



**BIRCH**

*Please*

BLACK TIMBER PEAK  
MOUNTAIN MEN

CARLY KEENE

# **BIRCH PLEASE**

BLACK TIMBER PEAK MOUNTAIN MEN

# CARLY KEENE





**Copyright © 2023 by Carly Keene**

Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Jordan Bailey

Map Design: Melissa Nash

Last Chapter Press LLC

6311 Ames Ave #1137, Omaha NE68104

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This material may be protected by copyright.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contact Last Chapter Press at [info@lastchapterpress.com](mailto:info@lastchapterpress.com) for permission.

# LAST CHAPTER PRESS

## STEAMY ROMANCE

We are Last Chapter Press, the fastest growing, woman-owned, romance publishing press.

Last Chapter Press strives to provide readers with a romance story that they'll love until the very last word of that last chapter...and then come back for more!

From contemporary romance to romantic suspense to rom-com, all of our stories will incite reader's hearts to beat fast, and their dreams will be filled with the swoon-worthy, strong, sexy, but ultimately vulnerable heroes we all love.

We publish multiple books a month, which means you'll have something new to read every week. We look forward to being a part of your eReader.

We can't wait to make both our authors and readers dreams come true.

**Be sure to sign up for our newsletter at [Last Chapter Press](#) and check out our Facebook page at [Last Chapter Press Facebook](#).**

## **BIRCH PLEASE INFO**

### **Lika**

I've spent my whole life trying to get out from under my parents' thumb. Everything in our family revolves around my brother's medical issues.

Even though I'm an adult, I still feel like a child.

But when I make the decision to step out on my own, everything goes haywire.

I run away.

When my car breaks down in Black Timber Peak, I'm rescued by the sexiest Mountain Man Mechanic I've ever seen.

Ace is perfect.

I just hope he doesn't realize how imperfect I am.

### **Ace**

I've done a lot of stuff in my life that I'm not proud of.

A misguided youth landed me in jail—ironically, for something I actually didn't do.

But I'm straight now. I own this auto repair shop, and I love Black Timber Peak.

When I see Lila standing frustrated near her disabled car, it's like the sun has risen on me at last.

She's perfect.

I just don't want her to find out that I'm no good for her.

Which is going to be tough, with my past rising up to threaten me.

And threatening her into the bargain.

I have to make a stand and decide what I believe.

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

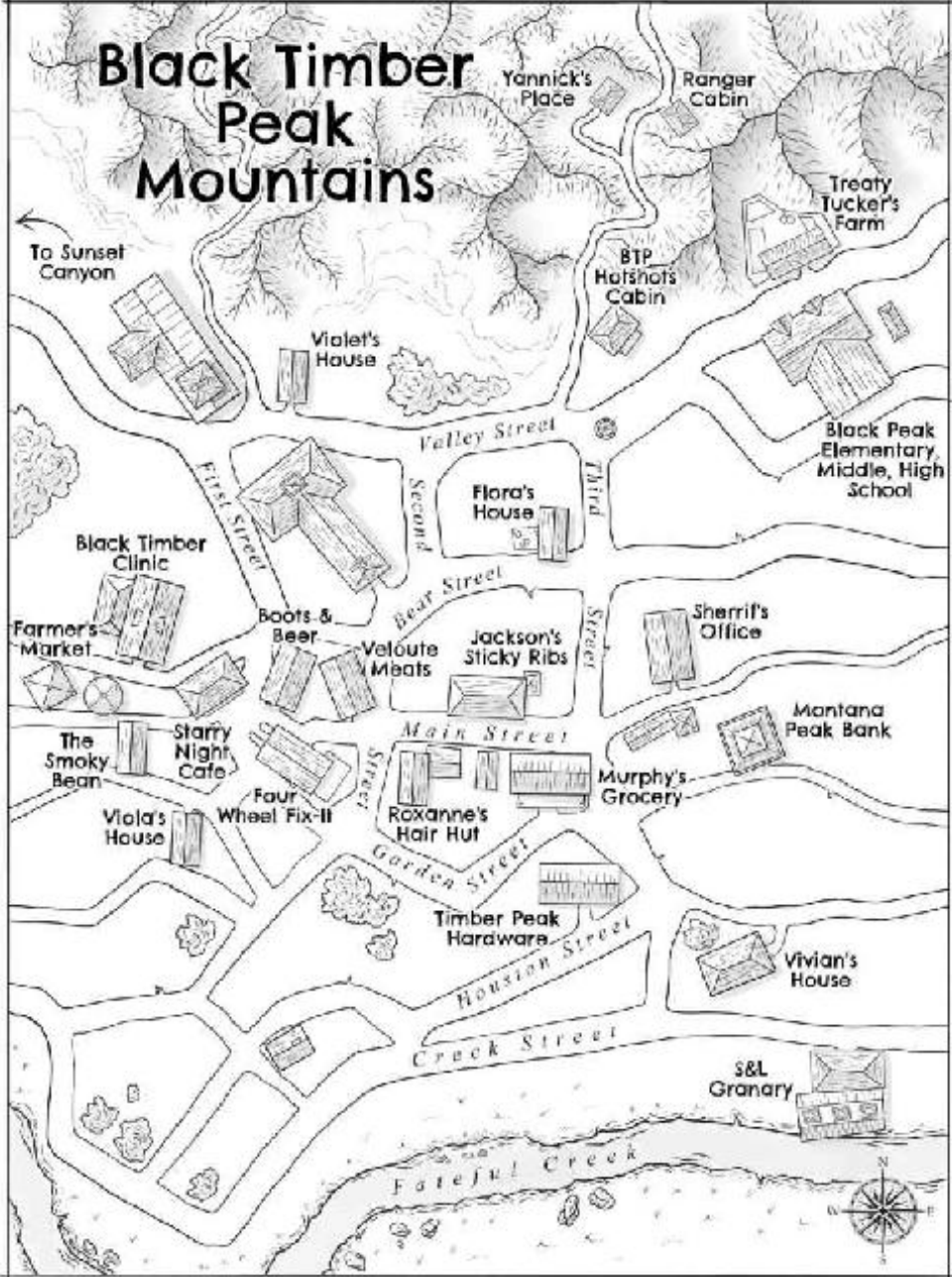
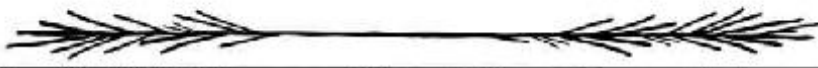
[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)





# CHAPTER ONE

LILA

I HATE MY LIFE.

Most twenty-six-year-old women have a lot more life experience than I do. They've been to prom. Lived in a dorm at college. Had friends. Had boyfriends. Been *normal*.

There's a reason why I'm not— my brother. He's nineteen years old and two hundred seventy pounds of nonverbal, severely autistic person. His name is Mattie, and I mostly love him.

What I don't love is that everything in our family revolves around him. Growing up, I couldn't have friends over, or do anything after school because Mattie got upset. No birthday parties, no sports or piano lessons. University was out of the question— I got my associate degree online.

Every time Mattie's doctor or physical therapist or social worker suggests putting him in a care home, my parents say no. "We can handle him," they say. "We can make it work."

Even now, when I've had my practical nursing license for five years and a good job at the hospital's assisted-living center, I have to be home at the same time every night before Dad sets the security-coded deadbolt that keeps Mattie from wandering outside.

I know Mom and Dad love me. I just wish my brother's needs didn't dominate my life.

A few months ago, I started thinking that I needed to move out and move on. Be normal.

As a result of those rebellious thoughts, I did something pretty stupid— I started dating Clinton.

I met him in the hospital parking lot. I was ready to leave and trying to coax my ancient Camry into starting when he came up to me. “Need some help?” he asked.

“I sure do,” I told him, and then I noticed how big and brown and puppy-dog cute his eyes were.

He tightened the wires leading from my battery, and my car started right up. “Thanks so much!” I told him. “I appreciate it! How can I thank you?”

“Give me your number?” he suggested, flashing me a beautiful smile.

That was six weeks ago. We went out for early dinners or weekend afternoons. I felt so lucky to be chosen, so grateful to finally not be the girl with the weird brother, that I ignored the red flags.

Like, Clinton didn’t have a car. And he shared a house with some other guys who looked kind of rough and had weird names like Jigsaw and Meatball and Big Frank. And they called him Baby Face, for no reason that I could ever figure out.

Like, he didn’t seem to have a job but spent his evenings at Lucky Horse Roadhouse. It was always quiet when we were there, but I heard whispers about the back room having a high-stakes poker game.

Two weeks ago he started pressuring me to let him kiss me when we said goodnight. I said no. He asked again, less nicely, and I said no again. He started getting upset, so I caved and said okay.

I didn’t like it.

The next time he called, I said I was busy. The time after that, I said I felt that I was too busy for a relationship. He got quiet and hung up. I was relieved. He hasn’t called me since, which is just fine with me.

I've been thinking new thoughts lately. I *should* be selfish. I *should* take charge of this life because it's the only one I'm going to get. I *should* tell my parents to let me live it.

Making that decision, I feel free for the first time in decades.

I try talking to my parents after Mattie's in bed. I bring them some hot cocoa and tell them I'd like to talk about moving out.

Mom says, "Moving out?" in a perplexed, hurt tone of voice. "You'd leave your family?" She shakes her head. "You can't even take care of yourself. We need each other."

Dad gets up out of his easy chair. "Lila, your mother and I are tired. We need you to pick up the slack around here so we can take care of your brother. Let's not talk about this right now." And he leaves the room.

Mom shakes her head. "I just don't understand you, Lila. You have responsibilities." Then she leaves the room too. I sit there on the couch feeling like someone with no life.

The next morning, Mom's so busy with Mattie that I don't try again to have that difficult conversation. I rehearse it in my head all day, ready to start it when I get home.

But when I clock out and head toward the front door of the hospital, Clinton is standing there in the lobby. He doesn't look quite sane. His eyes are wild, and his hair and clothes are mussed. I stop in my tracks and look around for the security officer, but there isn't one in sight.

"Lila!" Clinton calls. He starts toward me.

"No," I say, in a panic.

"Lila, just listen," he says, coming closer. "I love you. I want to be with you. You can't be too busy for me. I know you love me."

People are staring.

"I don't love you!" I say loudly.

"Of course you do. You're mine."

Something changes in me the minute he says that, like a breaker reaching its limit and switching off. I've had enough. "Clinton, leave me alone!"

"You don't mean that," he says, and lunges toward me, close enough to put his arms around me. I shrug his arms off and duck around him, but he turns and grabs for me.

I scream, angling my body so he'll miss, and run out the door.

I run all the way to the parking lot and leap into my ancient rattletrap Camry, locking the doors as soon as I'm in. I peel out of the lot and drive— not straight home, but to the police station. I sit in my car under the bright lights and reassess my entire life, and I make some decisions.

I hope nobody hates me for them.

But it's my life. *Mine*.

When I've been sitting there for ten minutes and I don't see anyone chasing me, only then do I pick up my phone. I call work— and I quit, effective immediately, citing the incident in the lobby and telling my supervisor that I simply cannot face being there again. She protests, but finally wishes me good luck.

I take a deep breath and fight my queasy stomach. It's scary to change your life, isn't it? I call home. No one answers. My call goes to voice mail, and I leave a message.

I say something about it being time to take back my life. Time for a change. Time to be me. And not to report me missing, because I'm going to look for myself. I say I love them and don't worry about me. And I turn off my phone.

I stop by the bank and take out all my money. For two seconds I feel guilty, and then I remember that I earned that money myself. I own it. It's mine.

With my cash and my purse and my phone, in the crappy old used car that I bought with my own money, I drive north. To freedom.

I drive north until I don't recognize where I am. My car makes funny noises, but it keeps going, and so do I. I spend a little of my cash for gas and snacks and terrible coffee. As I continue to head north, I realize that at some point I've gotten off the main road, and I'm in the mountains.

Good. It feels like a refuge. I'll find a small town and get a job... somehow.

I see an ancient, faded sign that says "Black Timber Peak, MT." I have time to notice that this little town nestled in the shadow of the mountains is adorable, and then my car makes a horrible groaning noise. Then a clunk. Then it stops dead, right in the middle of the road.

"Dammit!" I scream in frustration.

I'm screwed.

# CHAPTER TWO

ACE

I SHOULD BE HOME ALREADY. IT'S LATE, AND I'VE BLOWN THE whole day trying to fix this 2004 piece-a-shit Camaro. If it were mine, I'd have junked this piece of shit years ago, but for some reason, its owner loves the damn thing and keeps wanting me to fix it, bringing it over from Sunset Canyon every time it develops a problem. New brake pads here, new power window motors there, and I've replaced the opti-spark at least twice in the past three years. Not to mention that I think it's heading toward needing a new transmission.

Hey, at least it pays the bills.

My mechanic, Billy, comes around the side of the building and into the back vehicle bay where I've been holed up with the Camaro. "It's past quittin' time, boss," he says, wiping his greasy fingers on a rag. "Aren't you gonna knock off anytime soon?"

I stand up and stretch. "What are you doing still here? I thought you closed up hours ago."

Billy shrugs. "I did. Been working on the wife's van since I locked up the office. Don't worry, I made sure to note down every part I used so you can take the cost of 'em out of my paycheck. List is on the desk."

"That's the deal," I agree. I think it's fair. Billy's one of the few people I trust. "You got it done?"

"Not quite. I'll have to order a part for it, but it's getting close." He points his chin at the Camaro. "That thing's back again?"



“Might have to start charging Mr. Whittaker rent on it, it’s in here so often.” I pat its roof, where the clear coat is starting to wear off. “I don’t know why it’s worth it to him.”

“He was driving it when he fell in love with his wife,” Billy says, matter-of-factly.

I snort. “Yeah, like love is worth wearing a hole in your pocket for.”

Billy gives me a sharp look. “Well, it might be. The real thing don’t come along all that often.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, like love ever gave anybody anything other than heartache.”

Billy lets his breath out slow, like he’s disappointed in me. “All I can say is, you’re missing out, Ace. I got Lisa and the girls, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“No?” I raise my eyebrows.

He grins again. “Well, okay, I’d take winning the lottery maybe. But that still wouldn’t be worth it without them.”

I roll my eyes again. “Yeah. Agree to disagree, man.”

“See you tomorrow.” He’s gone, locking the back door behind him. I look at Mr. Whittaker’s aging sports car, rubbing my beard, and sigh.

My mom would’ve loved this car. So would my dad.

Hell, I’d have loved this car at sixteen. I didn’t have any car at sixteen. Instead, I had my grandfather’s dinged-up old Harley Softail. I’d practically stolen it out of the barn, fixing it up any time I had fifteen minutes to work on it. The day I got it to run, Pops came out of the house to find out what was making that noise and gave me holy hell for daring to touch his stuff.

It didn’t stop me from riding it. All he could do was yell and threaten to hit me, but I’d already suffered the worst by losing Dad and then Mom. No big deal if my only living relative was a shithead. Right?

That was in Bozeman. Before I got mixed up with the Junkyard Dogs. Before I went to jail for something I didn't do — or, more accurately, a repo job I was told was legal. Before I got my tattoos, before I got my ASE certification. Before Pops finally kicked the bucket and left me the farm. I sold it and bought this auto shop, with enough money left over to buy my cabin up on Hard Fall Road.

I'm alone, and I like it that way.

There's nobody to hurt me. Nobody to leave me or betray me. I can rely on myself.

Up there in the mountains, I don't have to worry about anything. I can handle the wildlife and the weather, and I can handle myself too.

Love? Like I said, heartache waiting to happen.

I finish scribbling down the parts I need for Mr. Whittaker's Camaro, turn out the lights, and leave, relocking the door. I stop in at Boots & Beers for a little while, shoot the shit with Shorty, who runs the place, and head up the mountain to my place.

I don't get there.

There's a little gray piece-of-shit Toyota blocking the road, and a girl is standing next to it, kicking the tire and looking disgruntled. I pull my truck up behind the car and roll my window down. "What's the trouble? I might be able to help."

The girl turns to me, and something happens to my chest the second I get a look at her face.

Can't explain it.

Maybe it's the way she looks halfway between scared shitless and brave. Maybe it's the way her chestnut-brown ponytail dangles off-center, like she put it up haphazardly and she's been tugging on it ever since. Maybe it's the way those big green eyes widen, or the way those delicate pink lips part, or the tiny wobble of her chin.

Or, hell, could be the way her full breasts lift when she draws herself up to answer me. I don't know.

I only know that I'm feeling something I've never felt before.

"Ma'am?" She still hasn't spoken, so I open my door and hop out.

"I don't know what's wrong with my car," she says in a rush. Her voice is a little hoarse, but I can hear the sweetness under that. "It's been acting weird for the past couple of hours. I should've stopped before, but..." She trails off, her shoulders shrugging up. "I didn't know where. And I was afraid somebody might come along and hit my car, but nobody's driven down this road at all since my car locked up."

I nod. "Yeah. We turn in early around here, for the most part. You're not hurt, are you?"

She shakes her head, but her mouth is pinched, and her eyes are wary.

Something about this girl says she's on the run— but from what? From where, and who's she running from? I take a slow, deep breath. Better not spook her. "I'm Ace McBride. I run an auto shop in town, and I can probably help with this."

"Oh, thank God," she says, closing her eyes briefly. "Thank you. I'm Lila Holton."

*Lila.* Pretty name for a pretty girl. "It's no trouble, ma'am. Well, not too much trouble," I add, smiling at her.

It works. She gives me a shy smile back, and damn all if my dick doesn't stir a little bit at the sight of it.

I start asking detailed questions about what the car was doing, and she answers them. I ask permission to lift the hood, and she gives it. As I'm checking it out, she comes to stand near me, and I can actually smell her— not that she stinks by any means, but her hair smells flowery and clean, and there's a hint of her body, just an end-of-the-day, lived-in skin smell. It's actually sexy as hell, and my own body responds to it.

She's a solid presence next to me. Lots of curves. She probably thinks she's fat, but what she *is* is a good armful of woman, and all woman at that.

There's been no woman in my life for a long time, and even when there were women, they were forgettable. Lila's not.

I don't need to remind myself what I think about love; I live that every day. My parents loved each other, but how did that end? With their deaths, that's how. And with my background, I know that no decent woman will care for me.

So I don't fall in love. But that doesn't mean that I can't get to know Miss Lila On The Run from God Knows Where.

Doesn't mean I can't dream just a little.

I poke around a little more under the hood of her piece-a-shit car, which must be fifteen years old if it's a day and have her run the engine for me. I diagnose the issue as a problem with the torque converter.

I ask her to turn the car off and put her hazard lights on, then grab a handful of LED flares from my pickup. I set them up, then tell Lila that I'll need to go back to town to get my tow truck.

Her face goes white in the headlights. "I'll be okay on my own?" It's not a statement. She crosses her arms over her deep chest, and her shoulders go up. Her forehead is creased with stress.

"Won't take me long," I tell her, handing her my card. "Here's my number. You can call me if you're worried."

"I don't want to turn my phone on," she says, looking panicked.

This girl is definitely on the run.

"Well," I say, rubbing my chin, "I guess you can come with me. If you want."

She raises those huge emerald eyes to mine. "I do want."

*Oh, hell, honey, so do I.*

# CHAPTER THREE

LILA

I FEEL LIKE AN IDIOT.

I mean, there's the Clinton thing. And the running-away-from-home thing and the on-my-own-for-the-first-time thing and then, of course, there's the car thing.

But then there's Mr. Gorgeous Giant Mountain Man Mechanic standing right in front of me, and he's so big and so capable and he smells good and his hands are huge, and for some reason I keep thinking about how they might feel on my shoulders or around my back, which is stupid, I just *met* him, I don't *know* him, and my mother's warnings about stranger danger are echoing in my ears, and I ought to know enough by now, post-Clinton, to be wary of unfamiliar men...

But.

I can't explain it, but this man makes me feel safe.

It's not just that he's good-looking, even if he's not what I've always thought of as "my type." I mean, before now, I liked boys who were handsome and sleek and well-groomed, boys who looked like my high school crush, Brandon, who was on the golf team and a member of Young Republicans, all perfectly wavy short blond hair and an innocent face. I liked Ryan Gosling and Austin Butler and the young Zac Efron.

This guy? He's not a boy. He's a *man*. He's even a slightly dangerous looking man.

It's giving me chills in the best, worst, way. Those tattoos. That beard. The small gauges in his earlobes. That long hair pulled up into a man bun, with the sides of his head trimmed

short. Those massive Thor biceps. And, oh heavens, did I mention those tattoos?

I look at the business card he's given me. "Four-Wheel Fix-It Auto Repair and Towing Service. Ace McBride, owner. ASE-certified mechanics on-site."

The card is perfectly clean. I guess it could be legit. I hope it's legit.

I hope *he's* legit.

I hope I'm not going to wind up dead in a ditch.

"You got a phone?" I ask, no, I demand. I hold my hand out.

Those thick eyebrows pull together over his dark blue eyes, but it's puzzlement, not suspicion. "Sure." He reaches into his pocket for his phone and hands it to me. "Code is 6754."

It's warm from his body heat. I shiver, even as I take it and enter the unlock code, then three numbers.

"911, what's your emergency?" a female voice asks.

"It's not an emergency exactly," I say. "But my car broke down in... What's this town again? Oh yes, Black Timber Peak. And somebody stopped to help, but I just want to make sure somebody official knows he's giving me a ride."

Gorgeous Giant Mountain Man Mechanic's eyebrows rise way up. "This is your idea of personal safety?" he stage-whispers.

I glare, then turn away. The dispatcher sounds confused. "Did he give you a name, ma'am?"

"His card says he's the owner of Four-Wheel Fix-It."

"So Ace has gotcha?" she asks, her voice warm. "Big guy, tattoos on his arms, beard?"

"Exactly."

"It's me, Trish," Mountain Man Mechanic says loudly.

“That’s Ace, I know his voice,” the dispatcher says. I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Disabled car is located on Hard Fall Road, ‘bout half a mile up from town,” Ace the mechanic says toward the phone. “It’s blocking the right-hand lane, but I put out flares. I’m gonna go get my tow truck and pull the car back to the shop and Miss Holton is going with me.”

“Right. I’ll let the sheriff know,” the dispatcher says. “You call me back if you have any more trouble, ma’am. I’ll let you go now.”

The mechanic opens the passenger door of his black pickup for me and gestures to the front seat.

I fight down a full-body shiver that has very little to do with the autumnal temperatures outside and climb up into the truck. It’s warm in here, and it smells like Mountain Man Mechanic— like male skin and his spicy cologne and leather seats. Which makes me shiver all over again.

“You cold?” he asks in that pleasantly raspy voice of his, and nods toward a hooded sweatshirt in the middle of the bench seat. “Feel free to borrow that if you’d like.”

Seeing as how I foolishly left Bozeman in just my hospital scrubs, without my jacket or any extra clothes, and I’m starting to feel the chill, I pick up the sweatshirt, wondering if it will smell even more like him than the truck does. I bring it to my nose.

It doesn’t smell like Mountain Man Mechanic. It smells like clean laundry, which is a little disappointing.

And then it occurs to me to wonder who washed this item. Does he wash his own clothes, or does his wife do it?

“Go ahead, put it on,” he says.

It occurs to me for the first time that I must look a complete mess, in my work scrubs and nursing clogs, hair probably falling out of its ponytail, makeup probably smeared. I probably smell like I need a shower.



But I put the sweatshirt on, and I can't help sighing at the comfort of its thick fleece.

"Better, huh?" He gives me a quick glance as we turn a corner into the town proper. I hadn't noticed much about it earlier, but it's a pretty little town, its streets lined with small, neatly-kept houses.

"Much, thanks."

"You a nurse?"

"LPN."

"Where do you work?"

The massive change in my life, and the chaos that caused it, swirls all around my head, and I feel distinctly dizzy for a moment. "Um... in Bozeman. Until I quit." I take a deep breath and let it out. Calm down. Breathe in. Breathe out. "This afternoon, actually."

There's a small silence, and the hot beardy bicep-y mechanic guy turns another corner. Ace. His name is Ace, and I should start thinking of him that way. It startles me when he asks a question. "So what was your plan? Drive to Canada?"

I shake my head. We turn into a parking lot on Main Street, and I see that it's the auto repair shop. The sign for Four-Wheel Fix-It is ridiculously cheerful-looking, given that its owner looks like Overly Sexy Brawny Man. "No, I..." I sigh out loud. "I just wanted a change. A big one. I decided to drive until I got to a good stopping place."

He stops the truck around back of the building, and exhales sharply through his nose. "Funny, that's how I wound up here, too."

"You wanted a change and this was a good place?"

He opens the truck door, making the dome light come on, and turns to me. "Yeah, that's exactly it. This town's the best. People are nice, but they don't bother you— except for the Teagarden sisters, and since I don't care about gossip, it doesn't matter. I'm on my own as much as I want, and I can have company when I want it."

“Are you married?” I ask, needing to know before my mind gets carried away.

He laughs. “Hell, no. Never have been, never will be.” He gets out of the truck before I can respond, then leans back in. “I’m gonna tow your car back here. You can come with me, stay here in this truck, or I’ll unlock the shop and you can wait in there.”

“I’ll go with you,” I say quickly. I’m still scared to be on my own.

He nods. “Come on, then.”

The big tow truck smells like dust and grease, although it’s not obviously dirty. I shiver in the deepening night chill, despite the extra-large sweatshirt. Ace doesn’t say anything, but he reaches over and cranks the heat in the tow truck, turning the fan up to blow the warm air. “Thanks.”

There’s a short silence as we retrace the route to my car, and then Ace says in a voice so kind that it brings tears to my eyes, “Lila, are you in trouble?”

I sniffle.

“I’m not asking because I want to get all official and tattletale on you, you understand?” He flicks a glance at me out of those blue eyes. “Listen, I’ve done some stuff. Never anything violent... but I know what it’s like to be in trouble, okay? And if you need help, I can help you or get you to a place where you will be safe. Just say the word.”

I knew there was something about those tattoos all up and down his arms, under those rolled-up chambray sleeves. Looking at them still makes me feel all tingly and dangerous in a good way.

I sigh. “Yes, I’m in trouble.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

ACE

WHEN LILA ADMITS THAT SHE'S IN TROUBLE, SOMETHING squeezes up in my chest. I reach over and put my hand over hers. "Don't worry. We'll figure something out. But first things first— are you wanted by law enforcement?"

She looks shocked, those sweet pink lips of hers popping open before she shuts her mouth and shakes her head violently. "No! I didn't do anything wrong! I just—" She stops there and sighs. "I sort of ran away. From home. From my parents. And from Clinton. And I quit my job. It wasn't illegal, and I left them a message at home, and I *am* an adult, after all, and I didn't take anything that didn't belong to me. No, the police don't want me."

*Well, I sure as hell do.* I don't say it, don't want to scare her. "So what's the trouble, then? Besides your car? And don't worry about that, we'll get you fixed up."

She heaves a huge sigh. "I didn't even mean to leave like that, all unprepared and spur-of-the-moment. It's... everything just blew up at once. That's why I'm not turning on my phone. My parents have probably filled my voice mailbox to overflowing already. And Mattie..." Her voice wobbles. She sniffles, and swipes at her nose.

I reach into my pocket and give her my bandanna. "Blow. You'll feel better."

"I can't mess this up," she protests, but I laugh.

"That's what it's for. I mean it— blow your nose."

She blows.

“Now, who’s Mattie, and why are you worried about her?”

“Him. My little brother.” She starts talking about her autistic brother, and how the whole family’s lives revolve around her brother’s needs. I can tell she’s not telling me everything, but just as I’m about to say something about how tough that seems, we get to her car and she says that’s enough about her family now, and can she help me get her car ready to tow?

“Nah, I got it.” And I do. She gets a gym bag out of the trunk and hands me the keys, and it doesn’t take long before we’re back in the wrecker and taking her car to town. On the way, I see Sheriff Dunning’s cruiser, and throw up a hand in greeting. He waves in return and continues on.

“So what happened tonight?” I prompt Lila.

She tells me this long story about getting involved with the wrong guy, just to have some kind of relationship for herself, and how he’s probably mentally unstable and maybe on drugs, and how his friends all have weird names like Meatball and Jigsaw— that little piece of info makes me jump. Jigsaw? Has to be a coincidence. Gotta be.

She goes on with how she can’t go back to the hospital, she just can’t, she just can’t, it’s too scary, and it got to be too much, and she *just can’t*...

She’s really sounding on the edge now. Poor kid, she’s had it rough. “I get it.” And I do. When I was in jail, I made up my mind I was done with the gang. I knew I had to get out of town and go somewhere I wouldn’t get sucked back in. I came out of the joint with an auto repair certification and a low-level mechanic job lined up in Butte, away from the Junkyard Dogs’ territory. “So you left without your clothes and your stuff, and you don’t have a job, have I got that right?”

“I have money,” she says, desperately. “I’m not broke!”

“Well, good. You thinking about moving on when we get your car fixed?”

She goes still. And then she bursts out into wracking sobs that sound out of control. We’re already back at the Fix-It, so I

park carefully, and then I kill the engine and turn to face her. “It’s okay. Look, you’re gonna be okay, Lila. We’ll take care of you until you can stand on your own.”

She keeps sobbing. I finally reach over and touch her arm, and then, without warning, she practically launches herself into my lap.

Holy shit.

She feels so nice in my arms. I know she’s crying and shit, but as far as I can tell, she’s got reason to, and sometimes girls just have to let it out. That’s what Mom always said, sometimes when money was tight and she was stressed and she was missing Dad, she’d cry and when I’d come over to hug her, she’d say she would be okay, she just had to let it out first.

I make soothing noises and stroke her hair. My chest gets wet from tears. I don’t mind.

She cries harder. I try not to focus on the glorious soft squish of her tits against my chest, or the warmth of her body in my lap. I pat her back. I say, “There, there.” I tell her it’s gonna be okay.

That squeezing feeling is back in my chest.

“Lila,” I say, surprised at the gentle way her name comes out of my mouth, “truly, it’s really gonna be okay. You are so lucky you wound up here in Black Timber Peak, because people take care of each other here. If you have nursing skills, you’re not helpless. And you’re not alone. You have me.”

I’ve surprised myself further by offering my help and telling her she has me. That’s very unlike me.

Or, rather, it was something I would have done as a kid, before Mom died.

Maybe that’s the real me— not the wary person I grew into when I had to live with my grandfather. Not the loner teenager who only felt at home with the Junkyard Dogs, and then later was betrayed by them. Not the guy with the prison record who has done his best to keep people away ever since.

Maybe this person right here, holding this girl and promising to help her... maybe this is who I really am.

When Lila stops crying, she simply rests her head on my shoulder, and I go on holding her. She sighs, and I feel her body relax into mine.

My body isn't relaxed, though. I want her too much.

She finally sits up, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands like a little kid. My bandanna is soaked with tears and snot, which should gross me out, but it doesn't. Those are Lila's tears.

"It's late," I say, suddenly realizing that it's well past midnight. "I'm guessing you didn't get far enough into your planning to choose a place to stay tonight."

She catches her breath. "N-no. No, I didn't. I thought I could find a cheap motel or something."

"Well," I say, pondering, "I think we'd have to go to Sunset Canyon to find a room for you. Black Timber Peak's really too small for a motel or even a B&B."

"Oh, God," she says, and slides off my lap, hiding her head in her hands. "I can't even run away right."

"Hey, stop worrying." I pull her hands away. "I have a spare bedroom at my place. I have a couch as well. For that matter, there's a couch in the shop." I nod toward the Fix-It.

"Could I stay with you?" she asks.

My chest feels tight again. "Yeah, sure." I give myself one moment to think about Lila, warm and sleeping in my bed, and then I make sure to mentally close the door and put myself on the couch. I will not be taking advantage of this woman. "Sure, you can stay. And tomorrow, I'll get the Teagarden sisters on the case. They'll find you somewhere to stay while I fix your car."

"Are you sure?" Her voice is shaky. "I know I'm really putting you out."

"I don't make it a habit to provide stranded motorists a bed for the night," I tell her, trying to get my mind off of the way

she felt in my arms, “but just this once, I think I can manage. And if you’re worried, remember that Trish at dispatch and Sheriff Dunning know you’re with me. You’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I feel safe with you,” she says quietly, and my chest feels that squeeze again.

I get us back into the pickup and drive her to my cabin. It’s strange to see it through someone else’s eyes, this little log construction on the side of the mountain. It’s small, but the views are spectacular, and I love how I fit here.

It’s chilly in the cabin, so I start a fire in the fireplace and point Lila toward the bathroom, which is the one space enclosed for privacy, telling her to use anything she likes. When she comes out, I can see that she’s washed her face but is still wearing her scrubs. “I found a new toothbrush in the cabinet,” she says hesitantly.

“Good.” I pause a moment and nod toward my extra-long couch. “That’s comfortable for sleeping on, so please don’t worry about me. I just put fresh sheets on the bed this morning.”

She yawns. “That’s very kind of you.” Her eyes find mine, and I’m tempted yet again to pull her close. Stroke her hair maybe. “I think I’ll... just... hit the hay now.”

Two hours later, she’s making a soft buzzing noise, not quite a snore, and I’m still awake with a raging hard-on.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## LILA

I'M SO EXHAUSTED BY MY DAY THAT I CAN BARELY KEEP MY eyes open in Ace's bed. It's a king-size, probably because he's tall and needs the extra length, but it's so luxurious that he could likely have gotten in here with me and I'd never have known he was on the other side.

I have just enough time to wish that he had chosen to sleep in the bed with me before I drift off, feeling safe.

I'm not sure what wakes me up. A dream? The call of a night bird outside? Doesn't matter— I wake up in a panic, screaming.

Then he's there with me, big and comforting. I can see the kindness in his expression, in the dim moonlight coming in through the windows. His bare chest is warm, his arms are warm, and I feel the gentle scruff of his beard on the side of my face as he cuddles me from outside the covers. "You're okay, you're okay," he keeps telling me. "You're safe, Lila. I'm here. Everything's fine. You're safe."

Once my breathing slows down and I remember where I am, I exhale all my tension and lean my head against his chest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he says. That deep voice of his is husky from sleep, but so gentle. "If you're okay now, I'll go back—"

"Stay here," I beg, clinging to his arms. They're so substantial under my hands. "Please. I'm..." I shiver, feeling frightened and stupid for feeling that way. "I'm scared," I whisper.

Right then I hear another noise from outside, and it makes me jump.

“Screech owl,” Ace says calmly. “They nest up here on the peak. I guess I’ve gotten used to the sound.”

“They say you can get used to anything if you regularly hear it in your sleep,” I say, and then I’m crying again, remembering the night noises in my childhood home— the dull rattle of the wooden shutters against the front of the house, the sound of my parents brushing their teeth, the *beep boop* of the door locks being programmed.

I try to tell Ace about these things, and why I feel both guilt and freedom at leaving my family behind.

He makes comforting noises and settles me closer against his neck. I don’t mean to do it, but my hand finds its way to his thigh, covered by his sweatpants, and I have to work to not stroke his leg.

“Is Ace your given name?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

I can hear the smile in his voice when he answers, after a pause. “No,” he says. “No, my parents named me Daniel Junior.” He lets out a little sigh. “I used to... oh hell. I might as well tell you the truth. When I was a teenager, I was living with my grandfather, who was a crusty old cuss, and he was, let’s say, difficult. So I spent a lot of time hanging out with some guys who ran a roadhouse. They let me stick around and run errands for them, and one of them taught me some stuff about cars. I played a lot of poker with them in the back room, and I was a terrible poker player. Lost all the time.”

That sounds unsavory. I don’t say anything.

“So the nickname was kind of sarcastic,” he says. “It’s just that I didn’t want anybody to call me by my dad’s name. I missed him too much.”

In the dark, it’s so easy to talk. He might be feeling that way, too. “What happened to him?” I ask, trying not to trace little curlicues and loops on his nearby, warm, hard-muscled, furry, tempting chest.

He sighs gently. “He was a highway patrol cop. There was a big accident on I-90, near the junction with I-15 near Butte.” He goes quiet for a moment. “He was working the wreck when somebody hit him.”

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry.” I put my head on his chest again. “How old were you?”

“Five. And it was hard for me, but my mom was just crushed. She and Dad...” He trails off, but when he speaks again, his voice is hoarse. “They were young when they got married. Mom was barely nineteen when I was born, and they’d had to elope because my grandfather was all kinds of mad that she’d gotten pregnant. So she never had any education past high school, and money got tight for a while.”

I don’t say anything. I can sense that there’s more.

“I guess she didn’t think she needed to get checkups. But she got this rash on her chest, and by the time she did go to the doctor, it was stage four breast cancer. The doctors said it was a really aggressive type.”

“So then you had to go live with your grandfather?”

“Yeah.” His hand is stroking my back softly. Easing me. “He didn’t want me, but I think he didn’t want his neighbors talking shit about letting me go into foster care or something. I kind of wish I had, now.”

“Why? It was that bad?”

His shoulders twitch, almost like he’s nervous. “Well. Because of the Junkyard Dogs, I guess. Pops always said they were a gang of no-good criminals, but I didn’t see it. Not then.” Long exhale. “They started taking me along on repo jobs when I turned eighteen. Those were all legitimate, as far as I could tell. Paperwork and proper procedures and everything. Then later, once I’d moved out of Pops’s house and in with the guys, I went out to pick up a car with this one guy—he was rougher than the rest, a big guy who went by Jigsaw—and he told me it was a repo job.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“It was grand theft auto,” he says bluntly. “I didn’t ask the right questions when he told me not to worry about the paperwork. I was young and dumb, and I thought it was legit because all the other ones had been for real.” He shrugs, and I find my fingers almost curling into the crisp hairs on his chest.

I want to kiss him.

Even though this talk of gangs and illicit activity is scaring me, it’s also... I don’t know... hella sexy. Or maybe that’s just Ace. So big and rough and tattooed, and yet so gentle and kind and thoughtful.

My body, even under the work scrubs I’m wearing, wants to explore and be explored. I feel liquid at my center, even as my nipples have gotten peaked, and my toes keep twitching. For someone who barely has any experience kissing, I’m aching to find out what it’s like to be physically intimate with someone. That urge to do something wild, which had made me say yes to Clinton, is pushing me even farther now, because Clinton was no Ace.

Ace is pretty much perfect. I just hope he can’t see how imperfect I am.

“I went to jail,” he says, suddenly and much louder than he’d been talking before. “You should know that about me. I have a criminal record.”

“Well,” I say, still fighting off that oddly restless feeling in my body, “you’re not doing anything illegal now, are you?”

“Not a chance! I got my ASE certification in the joint, worked as a mechanic for a while. It was tough finding jobs because of my record, so I was either paid peanuts or getting told I hadn’t passed the background check. One day I just got on my bike and rode north, and when my bike conked out, I was here.” He shrugs again. “And I stayed.”

“You said it’s a good place,” I say, letting my fingers start to trace little shapes on his chest.

“It is,” he says, his voice suddenly huskier than before. “Lila... I should let you get back to sleep.”

“Stay,” I say to him. “Please.”

Where our bodies are close together down our lengths, I can feel a growing pressure against my hip, even though I'm under the covers and he's outside them.

I want to explore.

"Stay," I whisper. I wonder if I'm brave enough, and then I decide that I am. Or that wanting to be brave is brave enough. "Kiss me," I plead.

"This is crazy, Lila," he says. But I tilt my lips up toward his, and his mouth comes down on mine.

It's not my first kiss, but it's the first time I've been kissed this thoroughly, or this well. I love the feeling of Ace's mustache and beard against my skin, and I love the soft gliding feeling of his lips on mine, his tongue stroking mine. It's soft and gentle and languorous until suddenly it's not. It's ravenous and bold, and Ace has rolled atop me, and I can feel the pressure of his hips against mine.

Okay, not hips. Penis. Dick. Organ. Whatever you want to call it. I've read enough Regency bodice-rippers to know what it is, and what I'm supposed to want to do with it. I've just never been brave enough to touch one, or even see one.

Until now.

And I *really* want to touch it.

# CHAPTER SIX

ACE

LILA MAKES THIS SOFT SIGHING PLEASURE NOISE, AND SLIDES her hand from my thigh right over my groin, and her hand cups my shaft. Even through two layers of clothing, I feel it, and I groan out loud.

I don't know how long I'll be able to control myself.

“Sweetheart,” I mumble, pulling my mouth away, “don't do this. It's late, you're tired, we just met... this is not a good idea.”

My dick disagrees with me. It thinks this is an awesome idea, thanks very much, and *stop overthinking it, idiot*.

She touches my cheek but leaves her other hand right on my hard-on. “Ace,” she says, her voice imploring. “I really want to. It's not because it's late and you're just a guy— it's because I want to do this. I want to do it with you.”

*We've got condoms in the nightstand*, my dick reminds me.

“You're sure?” I ask her.

She kisses me, deep and sweet, and then pulls back. “I'm sure. I want you.”

That sets up a fire in my blood. I've still got just enough blood in my head to try to talk her out of it, but she sits up and takes her top off.

No bra. Just the roundest, most delicious-looking tits I've ever seen in real life, right here in my bed. Right in front of my face. “Please touch me,” she says.



She sounds unsure, but she takes my hand and puts it right on her breast. Her nipple goes taut under my palm, and that last little ounce of blood heads south, and I give in.

I caress those glorious breasts while I kiss her. I heft their weight gently, I stroke their slopes, I tease their nipples. She keeps making these soft sounds of pleasure and discovery, and I keep touching them, and then as I kiss from her mouth down her neck and across her cheekbones to each breast in turn, she makes a breathy little gasp. Then another, as I take a nipple into my mouth, licking and nibbling at it.

I have no idea how long I do that. Feels like a long time before she turns to her side, lying next to me in the bed, and reaches for my stiff cock, slipping her hand under the waistband of my sweats. Her grip is a little too tight. “You’ve never done this before, have you?” I whisper, taking her hand in mine and showing her how to cup her hand around me.

She shakes her head. “Am I doing it wrong?”

“You couldn’t do it wrong if you tried,” I tell her. “But here, let me show you.” I pull my pants down. Then I take her hand and put it on me. “Like that.” I slide her hand up and down for delicious friction. I can feel when she gets the motion—it feels effortless and she’s getting good at it.

“You feel nice in my hand,” she whispers, and kisses me. I have no idea how long we do that, either, except that when I start getting too excited, I roll her to her back and kiss down to her belly button, pulling her scrubs down and slipping a hand down to cup her fat little mound through her underwear.

I can smell her. I can feel the soaking-wet crotch of her panties under my hand. She gasps. “I don’t know... I don’t know about all the way. I’m not sure about that.”

“Okay. But let me make you feel good, Lila.”

I pull her panties to the side and slide my fingers over her outer lips. She’s all natural here, just trimmed a little, and my control escapes me a little further. I slip one finger just inside. She moans. “I can feel how wet you are, Lila.”

She moans again. I tug her underwear down and toss it to the floor, then spread her thighs for a good look. She's glistening here, pussy lips pouting open, and I gently spread her folds wider. "Ah, you're fuckin' perfect, Lila. So beautiful." I stroke her lips, then begin to circle her clit with my fingers. She starts to whimper, her hips shaking. "You like that, don't you?"

I don't expect an answer in words. I'm looking for her body's response. But she says yes in this urgent voice, and I don't stop. I keep going, a little faster, and when she gets wetter, when her little grunts and whimpers get needier, I lean forward and taste her.

She cries out. I keep teasing her clit with my tongue, while my fingers dip inside her passage, and she's getting close. She's so close, her thighs tensing, her hips jerking, and then she comes, her inner walls squeezing my fingers while she moans out this long pleasure noise. I slow down as her spasms subside, and then I reach up to kiss her. "It was good, wasn't it?"

"Tha wass amaaaazingggg," she slurs out, and I laugh at how completely undone she is. How awesome it is that I made her feel like that.

I tuck myself into her side, telling my dick to calm down. She's a virgin. She's not ready.

She sighs, long and satisfied, and stretches, snuggling against me. "So good. I don't know if you could tell, but that was the first time I've ever done anything like that."

"I understand. I'm not going to push you."

"But— it doesn't seem fair," she says, turning her body to face me, and I feel the glorious curves of her all against my skin.

*Totally unfair, my dick protests. Virgin smirgin. You know she wants me.*

*Shut up, I tell it.*

She reaches for my dick and strokes it the way I showed her earlier. "Can we do this? Is this good for you?"

“Oh fuck yes.” I roll to my back. “Anything you want to do is good.” She strokes me, gripping just enough, sliding just enough, that I am awash in pleasure. While she’s doing that, she kisses me.

I kiss back. I stroke her shoulders, then reach for her breasts, playing with those lovely nipples of hers. The kisses get deeper, the stroking gets a little faster, and then suddenly she’s swinging a leg over me and letting my shaft nestle between her wet folds.

“Lila,” I pant, fighting the urge to just fuck up into her, just spear her on my shaft and pump away because it would be fucking incredible, the way this feels already... “Lila, we need a condom...”

“We can do this, though, right?” she says, sliding on my cock. Her voice changes. “Oh. Oh. Ace— oh. This feels really good,” she says, more breath than words. “Is it good for you because it’s— oh. Oh.”

“It’s good,” I assure her, keeping my hands on her hips, not letting her slide to a point where I’ll penetrate her.

Which I *really* fucking want to fucking do. But virgin. I don’t want her to do something she’ll regret later.

Most amazing pussy job ever. She slides on me, clearly driven by what feels good to her, with those full tits jiggling as she moves, her little pants and moans driving me crazy, and then she gives another one of those long, drawn-out moans, her head tipping back, and I feel the vibrations of her orgasm, and I lose all control. My vision grays out, sensation rips down my spinal column, and I come so hard I nearly black out, blowing a giant wad onto my stomach.

When I come back to my senses, she’s getting off me, reaching to the nightstand for tissues, and cleaning me up. “Are you okay?” she asks shyly.

“I am magnificent,” I say, still trying to get my breath back.

She smiles in the moonlight. “Yes, you are.” She hands me my sweats. “Maybe you should put those back on. Just in

case.”

I fumble them on, while she puts her underwear and my zip-up hoodie back on. I have just enough time to think how sexy she looks —and how I’m getting used to this squeezing feeling in my chest when I’m around her— before I am engulfed in sleep.

---

WHEN I WAKE, MEMORIES OF THE NIGHT ARE FUZZY, BUT I remember how wonderful it felt. I stretch, still feeling great. I turn to Lila, and those memories come clear as I watch her sleeping.

I want to hold her. I want to make love to her and talk with her and kiss her and fuck her and lick every inch of her skin and protect her and—

And everything.

The knowledge sears through me, and I can’t get out of bed fast enough. I can’t do that. I can’t be with her, I can’t love her... I am the waste of space Pops always said I was, and I don’t know how to love somebody. I can’t do it.

I dash into the bathroom, grabbing up some clean clothes and stepping into the shower.

Time to get the day started. Time to get Lila in touch with the Teagarden sisters... get her out of my life.

Before I corrupt her. Before I fuck it all up.

# **CHAPTER SEVEN**

LILA

I FEEL GREAT WHEN I WAKE UP IN ACE'S BED— EXCEPT THAT he's not in it with me. I would expect that my body would still be feeling the stress from yesterday. It was a lot to bear.

Instead, my body is remarkably free from tension. Maybe the orgasms did a lot more to relax me than I had anticipated.

It's so strange that the person I meet in this little town that Fate dumped me in happens to be someone who knows what it's like to struggle, and who has brought me immediately into his life.

Or maybe not strange at all.

I stretch, then stretch some more. The bathroom door opens, and Ace comes out, already dressed in work pants and a chambray shirt with a name patch on the chest. I like the way his tattoos show with his sleeves rolled up, and the way those pants cling to his butt and thighs. Yummy. I sit up and pat the bed next to me. "Good morning!"

He looks oddly tense. There's hunger in his eyes when he looks at me, and for a moment I think he might come back to bed— but then he turns away. "Good morning," he says. He goes to the small kitchen area and begins to take things out of the refrigerator. "I'm making breakfast. How do you take your coffee?"

"With cream and sugar."

He throws a half-smile over his shoulder at me as he busies himself at the stove. "Lucky for you I'm a cream guy."

I can feel my cheeks heat up, remembering the way he'd decorated his own stomach last night.

Oh my God. We came so close to having Actual Sex. Although I've been wanting to have someone in my life to do that with, now that it's almost happened, it's pretty scary.

*Lucky for you I'm a cream guy.* I get a flashback to the way it had felt, rubbing my bare girly parts on his man part, and I shiver.

"I brought your bag in from the truck," he says, nodding to the duffel bag on the floor.

"Oh, thanks." I'd had that bag in the trunk for at least several weeks— a change of regular clothes, an extra set of scrubs, and another set of clean bra and panties, just in case I'd need them at work. Lucky for me it was still there because these are now all the clothes I have. I hesitantly get out of bed and slip my scrub pants back on before picking up my bag.

"Take a shower if you like. There's a clean towel in there for you," Ace says. I watch the muscles moving in his back as he cracks eggs into a bowl, then shake off my fascination and go into the bathroom.

It smells like him in here: shampoo, shower gel, and clean towels. I'm going to smell like him all day, I realize, and I can't help the way that heat pools low in my belly at the thought.

I can't help thinking of the slippery, sturdy, hot, luscious feeling of his stiff penis between the folds of my labia, the swollen head of it rubbing insistently over my clitoris.

I have to push those thoughts away every time they pop into my head, and remind myself that it's just too early in our relationship to be thinking about sex this much.

I need to know *for sure* that I can trust him.

Breakfast is ready when I come out of the bathroom, dressed in jeans and a pink tee. He's set his tiny round table and poured me coffee, just the way I like it, still hot enough that steam is rising from the blue mug. He turns toward me and hands me a plate full of cheesy eggs and bacon, with half

a sliced pear and a perfect piece of buttered toast. I don't miss the way he looks at me, like he wants to memorize me, but when he speaks his voice is carefully businesslike. "Feeling better?"

"Much. Thanks." I sit with my plate and dig in. All too soon, breakfast is over. "Let me clean up, since you cooked," I offer.

"First things first," he says, and pulls out his cell phone. "Miz Teagarden? This is Ace McBride."

While he's talking, I get up and take our dishes to the sink. I try to wash them as quietly as possible, listening to the conversation he's having with what sounds like an elderly lady. He says things like "yes, ma'am," and "I think so," and "yes, she's an LPN." He says, "That sounds great," and "Thank you, Miz Vivian," and then he hangs up.

"They're on the case," he says with satisfaction. "When the Teagarden sisters take on a project, things get done."

"Who are they?" I ask, picking up a dishtowel to dry with.

"Pretty much the backbone of Black Timber Peak. Viola, Violet, and Vivian Teagarden have their fingers in every pie in town. They run the phone tree and know everybody's business, and if they hadn't liked me, I wouldn't still be here." He looks up and sees my face. "Don't worry. They like to fix things for people."

I nod faintly. I decide to check my own phone, so I take a very deep breath and turn it on.

Sixteen voicemail messages. Too many texts to count, all from my parents. Two from colleagues at work. I open those last two, to see that Nina and Tasha are wondering why I quit and if I'm okay. I reply briefly to those.

My phone rings. It's Mom. I'd better answer. I steel myself. "Hello?"

A flood of worried, angry, upset words flow over me, and I can feel myself shrinking. She doesn't even let me respond but keeps on talking. I say, "Mom," and "Can you just listen?" and



“I’m fine,” but she keeps cutting me off. Finally Ace stalks over and just takes the phone right out of my hand.

“Mrs. Holton,” he says, “your daughter is fine. She’s a grown woman and she has a perfect right to do what she wants with her life.

“No, ma’am, I’m not going to argue with you, but you have no reason to worry about her. Yes, ma’am, I’m the person who is fixing her car and making sure she has a safe place to be.

“No, ma’am, I would not recommend calling the police unless she asks you to. She will call you when she wants to speak to you again. Have a good day, Mrs. Holton. Goodbye.”

He ends the call and turns my phone off, then hands it back to me. “Don’t worry about them. They’ll be fine.”

I’m swamped with guilt. I’m such a bad daughter. A bad sister. A bad person.

He looks at me sternly. “I can see you’re beating yourself up but stop it. You’re a good person and you worry too much about everybody but yourself. You deserve to take care of yourself instead of everybody else.”

Tears flow down my face.

“Remember that,” he says gruffly. “Now, Miz Vivian and her sisters want to meet you, so let’s go see her before I go on to the shop. She says she might know of a situation for you.”

The rest of the day is a blur. I meet the Teagarden sisters in a house that belongs to one of them, and they’re nosy and blunt and kind, and I drink tea with them and tell them I’ve worked in an assisted-living facility, and they look at each other and nod, and one of them says I’ll do. She drives me, carefully and slowly, through town and back up the road I was driving on last night, all the while telling me about their friend Sadie Lou Morrissey, 92 years old and widowed. Getting a little shaky but unwilling to come down off the mountain to live in town, much less go to the nursing home.

“She’s a firecracker,” Ms. Teagarden says as we pull into a gravel driveway.

We have driven up the mountain to a cabin that looks like the twin of Ace's, except that the area around the porch of this one is full of colorful flowers, and there's a pretty quilt draped over the porch railing. The lady sitting in the rocker on the porch is ancient, all wrinkled and stooped, but her smile is big and welcoming, and she stands up spryly enough when we get out of the car.

"Sadie Lou, this is Lila Holton," Ms. Teagarden calls. "She's going to be your home health aide."

"My what, now?" the older woman says, surprised.

"Won't be any trouble for you at all," Ms. Teagarden says once we've walked up the three front steps. "Lila's a licensed practical nurse, and she needs a job and a place to stay. You give her room and board and pay her what you were paying that agency in Sunset Canyon to come check on you every day, and everybody'll be happy."

Sadie Lou Morrissey looks at me hard, and I remind myself that I'm a grown woman. I have the training to take care of geriatric patients, and I know I'm nice.

"Do you smoke?" she demands. "Or listen to that rap nonsense?"

I nearly laugh out loud. "No to both, ma'am."

"Can you make deviled eggs?"

I blink, then remind myself I'm a grown woman with skills. "I can make deviled eggs. I can also administer medications, check for bedsores, clean bathrooms, dust, change a catheter, safely lift a patient who has fallen, make iced tea, make conversation, and watch for signs of dementia." I raise my eyebrows. *That good enough?*

Mrs. Morrissey laughs. "All right then. Come on in and I'll show you your room. Lila, is it?" I nod. "Well, thank you, Vivian."

"Looks like my work here is done," Vivian says, and waves at me before going back down the steps.

I follow my new client inside, to a neat bedroom made up with another pretty quilt. She pats the bed and sits down in the armchair next to it. “You can call me Sadie Lou, honey. Now.” She settles herself and looks at me expectantly. “Tell me *everything*.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ACE

MIZ VIVIAN AND HER SISTERS HAVE GOTTEN LILA ALL SET UP by now, according to what she told me on the phone. “You might want to stop by Sadie Lou’s after you leave work,” Miz Vivian says, like she’s not a master manipulator. “Sadie Lou could use some groceries, I’m sure, with another person in the house, and Murphy’s Grocery is right on your way up Hard Fall Road.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Maybe some coffee. And eggs.”

“Yes, ma’am.” And I’ll get some cream and sugar for Lila.

*Lila.* The thought of her makes my chest hurt. I have never felt this way about a woman, and I don’t trust the way I keep wanting her. It might be good for a little while, but sooner or later I’d find out that I couldn’t trust her— just like my grandfather. Just like my Junkyard Dog buddies, who weren’t really buddies at all.

Around noon, Billy is still in Sunset Canyon, picking up the part I’ll need to fix Lila’s car. I’m around back, checking it over to see if there’s anything else to repair besides the torque converter. I’ve already done some basic maintenance, while I wait on the converter part.

When I hear footsteps, I ask Billy to bring me some chips when he goes to lunch.

A deep, hoarse, familiar chuckle has me jerking my head up. Surely that’s not—

“Well, boy. You got yourself a nice little business here, don’tcha?”

*Fuck.* It is. “Wheels,” I say, wiping my hands on a grease rag. “I haven’t seen you in a long time.” I concentrate on keeping my voice level.

“That’s right.” He looks older. Well, he is older, but he looks more worn than I would have expected. Heavier around the middle, too. “Been a long time since you ditched the JDs, ain’t it?”

“Fourteen years,” I say coolly. “That’s assuming that by ‘ditched the JDs,’ you mean ‘got sold down the river by the JDs.’ Am I right?”

Another hoarse chuckle. He wipes his mouth. “Naw. Jigsaw just panicked. He had a record then, and you didn’t. He figured you could take the fall, and we’d make it up to you later.”

That’s a load of bullshit. My skepticism must show because he spreads his hands. “Only you never came back to the Lucky Horse, didja?”

“I went straight.”

“I heard.” He shrugs his meaty shoulders. “You owe me, you know. I showed you a lot of shit about cars, back when you were a little-dick teenager. But when you got released, you never even stopped by to say hello on your way out of town.”

Damn, I’m thirsty. I walk over to the shop fridge and pull out a can of soda. “Want one?” I show Wheels the red can.

“Naw. Not unless you got something stronger to dose it with, boy.”

I shake my head, popping open the cold can and letting the fizz die down a little before sucking down some of it. “Not at work.”

“Heard this place was yours.”

“It is. Pops died and left me enough to buy it.”

Wheels looks around, nodding.

“What do you want, man?”

He shrugs, squinting at me. “Nice setup here. I imagine you get a hold of old vehicles now and then, don’t you? Junkers that are totaled but they’re still drivable, right?”

“On occasion.” I’m starting to see where this is going. Sometimes an insurance company will decide that it’s not worth the money to fix somebody’s car, and will call it a total loss, giving the insured party a cash payout instead of repairing the vehicle. Unscrupulous dealers might file off the vehicle identification number and sell the car on to somebody who wants an untraceable car. It’s illegal, of course. “Not really.”

“Thought you’d be happy to see an old friend.”

I shake my head, crossing my arms over my chest. “Not when that ‘old friend’ let me go to jail and never even said thank you. We’re done, Wheels. See ya.”

“You’re not gonna sell me any junkers? Even if I’m paying?”

“Forget it. Get the fuck outta here.”

He looks down at Lila’s car, moving around to see the license plate. “That one might do. Looks terrible, but I bet you can get it running. Where’d you get it?”

Oh shit. Something about the way he’s checking Lila’s car over is giving me bad vibes. Even worse vibes than before. “That one’s getting repaired, not junked.”

He raises his eyebrows. “It’s a piece of shit. And I’d know. Who’d choose to repair that thing?”

“Somebody who wants to keep it.” I shrug, pretending I don’t care.

“Got a girl, Ace? I’d love to meet her.”

My stomach drops to my knees. He’s not talking about Lila, is he? “Nope. Single.”

“No nice girls from Bozeman around here? That’s a shame. I could use a nice girl, myself.”

Oh shit. He could be just talking... or he could mean Lila. And if he means Lila, that’s worse trouble than before.

“I’m busy. Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out.”

Billy comes in. “Hey, boss, here’s the converter part.”

“Boss,” Wheels repeats, with another one of those rusty-ass chuckles and a snort. “You look like a smart guy. Where’d you get that car?” He nods at Lila’s Toyota.

Billy looks at me warily, and shrugs. He sets the chips down on the card table next to the fridge and picks up the air gun. “Gotta get back to work. Tires to rotate.”

Billy has good instincts. One look at Wheels and he checked out of the conversation. If only I’d been smarter when I was young.

But no, I was stupid.

“If you come across anything like I might be looking for, you let me know.” Wheels winks at me.

“I won’t.”

“We’ll see about that.” He finally goes out.

Shit.

I go over to the window and watch Wheels get into his car. Another guy, a younger one, is standing next to it. I don’t recognize him, but he has the look of a crony. I can’t really put my finger on how, but I know he’s part of the gang.

Wheels. Here. Looking for me. Why? Why now?

Whatever the reason, it’s just another reminder that I’m no good for Lila. She’s too sweet. Too selfless. Too perfect.

Too good for me, no matter how much I want her.

I want her anyway.



# CHAPTER NINE

LILA

I TELL SADIE LOU EVERYTHING.

Well, almost everything. I don't tell her about what Ace, and I got up to last night. But everything else— my parents, my brother, my growing up. Bozeman. My job. My attempt to break out of a rut by dating Clinton. Clinton's freakout at the hospital. My fear, my rebellion, and my running away. Ace rescuing me.

"I'm going to stop you right there, honey," Sadie Lou says, speaking for the first time in maybe an hour. "You're not a damsel in distress."

I blink in confusion. "I feel like one. I feel desperately in need of rescue."

"Lila," Sadie Lou says, placing her soft, wrinkled hand on mine, "you got to rescue your own self. You can get help from people," here she pauses and looks deep into my eyes with her faded blue ones, "but you are the only one who can rescue yourself. You have to take what people give you and claim it. Make it yours. Save yourself with it."

I think about that. "You mean... like people have given me a ladder, but I have to climb out of the well myself?"

She laughs softly. "Something like that. Now, that Ace of yours, it's clear he's been a bad boy sometime in the past. It's in his eyes. But he pulled himself out. He's changed. You can see that in his eyes, too. He's a good man now."

I can feel myself blushing. "He's not mine."

She just nods. “Now, I had me a good man. My Jimmy and I were married for 65 years. No children, and that was a grief and a trouble to us when we were younger. But once we both accepted that there wouldn’t be any, we became each other’s everything. Do you want children?”

I think about Mattie. “No. It makes me sad, but no, I don’t want to have kids with my genetic background. I’d love to be a mother, but not if my child has such a strong chance of being severely autistic.” I sigh.

“You think of yourself as not perfect,” Sadie Lou says. She shakes her head gently at me. “Honey, ain’t none of us perfect. Just think. There might be a child somewhere who would be truly blessed to have you as a mother.”

My eyes fill with tears.

“It’s all right to want things,” she tells me.

“I know.”

“No,” Sadie Lou corrects me, “I think you know that with your head. You don’t know it with your heart yet. Be working on that for me, all right? Your parents didn’t give you what you needed, so you think you don’t deserve it. But you do.” She looks deep into my eyes again. “You do. You deserve to have love. You deserve to give love. You are perfect the way you are.”

I can only marvel at the way this woman has gone right to the most important part of me. She just met me, but it’s like she can see right into my heart.

And then I realize— so can Ace. Ace makes me feel like this, too.

Or he did, last night. This morning was a different story. I don’t know what I did wrong.

Just thinking about him makes my body wake up, and I wonder when I will see him again.

“Now let’s go take a walk outside,” Sadie Lou says. “I always walk at least half an hour every day, unless the weather’s bad.” She gets her cane, and we go out. I’m awed by

the bulk of the mountain leaning over us and the height of the trees. It feels like fall here, too, with the golden sunshine slanting down and the smell of the dry leaves blowing on the wind. Autumn isn't quite so advanced in Bozeman just yet.

"It's beautiful here," I say, a little surprised at how much I didn't notice yesterday.

Sadie Lou smiles at me. "Yes, indeed. You could do a lot worse than Black Timber Peak." She elbows me. "You could do a lot worse than Ace McBride, as well."

"He's not mine," I repeat, but she just snorts.

She tells me how to make her beef stew and stands over me at the stove while I follow her directions. "All right, then. Let it cook the rest of the afternoon, and it'll be tender come dinnertime."

Then she lies down for a nap, and I clean her bathroom, thinking about my shower at Ace's place this morning.

I think about Ace, too. He'd been so open with me last night. I wonder if he's regretting that, and I realize I have to show him that he can trust me.

We can trust each other.

---

DINNER IS EARLY BECAUSE THAT'S HOW SADIE LOU LIKES IT. I make some cheddar drop biscuits to go with the stew. She changes into her night things and sits down to watch a game show in her recliner, and then there's a knock at the door.

*Ace*, I think, with a lift in my chest.

Sadie Lou takes one look at me and starts laughing. I shush her, and open to reveal, yes, Ace. He looks really nice. He's recently showered, and the long part of his hair is loose on his shoulders, and his blue eyes are vivid in his face. "Hi," I say shyly.

"Hi back. Did you have a good day?"

“The best.” It’s true. I really like Sadie Lou.

He nods. “Told you the Teagarden sisters would come through for you.” He nods to Sadie Lou as well. “And for you, too, Miz Sadie Lou.”

“They always take care of people in this town,” she says affably.

Ace bends down and picks up three grocery bags I hadn’t seen sitting at his feet. “These are for you,” he says. “Thought you might need a few things from Murphy’s Grocery.”

He’s brought us some fresh vegetables and bakery bread, as well as coffee and cream. There are also some basic toiletries for me. I thank him and start putting things away.

“Would you like to take a walk with me after Miz Sadie Lou goes to bed?”

“You can go on now!” Sadie Lou calls from the living room. “I can get myself in bed, youngsters. I don’t need help every livelong minute!”

I check her face. She’s serious, although I see a smile threatening to peek through. “All right. You’ll keep the phone beside your bed?”

She nods, and I get Ace’s sweatshirt from my room and put it on to follow him outside.

“We’ll walk down the road to my place, if that’s all right with you.” He smiles at me, in the last of the evening light.

“Sure.” Since the light is starting to fail, and I’m not that familiar with the road, I stumble a little on the grass, and he reaches for my hand.

It feels good.

And I can’t wait for him to kiss me.

We barely get inside the cabin when he does. I kiss him back. It’s lovely. The light over the sink is on, but no others, and I feel so safe here, like it’s a beautiful little nest for the two of us.

“Did you bring me here to kiss me?” I ask, halfway laughing in my happiness.

“To kiss you and more,” he says, his deep voice going rough and his arms tightening around me.

And then it's more than kissing. Touching. Hands caressing, sliding, squeezing, more. Ace's hands are eager on my breasts, eager to unfasten my bra, eager and gentle on my nipples, and I let my head roll back on my neck as he bends to lick and kiss them.

Fire kindles in my belly. It spreads down to the juncture of my thighs. My underwear is sticking to me, and I can't quite get my breath.

I unbutton his shirt and touch his chest, his shoulders. His strong forearms. His neck. I pull his mouth up to mine and kiss him again, loving the way he growls in his throat. I unbutton his jeans. Unzip them. Delve into the opening to find him inside his boxers, all hot and hard and delicious against my hands.

“You're bold,” he whispers, and the shiver takes me, perking my nipples even further.

“I want you,” I confess. “I want all of you this time.”

“I want you too,” he says, his breath ragged as I tug his erect penis out of his underwear. “But are you sure? I know you've never...”

“I want it. I'm sure,” I say, stroking him the way he showed me last night. “I want it with you.”

“Your wish is my command,” he says, and then he picks me up and heaves me onto his big bed. I've lost my shoes already, and my own jeans are suddenly loose, suddenly sliding down my thighs, and another time I might be embarrassed by the wetness of my panties, but just now I don't care. I know what it means. I know he knows what it means.

That I want him.

“I want to taste you again,” he says, and yanks those damp panties all the way off, spreading my thighs and settling

between them, stroking up my inner thighs, then over my outer lips, then parting them and bending down to lick at my little button.

I jerk so hard that I nearly levitate off the bed. He laughs low in his throat and puts one hand on my belly. “There now. Settle down. If I’m going to eat your pussy, you’re going to tell me what you like and what you don’t.”

“I like it,” I say, not able to get enough breath. “All of it. Everything you do. I love it.”

He begins again, and my pleasure ratchets higher and higher, until I’m flying off into the stratosphere, sparkling and spinning in the sensation of joy. When I can see again, I reach for him. “Now, Ace. Make me a woman now.”

“You’re already a woman,” he says, kissing me deeply. “But now you’re going to be my woman.”

I kiss him back. He reaches to the bedside table for a condom and rips it open. “Help me,” he says. I do. I help him stroke it over that gorgeous monster.

“Now,” I plead, and I guide him to my channel. I slide the head of his cock over my sensitive nub a few times, and shiver with the need it sets up inside me. “Now!”

He takes himself in hand, rubbing it against me, then just inside, then over my clit again and back to my entrance. A little farther in this time, getting me accustomed to the feeling of being invaded, and then back to my clit. Again inside me, deeper in. Out again, over my nub, and then back inside me.

“Now,” I insist, and he presses all the way in. It feels tight. It feels strange. It only hurts a little—

And then it doesn’t hurt at all. That rhythm is building in my blood again, as he strokes me from the inside with his cock and from the outside with his fingers... and he says my name. Moans it. Groans it, really, his voice deep and out of control, and he strokes faster with his hand, and I explode again, clutching at him with arms around his back and legs around his thighs.

It's even better this time. He sets his forehead against mine and makes a noise with no words, pressing his hips hard against mine, and then we are still. We lie still together, locked together.

He kisses me, sighs, and kisses me again. "You're perfect."  
"Not me," I whisper. "You are."



# CHAPTER TEN

ACE

I KNEW SHE WOULD BE. SO EAGER. SO SHY YET SO BOLD. SO unafraid to want me, so pleased to let me please her.

The feel of her, all hot and tight and so fucking slick, so responsive... I want her again and again. I never want to stop.

I just need a minute.

I finally flop to my side and pull her close. "You feel okay?"

"I feel marvelous."

I smile without opening my eyes. I reach for my phone and dial Sadie Lou's house, knowing that she's supposed to have her phone by the bed. She answers the phone not with "hello," but my name, and she's giggling.

"I'll bring Lila home in the morning," I say.

The phone is on speaker, so Lila hears Sadie Lou say, "I thought so. Now, you take good care of my Lila. You love her up and make her feel good. You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say fervently, and I hang up.

Lila kisses me. "She didn't even mind," she says in wonder, and then she kisses me again.

We drift into sleep tangled up in each other.

Sometime later, we wake again. And make love again. I teach her how to use her mouth on me, and I turn her onto her stomach and take her from behind, which she seems to love, especially when I whisper into her ear to touch herself while I'm driving my cock deep inside her.

“Your pussy is so incredible, Lila. It’s perfect. You’re amazing. You feel so good.”

“You feel so good,” she says, slurring her words like she’s drunk. “More, Ace. More.”

I give her more.

I give her everything. All of me. All of my body, and—

Oh God. I think I’ve given her my heart, too. It’s too late for me to say I’m not good enough for her— she’s the one I want.

She’s the one I love.

Afterward, we cuddle and talk. “Why did you name your shop the Four-Wheel Fix-It?” she wants to know.

I snort. “It was already named that. I wouldn’t have picked it myself, but the owner had died, so I got a good deal on the building, and the sign was already there. Plus, everybody was used to its name, so I just didn’t bother to change it.”

I tell her things I remember about my dad, and my mom. I talk about the things I loved when I was a kid. She tells me about her early childhood, too, which was good. Her brother wasn’t born until she was seven, and it was only then that he began to consume her parents’ attention, but once she was a cherished only child.

We talk about having kids.

She begins to cry. She says she’d love to be a mother, but she doesn’t dare have biological children because of the risk they may inherit the genes for severe autism. “Being on the spectrum isn’t so bad,” she says, “but Mattie…”

“I understand.” And I do. “You want to leave some of your true self for you.”

She nods against my chest.

“I’m afraid I’m not good enough for you,” I tell her.

She shakes her head this time. “I’m afraid you’ll find out I’m not good at all.”

I want to stay up and talk. I want to stay awake and make love to her again. Instead, we sleep, entwined in each other.

---

THE NEXT MORNING, I WALK LILA BACK UP THE HILL TO SADIE Lou's and then go in to work. The part for Lila's car is in, so I start in on that repair job. When the shop phone rings, Billy's wrist-deep in a messy oil change, so I wipe my hands and answer it myself. "Four-Wheel Fix-It."

"Ace's Auto Repair would've been a better name for the place," Wheels says. He doesn't identify himself, but I know.

I take a deep breath. "What do you want, Wheels?"

"You know what I want. Got any leads on junkers that run?"

"Why do you want them? The Dogs are expanding operations?"

He exhales through his nose. "Already did that. But now the cops are sniffing around the junkyard, and I need a new source."

"And you think I'm going to help you?"

"I think if you want to keep your girl, you will." I hear the scratch of a match being lit. "But maybe you want me to give her back to Baby Face. Just between you and me, he ain't too stable, but he still wants her."

My blood runs cold.

*Lila.*

For a moment I can't speak, and then my voice comes out cold with anger. "She runs her own life. You don't decide who 'gets' her."

Wheels snorts. "She's a woman. If we want to take her back to Bozeman with us, we will. Besides. You *owe*, Ace. You know you do." His voice turns wheedling. "Work with us,

and you can keep her. She's a little hefty for my taste, anyway. I'll find somebody else for Baby Face."

*You fucker*, I snarl silently. And then I start really thinking.

This is Black Timber Peak.

And I might have a plan.

"Swear you'll leave her alone?" I make my voice sound scared and weak.

"Find us some cars first."

I act like I'm giving in. "Okay. Okay. Just leave her alone. I might have access to one right now, and maybe another one by the end of the week."

"Now we're talking. I'll come by tonight. Make it look like a legitimate sale, since this seems like a nosy town. And Ace? It would be a grave mistake to involve the law, son. Especially with your criminal record."

"Understood. I'll have it for you."

I hang up. Billy is staring at me, wiping his hands. "No more appointments today, Billy. Close up shop. You can go home when you finish whatever you're working on."

"Boss?"

"Clear out and stay safe. I'm calling Dunning."

And then I call the sheriff's personal cell phone and tell him that I've got his personal vehicle ready, and he should come pick it up as soon as possible. He's a smart guy. He cottons on that I'm speaking in code.

The plan is underway.

I'm feeling optimistic about it, so I go back to checking over Lila's car.

And then I find something that turns everything on its head. I feel sick. I feel stupid.

I feel exactly the way I felt when I realized that Jigsaw had blamed that old vehicle theft on me, and I couldn't shake it.

I never thought she'd do it to me. Not Lila.

Fuck.

# **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

LILA

I HAVE ANOTHER GOOD DAY WITH SADIE LOU. I'VE WASHED MY scrubs, so at least I'm wearing clean clothes, but I'm going to have to go shopping soon. She says there are a few places in Sunset Canyon, but mostly she shops out of catalogs. She hands me a couple of old-lady-clothes catalogs.

"I'll just wash my own clothes for now," I say with as much dignity as I can muster. And then we both laugh.

I really like Sadie Lou.

After supper, Ace stops by. He comes in, exchanges pleasantries with Sadie Lou, avoids eye contact with me, and then asks if I'll take a walk with him.

"You do that," Sadie Lou says, waggling her gray eyebrows at me.

I can't help blushing. I'm hoping for a repeat of last night, and I guess it shows.

We don't actually walk anywhere. Ace stays in Sadie Lou's side yard, and his face is distant. He doesn't hold my hand. His voice is cool.

"I need to talk to you," he says tensely. "Tell me about that guy who was pursuing you in Bozeman. The crazy one. What's his name again?"

I'd been expecting love talk. I change gears and answer him straight-up.

"Clinton Smith."

"And did he have another name?"



“His friends called him Baby Face.”

“And what were his friends’ names?”

“Um, there was a guy called Meatball, I remember that. Big Frank. And... Jigsaw? Yeah. Jigsaw.” He exhales through his nose. “Is everything okay?”

“What do you know about the gang, Lila?”

I shake my head, confused. “What gang?”

“The Junkyard Dogs. They’re mostly legal, or they used to be. Sounds like that’s changed, these days.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” I say truthfully.

“I used to belong,” he says grimly. “Jigsaw set me up to take the fall for that car theft that I thought was a repo job.”

This is *bizarre*. “So why would you think that I’d know about them?”

“Two reasons. One, a guy I used to know stopped by the shop yesterday and tried to intimidate me into sourcing him with unidentifiable vehicles. He called me again today.”

“That’s got nothing to do with me.”

He pulls something out of his pocket and hands it to me. “That’s the second reason. I found that attached to the bottom of your car.”

I turn it over in my hand. It’s a metallic rectangle I’ve never seen before. “What is it?”

He sounds angry. “It’s a tracker.”

What? “I don’t understand.”

“And the guy who came to talk to me mentioned you.” He looks me in the eye. “Lila, are you affiliated with the JDs?”

“How can you even ask me that?” I shake my head, completely confused. “I told you everything about me. I told you about Clinton and how I didn’t want to see him anymore, and then he freaked out, and that scared me worse! You know who I am.”

“I know who you say you are.”

There's a hollow feeling in my chest. Ace doesn't trust me. I trust him, but he doesn't trust me.

"I don't know what to say." I'm close to tears. "I'm me, Ace. I'm just Lila. I'm just this girl who is just finding out what her life is about. I do know it's not about Clinton, but I was thinking it might be about us. You and me."

He's silent for a moment, and his eyes look bleak. "If you're who you say you are, I'm no good for you." He steps back a pace. "And if you aren't who you say you are, there is no us. I trusted the wrong person. Again."

Everything hits me at once.

I shouldn't have trusted him.

I have terrible judgment.

I'm stupid. I can't do anything right.

I shouldn't have left home. I shouldn't have told my parents that it was my life, and to butt out. Look what a mess I've made of it, in only a few days.

I was wrong to think that I could take care of myself.

My body is curling around itself, trying to protect my heart. "Go away, Ace. Leave me alone."

"So you admit you're involved with the JDs?" His expression is angry and disgusted, his features looking ugly for the first time since I laid eyes on him.

This is the man who told me I was perfect. That I was *good*. Who held me like I was precious. Now he's changed his mind?

I feel my heart break. It's a tearing feeling in my chest.

"No. But if you can believe something that bad about me, then you don't love me. You don't even know me." Then I repeat his phrase, the one that really hurt. "There is no us."

I turn around and stalk back into Sadie Lou's house. I lock the door behind me. I go into the bathroom, shed my clothes, and get into the shower, where I cry until the water is cold and I have no tears left.

I towel off, shrug on the nightgown Sadie Lou lent me, and collapse into my bed, exhausted.

My phone doesn't ring.

Ace doesn't knock on the door and beg for forgiveness.

He doesn't throw pebbles at my window.

I'm alone in the dark.

---

THE NEXT DAY, SADIE LOU DOESN'T ASK ME ANY AWKWARD questions about Ace, or about my long shower, or the purple circles under my eyes. She just pats me a lot.

Mid-morning, after she's shown me all the photo albums with pictures of the vacations she took with her late husband, I give in and place a phone order for a casual dress from one of her catalogs.

I feel hollowed out.

"Should I go home, Sadie Lou?" I ask at lunch, when it occurs to me that I've sat over my tuna sandwich without eating it for almost an hour. "I've made such a mess."

She regards me without speaking for a moment. "Honey, do you want to go home?"

I shake my head. "I just wanted to not waste my life. But my mother was right, I don't know how to do anything."

"Nonsense!" She pats me again. "You can do all those things you told me, and more. You're a good person, Lila."

"But Ace... he thinks I..." I trail off, trying not to cry more.

"I don't know exactly what happened," Sadie Lou says, "but something touched that sore spot in him. That man is running scared, Lila. Give him a chance to get it straight in his head, and he'll be back, because he's crazy for you."

I shake my head, wiping my cheeks. "I don't think so."

“Believe in yourself, honey.” She gives me one of her level, kind, looks. “I believe in you. And I’m not wrong. Now let’s go check on my bird feeders.”

Just before suppertime, she’s lying down to rest and I’m sitting with a blank notebook she found me, trying to write down how I feel, when there’s a knock at the door.

*Ace.* I practically break an ankle getting to the door fast, and I open it without peeking out the window.

It’s not Ace. It’s Clinton.

I open my mouth to demand what he’s doing here, and he steps right in. “Lila. You’re looking pretty.” He reaches behind himself to lock the door. “Wheels promised that mechanic guy I’d leave you alone if he helped us, but you’re gonna be the insurance.”

I get enough breath to scream, but Clinton grabs my face before I can make a sound. “Shh. No yelling. You’re going to sit quietly in this house, you and the old lady, until Wheels tells me he’s picked up the car, and then you’re going to come with me.”

I shake my head, furious.

“You’re gonna be mine, Lila.” He smiles in triumph, and I wonder how I could have missed that he’s mentally ill.

All my squirming and fighting are to no avail. Ten minutes later, Sadie Lou is tied to the bed with clothesline, and my wrists and ankles are zip-tied together. Our mouths are duct taped.

Clinton turns on the TV in the other room, leaving us to stare at the wall.

The phone rings. Sadie Lou and I exchange glances. It rings fourteen times, then stops. A few minutes later, it rings again. “You’re not answering that,” Clinton says from the living room. When it stops again, he comes into the bedroom to take it off the hook. Then he gives me an evil smile. “Won’t be long now, baby.”

I start wishing I’d never left home— and then I stop.

Because even if I'm starting late with this adult thing, it's still worth the effort.

And even if Ace doesn't love me anymore, I still love him. What we had together was beautiful, and I still want it.

I have to hold on to that.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

ACE

IT'S NEARLY 9 P.M. WHEN WHEELS AND BIG FRANK SHOW UP. I'm expecting them, but it still makes me jump.

I still wonder whether Lila is involved with the Dogs in some way, but I shunt that concern off into a corner of my mind. First things first. The arrangements I made with Sheriff Dunning have to take place before I worry about Lila again.

"Got the keys?" Wheels asks, while Big Frank simply glowers.

I hand him the keys to Mr. Shaw's old Honda Civic, which has been sitting on the shop lot for three years because he needs to sell it, but everybody in town knows to be wary. It runs —barely— but I'm even holding the title, just in case somebody did want to buy it. "Come on in the office so I can sign the title over to you. You did want this legal, right?"

Wheels shrugs his meaty shoulders. "Yeah, sure, we'll do it up so it looks legit."

I take him into the shop, then into the office, where I start to close the door. He smacks his hand against the door to keep it open. "Nah, son. I don't like being closed in."

I shrug. "If you want it, it's in the strongbox. Behind the door." I gesture.

Wheels glares at me. "Next time you'll have it ready to go, already signed. Got me?"

I press my lips together. "Fine. All right."

He lets go of the door, and I congratulate myself on rearranging the furniture in the office so I could do what I'm

doing now.

Closing the door so he won't see the sting coming. Big Frank's outside, but he's more of a muscle guy than a lookout. Wheels is smarter.

Still not smart enough for Sheriff Dunning.

I take my time getting the Civic's title out, making sure it's the right one. I sign it over. "What should I put for monetary consideration?"

"Say... 500 bucks? That's about what that piece of shit's worth." He snorts. "I'm not paying you, by the way."

I stand up. "You said source you some vehicles. You didn't say give you vehicles."

"I'm not convinced you're going to play nice yet." He shows me his teeth. "Prove it."

I glare long enough to convince him that I'm reluctant, then exhale loudly. "Fine. This one's a freebie, but it's the last one."

There's a noise outside. We turn our heads to it, but there are no windows in here. "You better play nice, Acey boy."

I motion to Wheels to sign the title. He bends over the desk and picks up the pen.

The office door opens, fast, and Sheriff Dunning aims his pistol right at Wheels. Wheels drops the pen, and I can tell he's going for his own gun, so I go right across the desk and punch him. While Wheels is trying to come at me, the sheriff and a couple of LEOs I don't know cuff him and read him his rights.

I stand there in my office, feeling relieved and sad, angry and vindicated. "I told you, Wheels. I'm out. I meant it."

Sheriff Dunning shakes my hand. "Bozeman police have been after these guys for at least a year. Thanks for your help, Ace."

I look him in the eye. "No, thank you. I was concerned you'd think I was still affiliated with the gang."



He shakes his head. “Boy, I’ve been watching you for years. Knew I could trust you.”

Trust. Now that’s a topic my brain’s been chewing on for a while. I think about Lila, and I realize I need to hear it from Wheels, whether she’s involved or not.

Right then, the sheriff’s com unit crackles, and dispatch comes through. It’s Trish. “Sheriff? We just got a call from Viola Teagarden. Says she can’t get hold of Sadie Lou Morrissey, and she’s worried. Can you go check it out?”

The sheriff is about to respond, when my mouth overpowers my brain, and I say Lila’s name.

Wheels and Big Frank start laughing, big evil chuckles, and I just *know*. Light bursts on me, and I feel sick.

Lila’s in trouble. She’s not in cahoots with them, she’s in harm’s way. I have to get to her.

I run for my truck. Sheriff Dunning curses and gets in his own car. We go hell-for-leather through town, up Hard Fall Road, and I drive past Sadie Lou’s house before pulling to the side and getting out. I don’t take the road. I run through the trees so I can come up to the back of her cabin.

I run as hard as I can. When I get there, I can hear the sheriff pounding on the door and demanding the inhabitants open it in the name of the law.

Just as I get to the back porch, the back door opens, and a young skinny guy with good hair comes out, dragging Lila. Her mouth’s closed with duct tape, her hands are tied together, and she’s stumbling over her feet. I hear sirens approaching.

The guy pulls her to the ground, turns, and runs into my fist. He runs into my fist ten times.

I make myself stop, then, because that’s enough. He’s woozy, disoriented, and not going anywhere. Sheriff Dunning comes around the back of the house and slaps a set of handcuffs on him.

Then I can take care of Lila. I get my pocketknife out and cut the zip ties on her wrists before gently pulling the duct tape

off her mouth. “Sadie Lou!” she cries, pointing frantically at the house. “Tied up!”

There’s noise inside the house. “They’ll get her,” I say, taking her into my arms. “She’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.”

“I know I’ll be fine!” she yells. “And where the hell were you when I was getting kidnapped and imprisoned—”

I shut her up with a kiss.

I don’t have to hold her too tight or kiss her too hard. She melts in my arms right away, so I stop and hold her at arm’s length to look at her face. “I was being stupid,” I confess. “I got scared of how much I felt for you, and I got even more scared that you’d played me for a fool.”

“I wouldn’t!”

“I know. I knew that deep down. I just had to talk myself into turning the light on in that closet inside me and look at what I was really afraid of.”

“Ace,” she says, and grabs me close.

“What I was most scared of,” I say, stroking her hair and savoring the smell of it, “was losing you. I don’t want to live without you, Lila. I love you.”

“I love you too,” she says into my neck.

We stand there together until somebody from the fire department comes out and tells us Sadie Lou’s just fine, but they’re going to take her to the hospital in Sunset Canyon to get her checked out, and would Lila like to go too?

She turns them down. “No. Ace will take care of me.”

Sheriff Dunning walks up to us and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Good work, Ace. We wouldn’t have gotten this one without your quick thinking. Wouldn’t have gotten the other two gang members without you, either. We’re much obliged.” He turns to Lila. “Will you come on by the office and make a statement tomorrow?”

She just nods. “Thank you, sir.”

“You rest up tonight and we’ll see you in the morning.” He claps me on the shoulder. “Night, folks.”

And then we’re alone.

“I thought of you,” she says, her voice husky and her eyes bright. “When Clinton grabbed me. I realized... I realized that I love you, and I trust you, even if you didn’t feel the same about me.”

“I do,” I interrupt.

“And I did do the right thing, claiming my life for my own.” She looks up into my face. “The best part of that is knowing who I want to spend it with.”

My heart overflows, and then I do the thing that I’ve sworn I’d never do. I get to one knee. “Marry me, Lila. I can’t wait to see what you do with your life.”

“Our life,” she says, and that’s it. I can barely see, blinded by the shine of our future stretched out before us.

# EPILOGUE

LILA

*SIX MONTHS LATER*

THE PEAKS OF LOVE WEDDING CHAPEL LOOKS BEAUTIFUL, exactly as I arranged with manager Phyllis. Flowers decorate the pews and the front of the chapel. There's no specific color scheme, just the soft pastels of spring blooms: tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils.

Since Ace and I are paying for everything ourselves, we chose simple things. There will be a small reception after the afternoon ceremony under the tent next to the chapel. Finger foods and punch are what we're serving along with wedding cake, and I'm not one bit sorry it's not a sit-down fancy meal.

The sooner we eat cake, the sooner Ace and I can leave for our honeymoon.

We're going to stay at a remote lodge up in the mountains. The vacation season hasn't quite started, so we're getting a discount on the room, but I'm looking forward to it. There's a jacuzzi on the deck, a gourmet chef on-site, and all the hiking, kayaking, and riding we could ever want.

Not to mention a big bed just for us.

I'm already wearing my wedding dress. Sadie Lou is wearing a lavender dress that makes her cheeks pink. "You sure you want this old lady up at the front with you?"

"I'm certain." She's the grandmother I never had, the one who believed in me when I didn't much believe in myself, and I love her.

I invited my parents. I don't know if they'll come. They didn't RSVP, so I'm guessing they won't. But I think it's okay. I can be sad, but I'm really okay. I've learned to stand up for myself.

Sheriff Dunning knocks on the small bridal room door, and peeks his head in. "You ladies ready?"

I can tell that I'm blushing. "Absolutely."

Sadie Lou cackles with laughter, and the sheriff's eyes crinkle at the corners. "Well, then, let's kick off this rodeo." He escorts Sadie Lou to the front as the classical music plays, then comes to offer me his arm. "Just so you know," he whispers to me before we step onto the aisle, "You two deserve to love each other for always."

I give him a warm, appreciative smile, this man who looks so tough but has such a good heart.

And then we're walking down the aisle, and all I can see is Ace.

He looks distinctly misty around the eyes, their deep blue tint glistening with not-quite-tears. He's wearing a simple gray suit, his hair pulled back and his beard neatly combed, and he is so beautiful to me.

I smile at him, and he smiles back, and it's just us. We say the words to each other. We make the promises. And then we're married, and this is the first day of the rest of our lives together.

On the way out, I see my parents. I don't stop walking, but the second we're out of the front door, I turn to Ace. "My parents are here! I didn't think they were coming!"

"You worried?" he asks me, his hand warm on mine.

"No. I guess not." I smile suddenly again. "They can't stop me now, anyway. It's done. I'm yours."

"And I'm yours, Mrs. McBride."

In the reception tent, the Teagarden sisters have nice things to say to us. Ace's coworker Billy and his wife Lisa give us both firm hugs and an invitation to dinner after we get back

from our honeymoon. The Murphys congratulate us. Shorty Blaine pounds Ace on the back and kisses my cheek. The Freemans from the coffee shop offer best wishes.

Then my parents are there. Mom's been crying, but she's smiling now. "Congratulations, sweetheart," she says, and opens her arms for a hug.

We hold each other tight. "Thanks for coming, Mom."

"Can we talk a little bit later?" she asks. I nod. "And I haven't met your husband yet."

"Mom, Dad, this is Ace. He owns the auto repair shop in Black Timber Peak, and he rescued me when my car broke down that first night."

"I think we rescued each other," Ace says to me, then speaks to my mother. "Mrs. Holton, I love your daughter with all my heart."

"That's as it should be, young man," she says, mock-sternly. "And you can call me Linda. This is my husband, Dave. Lila's father."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Ace says, offering a firm handshake.

"Take care of my little girl," my dad says, shaking hands with Ace and then turning to me for a long hug.

"I'm so glad you came," I tell them, wiping my eyes.

More guests are lining up behind them, so Mom pulls Dad away and we continue receiving congratulations.

But later, when we've eaten, I make my way to the quiet table where my parents are sitting with the Freemans, and I ask my parents if now would be a good time to talk. Jacklyn Freeman smiles at me, then pulls her husband out of his chair. "Wilfred, let's go dance." Their departure leaves the three of us alone.

"Honey, I'm so sorry," Mom says right away. "You were right. For too long, we ignored you because we thought Matthew needed us more. Well, he did need us more, but that's

only relative. We should have been looking out for what you needed, too.”

“We did it wrong,” Dad chimes in. “We’re sorry. We hope you can forgive us.”

I’ve been working on this with my counselor for the past six months, but I didn’t know how I would feel when I saw them. Now that we’re together, I know. “I forgive you. I’m sorry I had to go no-contact for so long. I hope we can see each other on occasion now.”

“We’d like that, sweetie,” Dad says, his voice scratchy. He rubs his nose and adjusts his glasses. “And I guess you’re wondering how we’re able to be here because we haven’t told you.”

Well, yeah, given that we never went anywhere when I lived at home.

“We had to put Mattie in the facility,” Mom says, sniffing.

“Linda,” Dad says in a warning voice. “What your mother means, Lila, is that once you were out on your own, it became apparent to us, over those months, that we could not take care of Mattie without burning ourselves out. We’d already been leaning on you too much, and when you were gone, we realized that we couldn’t do it anymore.”

I reach over to take their hands. “Is it a good place?”

“Well, it’s not like home,” Mom says, and Dad shoots her a look. “But he’s settling in. And they can do so much more for him. Physical therapy, activities he enjoys, a routine that keeps him calm, and there are medical professionals to help take care of his needs. He’s doing okay. He’s just across town, and we go see him four times a week.”

“It’s not the same,” Dad adds, “but we’re all getting used to it. And Lila?” He dips his head to look into my eyes. “None of this is your fault.” Mom shakes her head, squeezing my hand. “We love you.”

“I love you too,” I say, and then I let the tears flow as we hug each other.



When I look up, Ace is in the family hug with us, and I think I'm happier than I've ever been.

---

SIX HOURS AFTER THAT, I HAVE TO REVISE THAT STATEMENT. Now is the happiest I've ever been.

We're on our honeymoon. At Lupine Lodge, we've eaten a fancy meal and sat in the jacuzzi, and now we're on the private balcony of our room, looking up at the stars.

It's spring, but the air is chilly. Ace cuddles me against him on the bench. "Look how bright the stars are tonight. I think they're happy."

"They couldn't be happier than I am," I tell him, and reach back for a kiss.

Our lips meet and hold, explore and tease, and then I can't resist any more. I turn in the circle of his arms and kiss him more deeply.

"I want you," I tell him. "You're my husband. I want to be as close to you as I can get."

"I'll never argue with that sentiment," he says to me, and proceeds to take my clothes off, a piece at a time, kissing every inch of skin exposed to the chilly night. "Want to go in and do this on a bed?"

"No." I look him in the eye. "Right here. I want you inside me, Ace McBride."

"I want to be inside you, Lila McBride."

His hands touch all my sensitive places, his lips and tongue caressing me everywhere he can reach. I peel his clothes off as best I can, and then when we are both bare to the night, I straddle him on the bench and take his body into mine.

We're joined.

In every way. Our lives are knit. Our bodies are locked together. And our hearts?

That's the best part. Our hearts are one.

We may not be perfect, but we are perfect for each other.

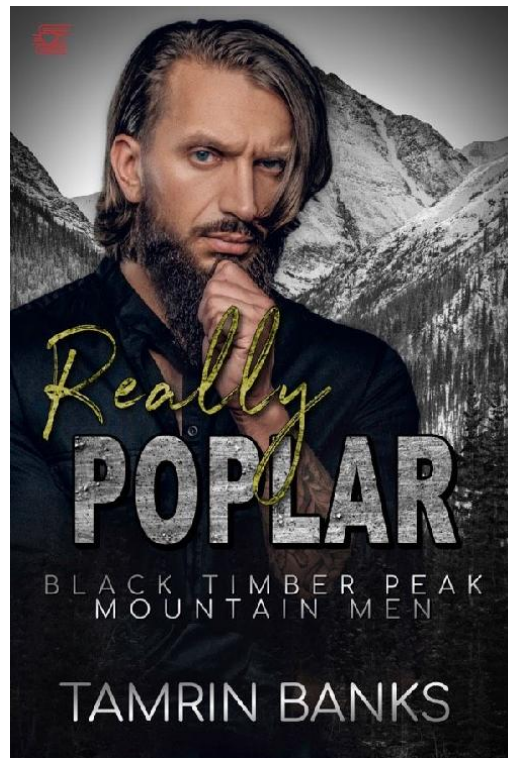
---

WANT MORE OF ACE AND LILA'S HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER? SIGN up for Carly's newsletter and get all the extra deliciousness! <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/c0d70btpi8>

**Ever thought of writing a story? Now you can!**

Last Chapter Press is accepting stories in the Black Timber Peak Mountain Men series. Check out more information at [Last Chapter Press](#), and be sure to sign up for our newsletters, too. Come be our friend on Facebook at [Last Chapter Press Facebook](#).

Coming next!



**Treaty**

I lost my only family and my marriage tanked all at the same time, but I've come home to take over my grandparents' farm and hopefully find a brand new life that's all mine.

I'm not looking for another man.

Jude isn't just any man though.

I've never felt as safe and at peace as I do with him, but somebody threatens that security.

They want my land and my home. I hope that they've got a bulldozer because they're not moving me.

Jude says he loves me and he'll take care of me, keep me safe. Strangely, considering my relationship wreck of a past, I still want to believe in him.

Maybe because I've fallen madly in love with him too.

They're coming for me but they'll have to get through one fierce mountain man to do it.

## **JUDE**

From the first second I saw Treaty Tucker at the Farmer's Market the heavens opened up and shone down on her, and I knew... She's my one. My soulmate.

I've waited my whole life to find the woman who would be my perfect match.

Just like all the men in my family, once you find your one, no other woman will do.

But she's lost on the mountain where I work as a ranger. Caught in a freak snowstorm and she's hurt as well.

No rescue has ever mattered as much as this one because she's my woman.

It's past time for me to claim her and bring her home.

**This is the bearded, rugged, growly alpha mountain man series you've been looking for!**

Come to Black Timber Peak where these alphas have been secluded for way too long. These men have escaped their pasts to find solace and solitude in the shadows of giant trees, fast moving rivers, and skies that darken to onyx at night. Their patience is short, their demeanor is possessive, and when a

curvy woman comes in their sights, they're going to fall hard and fast. She's meant to be theirs. They're strong enough to survive alone, but it's time to make the ultimate sacrifice to have everything they want in life.

**Take a trip with these five authors to Black Timber Peak and find your next book boyfriend mountain man.**