakes on the stove, and I’m pretty sure they’re burnt to a crisp. Nothing new there,” she adds with a sigh.

I smile, thank Penny again, and then head to my truck. I wave at the kids, but they don’t even notice me. Griff and the boys are busy climbing a tree while the girls are twirling in their dresses, falling to the ground after a few good spins.

Seems I’m no longer needed.

Not here, at least.

My mountain woman is calling.



I DAMN NEAR KICK the door off its hinges as I open the door to our cabin. No worries. I’ve become quite the handyman after spending years building this cabin up to house our family.

New additions—walls, windows, stairs, roofing. The cabin has expanded well past the cozy one-bedroom it was when I brought Lizzy here over a decade ago.

“Lizzy,” I call out as I head to our bedroom, peeling off my flannel as I cross the room. I cast the shirt aside as I make it into the room, but I find the bed empty.

I head to the kitchen. The love note I left her this morning is gone, same with the breakfast and coffee. But in its place, there’s another note written in Lizzy’s hand.

My Rugged Mountain Man,

What a lovely surprise to wake up to! Can’t wait to spend the entire weekend with you. Alone. In bed. Naked.

I’m in the mountains collecting mushrooms.

Come find me.

Love,

Your Mountain Woman

Good thing the door's open. If it wasn't, it would be off its hinges, splintered into a million pieces from me barreling through it.

Forget my shirt—don't need it where I'm headed. Might even lose the pants the way they're strangling my cock.

I'm pumping my arms and legs like the fucking T-1000 from *Terminator 2* because there's not a damn thing in this world that's going to come between me and my girl. Fucking love her more than ever. Never thought it was possible, but it's true. This past decade has been the best. Better than my years in the NFL. Nothing comes close, apart from my love for Sadie and Luke.

I come to a skidding halt as Lizzy's scent flares in my nostrils.

She's close.

But not close enough.

I leap over logs, duck under branches, and plow through thick brush, driven by my singular need to claim Lizzy's lips. Grip those hips and make her mine all over again. Fucking hell she drives me wild.

I bet I look wild, too—mud splatter all over me. Twigs and leaves and grime all over me from trampling through the forest. My eyes aflame as I search for my girl.

And there she is.

I pause, resting a forearm on a thick tree trunk as I pant, watching my Lizzy as she kneels against the forest floor, collecting mushrooms next to a fallen log.

Radiant.

Brilliant.

Fucking breathtaking.

Every time I see her it's like the first time. Stops me dead in my tracks. Sucks the air right out of my lungs. I remember the first time I saw her, a tiny little thing peering at me from around the corner as her brother showed me inside their house.

I had no idea then that she'd be my wife. That she'd bring me to my knees. That I'd be hers completely. That we'd create a family of our own on this mountain.

I walk towards Lizzy, my heart filled with my love for her, branches snapping on the ground as I close the gap. I'm halfway there by the time she looks up at me with a smile.

She sets her basket on the ground as she stands, swipes her hand against her dress, and then folds her arms across her chest. "Took a little longer than I thought," she says. "Not slowing down are you, Grandpa?"

I cup her face and she grabs my waist, her bottom lip dropping as she lets out a light, breathy gasp.

"Never," I say. "Not when I'm chasing after you."

I kiss her as her nails dig into my skin. Fucking love that feeling. Like she's marking me as hers.

"Kids okay?" she asks as we break our kiss.

"Yes," I say, "but Luke might come back with a finger missing."

"W-what?" Lizzy splutters.

"Kidding," I say.

Kind of.

"So what do you think we should do this weekend?" Lizzy asks, her hands pinned against my body.

"Each other," I say.

Lizzy swallows. "Sounds perfect."

Our lips meet again and sparks fly. They always do with Lizzy. Blinding, brilliant lights arcing behind my eyelids—more intense as the years have gone on.

"I have something to show you," Lizzy says after breaking our kiss.

"Better be between those thighs," I growl. "I'm fucking hungry."

Lizzy laughs. “You can have that after,” she says, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward a sheer drop into the river.

“This is where I fell into the river.”

“Where you jumped?”

She lightly jabs me. “*Fell*,” she corrects me.

I wrap my arms around her as we watch the waterfall off in the distance. “Great view,” I say. “Can’t believe I haven’t seen this earlier.”

Lizzy grips my forearms. “I wonder what would’ve happened if you never caught me,” she says absently.

I’d thought about it a few times over the years, but all it does is make me uncomfortable. I was there and that’s all that matters.

“Not getting any ideas, are you? I don’t want to have to jump in after you.”

She laughs. “You would though, right?”

“Without a second thought, Lizzy. I caught you fair and square and I’m never going to let you swim away. Never letting you go.”

Lizzy turns and our lips meet. I kiss my girl. I claim my girl.

“Prove it,” she moans against my lips.

“With fucking pleasure,” I growl, lowering her to the ground.

Flipping her dress up.

Peeling off her panties.

Inhaling her fucking scent.

I dive in, relishing the taste of Lizzy as she grips my hair tightly, holding me against her as she cries out my name.

The sweetest sound in the world.

The sweetest taste in the world.

The sweetest girl in the world.

My girl.

Forever.



Thanks for reading! Have you read Penny and Griff's story?

The Man of the Mountain

He's big. He's bearded.

And he's completely obsessed with me!

Want more over-the-top, instalove goodness?

**Sign up for my newsletter and be the first to know about
my new releases!**

Or check out some of my other stories on the next page. Free
through Kindle Unlimited.

ALSO BY TESSA KLEIN

Teacher's Forbidden Fruit Series (Kindle Unlimited)

Teach Me, Mr. Asher

My dominant professor wants to teach me what happens when I offer my cherry to him.

Teach Me, Mr. Barclay

*Two years ago, she was my student.
Now? She's my live-in nanny, my obsession... MINE.*

Teach Me, Mr. Cole

*How do you spell off-limits? Thatcher Cole.
My best friend's dad. My professor. My obsession.*

Teach Me, Mr. Devlin

*I have a problem, and her name's Lily Cole.
My best friend's daughter. My student. My forbidden obsession.*