



*Trapped*  
*by the*  
**MOUNTAIN  
MAN**

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

**C.H. JAMES**

# Trapped by the Mountain Ma

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C.H. James



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Trapped by the Mountain Man – Rough and Rugged – Book One

Ebook - First Edition

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# Blurb

Trapped by the Mountain Man by C.H. Jan

***One kiss between friends. One fateful night. Two broken heart.***

Ten years ago, Hannah broke my heart and left me running to the  
Ashamed, embarrassed and afraid, I didn't just lose myself that night  
my best friend.

So when the love of my life comes knocking at my door high up i  
mountains, I'm reeling. She claims she's here for work, but just look  
her has that deep, possessive behavior resurfacing.

Only this time – there's nothing to stop me.

We're all alone.

The rugged mountain is my home, and after all these years, my cur  
friend has never looked better. Dark clouds loom, old memories resurf  
old habits always die hard.

My heart aches, *burns* for everything I've ever desired. She will be

And this time, I will stop at nothing to win her heart. Once and fo  
*How far will a grumpy mountain man go to convince his best friend  
their love a second chance?*

**If you love a steamy mountain man dressed in flannel and a big**

heart, then it's time to meet Colt in Trapped by the Mountain N

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**heart, then it's time to meet Colt in Trapped by the Mountain Man.**

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# CHAPTER ONE

Hannah

“**Y**OU’RE NOT GOING! AND that’s final!”

I feel the anger simmering in my belly. My brother is so opposite me, a well-fitted suit making his shoulders broader than usual. The darkness in his eyes hides behind a glare of pure irritation. It would frighten me if I didn’t know him like I do.

“Xavier, please,” I try to cut in.

It’s no use.

Xavier slams a fist on the desk, cutting my words short. He stands around and meets me eye to eye. “No. This is my company. I don’t care you’re my older sister – this is work. This is business, not just some fun where you can do what you want. I’m not sending you up Falls Mountain with the weather forecast looking the way it is.”

His breath heats my face. The stench of the morning coffee steaming from the desk behind him surrounds me as he pushes his chest out and extends a hand tower over me.

“But this was a chance for me to get out of the office. I’m completely *exhausted*. You said so yourself!”

“You’re not going! It’s dangerous up there at the best of times, let alone when it’s wet and stormy.”

“Xavier, you’re being ridiculous—”

“No!” Xavier yells, his face turning crimson. “End. Of. Story.”

I shift on the balls of my feet and feel the irritation shrivel away inside my lips are sealed tight as Xavier spins around and reels off something about the wild snow and the time he hyperventilated just because he had a snow machine that was slightly too cold.

I don’t bother arguing, though. I never do, there’s no point.

In this office, I have no opinion. There is no fight worth having. No one to reason with.

standing    Yep.

ial. The    This is my life.

irighten    And this is how it’s always been.

“... so the doctor told me to always wait before resuming treatment to my balls. That should be a lesson to you, Hannah.”

“Oh, fuck! Xavier, I don’t need to know that!”

unches    “What?” My brother shrieks. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to get you to care if through to you...”

n game    I force a barricade over my ears. That’s enough talk about my balls. I’ve had my share of Creektesticles for one day. A lifetime, in fact. Instead, I stare just above Xavier’s

shoulder to see out the floor to ceiling window that overlooks Falls Creek.

ing on    I nod along, pretending to listen.

ends to    The small town behind the glass is bustling on a busy Monday morning.

People are smiling, friends conversing happily as they head to work. The

trained, is belting down as people rush to start their week with a skip in their step. Their happiness evident in the way they trot along, excitedly chatting and laughing.

it alone *I wish I felt the same.*

There have been no signs of the bad weather forecasted this morning. I stepped into Xavier's office. Since I started working at my brother's real estate firm, my first task of each day is to touch base with him. He's a real estate ide. My highly successful, mainly due to his ability to sweet talk investors into buying out the spending on run down investment properties. The stupidly high price of the shabby, beat-up townhouse in our small town is all down to Xavier's sales skills. He's been voted on the country's biggest up and coming entrepreneur list for the past two years – and he fucking owns that badge like no other. As for me, I started this morning with my usual stop at *What A Mouth*, a local coffee shop where my caramel latte sat waiting for me upon my arrival. The barista gave me a smile and told me to pay my growing tab whenever I want. He knows I'm good for it – I'm their most loyal customer. I then crossed the street, grabbed the morning paper and sipped my coffee while sitting on the same bench I've sat at for the past three years.

The park bench is dedicated to some politician who helped Falls Church bring home a professional football team, but the golden plaque with his name is to get removed and engraved with my name instead.

I have my routine set out from the moment I wake up, to the moment I brush my teeth, to my toothbrush in the third hole on the left of the canister on my bathroom sink every single night.

“Now, we still have all these files that need sorting,” Xavier said, smacking a stack of yellow folders with his open palm. He gave me a menacing smile and I want to throw the stapler on the desk at him. “I know how much you love filing, am I right?”

“Oh, you know me,” I say, sarcastically wagging a finger at my brother. The image of driving up the picturesque mountainside is quickly fading

had better get started then. What a busy week I'm going to have."

ing as I I grab the stack of folders and kick the door open. A horrible feeling  
r's realwalking into the same old boring daydream grips me so tight I  
becomesuffocate.

o over- A team of dedicated workers on the floor are all focused on their  
ce of amaking phone calls, taking offers and searching for new  
s savvyOccasionally, one will glance up at the clock, but this group of co-  
reneursselected workers is one of the best teams we've ever had – or so I  
er. every single family dinner I have to endure.

lug, the "Morning, Hannah!"

arrival. I glance to the cubicle next to mine as I set the folders down. "C  
never I Matilda. How was your weekend?"

Then I She flicks her blond hair over her shoulder and spins in her chair  
on thebad. I was trying to catch the game, but couldn't find anyone to go with

glances down at her nails, and I see the long lashes flick up the wall.  
s Creekalways do. "Do you know if Xavier likes football? Maybe I could ask  
his name I feel my eyes roll as I settle down behind my computer screen. "

think so, Matilda. He's always saying how busy he is, so I don't  
nt I slotwatching sweaty men run around in tight trousers would be his thing."

throom Matilda breathes a dreamy sigh. "Oh... I just wish for a man like him  
know?"

r says, "A sweaty one with tight trousers?"

s me a Matilda laughs and flaps a lazy hand at me. "No, silly. Your brother  
"And I just so dreamy..."

I grab the first folder off the stack that's barricading me in my small  
brother.the bullpen. I can't help but give yet another eye roll. If you're keeping  
ling. "I

that's two already. And it's only Monday morning. "I know. But making flight trousers would be a better option."

I could I start tapping on my keyboard, not really typing but trying to evade further conversation about Matilda's not-so-secret-crush on my brother's tasks, I don't understand how he's still single. Constantly I see women clients themselves at him, but he's too damn hard working to see their advances carefully. And then there's me, signing up for all the dating apps only to get told guys with bent dicks sending pictures to me all day long. I mean, I've seen a lot of naked men, but a ninety-degree angle right in the middle of a tiny, hardened shaft is enough to suggest it wouldn't work too well in the love making department.

I've only ever lasted long enough on one of those apps to have one conversation. "Not even that was a complete failure. I'm sorry, but if you show up wearing a shirt that says '*I Heart My Mommy*', then I don't think you're ready for a serious relationship."

"I scan the computer screen and when a pop-up alerts me to the fact that I don't supposed to be leaving in twenty minutes, a weird growl forms in my throat. Just as my lip curls and I grip the mouse hard, Matilda's head appears from behind the stack of files.

"Hey, are you going soon?" Matilda says, her red lips matching her summery dress. "That inspection on the mountain cabin is due, isn't it?"

I nod and glance at Xavier's office. "I've been told I can't go. Because of the storm is coming, it's 'too dangerous'."

My fingers wag between air quotes and Matilda follows the dagger part of shooting towards our boss' closed door. Her cheeks relax and her eyes light up, with a mixture of affection, lust and deep contemplation. *Fuck*. I hope

Maybe she doesn't tell me what she's thinking right now - I don't want to think about his balls again.

Maybe any "Oh, he's so caring... and gorgeous... and-"

Mr. Add another eyeroll to the tally. "Yeah. He's fantastic. Let's just leave that, yeah?"

Yes. The thought of a drive up the mountainside was what got me through that weird long, boring weekend of sitting on my couch bingeing Netflix all day, haven't between ordering Uber Eats deliveries and wasting the hours in a hot tub. I was excited to hit the road. It was a chance to prove to Xavier that I'm not as useless as he thinks.

"If it really means that much to you... Just go." Matilda shrugs, and catches me staring blankly at the screen.

"I can't just go," I say, clicking the meeting alert in the corner of the screen so it disappears.

"Of course you can. It's not like he's going to fire you. Plus, it's just a rain, right?" Matilda's blue eyes gleam at me and for the first time I've known her, she isn't talking complete trash.

I lean forward on my chair. "You really think I can?"

She shrugs. "Of course. Maybe change your rental vehicle, though our reservation team only ever book those tiny compact cars because they're cheaper."

A laugh bounces off my chest. "Yeah, I think it's called cost cutting."

"Well, just to play it safe, why don't you talk to Dave in the operations department on the way out? I'm sure he could get something sorted quickly."

I look towards Xavier's office. The door is closed, but I can see him holding a phone to his ear, staring out of the window. It's so unlike him to even be considering this, but I'm tired of my dull, boring life. The

have to routine of doing the same thing every single day is mind-numbing. Dammit, I'm ready for more.

I stand and flatten down my shirt. "Thank you, Matilda. I will go."  
She claps in front of her face frantically. "Yay!"

"And if *he* asks..." I jerk my head in the direction of Xavier's office. "I'm working from the café today. I'll be back by nightfall; the cabin looks pretty straightforward."

Matilda sighs and the longing in her eyes returns. "You really think you can doask me? Oh, wow. What will I say? He never talks to me."

I shake my head, grab the file for the inspection and race towards the door.

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I shake my head, grab the file for the inspection and race towards accounts.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## Colt

A COLD RAINDROP FALLS on my arm and I roll my sleeve grip the axe harder. The skies are darker than they were five minutes ago, and maybe for once, those fucking jerkoffs at the weather office can be wrong.

“Argh!” I swing the axe and the wood splits in half. Almost dead centered. “Only another fifteen to go.”

I kick aside the split log and stack the next one on the splitting pile. Another whack sends this to the ready pile, and I’ve barely broken a sweat.

A balmy breeze stirs in the trees behind my cabin, but I’ve been here long enough to know the storm is at least an hour away. I have plenty of time to prepare the garden and secure my tool shed, but as a distant crack of thunder echoes down the mountainside, something about the smell hanging in the air tells me this storm isn’t normal.

I split another log and toss it aside, eyeballing the bend in the trail. Another angry growl rumbles in the sky and I’m second-guessing my decision. I know this land better than I know myself, that’s what you get when you put your heart and soul into something for so long.

This land is my life. Literally.

I lift the axe and swing it over my shoulder. When I connect with the wood, a crash louder than anything I've ever heard before sends me face down to the ground, shielding my head like a lost child.

"Fuck! What the-"

I look up to the skies and heavy rainfall begins to fall around me. The sky lights up with bright flashes of lightning in all directions. It's a brilliant show put on by Mother Nature herself with flashes illuminating the darkness.

"Fuck me. I was wrong."

I grab the logs and start tossing them in the wheelbarrow, shoving up my flannel sleeves cutting into my forearms. I steer the load across the paddock and quickly latch the tool shed closed. Cascades of rain are won't down the old tin roof that I've sworn I'll replace a million times, but the rusty old lock shut across the door and step back out into the rain face. With as much hustle as a big man like myself can manage, I go to the shed quickly but my eyes catch on something gleaming in the far paddock surface. The yellow glow of headlights in the distance appears momentarily. As quickly as it flicked before my eyes, it disappears again.

Up here I hold a hand over my eyes, feeling as if they're playing a trick of time. Maybe it was just lightning? Surely no one would be so stupid as to crash off the mountain in this weather? I know my hatred of pretty much everything in humankind sometimes gets in the way of my emotions, I mean, that's why I escaped to the mountains over ten years ago.

Even the trees. But seriously, the mountains are dangerous at the best of times. In weather like this, any dipshit who is driving on the slippery roads right in front of you should be shot.

Nah. It couldn't have been a car.

A glacial burn of devastatingly cold air gushes around me as I squint across the downpour. It's not in my nature to come to the aid of a giant, burly mountain man with an impressive beard and ripped flannel shirts, but I'm not a complete idiot. The wheelbarrow is quickly filling with a thin layer of rainfall and the sky I've split is getting soaked. The collection of hand-picked vegetables is getting a good wash but now I'm just looking down at the pile and hoping I've picked enough to last until the storm passes.

*I didn't think it would be this big.*

I grab the handles of the barrow and go to head back to the cabin, but the lights appear again.

"Fucking hell," I growl, dropping the wheelbarrow with a thud. It tips over. "If these assholes are lost, I'll give them something to be afraid of."

My long hair is hanging over my shoulders as I stomp across the paddock by squeezing the moisture gathering in my beard. My boots are heavy, and a layer of mud clinging with each step I take towards the vehicle waiting at the bottom gate of my paddock.

My cheeks heat the closer I get. Seriously, that person is thick. I drive up jumping out of the vehicle now. A growl deepens in my throat as I see them start to unhook the gate while using a fucking clipboard as an umbrella. "Who the fuck are you?" I shout, my voice booming.

I trek through the mud, watching the figure scuttle back towards the vehicle as the gate swings open.

"Stay there. Stay the fuck there!"

My legs swing into a jog that makes the earth vibrate beneath my feet. I'm nearly seven-feet tall, and if my height doesn't scare this lunatic away

nd I'm maybe a fist denting the hood of their shitty Japanese car will.

rescue, A loud crash of thunder pierces the air as I meet the wet sheet of steel with an vehicle shakes beneath the force of my thump. The black wipers are fasshole across the windshield like crazy wet birds, but they still don't clear the e woodrain enough for me to be able to see inside the vehicle.

les I've "Get the fuck off my property!" I stomp around to the driver's w e small Fuck. This is why I hate people. They think just because they're in the of nowhere they can do whatever the hell they want. "What the hell think you're doing anyway?"

ut then, The window rolls down and fuck me.

It's like the rain has stopped. The howling wind has stalled. And m almost has damn near exploded.

scared "I'm here for the inspection," a sweet voice sings from inside the ve I gulp down, my throat suddenly dry.

addock, *It's her. It's actually her.*

a thick Soft, glossy red hair glows before my eyes. Instantly, it's like the w g at the ripped my soul from inside my deadened casket and thrown me back a years.

They're A light smattering of freckles is dotted across the beautiful girl's I watch They're adorable. They decorate her face right down to the tip of he brella. Something about her draws me closer as the rain streams down and p my open mouth.

rds the My heart has stopped beating. Like, literally. I swear.

Fuck. I thought that was just something that happened in storyte those shitty blockbuster Hollywood romance films.

ne. I'm A warm gaze coasts over my skin. The biggest, brightest smile I've ay, then years reflects beautiful white teeth and a mouth that is screaming out

to kiss it.

mel. The “Get in.”

lapping The voice is the same as the one I hear in my dreams. Every. Single  
e heavy It’s like a soft and gentle breeze layered with kindness and compassion  
of sunshine breaking through the stormy clouds above us.

indow. “Get in!”

middle Now there’s an urgency in her voice and it pulls me from the  
do you overtaking my body. That, and the splitting of the sky above me with  
earth-shattering crack of thunder bringing me back to real life.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

y chest “I’m Hannah Mell,” she says, gorgeous green eyes growing wide  
from *Mell Estate and Planning* and we’ve been ordered to fu  
hicle. inspection on your property.”

I swallow down. My brows join the thoughts circling my mind in v  
overtime.

ind has There’s so much I need to unpack right there. And with my mind ra  
ll those the sight of the only woman I’ve ever loved, I’m not even sure where

Does she not recognize me? If she really is here for an inspection, i  
cheeks.name on the paperwork? She would recognize me from that, I kn  
er nose.would.

ools in She knows who I am, we went to our prom together. We spent hou  
hours laughing, chatting and living out all the angst a teenager lives t  
in those turgid years. Maybe, after all these years, after a decade of li  
lling or the wilderness alone, maybe Hannah is finally here to tell me why sh  
returned my calls after *that* kiss?

seen in I try to clear my throat, instead I end up coughing out some word  
for medon’t intend.

“Inspection? What fucking inspection?”

“Didn’t you get the notice?” Hannah asks, looking up at the fall  
Night with concern. “Do you want to get out of the rain? Run around and get  
1. A ray “I didn’t get a fucking notice. There is nothing to inspect.” My barr  
vibrates against the vehicle, and I feel my cheeks heating. “The cabin  
I built it with my own bare hands, so if there’s a problem, I can damn  
tranceit myself.”

another Hannah’s eyes catch on mine and I’m almost expecting her to drop  
and burst out laughing.

But she doesn’t.

r. “I’m “Listen, I’m sure everything is fine...”

lfill an “Yes, it is *fine*,” I snap. “What isn’t fine is the fact that I’m standi  
getting soaked while talking to some idiot who thinks it’s safe to dri  
workingfucking mountain when...” I step back and hold my arms out, a weir  
lifting one side of my face. “...hello! There’s a big fucking storm com  
acing at She shrieks and begins biting her nails. “Oh, I know. I know. I sh  
to start.have come.”

sn’t my “You think?!” I bark, but when she flinches, a hint of regret pull  
ow shebelly.

A burning feeling in my stomach shoots up my throat. It dries in  
rs uponHer eyes cast across the paddock, through the windshield and I see a  
throughpain glaze over the moisture gathering in the corners of her eyes.

iving in The wind blows and it’s like I’m thrown back twenty years. Fifteen  
e neverFuck. I don’t know. It’s been a long fucking time, that’s what it is.

But she hasn’t changed at all.

s that I If anything, she’s more beautiful than ever.

A white, tailored shirt is showing off an ample rack that I spent n

school years craving to see beneath. I never told Hannah how I felt, not until that night when I finally got her all to myself. My grand plan came to life that night - high school prom was the moment I made my move.

A crush on my best friend grew over the years. She was my obsession. I felt love for the first time, and I told myself each and every night that I would fix going to feel the same. I took it slow, built the foundations of a friendship until I felt sure the connection was there.

Then the final step to win her once and for all: I just had to tell her I loved her.

Sure, my life at home felt like torture. Thinking about Hannah's smile brought me a momentary relief from the barrage of insults cast at me endlessly by my parents. You can expect that when you're the product of a life-changing mistake, your parents didn't want children, but one drunken night later, abortion was the only option in my mother's books.

Instead, I suffered through a loveless upbringing. No siblings. No grandparents. No family.

Nothing.

Hannah was my everything.

And finally, just as my lips sealed the promise that I craved. The promise of having someone else's heart beat alongside mine... she was gone.

I ran away. I retreated up the mountains and never looked back.

"Get in!" Hannah screams as lightning strikes a tree nearby and a crack causes us both to jump. "Before you get killed! GET IN!"

I race around and pull the door open. Hannah plants her foot on the ground and the wheels just skid round and round in the muddy bog.

"Ease it up," I say, reaching down for the gear shift. "Switch it to all-wheel drive." I slam the gearshift down and the engine cracks and groans loudly.

ot untilus. “Try it now!”

fruition Hannah grips the steering wheel. Her knuckles whiten and I’m to  
staring at her to see us flying across the bumpy paddock.

ssion. I *She doesn’t know who I am. She’s got no idea. She hasn’t recognize*  
she was “Where do I go?” Hannah cries out.

endship “Straight through there!” I point towards the opening gate by the cal  
racing towards us, approaching at an increasing speed that has my jaw  
r how Itight. “Watch out for that-”

BANG.

ile was “...wheelbarrow.”

nts. But The vehicle comes to a screeching halt, smoke bellowing from the  
ke. MyHannah’s breathing is rushed, her chest heaving through scattered l  
asn’t anMy hand is pressed up against the dash, holding my heavy body fr  
impact of the smashing blow into a wheelbarrow. I glance throu  
ncles orwindow and over the hood. The rusty wheelbarrow Hannah’s crashed  
still tumbling across the vegetable patch, leaving behind a trail of lc  
fresh produce.

Hannah reaches for the clipboard and tries a smile. “Well, the gate  
promiseCheck.” She strikes a bright red tick on the paper, laughs nervously an  
out the window. “Shall we get started on the inside first?”

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l wheel

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us. “Try it now!”

Hannah grips the steering wheel. Her knuckles whiten and I’m too busy staring at her to see us flying across the bumpy paddock.

*She doesn’t know who I am. She’s got no idea. She hasn’t recognized me.*

“Where do I go?” Hannah cries out.

“Straight through there!” I point towards the opening gate by the cabin. It’s racing towards us, approaching at an increasing speed that has my jaw locked tight. “Watch out for that-”

BANG.

“...wheelbarrow.”

The vehicle comes to a screeching halt, smoke bellowing from the engine. Hannah’s breathing is rushed, her chest heaving through scattered breaths. My hand is pressed up against the dash, holding my heavy body from the impact of the smashing blow into a wheelbarrow. I glance through the window and over the hood. The rusty wheelbarrow Hannah’s crashed into is still tumbling across the vegetable patch, leaving behind a trail of logs and fresh produce.

Hannah reaches for the clipboard and tries a smile. “Well, the gates work. Check.” She strikes a bright red tick on the paper, laughs nervously and looks out the window. “Shall we get started on the inside first?”

# CHAPTER THREE

Hannah

*F*UCK.  
If Xavier ever hears about this, I'm not sure my status as fam even save my job. Trust my luck to get me halfway up the mountain b was too late to turn around. This is why I never trust my gut – it's fucking wrong.

*And that man won't stop glaring at me.*

“Quickly, get inside,” the big grump demands.

He shoves a creaky wooden door open and steps back to allow me The door slides off the hinges and I step inside the small wooden cat slumps to the ground and falls back against the wall.

A strong scent of raw timber and lavender fills my lungs the momer inside, but a weird groan tickles the hairs on the back of my neck around and the man ducks beneath the frame of the door, gripping ea with enormous hands.

He forces it closed and shoots me a fierce look. “I guess that's against your checklist then?”

The scowl both captivates and scare's the living daylights out of m

like I should go back outside just to cool down.

I pull the clipboard in my hand closer to my chest, the growl in his voice hitting my body like a lightning bolt just blasted through the roof.

A hint of danger closes in, an oddly familiar feeling washing over me. His strong glacial colored eyes of the mountain beast make my heart stop. My skin prickles. I feel like I know him. But he's so jagged and rough... I don't know anyone like that.

That ripped flannel shirt is kinda sexy though. And that pull between his legs... that just me?

Shit.

Whatever it is, it's making my mouth dry.

I stand back and watch the way his eyes crinkle. The way his face before it creases beneath that darkened scowl that just won't let up. He's clear as always out in the sun for most of his life, and judging by the powerful chest low, short breaths, he's spent those hours chopping wood or sculpting rocky mountainside.

Either that or he's been catching fucking grizzly bears with his hands in first. "No, it seems easy enough to fix." I twist nervously on my feet, trying to figure out why my nipples are stinging with a weird tightening. "A man like you seems like the capable type."

He takes a giant step forward, watching my eyes as they coast over my body. The floorboard beneath his boot splits as he leans across my body as he throws his coat over the stand behind me.

I pause on the spot.

I don't know why, but my feet won't move.

I just stare at him as he steps back. He runs a hand through his long hair. It's sandy blond, slowly darkening as it reaches its roots above

that's so handsome I want to cry. A hint of mystery lingers in his tonecharm and attractiveness that's almost instant whenever our eyes lock.

The way he holds his jaw, the straight line of his lips, full and serious. The surrounded by rough stubble. I chew the inside of my cheek, wondering and my the roughness would feel between my legs. I know I'm soaking through I don't panties right now. I mean, he's so big and burly. So impressive masculine. I've never had someone like this so close to me, more to than us? Is I've never had anyone look at me the way he is.

"Do you have something you need to say?" He asks, a pointed look and revealing it makes me shiver.

I swallow. "Ah, ah... No. I don't think so. Do I?"  
A weird smirk curls his lips. *Fuck*. I want to bite them so bad. Why been hell is wrong with me?  
He shakes his head and stomps to the side. The floorboard cracking and when I look down, it's split in half.

"Yes. Whatever. I'll fix that, too," he barks, yanking his tree-stump leg from the hole now in the floor.

I glance behind me to dodge that look again.

The cabin is small and compact, but I'm enveloped with warm comfort despite the unwelcoming look I'm trying to hide away from. Over his fireplace takes center stage, rich dark wooden panels stagger the height of the walls surrounding it. The floor is covered in soft, plush rugs and the furniture looks handcrafted and well-loved.

I breathe in and the pine and lavender make me feel... *At home*.

I close my eyes, trying to gain some control over my body. My imagination is running wild, telling me this wasn't such a bad idea after all. I see a face

gaze, aThe smell of smoke and the warmth of the blankets thrown over the sofa help me forget that I am actually supposed to be working right now. sensual, *This doesn't feel like work.*

ng how “The snow is getting thicker,” the man says from what appears to be my kitchen. “I’m not sure you’ll be going very far today.”

ve and I bite down and scamper over the broken floorboard to look outside. e point, “Snow? What?” I gaze in wonderment out the window. “Shit... right.”

so dark A fresh burst of snowfall scatters across the greenery of the paddock a small flock of sheep hiding beneath the cover of a birch tree that is lit in the wind. The rainfall has quickly changed and wicked gusts of what the doesn't allow the snow to settle quickly. But as we stand there for a moment completely silent, the rain seems to be completely replaced by a steady s again of snow that's thicker than the stuff we get back down the mountain falling and dancing all the way to the ground.

p sized I pull my phone from my pocket, needing to capture this beautiful sight. “That won't work up here,” he grunts.

My finger slides across the screen. “The camera will. Plus, it's one of the best with and fan-dangle brand-new smart phones that can roam the world without a rustic issues.” I glance down at the blank reception bar. “Or not.”

it of the He chuckles and I swear the whole fucking cabin shakes beneath the worn weight of his amusement.

“Come on,” he says. “If you're stuck here, we may as well get this inspection over with. Unless...” He scans me up and down, eyes lit with a stupid over my body. It's the same expectant look in his eye, twinkling, striking after all. like he wants something from me. “Unless you have something to say.”

This time it's me frowning. “No... Why do you keep-”

ripped “Never mind.” He cuts me off and trudges forward, that grumpy  
w. intensifying even more. “Start here then.”

I pluck the pen from the clipboard, side-eyeing the glum expression  
be the tugging at his eyes. He looks like he’s trying to hold something in.  
work out if he hates me, or whether I’m just irritating him because he  
check his fucking mailbox for the notification of the inspection.

You’re Shit. I wonder if he even has a mailbox? Do mountain men like his  
basic reading and writing skills?

k. I see Whatever his problem is, I’m not about to start taking his shit  
ending might be a big, burly mountain of a man, but I’ve come up here to  
of windpoint. If I’m going to go against my brother’s wishes and start taking  
moment, my job, *my dreams*, seriously, then it needs to start right now.

ly swirl *I’m not a pushover. I’m not a pushover. I’m not a pushover.*

in. It’s “That sink.” I shove the tip of the pen towards the dripping tap.  
fixing. Leaking water makes wood swell and can cause rot. It also  
ght. disease and all types of disgusting molds that can make you seriously  
look around the cabin, face hardened. “Got it? Good. Moving on.”

of those I feel uneasy being so harsh. Actually, in reality, I *adore* the kitchen  
out any appetite and tiny, cluttered with various pots and pans that look older than

The stove looks like a wood-burning one, the comforting aroma of  
ath the wood bringing a sense of calm over me.

But I force those feelings back. *Be strong. No more taking shit.*

s damn I stomp forward, glaring at the firm, ice-cold stare shooting in my direction  
ngering before I move away. My palms are sweaty, my stomach squirming  
ing me going to be sick. I pace, my narrowed eyes scanning the cabin.

..” “The fireplace...” I twist. He hasn’t taken his eyes off me, by the way.  
“Any blockages? Build up of debris gone unnoticed? That can be a real

by look again with the timber cabin. Any flare ups could be disastrous. You lose everything.”

pression He shakes his head, the wet strands of long, blond hair shifting across my broad shoulders.

He didn't “No. I clean it regularly.”

He leans back against the wooden counter in the kitchen and folds his arms over his chest.

“Of course you do,” I say, trying not to peek between the gap in his shirt.

I want to cry right now; he looks so fucking gorgeous. A tree-trunk crosses over the other and I'm reminded of my old friend in the way he's standing. The way the tip of his boot points down on the ground, allowing his calf to relax and sway.

I strike the pen over the paperwork. I'm pretty sure I do it just to attract eyes, but it doesn't work. I find that gap in his shirt again, and this tiny sliver of dark smattering of his hairy chest.

This all feels so unfamiliar.

My renewed attempt at making something of myself isn't going to help. The change in attitude, sparked by the constant demands of my brother, his need to control absolutely everything is falling short.

And it's all because of the sexy man-beast in front of me.

And now, the deep timbre of big man's voice shakes me to my very core. He steps forward and says, “You really don't remember me, do you?”

His lips are so close to me. Closer. Closer. Closer.

My chest closes over and fuck, this is how it must feel to have a heart attack. My ribs tighten. My throat clenches and I'm pretty sure I've got a breathing issue.

u could He towers over me, looking down with a deep, dark expression th  
scary. Though it should be... It should have me running for my rental  
ross hismatter the weather.

But no.

It's weirdly intimate. Familiar. *Sexy*.

is arms Our eyes catch and this time, I don't look away. His breath touc  
nose and I breathe in his scent with long, purposeful breaths.

flannel Minty fresh.

Earthy and natural.

unk leg A hint of musk that takes me back to those better days. The days  
y he ishad...

ving his "Colt?" The name just leaves my mouth like a puff of air. His lips c  
I mutter his name again. "Colt Brander?"

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ne I see

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He towers over me, looking down with a deep, dark expression that's not scary. Though it should be... It should have me running for my rental car no matter the weather.

But no.

It's weirdly intimate. Familiar. *Sexy*.

Our eyes catch and this time, I don't look away. His breath touches my nose and I breathe in his scent with long, purposeful breaths.

Minty fresh.

Earthy and natural.

A hint of musk that takes me back to those better days. The days when I had...

"Colt?" The name just leaves my mouth like a puff of air. His lips curl and I mutter his name again. "Colt Brander?"

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Colt

“IT’S ABOUT FUCKING TIME,” I drawl, the hint of a smirk as Hannah’s lips stirring my stomach.

“Colt! It’s really you!” She jumps into my arms and I catch her before she’s been...”

She looks up at me, the weight of her feeling like a feather that’s gone for too long. Her eyes gleam, so fucking beautiful and green. I feel like I’ve been set on fire. Her arms are around me, draped around my neck, holding herself steady as she twists on the spot.

“Too long.”

We say the words together, like an echo in the sudden molten heat inside my cabin.

She slides down my front and I hope to hell she can’t feel the hard lump pressing against my jeans.

Every single nerve is on alert. Waiting and watching every tiny movement she makes. She grips my shoulders, holding me steady, surveying me with wide eyes. I want to lean forward and nibble her neck, bite her ear, damn well demolish her.

“I didn’t know it was you,” Hannah says through an exacerbated  
“Why didn’t you say something, Colt?”

I lead the way across to the sofa, shifting the woollen blankets to the  
“I wanted to. But I was in shock. It’s *you*.”

She smiles and settles down beside me. Her shirt shifts and I  
hardest not to stare at the top rounds of her breasts. *Goddamn*. She’s  
so damn sexy. I don’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t feel the  
hammering of my heart for this woman. She’s always done it for me. For  
twenty long, painful years later, she still does.

“I didn’t see your name on the inspection sheet.” She reaches  
for the clipboard and runs a finger down the paperwork. “It just says  
*Occupied*’. I didn’t even know that was legal...”

“It’s...” I shrug and watch the way she flicks her smooth, ginger hair over  
her shoulder.

“You let your hair grow out,” I say, reaching to hold the loose ringlet  
that wraps a gentle curve around my finger. “Like I always told you to  
trim your neck, cheeks brighten with a soft pink blush. “I told you it would look good.”

She hides a smile into the crook of her shoulder. “Stop it, Colt. You  
were the same sweet-talker then?”

I lean back on the sofa, staring at Hannah.

Having her this close, after all this time. After all the pain and  
hardened nightmares of never seeing her. Ever since that kiss. That night  
I thought I had it all.

I blow my cheeks out, squeezing my eyes shut.

“I should make us some tea,” I say, pushing up on my knees. “The  
fire can continue ripping this shithole of a cabin to shreds.”

I bring the kettle to the tap and take a moment to draw in some oxygen.

breath fills. I ignite the flame on the stove and place the kettle down, sneak  
look over my shoulder.

the side. For a few perfect moments, it feels like the world has stopped moving,  
the storm outside has passed, the snow has settled, and everything is still. I  
try my best. Hannah just sits there, breathing, blinking, searching around with  
her eyes. She gets a small smile. She moves so very slowly, and I can't help but think how natural  
she feels here.

me, and It's like she *belongs* here. This could be her home. This could be her  
home. Sheltering in the safety of *our* home, warm and snuggled up together  
for the first time like we should be.

'Owner' A low groan deepens in my throat. Fuck. I force those thoughts back  
now.

over her "I don't have any cream," I say, pouring the boiling water into the  
mug. "The storm caught me by surprise."

let that Hannah's eyes lock on mine. "That's ok. Just tea is fine."

o." Her I settle down and pass her the mug. "So now you've finally remembered  
" who the hell I am, can I ask..." She nods, slurping the mug with a sheepish  
're still guilty expression. "What the fuck do you think you're doing driving  
in the middle of a storm?"

I don't mean to sound so harsh as the words spit from my mouth. I know  
and the years and years of little-to-no hospitality has made me forget how to speak  
when I speak properly. Even if it is the girl I fell in love with all those years ago.

Hannah swallows and holds her throat as if the tea has scorched her  
insides. I'm kicking myself for speaking so firmly, but I hold a firm line.  
when you She needs to know this mountain isn't just a game. If anything ever happens  
to her, on *my* land, fuck... I wouldn't ever forgive myself.

gen as it "This isn't just somewhere that you can 'visit' whenever you feel like

aking a “I know, it was dumb.” She slams a hand on her forehead. I feel the  
her eyes and move in closer. “I was trying to prove a point.”

ng. The “Prove a point?” I bellow. “To who? Who the hell do you have to  
perfect.anything to, Hannah?”

a tight “No one! I don’t know... I was just trying to do... do...” I  
al it allscrunched face and smack against her frizzled brow. “Argh! I don’t  
ok? I don’t know what I was doing. I don’t ever know what I’m doing.  
er life. I slide across, hating the way her cheeks are puffy and red now. I  
er, justshe’s about to explode.

“Talk me through it,” I say, trying to be as gentle as I can with a vo  
ack forsounds like a tire crunching over gravel. I edge closer still, unsure if t  
Hannah gives me is a warning to back off or not. “You’ve been holdi  
e mugs.this, haven’t you?”

She nods and blinks silently up at me. “See... nothing has cl  
Nothing. Even when you’ve been gone all these years, Colt. You’re  
mberedstand up guy, you know that?”

epishly I shrug. “Someone’s gotta be.”

up here She smirks and allows me to curl an arm around her, pulling her so  
get a waft of sweet vanilla and cinnamon. She lets out a long, deep s  
Perhapsmakes her sink into the soft cushions behind us. The fire cracks and I  
peak tositting here, holding the best friend I ever had, staring into her leafy  
igo. eyes, wanting nothing more than to tell her to never leave.

ied her “Tell me what’s going on.”

n stare. “Well, where should I start?” She releases another sigh before draw  
ppeneddeep breath that makes her chest explode. “My brother ripped away t  
exciting thing in my life. Getting out of that stale office? Heading on t  
ce it.”

pain in and seeing the world beyond the same, dull fucking streets, day in, c  
Fuck, I've wanted that for so long."

o prove "You work for your brother?"

She nods. "Yeah, unfortunately. He might be my little brother, but  
Another hell of a lot smarter than I am. His company is on the rise and I  
: know, holding on for the ride."

"Come on... Xavier was always a good guy, but I'm sure he's fair."  
it's like Her eyes pop. "This promotion is something I've been begging  
doesn't trust me to undertake even basic inspections, so this was a b  
ice that Dad has drilled it into him right from the beginning of starting  
he look company... *Don't trust Hannah... Don't trust Hannah...* You rememb  
ng onto is was like? My parents still won't let me live a life of my own."

I nod along, listening intently.  
anged. She continues telling me about her struggles. An emotional outpour  
e still a has my belly twitch with a feeling of guilt for not being there for her.

I know Hannah's pain throughout high school. Xavier casted a big :  
over his sister and she never got the attention like he did. Lik  
close I teenagers, she wanted independence. She wanted to be her own  
igh that allowed to grow and live for herself.

'm just But she also strived for the love of her parents.

y green Something I knew the pain of all too well.

"So why don't you quit? You don't *have* to work for him, right? Y  
get your own job somewhere else?"

ing in a "Ha. Yeah, right. With what qualifications?" Hannah glares. I  
he only feeling pretty useless right now. "You don't get it, Colt. It's fine, yo  
he road had to worry. Your parents were..."

"Assholes," I growl, cutting in before she can even think about

lay out them any credit for a shitty upbringing. “And yours aren’t. At least weren’t the last time I checked.”

Hannah rolls my arm from around her and closes her body off from me. Suddenly the warmth in the room has escaped into the wintry snow outside.

“Exactly. You disappeared, Colt. You left without saying a word. I knew where you went. Still, to this day, no one knows where you are.” She runs a gut-kicking glare the length of me. I could tell her she’s a big deal who didn’t return my calls for days after the event. Instead, I stare at her as they move, remembering that kiss. *God*. It’s fucking torture. I’ve never whithered so much, so badly my entire life. She ruined me for anyone else. My heart has belonged to her ever since that night I laid the kiss on her.

“You don’t know what it’s like to have it tough. Up here all alone. Looking that looks around the cabin. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand. You know everything, Colt. Everything.”

A burning feeling ignites. I rise from the sofa, placing the mug of tea on the table, trying my best to hold the burning split between my eyes.

“You wanna know why I left, Hannah?” I feel my heart racing.

This isn’t how I had planned the reunion in my head. When I laid a night thinking about her, I pictured being a hell of a lot closer to her than I am right now.

“You really wanna know?” My chest is fucking exploding with emotion I haven’t felt in years. “It was because of you. Did you ever stop to think about that while you’re drowning in your own self-pity? Huh?”

She straightens. “Me? What the hell did I do?”

I fall to my knees, grab either side of her face and hold her steady. She’s so painfully beautiful. So goddamn gorgeous. And stubborn.

ist they Jesus Christ.

She hasn't changed. And that's the damn problem.

om me. She's still just as wonderful as I remember.

wstorm "This. You did this."

I pull her into me, our lips colliding together with a heat that de  
No one instantly. A twist inside my chest grips me hard and I slide a tongue

' Hannah's soft lips. She parts them, allowing me in only for a moment,  
the one long enough for me to taste her again.

her lips I want more.

wanted I want her.

and my I want to make her feel as good on the inside as she makes me fe  
shouldn't be saying these things about herself.

..” She I step back, breaking the kiss and releasing my hard grasp.

u have “Ten years.” My voice is raspy and firm. It's shaky and fucking terr  
the way she's destroying me inside. “It took me ten years to get a  
a to the living up here. I've been on the brink of falling to a devastating deatl  
times. And you know what? There are times when I wouldn't have ca  
did die up here all alone. And it's all because of you. Don't tell me  
wake at understand what it's like to have it tough. Every day up here has  
han we battle.”

Hannah flicks her eyes up at me. Something painful pulls in my che  
otion I race out the back door and don't look back.

k about Even when the door crashes to the floor, obviously sliding of the  
again. Fucking shitty cabin.

I leave it hanging on its hinges. Fuck it.

he's so I storm through the wind, shielding my eyes against the snow. S  
breath, I reach inside the vehicle sitting in my driveway and twist th



They fall in my hand and I just stare at them, struggling to even thoughts in my mind.

*She can't leave. She can never leave.*

I crawl beneath the vehicle, locate the fuel line and reach for the pocketknife attached to my belt.

Tears swell in my eyes as gas spills around me the moment the line is cut. Liquid flows, burning my nose and narrowly missing my mouth.

I shuffle from underneath the car and stare back at the cabi- netry, drenching all around me.

*She can never leave me.*

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They fall in my hand and I just stare at them, struggling to even out the thoughts in my mind.

*She can't leave. She can never leave.*

I crawl beneath the vehicle, locate the fuel line and reach for the pocketknife attached to my belt.

Tears swell in my eyes as gas spills around me the moment the line breaks. Liquid flows, burning my nose and narrowly missing my mouth.

I shuffle from underneath the car and stare back at the cabin, rain drenching all around me.

*She can never leave me.*

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# CHAPTER FIVE

## Hannah

**C**OLT RETURNS TO THE cabin a few minutes after stealing my breath. I'm still on high alert – what the fuck was all that about? He has snow smattered in his long hair, a deep scowl reemerging on his face. He tugged the long, blond hair up in a rough ponytail and I feel my fingers brush for my lips as he storms across the room, disappears up a dark hallway, and slams a door shut.

The cabin shakes and, just like the back door, the force of his slam sends the old timber door falling off its hinges.

“I’ll fucking fix it!” Colt shouts from behind the wall somewhere.

I can’t help but smile as the sound of a shower tinkers through the creak of the door.

What the hell was that? That kiss? That outburst.

Did he really come up here to escape me? Did he leave Falls Creek because I was so confused that night that I just ran?

That kiss meant everything to me. I haven’t thought about it much only because I’ve trained my brain to forget everything that Colt I ever did for me.

I should be pleased.

He has everything up here. He seems happy, though it goes without saying he's *changed*. I couldn't even recognize him through the weathered skin on his face. He's bulkier, bigger and I'm pretty sure he's trying to grow to match the brawny man look he's got going on.

And this cabin... wow.

It's simply gorgeous. Homey. Rustic. It's perfectly natural, nothing fancy and no big brand names to be seen. I can see myself curling up by the fireplace, devouring a book with actual pages that are dirty on the edges from being read over and over again.

ing my The entire cabin is purely authentic, just like the man who owns it.

out? He As I feel my belly squirm with a gooey happiness, I can pinpoint the moment I lost Colt from my life. Maybe he's right... Maybe I should have kissed him that night? He left soon after I stopped returning his calls. And that's right about when I started putting on weight. It's when I

locking myself away, cutting ties with old friends and blocking out the world. The long nights chatting on the phone were gone. Listening and laughing until the sun set and my parents screamed at me to get off the phone. That moment made me smile in a way that no one else ever could.

crooked And then one day... it was all gone.

My teenage years were spent with Colt, and they were the happiest moments of my life.

behind But that kiss scared me. If I went through with whatever it was that his heart was promising, I risked losing the one thing that I had treasured most, but one thing that had treasured *me* and been there no matter what.

3rander Having Colt's heart wasn't an option because losing him would hurt so much.

I trudge around the cabin, taking in the rough interior as the noise saying, shower teases me. *He's naked in there, you know...* My finger drags tone in the timber wall, the texture surprisingly smooth as my lips burn. Old a beard nails hang from the timber in places, and if I was looking hard enough sure I would find at least ten faults within the structure without leaving living area.

ng fake Somehow, I see past it all.

he fire, *It's so beautiful.*

n being “We should get started on that checklist,” Colt’s deep voice bellow behind me.

I turn and the color must drain from my face when I see him standing there, shirtless with just a towel around his waist. “Uh, uh, yes...”

d never I’m momentarily dumbstruck. Unable to move.

is calls. I think my brain is trying to ignore the pebbles of water sliding down I began bare chest. Gliding across his well-defined muscles as they dip beneath world. dark hair trailing down and disappearing below the towel.

ughing I have to squeeze my eyes shut just so I stop staring.

ie. Colt A big, broad chest darkens the room and holy shit... I’m paralyzed.

“Do me in the living room first,” Colt says, his voice like a deep my daydreamy state.

happiest My brows snap. “What?!”

Every chiseled ridge pulls his abdomen tight. “I said do the living room first.”

ed. The My heart releases. *Fuck.*

“What did you think I said?” Colt growls, that fierce tone making my nipples tingle.

I can see the strength and power coiled around his bronzed skin

of the wonder I survived my parents disappointed looks and disparaging comments across whenever he was around.

rusty “Nothing. I didn’t-” I pause, stopping to get my head straight. I sigh, I’m even possible with him standing there like that. “The report. Letting the started....”

I bite down on the pen, peering through the tops of my eyes to see him puts a shirt on first. He doesn’t. And something heats my core like before.

from “Are you... staying like that?”

He shrugs and I’m resisting the urge to pluck the towel that clinging to his hips. “Yeah, why?”

I shake my head. “No reason.”

*Big fucking reason. I can see it poking through the cotton.*

own his We work through the living room, my hand shaking with every breath the mark on the sheet. Colt tells me about the structure, where the supports lie and how much wind resistance he’s put into the outside structure.

“I can show you when the weather clears,” he says, leading the way down a dark corridor. “And down here, a bedroom.” He pushes a door open and an echo in right. “And this one is the bathroom.”

I chew my lip, hardly able to stop the teasing way his firm ass tucks beneath the towel when he walks.

g room “So one bedroom? Or two?”

Colt turns and the rich blueness in his eyes connects with me. His face hardened still, I haven’t seen that smile since he broke out in that room during my outburst earlier. Right about the time he clasped my face, yanked me to his chest and swallowed me like a hungry bear.

cin. No I can still taste him.

ments I can feel the warmth of his hot tongue, sliding across my mouth.

Why did he have to pull away?

f that's "The generator sits outside this window." Colt steps around a  
t's getclothes on the floor.

Without even realizing, we've stepped into what I can only assume  
e if he bedroom. A large bed takes up most of the space, the white sheets ap  
e neversoft and inviting. The room is bathed in a soft light that would b  
cheerful on a bright sunny day, but somehow, with the strong scent  
and Colt in the room, it remains warm and alluring.

g to his A set of drawers by the bed catches my eye, where a collection o  
trinkets rests atop the burgundy wood. A comforting scent draws me  
into the room, and I glance down to see what looks like a woman's h  
laying on the floor.

d tick I "Oh," I say, the noise coming out involuntarily.

t beams Colt's gaze follows mine and he drops to collect the brown, leather l  
straightens the long shoulder strap and squeezes the silver butto  
y downengraved with the letter 'C'. The bag clamps shut and the more I lc  
1 to ourmore it looks like an old compact waist bag.

"What is that?" I ask, frowning.

ightens Colt lifts the bag and loops it over his head. "It's my promise bag."

"A promise bag?"

He nods. "That's right. It's a personal bag that I made from materi  
face is gathered over the years. Men of the land used to carry them, storing  
vealing items or treasures that they have gathered in their travels. Often, the  
forward meaningful to the owner and gave them a sense of belonging in unis  
nature."

I step in, feeling drawn by the bag. "Can I see inside?"

Colt allows a weak smile to creep along his face. It's the first time relaxed since he kissed me. A wave of relief floods my body.

He lifts the bag off his neck and slowly, he drops the leather strap over his shoulders. With big hands gently gliding across my skin, he adjusts the bag so it rests just above my hip.

"I don't use it much. It was one of the first projects I did to keep me busy." His gravelly voice burns against my face. "It was a distraction, I put off building this cabin for so long and things like making this bag make me feel like I belonged here."

"I think you belong here."

His eyes flash down at me. "Really? Is that what that report says?" He glances to my side where I'm gripping the clipboard. "Because I'm sure I saw a whole bunch of crosses on there."

"That's just a sheet of paper. It means nothing, Colt." I drift closer, suddenly moist when he swipes a tongue across them. *Irresistible*. "You know that's this. With your own bare hands. Do you know how incredible that is?" He shifts uncomfortably. "If only the fucking doors would stop off."

I should giggle. But I don't.

"... and the plumbing... Yeah, I wasn't completely honest about that." I step in closer, allowing him to keep talking.

I like it that way – he's distracted.

"...the roof is rusty and needs replacing. I've never got around to it because-

My chest touches his, the clipboard falling to the ground when I let my hand reach out for the heat of his skin. He keeps talking, staring down at me with the most amazing glint in his eyes.



ne he's I see his jaw move. The words reeling from those lips, teasing every nerve at the tip of my tongue.

ver my The strength of his body soars through my touch, burning my pale the bagbreath trembles across my skin, sending shivers of desire to my panties. I look to my hands, they're flailing, fumbling to release themselves from around his waist. The second it falls to the floor, Colt's large hand, really, me by the waist.

g made My body responds.

I melt into his touch, embracing him, whimpering softly and allowing him to deem control over the moment.

s?" He He lifts me, tossing me to the bed and crawling across the mattress in a pretty shape of a hulking beast. Wide shoulders and a big, heavy chest. Ready to consume me.

his lips I am his. Completely his, forever.

ou built "Colt..."

He stoops over me, darkness in his eyes. "Hannah..."

falling "Colt, I never wanted to leave you."

He slides between my legs, my core throbbing, desperate for his touch. "Don't go, Hannah. Stay with me."

it." I pull him on top of me, sealing the kiss with a deep moan that disappears somewhere between the sheets. He kisses my neck and my shoulder, kisses my throat, crawling up and down my body, pulling and tugging at my clothes off with quick, fast desperation that makes his movements clumsy.

go and Colt deepens our kiss, mumbling something about staying that I can't choose to ignore or my heart doesn't truly believe. His tongue sweeps my mouth and I forget everything. I taste a mixture of freedom

ery weteverything I've ever dreamed of. Everything this mountain threatened  
from me, my life, my safety, security, and a heart protected so fie  
lm. His could never be broken.

soaked Now, it's all coming loose.

e towel I never want to go back. In this moment, this is everything.

ids grip

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everything I've ever dreamed of. Everything this mountain threatened to take from me, my life, my safety, security, and a heart protected so fiercely it could never be broken.

Now, it's all coming loose.

I never want to go back. In this moment, this is everything.

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# CHAPTER SIX

## Colt

**M**Y MOUTH WON'T LET go. Hannah cups my face, hold tight, drawing me closer so our lips never separate.

“Fuck,” she breathes, green eyes hooded.

I groan, kicking the sheets back so they gather at the base of the bed. Hannah clutches my chest, nails dragging across my skin. I hope she leaves a permanent mark along with all the other scars from the mountain. I hope she leaves a mark on my skin with an imprint, because if I fuck this up, if I force her away from me for good, if I never see her in my life again, I want to remember this moment.

“Colt... This is...”

“Perfect.”

Something detonates inside me, stealing her words like they belong to me. I collapse down. I kiss her harder, plunge my hand in the mattress, feel the warmth of her body beneath me. I'm so fucking hard, grinding against her leg as if it soothes the aching throb hanging heavy between my legs.

“I need you,” I grunt, biting her lip. “I need you more than I've ever needed anything before.”

She nips me back. “I know. This feels right, Colt.” She interrupts another kiss. “Why were we so stupid?”

“I was stupid, Hannah.”

Her tongue slides across mine and she’s ruining me even more than she already has.

“No. You weren’t.”

I couldn’t stay mad at her. I’ve never been mad at her – I’ve hated her for running away. That’s it. I should have stayed. I should have fought for this. Instead, I wimped my way to the farthest mountain I could find here, missing out on this... this perfection.

But that’s why she has to stay. I can’t let her leave and I’ll do anything to make her realize we’re meant to be.

Shock waves ripple through me, and I slide down Hannah’s body. Her clothes are somewhere on the floor, no longer required. The softness of her belly heats my mouth. I kiss her and trace my fingers over the soft curves of her stomach. I know she’s self-conscious – she’s squirms whenever I touch the love handles that have been driving me crazy all

And that’s the point.

She needs to know what I see. She needs to feel beautiful, because she is more stunning than the morning sunshine on a dewy pasture.

“You’re beautiful, baby girl,” I say, holding her steady to stop the seconds and I kiss her belly, gently shifting down towards the scent of her armpits. I take a moment at her chest, tweaking her perfectly pink nipples, pulling one into my mouth and plucking the other. I want to taste her, feel her

against my tongue but I demand my body to take it slow. I need to show her what she does for me, how she makes me feel inside, how much I treasure every moment I get to touch her.

ts with Maybe, just maybe... If I can do that, I might stand a chance at keep  
here despite what I've done to make sure she never leaves me again.

A sense of tenderness grips me as I run my hands over every inch  
of her body. I drop, kissing the stretch marks on her hips. They're dark and  
but I love them. It's a sign of who she is and where she's come from  
she's been through.

myself If living on a rugged mountain has taught me anything, it's that every  
mark has a story. Every mark means something. Every scar, every wound.  
I hid part of a story.

And Hannah's story is one I've fallen in love with.

thing to "Colt, you don't have to..."

I crawl back up the smooth, soft skin, brush the hair from her eye  
lid. Her head the side of her face.

side of her "You're so beautiful. So pure. So magnificently precious." I feel my  
heart roundbouncing with joy with every word I mumble against her cheek. "I've  
been waiting for this moment for too damn long not to appreciate every perfect  
day. You, baby."

Hannah gazes back at me, flushed cheeks deepening with color. God  
damn fuck, she's pretty. She wets her bottom lip, pulling me in for a kiss before  
me down her body again.

quirm. "That's my girl," I growl against her smooth skin.

possession. I She chokes out a laugh, splitting her thighs as I roll down between  
her legs, the flush taking over her body, heating her skin as I take control  
of her wetness way she's panting has me excited – we're just getting started.

show her "Spread those legs for me, baby girl," I say, guiding her thighs w  
ay they reveal a glistening pussy so beautiful I'm sure this is how I die. "Holy  
You're soaked already."

ing her She fights back a laugh. “Stop it.”

“I won’t.”

1 of her I lean in, inhaling her sweet scent of pure wetness. Something prim  
d wide, at my insides, something wicked and wild that demands an animalisti  
n, what that forms somewhere deep in my chest. It leaves the back of my thr  
allow my nose to trail up her slit, breathing in every perfect inch.

rything I remind myself to take it slow.

It’s all Treasure this. Treasure every fucking second.

Her breath catches and I slide my tongue up her entrance, my  
gripping the insides of her smooth legs. I take it nice and slow. N  
slow. Purposeful movements search her pussy, my tongue nudging he  
yes and she trembles beneath my light, feathered touches.

The sound she makes is just about as amazing as her swollen lips, p  
y heart delicate with a light smattering of hair that matches the long red lock  
waited from the back of my paddock only a few hours ago. How is she here?  
inch offate? Am I a believer now?

Her stomach trembles above me as I find my rhythm. I begin circl  
damn, clit. My tongue flattens and she’s whimpering into the heat of the room  
forcing “Oh... Oh... Colt... This is...”

I allow my tongue to dive inside, the salty taste meeting me with a v  
pleasure that rockets to my cock. I won’t ever get enough of this. Thi  
them. Iis mine. Mine. I feel her shudder, her entire body tenses on the sheets  
ol. The grips them hard.

Sexy as sin moans fill the cabin. I steady the pace and bring her c  
vider to the edge, her hands slowly working to find my hair.

ly fuck. She whimpers and moans.

Goddamn, she’s fucking sexy.

“I think... I think it’s coming.”

I keep licking, not letting up the feverish pace. I wonder if she’s ever pulled like this before, but quickly shove that thought aside. This woman is a growl now. We’ve crossed that line that stood between us for too long. Friend or foe as I go. This is it for me now, there is no going back.

“Oh, yes! This is it!”

Hannah squeezes my hair. Tight.

She’s grinding against my mouth, and I work a finger inside her. She’s hands fucking tight, so damn wet and I feel her body suck me in. I move in and curling my finger to find that tiny little spot deep at the base of her clit. It’s so warm and wet, my cock is dripping just at the touch of excitement.

Her hips rock, and before I can even think about adding a second finger I see she’s rubbing herself all over my mouth. It’s fucking damp and wet, but is this she finally let’s go, I feel like the entire world beneath us shatters under deafening screams.

“COLT! OH, GOD, COLT!”

I’m burning hot when she pulls me up her body, nails digging into my skin. She bites my lips, her eyes slammed shut as she devours her juice from the edges of my mouth.

“Baby, that’s so fucking hot,” I grunt, allowing her mouth to devour my neck, biting and sucking.

“I want you, Colt.” Her eyes are darkening. “I want you to be my first loser to Wait.

What?

I steady on my heels, breathing suddenly difficult.

Crouching on the bed, I hold Hannah deadly still so I can look deep



eyes.

er come “What did you just say?” I bite, my spine tingling.

is mine Her body is hot, her breathing absolutely shattered. “I’ve never had a relationship with anyone like this. I’ve never been close enough to anyone to want to do something so intimate.”

I’m struggling to find the right thing to say. I want to jump up and run to the top of the fucking mountain. Slam a fist on my chest and shout out to the world that she’s mine.

and out, Holy shit. No man has ever taken my girl? *My girl?*

it. I can’t fucking believe it.

of her “Baby, are you sure about this?” I hold her steady, my heart hammering against my ribcage. “We don’t have to do—”

finger, She’s shaking her head. “Please, Colt.” She reaches down and grabs me when I’m hard. “I want this. With you. Believe me, I *want* this.”

der her She strokes me long and hard for a moment, dropping her forehead against mine. We pant against each other, breathing becoming more and more difficult the longer her strokes become.

nto my Her wrist finds a slower pace as she wriggles her ass and drops her head against my cock. Her lips seal around the tip and I’m gasping for breath.

have time to stop her, but damn it all the hell, I don’t fucking want to.

e down Her tongue swirls around the sensitive tip. It’s fucking hot and a new feeling shoots down through my body and urges me to let go right here and now.

“Oh, baby... If you want to do this... If you want me to make you...” I fight the words through deep groans. “If you want me to touch you and make you feel as beautiful as you look, baby girl... You’re going to stop that.”

Her mouth feels so fucking good. Bobbing up and down as I rock in the wet heat of her mouth. She sucks as much as she can take, and for so long. As a virgin, so inexperienced, I'm amazed when she cups my balls and begins bringing them through her nose, swirling my sack between her delicate fingers.

"Jesus," I grunt, holding her hair back. "Yes, baby. Do you think you can take it all?"

She nods. Of course she does it with my cock hanging in her mouth and a smile on her face. Because she is just that damn perfect.

She pulls off for a moment, draws breath and shuffles back. She reaches for those soft, pink lips around my cock and smiles up at me again, winking at me. The naughty little girl I had no idea was beneath the beautiful exterior of my best friend.

Blood pumps through my veins, filling every rigid muscle that's been relaxed beneath her passionate touch.

My head rolls as a twitch in my belly has me on high alert. I pluck at the hair, holding it tight and guiding Hannah's lips to draw off me.

"I'll explode if you keep going," I groan.

I hold her, lifting slowly to smother a kiss to her gorgeous mouth. Her soft body presses into mine and we kneel on the bed, a hot-kiss making my chest explode.

"Colt, I'm sorry I left you," Hannah breathes between kisses.

My lips press against her. "You didn't leave me. You just made me realize it's the past now. This is us, right here."

I bite down on her neck. "Take me, Colt. I'm done waiting."

She allows her body to fall on the bed, red hair fanning over the pure whiteness of my sheets. I hover for a minute, gripping myself and admiring the sweet angel beneath me. Her body. Her lips. Her eyes. Every tiny

into theme is tensed up, my body shaking with emotion as I draw nearer to t  
omeonebetween her legs.

eathing “I don’t have a condom.”

*Fuck.* I don’t know what makes me say it, maybe I’m looking out f  
you canMaybe I want to make sure she’s fine with it?

Shit, maybe I’m nervous?

h and a I can’t fuck this up - taking her innocence is a lot of pressure.

But Hannah just shakes her head and smiles.

attaches “We don’t need one. I’m clean and I have the implant.”

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r of mymischievous grin curls her lips, and I can’t help but laugh.

“You’re amazing.”

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my eyes as I feel the wetness touch me. The air falls silent, the wild,  
a fistfulstorm outside suddenly hushed. Our breathing ceases.

I make damn sure my eyes don’t close when I start pushing inside.

I’ve dreamed of this moment.

th. Her And I damn well want to remember it for the rest of my life.

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I’ve dreamed of this moment.

And I damn well want to remember it for the rest of my life.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Hannah

I THINK IT'S TIME I admitted the truth. I've always wondered how  
Colt was.

I mean, I knew his size was impressive. On more than one occasion he stood up for me, puffed his big, beefy chest out and warned the bull away from me in high school. I knew his deep, gravelly voice was a weapon he used wisely, and now he's spent time on the mountain, the hulking brute that put the jocks at school to shame is even bigger.

But I never expected to feel *this* part of him.

"Tell me if it hurts," Colt says, easing the first inch inside.

My body tenses. *Fuck.*

A rapid beat throbbing from behind the rough stubble on Colt becomes a target my eyes lock on. He's so damn handsome, a tiny amount of gray tinge hinting at the years that have passed us by. Years that we have been doing this. Years of happiness instead of tediousness. Years that our love could have grown.

*Our love? Am I in love with my best friend?*

Colt grunts, his glacial blue eyes struggling to stay open.

Something stretches and a burning sensation ripples through my body, not painful. It's not sore or uncomfortable. Colt senses it though and leans back, slowly shifting his hips, watching my expression every step of the way. "Is it ok?" he asks.

I nod, biting down. "Yes, oh... Colt."

I'm filling up, dragging Colt by his round shoulders to meet me. I need his touch, his heat.

"Fuck, you feel so damn good."

He works himself further, patiently waiting for my core to permit him his length. Slowly, I feel fuller, and I can't believe there's more to come. His hands slide down my body, touching every tiny insecurity I've ever felt on my plus-size body. He tweaks my nipples, a wave of pleasure hitting me from the inside as he cups my breasts.

Colt's eyes twinkle, his hips rotating to move in, then out, in then out. My body is flushed. I kiss his chest and the salty taste of his sweat, paired with the rough tickle of the masculine spread of fuzz makes me hold him close.

It's perfect.

I'm not embarrassed by my soft belly jiggling and swaying with his rhythmic thrusts. I've never felt anything so beautiful, and with the weight of a man laying on top of me, it's the most damn perfect moment of my life.

"You okay, baby girl?"

I grind against him. "Never better."

He groans and the pace increases. We're gripped together, holding each other like a vice, not allowing even a hint of cooling air to inch between us. His eyes snap, his pupils darkening almost completely so no blue remains.

He rises, the size and power of him above me sending shooting heat

dy. It's slit.

d eases "Touch me. Here."

ne way. I grab his hand and he circles a thumb over my tiny bundle of n  
gaze up at him, eyes hooded. His forearms are tense, corded with mus  
ridges of veins. I moan, louder, holding him tight. He's so fucking h  
loser. Irough and manly.

I fucking love it.

"Baby, I want this to be forever," Colt grunts.

nore of I nod. "Yes."

ne. His "This pussy." He slaps my clit with the tips of his fingers, his cock  
It about all the way inside of me. The shock of it makes me scream when he  
ig deephard. "This is mine. You hear me? Mine."

"Yes."

out. His His cheeks are turning bright red. Another slap to my clit. His ey  
ed with and intense, something like a raging animal gripping his soul.

oser. He slaps my pussy again.

"Oh! Fuck!"

with his Colt groans, purposeful movements making the thrusts harder, deep  
e giant powerless to him, but I don't care. A strong commanding presence like  
t of my what I need. Someone to hold me, love me, tell me everything I need t

He rubs and fucks me at the same time, staring deep into my ey  
every movement purposeful, and with meaning.

"Come for me," Colt grunts. "Come all over my cock, baby girl."

ig each I nod. It's all the tightness in my throat will allow.

reen us. My thighs tighten and I lock my legs around his waist. The bed  
ins. beneath our weight, or maybe it was the window? I don't know, b  
t to my

sinks on top of me, fists plastered either side of me face. I angle my legs  
my hips raise off the bed. He plunges deeper and I dig nails into his bare  
erves. I “I’m gonna come, baby,” he grunts against the crook of my shoulder  
cle and “Yes. Please, Colt.”

uge, all Every thrust pushes me closer, his cock feeling as if it’s pulsing in  
me. My pussy takes over, my eyes closing. Wave after wave thrum  
through me, a vibration of pleasure making my breath catch. I bite down  
Colt roars above me, his cock releasing a warmth that fills me completely.

I slump back against the mattress, completely and utterly spent.  
almost “Fuck,” Colt whispers, laying beside me, staring up at the  
thrusts “Hannah, that was...”

I roll to meet his lips, plastering a kiss on his mouth. “We don’t need  
words.”

es dark He shuffles and I lay on his hairy chest, listening to the beating  
heart. He holds me, a warm hand gliding across my skin until  
peacefully, I drift into the best sleep I’ve ever had.

\*\*\*

over. I’m  
e this is I wake up alone. The blankets beside me are pulled all the way up, snuggled  
o hear. around my chin as I hold them close. I’m enveloped in a warm, toasty  
es with of something new. Something I haven’t felt before.

My nose presses into the pillow and I can still smell the musky scent of  
Colt on the fabric. A warm fuzzy sigh meets the smile on my lips as my body  
stretches out. I want to snuggle in deeper, relive the magic of last night  
creaks way I felt just holding his warm body as we drifted off to sleep together.  
ut Colt Comfort. Strength. Security.

But it can’t be real, right?



body so    Colt has a life of his own. This mountain is his world, his land is his  
ck.        He's lived up here for over a decade, ever since I forced him to escape  
r.         world he hated so much.

            He doesn't want me to intrude upon that.

inside of    Does he?

unders      Slowly, I get dressed, pulling the same pair of work trousers on that I  
own as yesterday morning when I headed into the office for another dreary  
Monday morning. I pull the shirt over my head and think about Xavier – is he  
worried about me? Do I still have a job? What is going to happen when I  
ceiling. in the car today and drive back down the mountain?

*Shit. The report.*

it need     I pull my hair into a rough ponytail, looking around for a mirror.

            "Of course he doesn't have a mirror," I grunt, unable to stop the  
; of his emerging on my face. "What would a mountain man need to check  
slowly, out for? The big dance?"

            "The sheep, actually," Colt says, a sway of long, blond hair appearing  
through the crack of the door. His stubble is thicker this morning, darker  
around his neck. "And who says a mountain man doesn't like to look in the  
mirror?"

            He steps in, a big hand clutching my waist.

feeling     "Good morning," Colt says, eyes soft and brighter than yesterday's.  
            storm has cleared. The sky is blue and you're just as beautiful as  
I remember."

my body    His breath touches my lips. "Thank you, Colt."

ght, the    "So," Colt begins, holding me close. "I was thinking we could get  
r.         today, tidy up any mess that's blown around and then I'll cook up something  
from the garden. I want to show you around the place, and if you like, I  
maybe you can bring that stupid clipboard with you."

s work. “I do have to finish the report. My brother will kill me if I don’t.”

ape the Colt’s expression twitches. “No, he won’t. He won’t fucking touch y

I chuckle but his frightening expression shows me he’s deadly :

“Oooo... Mr. Protective now, are we?”

A smile tries to escape, but I see his eyes drop to the logo on my  
at I didcan almost see the thoughts racing through his head. The blue in h

Mondaydarkens, as if the fear is taking over and something has ignited deep in

ie even “Colt...” I choke out. “You know I have to go home-”

en I get He steps back, a large palm blocking me out. “Don’t say it.”

I grab his hand and guide it down. “I have to go back to work. I

finish the report today and get it back to the office.” I step in, trying

hand on his chest. “I’m sorry.”

e smirk He grunts, a wild, angry growl and snatches his hand away. “I kn  
himselfwas going to happen.”

“I have to return the report, it’s overdue!”

pearing “Fuck the report,” he grunts.

darker “Colt... I don’t have any clothes...”

uice?” He shakes his head and storms away. I follow close behind, b  
waving a hand over his shoulder like he’s not listening anymore.

y. “The “My brother will be worried. My family, too. No one knows I’m u  
il as IColt. They could be looking for me for all we know! What if they co  
find me here? You’ll be in trouble.”

He stomps across the floorboards. Jesus. The entire cabin feels l  
outsideshaking.

e lunch “I can come back though. I promise I want to...” I struggle to keep  
ave to,him. His steps are fucking enormous. “Colt, please stop! Listen to me!

I’m skipping alongside him, tugging at his arm. He grabs a plate fi

bench in the kitchen, his frown blanking me out as if I don't exist. You." He stanches across to the stovetop and begins spooning the yellowest scrambled eggs I've ever seen onto a plate.

The smell is incredible, but I'm too worried about the scowl on Colt's shirt. I "Colt, please..."

His eyes "You won't come back."

I side. I jerk back with shock, a frown ripping my brows downwards. "I won't."

He adds a few rashers of bacon to the plate and a charred piece of sourdough. When he spins, his lips have formed a straight line again. I have to certain of his words, but I know there's more to it than that. Something to lay a bubbling beneath the surface, the way his eyes have changed.

It makes me want to know what's going on in that mind of his. I'm shaking, hating the way he's turned so quickly. Over something so simple, so stupid.

*Maybe this was all a big mistake.*

The tightness at the corners of his eyes more prominent than moments when he held me with such softness. Such care and love. He looked at me like I was his entire world, a feeling I've never had before.

How does that disappear so quickly? "No. You won't." He shoves the plate in my chest, his brows furrowed. "It's fine. This is my life. Not yours."

I open my mouth to reply, but Colt storms off and slams the back door before I can mumble anything.

There's no point and I slump down on the sofa, my heart broken.

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ist. He  
ambled

's face.

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ved and

ck door

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Colt

**T**HE CRUNCH OF THE ice beneath my boots sounds exactly h  
heart feels.

*She can't leave.*

I grab the axe from the tool shed, my head a whirlwind of crazy th  
How could she want to leave after last night? Holding her while she  
so softly. So fucking adorably. The way her body moved, slick and  
through my sheets.

*Goddammit.*

“God damn it all to hell!” I shout, my voice bouncing off the mount

The sun is peeking through the valley. The warmth is nothing to hov  
feel inside. I've screwed up, yet again. Goddammit. My blood races t  
my veins as I move towards the chopping block. I need to let this sim  
rage out.

*She's mine. She's mine.*

I lift the axe, splitting the first log with an earth-shattering blow. I  
next one up and make quick work of that too.

Why am I like this? Why can't I just listen and accept her for what s

A bird lands nearby, chirping softly like everything is normal in the wild. Today is just another day in the wild. Its feathers are fluffy from being probably caught in the storm like Hannah. But it hasn't dulled the excitement of the bounty of worms that will be brought to the surface by the weathered ground.

The bird's life is this mountain and its business as normal up here.

Why can't my life be that fucking simple?

Nothing about today is normal. Nothing about the way my heart exploded at the sight of Hannah's bare body laying beside me the moment the door opened. It was all I could do not to curl up against her, nudge my nose into her wood between her smooth legs and wake her up the way I intend to do the rest of my damn life.

*She can't leave.*

Another log suffers the brunt of my emotions. I need to let it all out. I talk to Hannah again. I can't speak to her the way I did before. No matter how badly I want this to work, I need to show her my world. Show her she could be happy here if she would just give it a chance.

*We could be happy if she just let us.*

Too much time together has been left behind already. I'm not about to let it go.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but the pile of chopped logs is growing quickly and sweat cools the heat on my face. The storm has passed, but the pent-up anger inside of me seems to be clearing, but then I hear the door shut behind me and I'm spinning on the spot to see Hannah set the table down on the veranda.

*She can't leave.*

I remind myself what I've done. Cutting her fuel line was an act of

world. because I knew deep down, somewhere along the way, I would fuck things up. Every day, I still hear the yelling of my father in my ears. I still remember the redness in his face and the frustrated scrunch of his fists as he tells me I'm screwed up. Yet again.

Yep. I've lived inside my own head for long enough to know I need more than a second chance with Hannah.

I hold the axe by my side, my chest heavy with exhaustion. Some clouds have moved over the morning sun, but the weather always shifts quickly. I just hope it remains this way long enough for me to see a smile back on Hannah's face.

I take a seat on the block, remaining quiet enough to observe Hannah as she moves around the perimeter of the cabin. She's holding a pen in one hand, the clipboard in the other. Every now and then she leans down, looking so damn perfect. *Fuck*. Yesterday that would have mattered, but right now, all I'm thinking is I hope it's not the last I see of her that way. A few more minutes pass and she's pulling at the peeling red paint on the old timber shed. The structure is shit, but standing beside it, Hannah's red hair swirling majestically in the wind makes it appear ten times more beautiful.

She's too damn perfect.

"It was the second building I erected," I say out loud, the sudden sound of my voice causing Hannah to jolt on the spot. Her cheeks flush as I see her in the chopping block. "I actually used it as my main shelter while I was gathering material to build the cabin."

Hannah hums, diverting her eyes.

My boots sludge across the muddy garden beds, slopping and sticking to the ground. I watch her tick the sheet as I approach. The breeze blows

is up. the yard, bringing her sweet smell closer. My nose tingles, a stiff reminder of what I had in my arms hours ago, warm and tight.

me I've "What else is on the list?" I ask, desperate to hear that voice again.

She doesn't look at me, instead, runs a finger down the clipboard and more that's left on the exterior is the fences and foundation beneath the structure. I finished up inside while you were out here."

clouds "The foundation is closer. I'll show you the access door for quickly on cabin." I wave a hand over my shoulder. "You'll be able to see from there get that She nods. I catch the green of her eyes for the briefest second, enough to jump start my heart again.

annah as *Here we go. Attempt number two. Win her over.*

in one *She can't leave.*

her big, A freezing cold breeze blasts the second we're around the side of the driven cabin. It's exposed to all the elements rolling down the rocky cliff-face of it. there's no wind block here. The timber on this side of the cabin has a patina on the quickest due to the harshness of being exposed to the weather.

s bright Hannah scratches at the paper and I fight the urge to drop to my knees as more beg her to stay.

"Down in here," I unlatch the small access door and pluck the flashlight I've set up on a hook on the inside. "You'll have to use a torch around the ground underneath. There's been a few leaks over the years, but it should all be slide off I've never been able to go all the way under. I'm the dumbass who sourced make the door large enough for these wide shoulders."

Hannah looks at me, the poor attempt at amusing her falling flat.

I've never been very good at making jokes. Good to see nothing has changed about that either.

s across A blank face takes in my broad shoulders, and for a moment I



nder of whether she might laugh. Her eyes flick across my body, it's for longe  
second this time and my body damn well knows it.

My chest races. My skin boils hot.

d. "All *I love you. Tell her. I love you.*

e main She bends down and clicks the flashlight. I stand back, scrub a hair  
my face.

der the "Looks fine," Hannah says, standing straight and brushing down l  
iere." "Except for the light filtering through that hole you made yesterday. I  
but it's said you'll fix the floorboards, so..."

She strikes a tick on the paper and clicks the pen. "I'm all done."

My eyes go wide. "So... So what?"

She shrugs, staring at the ground. "I'll file the report and you'll be  
of theus."

ace and My stomach twists. I hate the way her voice has changed. She's g  
ged the twang in her tone, the one she used when she introduced herself as '*I  
from Mell Estate and Planning*'. It's her work voice, her profes  
ees and mannerism.

It's not the voice she used when she moaned my name. It's not the s  
ashlight the way she screamed with pleasure and told me I was hers forever.

to see I fight the demons in my mind. The same ones I had when I was  
e solid school when I would sit in my room, the screams of my parents l  
o didn't through the walls, telling me I was a useless piece of shit. I was a

Everything I did was wrong. I was never wanted, but they were stu  
me, and boy did they let me know that.

ing has Is that how Hannah felt last night? Was she stuck with me?

Why would she say those amazing things though? Was it all just  
wonder the peace and make it through the night?

r than a *Fuck.*

I flick my hair over my shoulder and straighten up.

“Okay. I guess if you’re all done, then I have work to catch up on.”

I spit the words out, turning in a huff without giving Hannah a chance to overreply.

My head is spinning, tears threatening but I force them back. I turn my head straight back for the wood pile, my mouth tight and a weird feeling in the back of my throat. I’m sure I hear her mutter something in the distance that sounds like she’s telling me she’s coming back, but all I’m thinking is *can’t leave... she can’t leave.*

I leave her behind, hoping to hell that my plan is about to work.

It’s not right. It’s not how I wanted it to be.

She should stay because she wants to. She should be here with me because her heart beats the same rhythm as mine. We damn well belong together. *Hannah* can’t deny it. I felt it, I saw it in her eyes when she looked up at me.

I clutch the axe and grunt, lifting a round log and placing it ready.

The trunk of the vehicle slams and I cast a sideways glance toward the car. Sun glares across the grass again, and I realize my fingers are gripping over the wooden handle of the old axe. Hannah moves in behind the car, in high and glances in the mirror, adjusting her hair and guiding it behind her head. She takes a moment longer to do something I can’t see, then, she turns the engine. *Failure.*

Nothing.

I hear the ignition. It switches as Hannah tries to ignite it again.

Nothing.

My heart is racing, thumping inside my chest. I drop the axe with a thud and step over to the car slowly. The dent on the hood is glistening from

sunshine reflecting on the moisture in the air.

Guilt makes me feel sick in the pits of my stomach. I shouldn't have done this. What have I done?

I pull the driver's door open, Hannah's confused eyes flashing up at me. "It won't start," she says, frowning.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Let me try."

I twist the keys, feeling like a goddamn fool. Fuck. I am not a good driver, she deserves better and I should let her race away as quickly as she wants. This is my fault, keeping her here beyond her will. If this is the level I stoop to to make a woman stay with me, I don't damn well deserve her. Sabotage was a last resort, and now, I wish I didn't do it.

"It could be frozen," I lie. I don't know where it comes from, but I can't stop myself. "And the radiator might have a leak. She'll be fine from the impact of the collision."

Hannah looks over the steering wheel at the dent. "It wasn't that bad, was it? It was just a wheelbarrow."

I step out and get a whiff of gas.

"I don't know. But it's not starting."

Hannah tries a few more times, pumping her foot on the gas. She's frowning, her eyes panicking and I fucking hate myself.

"It's not starting, Colt. What do I do?" Hannah's eyes fill with tears. "I need to get home!"

I bite my tongue. "Fuck."

My cheeks puff and I'm pacing in a circle, tugging at my hair. *Tell her what you did. Tell her, you fucking prick.*

"Listen, Hannah," I stammer, my voice shaky.

She looks at me, her eyes so goddamn beautiful and perfect. The m

seems to close in around me, as if I've entered a long, dark tunnel and I've done can see is her. Her beautiful face, framed by hair as red as the blood flowing through me. Her soft cheeks, so plump and kissable. Her red lips and a little nose.

"I know a guy, but he lives a few miles away. He might be able to help you say, unable to speak the words my brain is screaming at me. *Liar. Liar.* Lia person, "I doubt he'll be able to get you going today, though." She wants to. Her expression remains still as she shrugs. "I don't have a choice, don't have to hint of nervousness makes her step closer. "Colt, let me stay with you. Just until it's fixed."

My heart leaps.

I look in *I don't deserve this.*

I look from

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and, was

flushed,

ears. "I

*Tell her*

mountain

seems to close in around me, as if I've entered a long, dark tunnel and all I can see is her. Her beautiful face, framed by hair as red as the blood pulsing through me. Her soft cheeks, so plump and kissable. Her red lips and cute little nose.

"I know a guy, but he lives a few miles away. He might be able to help," I say, unable to speak the words my brain is screaming at me. *Liar. Liar. Liar.* "I doubt he'll be able to get you going today, though."

Her expression remains still as she shrugs. "I don't have a choice, do I?" A hint of nervousness makes her step closer. "Colt, let me stay with you. Please. Just until it's fixed."

My heart leaps.

*I don't deserve this.*

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# CHAPTER NINE

## Hannah

**T**HE NIGHT IS COLD and dark and I snuggle the blankets on the floor. The fire is flickering, lighting up the darkness of the living room.

After his outburst, I give myself space from Colt. I spent the afternoon on the verandah overlooking the vegetable patch, allowing my mind to wander. I'm grateful to have somewhere to stay, and Colt was busy working in the garden and doing other jobs, which allowed me to take the time to complete the report as best as I could with what battery remained on my laptop.

While Colt drove to inform his friend of our mechanical issues, I searched for Wi-Fi. I tried to hotspot my phone just to let the world know I'm online.

I'm not sure if I'm mad at Colt or whether I'm just scared for myself. Last night, everything I felt was so real. So pure. My heart has exploded. Finding something that was always there in our friendship, hiding beneath the surface and Colt helped me bring it out.

I think I've always loved Colt. I just didn't know I loved him in *that* way. But now those feelings are shattered.

I feel like my heart is on fire, burning out of control and there's no way to save what might have become.

How could he just turn like that? His mood swings are worse than my brother's, and the reason I've raced up this mountain and bought all this gear upon myself, was because I'm tired of being trodden on. The same routine was wearing thin, and I'm not about to let someone else take over my life no matter what my heart is telling me.

The fire cracks and I roll to my side, closing my eyes.

I drift in and out of sleep, each time I open my eyes the embers in the fire slowly dying until it's almost completely out. My body is tense on the sofa and it's hard to find a comfy place to settle down.

Colt had insisted on me sleeping in his bed, but I couldn't.

On the sofa. I couldn't lay there thinking about last night. The way his warm breath came above me. The way his eyes caressed every inch of my skin as he made love to me. The way his tongue felt against my pussy, the soft tenderness of his hands as he roamed over my body and made it his own.

I sigh in the *Fuck, here I go.*

Complete I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing that memory from my mind. I throw the blankets off and step quietly across to the sink, tiptoeing across the creaked floorboards in the darkness. I pour a glass of water and allow the cool water to soothe my throat, placing the glass in the sink and gripping the edge of the counter.

And after I bend and stretch, my muscles tight and stressed from the sleepless night, I roll around, trying to get comfortable on the sofa.

I enjoy the feeling of my muscles stretching as I bend and my eyes close. Then a warmth coats over my skin, first at the base of my spine, then dipping beneath the fabric of my shirt. A weird roughness of the hand on my skin, a new feeling that sends a tingle up my spine and a jolt to my heart.

"Colt-

an my A shushing noise presses against my ear and another hand slips up of this and slowly works up my body and cups my breast. It's snug and warm me old callused fingers twisting at the sudden arousal of my nipples. My hand ile over to sweat, my throat dry as my grip on the sink slowly slips.

My chest is heaving as I melt into the unexpected touch plucking, tw my nipple.

the fire "Is that you?" I breathe into the darkness, but another *shhhh* he hard through my ear.

A roughness scratches against my neck, the feeling of hard lips s licking and biting my earlobe making my body shake. My back arcl ody felt that's when I know I don't want it to stop. My ass pushes back de loves something firm, something long and hard as steel.

I felt as Silently, I whimper. It's ever so quiet, so soft and seductive that kisses trailing up my neck echo into the night.

A firm pluck of each nipple sends waves down my body to soak my row the I'm scorched, my breathing becoming labored and fast. My hips b creaky move, sliding against the hardness pressing into me. One hand slides c l liquid stomach, dipping beneath the waistband of my panties to find my cl e of the wriggle to encourage more pressure.

I let out a shaky sigh, a gentle moan.

s hours A big bristly face rubs against the side of my cheek, that musk filling my chest with all those feelings that come storming back. *Fuck* s close more and I'm rewarded when a bolt of heat pulses through me. I dor before it, instead, the hand dives further between my legs, the slickness creates guiding a thick finger into my tight, wet passage.

"Oh... oh..."

I tremble, needing the support of the sink to hold myself up.



my top “Oh... yes...”

1, large, The hands ravaging my body are setting me alight in the darkness. Everything I've been craving ever since last night, ever since the who-

came crashing down. Why did that have to happen? Why did we fight  
weaking A hand reaches around my body, the angle allowing it to slide in and

my drenched pussy. My stranger of the night circles my clit before a  
echoes finger is inserted and he starts fucking me. The other hand cups my  
squeezing and massaging. A thumb drags across my nipple and my  
ucking, body pulls taut, my knees almost giving way.

hes and My shoulders shake, I rock my hips, wanting that firm ridge I felt b  
against find its way between my legs.

Heat dampens my skin, and like he can read my mind, my pants  
the hot pulled down and a firm press in the small of my back encourages me  
my back and bend further. I hold on, wanting to look behind b  
7 pussy. enjoying the randomness of not knowing.

egin to Deep down, obviously it's not surprise. But my heart is pound  
over my something nudges the throbbing ache between my legs and the random  
it and I this all is turning me on so much, the hardness notches at my entrance  
slowly pushes inside.

“Oh, fuck...” I breathe.

y scent A hand quickly closes over my mouth, forcing the words back.

. I want “Quiet.”

i't fight The deep voice rattles me. It's not a question. It's not an offering.

; easily It's a demand.

A firm grip tightens around my hips, the other covering my mouth. I  
don't make a noise. Suddenly it's all business, and hard thrusts fill me  
and fast. My hips automatically push back, greedy for more. I don't n

word, my face hidden against my supporting arm, holding that scream  
ass. It's back of my throat until a burning in my pussy threatens to explode.

le thing I gasp for air, and the hand releases from my mouth, quickly grabbi  
it? my hair, curling around and yanking hard. I open my thighs wider, he  
d out of allows a deeper penetration. The girth is almost too much, but my  
secondaches for more. Deeper. Harder.

breast, "Fuck!" I scream. "Oh! Yes!"

r whole I don't hesitate to scream. My body tightens and fuck, I want it all.

I feel my release getting close. He's rocking against me, long, har  
efore to thrusts making my body wobble and shake. He slams into me, moving  
and my instincts take over. I reach for my clit, circling and the mome  
ties area surge of heat races through me, escaping quickly with a fresh expl  
to archwetness drenching both of us.

ut also "FUCK!"

A low groan vibrates behind me, a hard hand gripping my ass so  
ding as bite down on my forearm just to share the pleasurable pain surging t  
mess of my body. The mountain has come alive, and I meet the warmth shooti  
nce and inside of me, hard bursts coating my pussy, thrust for thrust until I'm  
up and turned around, a tight hand around my neck holding me firm.

My mouth is smothered, a tongue forced inside, sliding against  
before it's snapped away and I'm standing there, freezing cold.

My mouth hangs, desperate for more.

But it doesn't come.

Silence grips the cabin. I look around, searching for light but  
with so nothing but freezing air.

ie, hard The fireplace in the corner, like every fear pounding inside of me  
nutter ounce of dread and regret about last night, every tiny seed of doubt tl

n in the been thinking about all afternoon...

It's all completely extinguished.

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It's all completely extinguished.

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# CHAPTER TEN

## Colt

**S** HE'LL STAY. SHE'LL STAY.

I crack the egg on the side of the pan and let the yolk fall. I watch the shell burst the thick, gooey center and trudge over to the table, ignoring the memory of last night trying to invade my mind. The knives and forks are gathered in a heap, and I begin laying them out, a tiny smile lifting my lips at the sight of two places set at the table.

*She'll stay.*

Oil splatters behind me when I hear the clunk of the plumbing beneath the house. The tinkle of the shower filters down the dark corridor where the tub is set up for a shower.

I've done everything I can this morning to make things right. If I were my best friend I've ever had to share my surname one day, and goddamn, that's the reason I rolled out of bed this morning, then I need to get started now. If enough, people will be searching for her. Knowing her brother as I did those years ago he would have been switched on enough to put two aces together.

He'll find her, but not before I can convince her to be mine.

I set the fried eggs at the very top of the plate, curling a rasher of bacon into a smiling mouth. Some fresh tomatoes are the perfect red cheeks, their smooth skin glowing elegantly in the morning sunshine, just like Hannah does. A tiny button mushroom reminds me of her petite nose, and finally a deep green bunch of parsley scattered randomly completes my breakfast.

A smile pulls my mouth to one side. I scrub a hand through my hair, pulling the growing length of my stubble as I slide a nervous hand down my throat.

I can't remember ever smiling so much. We've shared our bodies, in kisses just like the one I've dreamed about forever. Last night, hearing her stumble around without me while I tossed and turned in bed... Leaving her alone in the dark was a bad idea, and I just had to check that she was opening the door. Then, squinting through the cold air of the night, seeing her bent over, her breasts are that... bending and stretching that wonderland of curves... *Fuck.* Her lips at last. I couldn't help myself.

"Breakfast!" I shout through the cabin. "Take your time, though. I'll keep it warm."

As I settle at the table, my knees touching the underside when I shut the Hannah chair in. I really should get around to extending the height, either that or I should try to build appropriate size furniture for my size. The old furniture I've collected over the years all have dimensions in them. It's practically useless, though. I swear the instructions to build beautiful furniture like this table are made for elves, not huge fucking mountain men like me.

"Wow..." A sweet voice hums. I look up and Hannah's hair is wet, draped over one side of her shoulder. "It smells amazing."

I stand, holding a hand over my chest to stop the rapid beating of my

f bacon “And so do you.” I step around and pull the chair out for her. “Please  
ks, the Sit down.”

annah’s She glances at me and her big, beautiful eyes make my skin heat.  
nally, ayou.”

st. She sinks into the chair and all I want to do is press a kiss to the top  
y hair, head. I want to tell her about my mistakes, about the fact that when  
own my away yesterday, all I did was take the beat-up old four-wheeler to hid  
forest. Waiting and pretending to talk to someone who doesn’t exist.

ntimate There is no mechanic. There is no car to take for a drive. There is o  
ing her for miles and miles. The closest thing to a working vehicle is the she  
ing her old truck that’s rusting away in the back paddock somewhere. Th  
k. wheeler barely started when I jumped on it for the first time in  
ver like yesterday.

This land belongs to me, and no one dares to come near my property  
days. I don’t need transport. I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. W  
’ll keep alone up here, and that’s how I damn well want it to stay.

I settle in opposite her. The chair squeaks beneath my weight as I  
ffle my Hannah smile at the plate, poking a fork through the red cheeks mac  
or learn tomato.

making “You’ll have to excuse my childish attempt at making you smile. I f  
They’re I owe you an explanation...”

I forest She flashes me a look. “Don’t be sorry. It’s cute.”

n bears “Thanks,” I say, my palms sweaty.

Her eyes fall to the plate, and she shifts the eggs to one side. I ch  
, pulled bacon, observing the way she’s dancing around the food as if some  
troubling her appetite.

y heart. “Is everything ok?” I ask eventually. “How was the shower?”

o, baby. “The shower was fine. Does the temperature always cut in and out like that?” Hannah asks, finally popping the mushroom in her mouth.

“Thank you.” “Yeah, sorry.” I grunt.

“Stop saying that,” Hannah says. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I’m grateful for you. If it wasn’t for you, I’d be stuck in the forest with nowhere to go. I’m glad I drove for you.” Her eyes gleam across at me. “Honestly, thank you.”

Something makes me sit upright. It’s not guilt or the bad feelings I’ve been rolling around in my stomach. No. It’s something else, something that only makes me want to make her feel as happy as she makes me feel.

“I know somewhere we can go,” I sputter.

Her brows snap together. “What? What do you mean?”

“Today.” I burst out, slamming my fork down. “We can’t just wait around all day. I’ll take you somewhere beautiful. A piece of this land so pretty, these magical only a woman like you should be so lucky to grace it.”

“Colt...” Her voice is soft, a gentle warning somewhere behind her eyes.

But I point my fork at her plate, a thoughtful smile beaming across my face. I watch as a new plan formulates in my head. “Eat up. We’ll leave before breakfast to allow enough time.”

I feel like

\*\*\*

The snow on the path is a blanket of white, untouched and pristine. It crunches beneath my boots, feeling like the nervousness caving in around me. I open the chest.

“We’re almost there,” I say, holding a hand out to guide Hannah up the rocky section of the path. “It’ll be worth it, trust me.”

I go to let go of her hand, but her soft fingers clasp around mine.



out likeover my shoulder and she smiles.

“This is already beautiful,” she says, a smile brighter than the sun filtering through the treetops. “Thank you for bringing me.”

r, Colt. I grip her hand tighter. “We’re not there yet. You wait.”

grateful Our hands lock as we step up the last incline. The wintery landscape is cold and powdery, the moisture in the air clearer than down at the cabin.

g that’s help but feel like this is it – this is the moment I win her over.

ing that It has to be.

Dense forestry slowly disappears and the crystal clear water appears in our eyes. I feel Hannah’s hand clasp down at the sight of the thermal springs nestled in the secluded valley. The heavy scent of pine couples with the soft aroundchirping of the songbirds. Enormous trees stand tall and proud, much more than I do when I shift Hannah in front of me hold her back close to me and curl my hands around her waist.

words. “What do you think?” I whisper into her ear from behind.

ross the “I feel peaceful. Content.”

re after Her words escapes in breathy movements of her lips. The leaves rustle above us, the breeze blocked by dense forestry that surrounds us.

“Feel the water,” I say, leading the way forward to the edge of the thermal springs. “It’s always warm. And right over there...” I point to the rocky ledge towering over the springs. “When the rain is heavy enough, a waterfall cascades down those rocks.”

und my She spins in my arms, eyes locked on mine. “I want to shower here one day.”

a steep “It’s beautiful,” I whisper. “And I don’t mean the waterfall.”

My lips crash on hers, the warmth of the springs somehow bursting through. I look capturing us completely. The world falls away and it’s just the two of

lips are soft and gentle, the warm embrace of nature nothing compared to the sunlightfeeling of her tongue as it slides across mine.

Time stands still, but when the kiss breaks, Hannah's eyes fall to mine. Her hot palms press against the pounding inside my ribcage, and I wonder if his softer it's beating for her. Only her.

I can't "Will you swim with me?" Hannah says, seductive eyes teasing me. She takes a step back, her fingertips trailing down my body, leaving a line that escapes just above my belt.

Just before I grip the hem of her shirt, pull it up and over her head. Red hair falls and I reach around her gorgeous body, unhooking her bra and allowing it to fall to the damp earth. Her cheeks flush as her breathing comes out in little pants. I find the button on her pants, gently guide them down along with my chestpanties.

She takes a step back, a giant lump in my throat stopping me from asking her to marry me right here, right now.

"Promise me it's warm?" Hannah says, standing before me with glowing skin that shows every curve, every sexy lump of her generous curves.

A growl deepens in my throat. "Would I ever lie to you?" She shakes her head. "I hope not."

Hannah smiles as she turns, her big, plump backside bouncing with a delicate step. The soft, full curves move in a rhythmic way that's natural, more pure and organic than our surrounds.

She dips a toe in the water, shaking her hair so it spills down her back. She moves with a grace so alluring and irresistible, I rip my shirt off and stand at the edge of the springs.

"Hannah, can I join you?" I ask, unsure whether this is my moment. Hershare.

d to the This has to be perfect, but not for me. This isn't about me. This isn't  
that growing feeling inside of me that I can never let her go. This isn't  
y chest.that burning inside my chest that aches to keep her safe, to keep her h  
it to tellmy side forever.

She turns in the water, the gentle lap of the waves hiding the round  
breasts. Her lips are slightly parted, her green eyes lazy and relax  
ig a hot smiles at me before sinking deeper into the crystal clear water, the c  
lines of her body disappearing until she's just a floating head.

ans out Slowly, with my heart wedged in my throat, she curls a finger to in  
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This has to be perfect, but not for me. This isn't about me. This isn't about that growing feeling inside of me that I can never let her go. This isn't about that burning inside my chest that aches to keep her safe, to keep her here, by my side forever.

She turns in the water, the gentle lap of the waves hiding the rounds of her breasts. Her lips are slightly parted, her green eyes lazy and relaxed. She smiles at me before sinking deeper into the crystal clear water, the delicate lines of her body disappearing until she's just a floating head.

Slowly, with my heart wedged in my throat, she curls a finger to invite me in.

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Hannah

**C**OLT WALKS ACROSS TO me, his broad chest barely visible beneath the water. His massive, naked body slowly becomes enveloped in the warmth of the rising steam that disappears into the cool mountain air. The thick mat of hair covering his masculine chest darkens, the fur sinks, the closer he gets to holding me again.

Lower and lower, he descends and almost transforms into something that resembles an untamed beast. Something primal. Powerful and untamed.

“It’s so warm,” I breathe, reaching out for his hand.

My eyes trace the muscles glistening in the subtle sunlight. A guttural moan meets my lips and Colt curls a hand around my back, pulling me into him and smothering my mouth. A wave of emotion laps between my heart skipping a beat when a hand slides beneath the water to slide up my breast.

“Colt,” I moan, my head falling to allow him to suck my neck. “That’s amazing.”

He bites down, his scratchy beard sending a roughness over my skin that has me curling a leg around him. Colt nips hungrily across my skin,

me up and gripping my ass so my chest covers his face. The tips of his hair is wet, and when he shifts between each nipple, suckling and nibbling, a trail of droplets ripple the water.

“These tits are amazing,” Colt grunts.

“Yes, Colt. They’re all for you.”

A dark look catches my eye. Something animal has ignited within him the swirl of his tongue quickens. My whole body is filled with heat as he reach down but he growls at me, warning me to steady.

“Lay back,” Colt says. “Arms out like this. Use your body to float, the rest.”

dipping I don’t have time to argue as Colt pulls me from around his waist. Developed guides my ass so I’m floating on the water. My heart races and the cool rain air tickles the heat of my tight nipples. The back of my head sinks into the water. I feel hands spreading my thighs.

“Just relax,” Colt says, shifting between my spread legs as his hands slide beneath me to support my back.

I nod, trusting him completely as I stare up at the canopy of trees. The rough feeling of Colt’s beard creeping along my legs. My breath deep, steadying, my mind unsure whether to focus on not sinking in the water or the pulling warm feeling gliding across my slit.

“Oh... Colt...”

Long, hot licks slide the length of my pussy. I go to arch my back, to stop the feeling consuming me. Colt breathes me in, a huge inhale that is so the natural scent of my pussy all the way in. He licks me, starting at the bottom swirling slowly as I close my eyes and allow the water to lap at my side.

“You taste better than anything I’ve ever had,” Colt says.

pulling He holds my ass up, devouring my wet pussy with his lips, kissing

his longlicking my entrance until I'm thrashing in the water. He teases me, and his tongue over my clit, dragging his tongue down my entrance and inside with the wet heat.

I tremble in the water, purely at his mercy.

My body aches for more, but a sudden throb aches in my belly, him and working down my core with every passionate lap at my pussy. I'm melting. I try to the sound of my pleasure rattling off the rocky cliffs surrounding the warm water.

My desperate cries intensify, Colt's grip suddenly firmer as my almost sinks down beneath the wave of pleasure.

"Colt, I'm going to come. Hold me. Hold me!"

He grips my ass, sinking his face into my cunt. My legs start to shake, I can't hold it back. I'm left shuddering, gasping for breath, Colt sinking me back into the water when the twitching stops. I pull his face

to mine, hoping to taste that sweetness that he pulls from deep inside of me.

"Fuck," Colt grunts against my mouth. "Hannah, you're fucking wild." "This is wild." I jump on him, curling my legs around again. "You're right. This is magical." I press a kiss to his lips, my chest exploding. "And no more talking about the springs."

We're lost in each other for a moment, feverish and wild kisses covering my heart. It's sticky and wet, hot and heavy. Everything is damn perfect. Suddenly I'm thankful I'm still here. Part of me wonders if I belong in this world, maybe there's a reason I defied those orders my brother shouted at me. This is fate. This is meant to be.

"Fuck me," I gush, pulling from his lips for only a second. "I want to fuck me in here."

Colt grips my ass beneath the water. "I want that."

flicking He holds me with one strong arm, the other dips beneath the water sliding on, gripping his wet muscles like my entire world depends on it. He grunting, and nudges at the my wetness, slowly working the tip I'm biting down on his shoulder.

slowly "Oh!" I scream, a hint of pain scorching through me. "Fuck! Oh!" moaning, He holds me, shifting my body so slowly he works deeper. The pool of swirls around us, the heat of the springs suddenly sizzling. A rush of pleasure escapes and I'm already coating his cock with an unexpected orgasm by my pussy clamping down on him.

"More, Colt. More."

I hiss with pleasure, the way his strong hands are holding me, moving up and down his wet body. He makes a rough noise in the back of his throat, the feeling of his thick, wet cock sliding inside me. He roars, throwing his head back so his hair dips in the water.

He's a wild animal.

He's my animal.

It all happens so quickly, a wildfire searing through us simultaneously. I'm not still inside me, holding me close against his chest as he twitches and

A deep heat releases in my core, tipping me over the edge until he proclaiming and lowers me down.

He holds me against his chest, our breathing heavy.

"Thank you," he says. He grips my chin and makes my eyes snap at me with the lust still lingering within. "You complete me, Hannah. This is nothing without you now. My shitty cabin isn't a home without you. Without your smile, your comfort."

He breathes against my body, his eyes staring at me in a way I've never seen before.



I hold “You’ve consumed me since forever. I’ll never stop loving you, He  
rabs hisHe holds my face, a hard stare looking right into my soul. “Never.”

in until “Colt, you’re incredible.”

He holds me, his head shaking. “*We’re* incredible. Can’t you see tha

I nod, my slippery body sliding across his rough, hairy chest. “I kn  
e waterare. We always have been and after all this time, nothing has changed.

wetness He leads the way to the edge of the springs, something still mak  
that hasmuscles in his shoulders harden. Slowly, he helps me out of the water

firm grip of my hand. Our naked bodies are steaming in the cool air, t  
of the springs soaked into every pore.

ring me Colt gathers his flannel shirt and slides it around me. He tells me

throat,here while leading me to a circle of round logs that surround a burn

ring hisfire. Mossy patches stick to the logs and there’s a small pile of wet s  
one side.

“This is my favorite spot,” Colt says, guiding me down. “I con  
sometimes, whenever I need a break. The view of the springs is perfe  
sly. Hethe shelter of the cliff over there will keep you warm.”

swells. He stands and I gape up at him. “Where are you going? Don’t leave

ulls out His chest bounces under a deep chuckle. “I’m getting food. Don’t  
nothing will happen while I’m around.”

I smile, swiping a droplet of water from my cheek. “You said tha  
atch hisonce before... Do you remember?”

land is He straightens, a smirk appearing on his stiffened expressi  
u there.remember.”

“Taylor Hughes. Ninth grade party.”

e never We say the words at the same time. The smile on Colt’s fac  
wholesome it’s like the world is pushing us closer. I can’t resist him.

annah.”be mad at him. The silly arguments have to stop, because this, right  
*Shit.*

I’m so far gone with this man.

it?” A gentle breeze somehow squeezes through the forest. Colt steps i  
now weand drops to his knees, holding me until I stop shivering.

” “And do you remember what happened that night, baby girl?”  
ing the I nod, biting my lip. “You stayed by my side all night. You wal  
r with ahome, you made up that story about the pizza delivery being late just  
he heatparents didn’t yell at me for being late.”

“I didn’t want you to be grounded.”

to stay I shake my head, a sad smile remembering those painful teenage ye  
ned outdidn’t work. I was always grounded.”

ticks to He leans in closer, his eyes on my lips. “You really *were* alv  
trouble.”

ne here “I was.”

ect, and My words are just a whisper, blocked by Colt’s mouth as he pres  
lips against mine. A hand glides to my cheek and he holds me so ge  
me!” lovingly. I feel his lips on mine and as he breaks the kiss and slowly  
worry,away, I know without a doubt that I have fallen in love with this man.

My heart will never be the same.

t to me

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be mad at him. The silly arguments have to stop, because this, right here...  
*Shit.*

I'm so far gone with this man.

A gentle breeze somehow squeezes through the forest. Colt steps in again and drops to his knees, holding me until I stop shivering.

"And do you remember what happened that night, baby girl?"

I nod, biting my lip. "You stayed by my side all night. You walked me home, you made up that story about the pizza delivery being late just so my parents didn't yell at me for being late."

"I didn't want you to be grounded."

I shake my head, a sad smile remembering those painful teenage years. "It didn't work. I was always grounded."

He leans in closer, his eyes on my lips. "You really *were* always in trouble."

"I was."

My words are just a whisper, blocked by Colt's mouth as he presses his lips against mine. A hand glides to my cheek and he holds me so gently, so lovingly. I feel his lips on mine and as he breaks the kiss and slowly walks away, I know without a doubt that I have fallen in love with this man.

My heart will never be the same.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## Colt

I GET STARTED ON lighting the fire the moment I get back at Hannah's skin pebbling. Her clothes are clinging to her skin, now wrapped tightly around her shoulders as she sits on one of the logs.

"This shouldn't take long to heat up," I say, laying the sticks in shape. "The springs always heat you up pretty quickly if you need."

Hannah smiles. "I'm ok for now."

I smile and get back to work, twisting one stick between my twisting friction to heat the log below. I speckle the log with shavings and other dried leaves that will catch the heat.

"You're good at that," Hannah says, eyeballing the smoke starting from beneath the stick.

"Ah, it's easy," I reply, the stick crunching against the wood. "Come I'll show you."

Hannah hesitates before sinking down beside me, her knees in the shuffle to make room and angle the stick so she grabs it.

"The idea is to keep the heat centered. Don't move it around all over the place, or else we'll be here all day." Hannah grabs the stick and we

between her palms. “That’s it. Now just pretend you’re rolling sausage.”

She giggles and begins working the stick between her hands. I see more fuel for the smoke and slowly, a gentle orange glow begins to emerge.

Hannah looks at me, her eyes wide with surprise. “It’s working!”

I grin, admiring the way her eyes crinkle. “Keep going, don’t let up yet. It’s time to blow some oxygen around the heat.” I bend down and puff on my cheeks, gently adding air to the heat. “Just like this. You try.”

Hannah bends down, her lips pursed as she blows gently. The orange glow brightens with every breath she puffs on the wood. The smoke gets thicker and see and within a minute, a small flame appears.

My shirt “Fire!” Hannah calls out, beaming. “There’s fire!”

I stand up and flex. “She’s done it!”

a tepee We laugh together, slowly growing the campfire together. Warmth fills the space around the pit, and when the stack of wood is burning brightly, roaring flames, we settle back and let the fire heat our hands.

palms, “It’s perfect,” I say, shuffling in beside Hannah. “Much like you.”

of pine Hannah smiles. “Well, even if I say so myself, I am impressed.” She looks around the forest, her beautiful green eyes searching. “What else can you do to rise and feel connected right now. Teach me your ways of the land.”

My chest feels like it jumps across and latches on to hers. Pride fills my heart, seeing my girl so enthusiastic about the land. The way she’s engaged with nature, getting involved and trying things out.

the dirt. I “I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling pretty hungry after all that work.”

I stand to my feet and hold a hand out to lift Hannah up with me. “Have you ever foraged for food?”

edges it “Foraged?” Hannah’s forehead crinkles. “No. The only food I’ve

out eaten has come from my pantry or the local diner.”

I clutch her hand. “That’s not real food. I’ll show you proper nutrition. Sprinkle some on.”

I lead the way down the path, leaving the fire crackling behind us.

I know this land well enough that I’ll stay within sight of the flames, never letting up just in case of something bad happening.

We move quietly through the trees, hand in hand the entire time. I

feel excitement oozing from Hannah’s expression, her eyes bright and alert.

“Listen out for animals,” I say, helping her down a steep trench where I’ve seen thicker wild berries before. “Wolves and bears can appear out of nowhere around here.”

“You’ve seen a bear?” Hannah gasps.

“Yeah, he was far enough away that I didn’t have to worry, though I’d do my best to keep it that way...” I look at the blank look Hannah’s shoots beneath. “Obviously.”

She huffs a laugh. “Yes, probably a good idea to stay away from an enormous bear, Colt.”

I chuckle and crouch down when I see a small collection of mushrooms at the base of a tree. I pluck my knife from my belt and cut right at them.

Hannah’s keen eye observes every slice I make, and I pass her the so-called berries until her cupped hands are filled.

“That should be enough,” I say, standing straight. “Now if we can get a few of these berries, I’ll show you something very special.”

I move across to the dark green shrub on the edge of the bank. I look back over my shoulder to the fire and it’s burning brightly in the dark backdrop of the forest. I

Hannah follows closely, appearing as though she’s in her element.

“You’re connected to the earth, you know that?” I say, kneeling down.

collect the tiny red berries. “I can sense it. You aren’t scared like most trients, when they come up here.”

Hannah laughs, dropping the mushrooms to help me pluck berries from I knowshrub.

ting the “You didn’t see me when I took a few wrong turns on the way up l

pile the berries near the mushrooms, listening to every word she say feel thetelling you, if another five minutes went by, I was driving down that rc

:. I growl. “Not in that storm, you weren’t.”

ere I’ve She nods, eyes wide. “See. Not connected to the land. I had no owhere would be that bad despite my brother’s warnings.”

I wave a hand. “Ah, don’t worry about that. We all have lay judgement sometimes.”

gh. It’s I swallow the words, unsure whether I’m talking to her or mysting me. continue to chat as the assortment of different sized berries grows bene

We laugh and joke, reminiscing about school, the weekends we om thetogether and the hard times we lived through together.

It’s the first time we’ve talked like this. And I never want it to stop. oms at For a moment, the sights and sounds of my favorite place disie base. Instead, I’m listening to Hannah’s laugh. I’m watching her talk, conft fungientranced by her.

“That should do, shouldn’t it?” Hannah says, forcing me to break th n get a An impressive pile is at my feet and I didn’t realize just how many plucked from the bush. “Oh, shit. Yes. Wow.”

ok back Hannah sniggers, her entire face bright with pure satisfaction. “This Hannah Now what?”

A sudden chill sweeps over my body as her gaze wanders slowly o lown to She waits for my command, and I just want to grab hold of her and s

people her with kisses. I want to hold her and take her right here.

But that's not what she wants, at least not right now.

From the "Well, we have vegetables. We have fruit. The only thing missing true mountain man's diet is some protein," I advise, gathering them here." I together. "Have you ever caught a fish, baby girl?"

s. "I'm Hannah shrugs. "I went fishing with Xavier once, but we didn't catch anything."

"Then come with me. I'll teach you how to catch a fish the way men are supposed to catch a fish."

I grab her hand, squeeze tight and lead the way to the river dipping through the dense forest. Clear, cool water flows steadily through the lush vegetation surrounding the bank. The sound of water rippling over rocks is soothing, the river filled with life, but most important of all, the weather is perfect. "Leaping salmon." I pull my boots off and roll my pants around my waist. "The freshest you'll ever eat. But don't be fooled, they won't just jump into your hands."

Hannah remains still on the riverbank, her face glowing in the sunlight.

"What do you mean my hands? We're not..." She watches my steps as I wade into the middle of the river, spread my legs wide and dip my hands into the water. "Oh, right. I guess we are then. We're catching fish with our hands." I laugh, and gesture for her to join me.

"Wow, this is much colder than the springs," Hannah says, tiptoeing across the rocks, meeting me in the deepest part of the river. "Why couldn't you just meet us up there?"

ver me. "That would be too easy, baby girl," I grunt, moving in behind her and bending over and holds her hands in the water. "Plus, in the wild, you



earn it.”

I give my hips a quick thrust, teasing her big bottom with a push from ahips.

ie food “Hey! Stop that!” Hannah squeals, her cries bouncing down the stream water. “This is serious stuff.”

't catch I grab her ass, pulling off with a slap. “And so is this. Wowzers, what ass you’ve got, baby.”

en were “Stop!” Hannah laughs, standing tall to give me a hard stare. “Come on. There’s plenty of time for that later. The fish will be asleep soon, I can see it beneath it.”

d, lush I wiggle my brows. “Oh, is that right? Are you starting to feel like a fish out of the water or something?”

tly... She gives a shrug. “Perhaps.”

ankles. I can’t help but smile. Deep inside, I hope she’s being sincere. Even if she wants nothing more than to do this every single day with her. Working

her take to life on the mountain fills me with joy, and to be honest, it’s gentle actually really, *really* good at it.

“Fine. So what you want to do...” I bend down behind her, sliding my hands down her arms to cup her hands and hold them almost level with the cool surface of the water. “... is hold your hands about here. It’s a waiting game, baby girl. Be patient and watch this stream of water through your legs. When you see their scales flicker in the sunlight, and when you do, be quick.”

g across “I just clasp my hands together?”

the fish “Yeah,” I say, snapping her hands together as if a fish has just jumped. “Like this.”

r as she She nods as I step back. I position myself beside her, bending down to the river and waiting.

A few minutes pass, but standing beside Hannah, watching her concentrate so fiercely makes the time fly. She tries a few times, but the fish are too fast for her today. I'm too busy studying her technique to even see the fish swim past me, and by technique, I mean the way she's bending over, her back arched, and beautiful.

"What an idiot!" Her scream catches me off guard and when I look to her, she's holding the biggest, freshest salmon I've ever seen in these rivers. "I got one! Take it, oh God, it's slimy!"

I can feel her hands on my face. She throws it at me, squealing as the fish flops in the river. My hands stomp over the rocks, luckily for us the flapping salmon landed right in the water. "A ladyfish can't swim away again."

"What a beautiful fish!" I say excitedly. "Hannah! You're officially a mountain girl!"

Every fibre of my body launches herself at me, sending me stumbling backwards in the water. The weight of her embrace forces me back against the dampness and the cold, she's my balance, falling into the bank as she kisses me deeply. I hold her, allowing her to pin me to the ground as her lips seal over mine.

My head is spinning. Slowly, she eases up and her green eyes are half-hooded, looking at me with the faintest smile. "Thank you for today," she says, smiling. "It's the best day I've had in a long time."

"You'll do anything for me, Hannah." I cup her cheek, her warm face every inch mine. "I need right now. "I mean that, too. *Anything.*"

She smiles and I lean up, pecking her lips again. I hold her tight, my hands finding their own way to grip her hips, pulling her in until I can't get any closer. Her heat covers me, the feeling of being beneath her the only thing I've ever permitted someone to power over me.

"Um," Hannah says after a warm minute of cuddling by the river. "

concentrate Where's the fish?"

jumping I gasp and jump up, looking to my empty hands then to the bare  
limbs around us. "Dammit!"

ass big Hannah rolls her eyes and adjusts her pants, stepping back in the  
with a straight face. She pretends to scowl at me, resuming her p  
hands, position and watching down the stream.

vers. "I "Leave it to me, big fella. I don't want to lose another fish."

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'Colt...

Where's the fish?"

I gasp and jump up, looking to my empty hands then to the bare ground around us. "Dammit!"

Hannah rolls her eyes and adjusts her pants, stepping back in the water with a straight face. She pretends to scowl at me, resuming her previous position and watching down the stream.

"Leave it to me, big fella. I don't want to lose another fish."

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hannah

**C**OLT STACKS THE FIRE, poking the ashes with a thick stick nearby. My belly is full, the beautiful taste of freshwater fish lingering on my lips. The beautiful landscape is darkening, the warm thermal springs becoming more and more appealing again as the sunlight disappears above our heads.

“We should probably head back soon,” Colt says, settling back beside me. He loops an arm around me, gripping my shoulder and pulling me in close. My nose squashes against his warm chest, a sense of peace and safety flooding my insides. I’m sitting here with the best friend I’ve ever had, not wanting to leave. But it’s become so much more than that – it’s become a *need* to stay here forever.

It’s something I’ve never felt before. My life back home was always planned out, right down to my dinner every single night. The microwave meals I purchased from the store were always the same, just peel off the plastic and shove it in the microwave.

It’s nothing like letting the trickle of freshwater move around your body, dipping your hands in while your back aches for that fucking fish to catch.

It's a life I never knew I'd love.

And now Colt is holding me, I can't help but feel like this is a manly, burly, brut of a man at that... But a man that I never thought I would be fucking in love with.

"I don't want to leave," I say, my breath teasing the hairs on his chest. "I want to stay here forever."

His arms clench. Like he's holding me to my words or something.

"I want that, too." Colt holds me tighter again. "We can stay here and we can prepare the land." He lets go of me and drops to his knees. His blue eyes match the glacial blue of the thermal springs in front of us, the black and grey rocky ground like the gravel of his thickening beard. "You say the wish still I'll do it."

My shoulders slump. "It sounds amazing, but we aren't prepared. We'll freeze."

Like I've just challenged him, Colt bursts upright, his nostrils flaring. His big, brawny chest pumped full with mountain air.

"I'm always prepared, baby girl."

He stomps away, leaving me to tend to the fire. I watch as he works, never through some branches, stomping them and splitting some into shape. Some more minutes pass and I chuckle at the way he rips giant leaves off

fern shrubbery nearby and begins carrying them over to our resting place. "What are you doing?" I ask, frowning at the growing heap of sticks and branches in front of me.

He grunts, a scowl deep across his brow. "You'll see."

My body tingles at the way his face has hardened. His cheeks are taut, his long hair being whipped from side to side as he works. He's turned his back to me. Pure muscle sculpted across every perfect inch of his manly body.

rips through the thick leaves, biceps ridged with pulsing veins as he n, a bigbashing some thick branches into the soft forest floor. He twists some l fall sogreen string he's plucked from somewhere behind us, wrapping it arou sticks so they hold together.

s broad Before I can ask what the hell he's doing, he's tying up the final p the structure and laying the long leaves over it. *Holy shit.* He's built made from forest material in a matter of minutes. It's not much, but if night. Ior snows tonight, it will be enough to keep us dry.

ue eyes He steps back, chest puffed out. He presses his big hands to his drop ofserious smile spreads over his face. "Shelter."

ord and I laugh. "Thank you, Mr. Caveman. What's next?"

He points to the ground where the bones of the salmon remain. l, Colt.Gone. Me. Get more."

My chest bounces, the grunting of Colt making my belly rumb aring, abouncy laughter. "Very funny. But I wouldn't recommend goi caveman... You know they had small peckers, right?"

Colt's eyes go wide, and he peers down his trousers. "No. Me. Big." e slices He stumbles over and lays beside me. We lay there, la . A fewuncontrollably as night falls above us. The fire remains bright as we a thickeach other arms, eventually moving to the warmth of the thermal spi ce. make love under the stars one final time before Colt holds me all night redded He cuddles me to sleep under the shelter.

I've never slept better.

\*\*\*

e tight,  
full on  
dy. He

begins We reach the cabin early the next morning and Colt's hand slides  
kind of mine so he can tend to his chickens before coming inside. I step up the  
and two steps of the cabin, the shine glaring off the rental vehicle in the dirt  
catching my eye.

piece of It's a bright sunny morning, and the moisture hanging in the air catches  
at a tent my throat. Despite the long walk back down the mountain, I can still  
it rains Colt's thick stubble tickling the back of my neck. I can still feel his  
around my soft belly, holding me as he snored into my back, his breath  
hips any body all night.

I've never slept in the forest before. The noises that you hear  
frightening. The cracking of sticks beneath an unknown weight. The  
"Food of the ground nearby, a hidden figure roaming in the shadows of the  
The gentle splashing in the springs when you peer into pitch black darkness  
le with It should have been enough to keep me up all night.

ng full But not once did I ever feel threatened.

I had all I needed to keep me safe.

' I had Colt.

ughing A tear reaches my eye as I stare at the dented disaster of the vehicle  
e lay in have to return at some point. My brother will be sick to his stomach  
rings to He's probably sent a search party out for me, but even this far  
long. mountain, they'll be doing well to find me.

The truth is, I don't want them to. After almost leaving the other  
now... I'm not sure I want to go.

I left a life of routine and being controlled by my family. And ever  
stepped out of that vehicle, nothing here has been predictable. The first  
my eyes open at my small apartment, I know what I'm about to do. /



as from don't, someone will sure as hell set my day out for me like I'm still  
timber who can't control their own life.

iveway Each step of my day is the same old thing, over and over again  
throbbing ache at the back of my skull.

ches in Up here... That's not the case.

till feel I didn't know I would be reunited with my best friend. I didn't know  
s hands losing my virginity in the comfiest, adorable mountain cabin I've ev  
hot onin. I didn't know I'd forage for my lunch, and I certainly didn't th  
catch a fucking fish with my bare hands.

can be Looking around the rugged, mountainous land, I know there's sor  
thumpdeeper here.

e night. I swipe my eyes and force my legs to drag me inside, catching on  
kness. breath of fresh air. I set down the bag Colt left me to carry inside and t  
way across the kitchen. The pots and pans from yesterday are still dir  
fill a clean pot with water and wait for it to boil while scrubbing th  
dishes in the sink.

My mind begins to drift as the water boils on the stovetop.

e I will *I love him.*

oy now. I find some tea leaves on the rustic wooden shelf by the fridge. Th  
up the on the jar has '*Cherry Bark*' scribbled messily on the front. I twist th  
open it and it pops loose. The smell of the dried leaves bathes  
er day, allowing me to inhale a deep, long breath as the sweet, woody aroma  
nose.

since I "Smells good, right?" Colt says from behind me. He steps inside  
noment four eggs in one hand and a small pumpkin tucked under the other a  
And if I luxury of the forest up here, cherry bark. I harvested it last year. Dric  
the fire."

a child “Can I taste it?” I ask, my curiosity of this land and the wonders it only growing stronger.

I like a “Of course you can, baby...” Colt slips in behind me, pressing a round to my neck. “What’s mine in this cabin is yours.”

My tummy sparks with excitement.

Why I’d be *Does he really mean that? What if I wanted to stay? Shit, do I want*

er slept “Where do you get it?” I ask, spooning the brown leaves into a drink I’d squeezing the confusion swirling in my head away.

Colt pulls a chair from behind the table and sinks his big frame down next to nothing from the trunk of a cherry tree. A lady who stopped by to welcome me many years ago taught me how to make it turn into the rich, deep flavor the final batch has.” I listen to him, loving the passion in his words. He really find my love living up here, and it’s easy to see why. “It’s good for you, so I Whenever I get a cold, I’m straight into it.”

He dirty I smile, pouring some water into the mug. A sweet perfume wafts in towards my nose, filling me with the scent of blossoming cherry tree in springtime.

Colt reaches across and grabs the stack of paper on the table. I sip the label while he gazes over my condition report. I’ve left it unattended, which is the lid to speaking, isn’t allowed.

the air, But I have my delicious tea, and my life back home is suddenly even hits my important than before.

“It’s so nice,” I say, clutching the cup at my lips, allowing the steam holding take over my senses.

erm. “A “Yes, I’m grateful to that lady. She showed me so much.”

and it by “Who was she? Does she visit anymore?” I settle down opposite Colt and sip the tea.

He shakes his head. “No. She’s lived on the land for a few years, man over the hill a few miles back. They keep to themselves these days.”  
Colt’s head dips, and I wonder if there’s something he’s not telling me. He’s busy reading my evaluation, and although he’s not really permitted to do so, I let it slide. *Just for him.* I study his gaze, watching for a hint of *that?* why nobody seems to come around here to visit him.

“Do you get lonely up here?” I ask eventually.

A splitting stare rips through me. “Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug, dodging Colt’s sudden irritation. “It’s funny, many, few days... but I’m not *living* here, am I? This tea is unique to the area, the flavor this special. But doing this day in, day out... That’s part of the reason I’m usually so excited to come up here. Break the monotony of every day being the same, too old thing, you know?”

Colt’s face is stiff, he’s glaring at me with a scowl creeping into his eyes. I instantly swallow the hot tea, dodging his intense stare as he slams the papers down on the table. Is this another one of his sudden mood changes? What the hell am I wondering what I’ve said that’s pulled the smile from his lips.

“This is my life,” Colt grunts, his voice snapping through the tension. “I know it is... I’m not saying-”

I take a moment to think, reading the venom between his words.

Not for the first time, I begin to wonder... is he truly happy? All that *of what’s mine is yours*, but is it really? Would he give any of this up to me if I asked? If I bared my true feelings to him, would he consider adapting his life to suit *our* needs?

I’ve loved every moment of these few days. Cooking. Hunting. Exploring. It’s been wonderful.

But could I do it every single day?

arried a *Maybe. I love him. I love him.*

s.” “Not saying what?” Colt prompts me, catching my state of deep thoughting me. I look at him, recalling everything we’ve done. He’s so damn tempted to struggle to find a reason not to tell him how I feel despite the fight rampant as to my mind. His rugged good looks are harder to miss than before, his chiseled jawline and rough stubble so irresistible. He’s grown in strength, even I’ve been here, watching the confidence in the way he moves. This is the man I grew up around, a man I know better than anyone in the world.

in for a I’m drawn to him. I want him to hold me. Touch me. Feel me.

ne; it’s I want Colt. Heart and soul. Forever and ever.

was so *Shit.*

ie same Maybe that’s all that matters?

“I know this is your life,” I lean in, sliding a hand over his knee. He smiles. “And I think your life is amazing, Colt.”

down. His eyes flash and he almost smiles before his face straightens out all? I might take a look at that vehicle for you. We’ll be waiting God knows how long for the mechanic otherwise.” He smacks the report with the back of his hand and looks up at me. “And then, judging by the amount of red crooked here, it seems I’d better get to work on fixing this shit heap of a cabin.”

He pushes off the chair and dips down to kiss me, lingering longer than usual. My eyes close, drinking his touch in, before slowly, Colt disappears out the door without another word.

ting his

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ploring.

*Maybe. I love him. I love him.*

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I’m drawn to him. I want him to hold me. Touch me. Feel me.

I want Colt. Heart and soul. Forever and ever.

*Shit.*

Maybe that’s all that matters?

“I know this is your life,” I lean in, sliding a hand over his knee and smiling. “And I think your life is amazing, Colt.”

His eyes flash and he almost smiles before his face straightens out again. “I might take a look at that vehicle for you. We’ll be waiting God knows how long for the mechanic otherwise.” He smacks the report with the back of his hand and looks up at me. “And then, judging by the amount of red crosses on here, it seems I’d better get to work on fixing this shit heap of a cabin.”

He pushes off the chair and dips down to kiss me, lingering longer than usual. My eyes close, drinking his touch in, before slowly, Colt disappears out the door without another word.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## Colt

“**P**ASS ME ANOTHER NAIL, please sweetheart,” I say, the handle in my hand gripped tight.

Hannah flicks through the box of old nails I’ve straightened out over the years. Pulling bent, rusty nails from old timber fences saved me a lot of money when I first moved up here. The hours I passed, sitting next to her hammering twisted nails straight again was time well spent.

“I didn’t know you kept an antique collection,” Hannah smirks, her hair swirling in the breeze.

I grab the nail and hold it steady over the new decking board, my shadow cast across the day’s hard work.

It’s been perfect, working in the gentle heat of the sun all day.

Of course, pretending to look over her car isn’t exactly ‘perfect’. I can’t fix it, but I haven’t had the guts to tell her what I did. I haven’t had a mechanic there is no mechanic. It’s one lie after the other, but it’s all for her.

I can’t risk losing her.

“Shut up. They’re not antique.” Hannah’s brows flick up at my words, her gorgeous face suddenly playful. “It would do the humans of the world

to start reusing old supplies. Recycle. Reuse. Instead of mass producing this ‘stuff’ all the time.”

I start hammering, once, twice until the long piece of timber is set. I give it a wiggle and no movement has me leaning back on the balls of my feet, smiling.

Hannah follows my gaze over the creamy color of the new deck back to the veranda. The smell of freshly sawn pine fills my chest with memories of when I built my cabin. Lost in all the other things living in the mountain throws my way, I think I’ve forgotten how much I like working with wood.

hammer Fixing the deck has been on my list of things to fix up for a long time. Finally getting it done has a feeling of accomplishment bursting inside me that hasn’t been there in a long time.

A lot of “Wow,” I say, sliding a hand through my hair, pushing it back so that the fire, breeze tickles the beads of sweat. “It looks bigger now, right?”

Hannah nods. “Yeah. We’ll just fix up that section over there.” She points to the dark, rotted wood that’s below a hole in the guttering. “And the cross will be a big tick on my paperwork.”

My giant “Hang on.” I hold a frown, glaring at Hannah. “You said ‘we’ll fix it.’ Does that mean you’re actually going to help now?”

Her mouth drops into a perfect ‘O’. “I’ve helped! I’ve been sifting through this mess. There is this shambles, thank you very much.” She shakes the tray of old nails and a nail told her tongue poked between her teeth. “And just so you know, not all of the nails are perfectly straight. If you really did straighten these out like you said you would, then you didn’t do a very good job.”

me, her *Fuck. This woman.*

It’s good My chest bounces beneath a deep chuckle. Hannah’s striking green

cing allglow in the sunshine, her amusement making her face brighten as she  
hand down her curvy waist and pops a hip out. Goddamn. I want to  
ecure. Ihold her so tight she can't ever leave. She's spent all day by my side, h  
s of mytalking and simply just *being* here.

Yes, she gives me shit. Constantly.

on the And you know what? I fucking *love* it.  
ith old I've never had that before – the company of someone happy to be w  
g on the She's perfect in every sense and a deep, growing feeling is mak  
workingbelly twitch. I want to marry this woman. She needs a ring on her fing  
just any ring... The biggest, most beautiful ring I can provide for her.  
me, butthe least she deserves.

e of me She's so damn sexy, so smart. So funny.

More than that, when I'm around her, *I'm* those things too.

he cool I'm a better man when I'm with her. I want to make improvement:  
cabin instead of shoving them aside for another day. I've got ener  
e pointsenthusiasm for life. I'm brimming with excitement to teach her, pass  
ien thatknowledge of living on the land and help create a home that we can  
proud of.

« *it up*'. I want her.

And nothing else matters.

through “Come on then,” Hannah slaps my arm and crawls across the c  
at me, aboards to the last piece to repair. The loud cry of the evening birds is c  
iese are down the valley, a squawk piercing the silent, peaceful air. “What  
ou did, waiting for? I'm starving and I can smell the cherry tea calling my nan

I watch her crawl across, her big, round ass wobbling with each sh  
her knees. I grind my teeth, wanting to take her right here on the deck  
en eyes



slides to grab her ass and slam into her, hear her scream my name into the fucking where we belong. Together.

helping, My cock twitches at the thought, her perfectly rounded body against the orange hue falling upon us. I grab the hammer, stomping on slapping her ass on the way.

“Let’s finish up. You’re ripping the timber up this time, baby girl, with me passing her the hammer.

ing my “What?!” Hannah gasps. “I can’t-”

ger. Not I shuffle in behind her, curling my arms around her waist and close. That’s fingers around the hammer. She’s warm and soft. “Spin it around claws are pointing down.” Her hair fluffs into my face, but I don’t mind gentle, floral scent bursts through my nose and set my heart on fire. I h tighter, a steady hand guiding her shaky arm down to meet the crum s to my decking board. “Now hook the claw under that piece. Make sure it’s gy and real good, and yank back.”

on my Hannah’s breath trembles and I let go. She positions the hammer ur both betimber, wiggling and grooving it until it holds firm. She gives a quick thrust backwards, pulling the old board up and splitting it in half.

“I did it!” She cries out, quickly hooking the hammer back beneath timber to release the last few splints that remain. “Look, Colt. Look leaning back into me. “That was easy. And fun.”

echoing Her body twists and she flashes a look up at me. Her big, beautiful eyes are glowing with pride, a look I’ll never get tired of.

le.” “Perfect.” I swallow hard, staring into her eyes. “And I’m not talking about the new hole in the deck.”

. I want Hannah’s cheeks flush and I lean down, pressing a kiss to her lips. mouths lock, my tongue invading her mouth as we sink into a long,

e forestkiss before eventually finishing the last few boards to complete the new

Hannah takes control, even hammering in a few of the old nails to  
radiantthe timber she's cut with a surprisingly steady saw action.

ver and "Measured. Cut. And laid." Hannah folds her arms over her chest

casting in the sunset over the completed project. "Mr. Mountain Man  
" I say, have no place here anymore." That spirited look in her eyes is back. ]

I love so much. "This is my house now. You are free to go."

I giggle. *Holy fuck*. I actually *giggle*.

ing her "You're aware you sound so adorably dorky right now, don't you?"

so thelaughing. I wrap both my arms around her and look down at her face  
nd. Thebeauty. "If you were really a mountain woman, you would know it'  
old herhouse. It's a *cabin*."

bly old Hannah glares at me, a playful frown forming as she steps in so close  
s underchest warms my belly. "You're just jealous."

"Well," I breathe, releasing a long sigh. "If you're taking over the  
nder theduties, I'd better go in and make that tea."

ck, firm Hannah gives me a pat on the shoulder, eyes gleaming. "Good idea  
just go and fight a bear and I'll be back."

ath the We laugh and I stoop inside, quickly make some tea and trudge back  
k." Shethe glistening new deck. The steaming mugs swirl in my hand and

Hannah swinging her legs at the edge, her relaxed gaze cast across  
eyes aregarden.

"Here you are." I pass her the tea. She slurps and I sink down beside  
g about"Really, thanks for your help today. I know that report is going to be  
restructure, so having you here to help out means a lot."

ps. Our Hannah flashes me a look. "It means a lot to be here, Colt."

loving Our gazes lock. My heart thunders inside my chest, my blood burns

w deck against my skin. A cold gust of wind blasts across the garden. It must be secure from the tip of the mountain and fly through the valley because it's fucking cold. It's forceful presence pushes the strands of Hannah's hair against her face, hiding her eyes from me.

me. You I lean in, brushing her silky soft hair behind her ear.

The one I take a second to stare into her eyes. I'm not thinking. I'm not feeling. I'm just in the moment.

Me and her.

"I say, Hannah and Colt.

lawless The way it should be.

is not a "The deck looks incredible," I say softly, allowing my fingers to trace her cheek. "If you want, I'd love for you to help me fix some other things. You can teach me more. Stay for a few days, Hannah."

I wriggle in and my hand splits between the heat of her thighs. I grip her waist hard and firm, pulling her legs so she angles towards me.

"I can see it in your eyes, you're thinking about home again." I gulp. I'll avert my eyes so they stare down at a dirt patch on the ground beneath her feet.

"I hate that. I hate that this isn't enough for you."

back onto Hannah dips so her eyes pull me in again. "Colt, you'll always be here for me." I see her lips tighten and I wait for the killer blow. "But I have to go. I've been thinking about it while we worked, and I'm going to leave tomorrow. You looked over the car, right?"

hide her. I scrub a hand over my face, my body feeling like I've just fallen from a cliff.

"Yeah. I looked over it."

I feel her eyes on me, hope lingering in her expression. Another thing I know that I can give her what she wants. She believes that I've helped her.

ist race the glint in her eyes trusting that I can fix anything.

reezing “Then, Colt...” She grabs my hands and pulls me in. “There’s one  
air over more thing left to fix before I go...”

My hands go to her chest, the heat of her palms holding my hands.  
perfect roundness of her breasts.

ng. “Hannah,” I breathe, guilt riddling through me. “Hannah-”

“Make love to me, Colt.” Her voice is breathy, hot and desperate.  
to feel you again before I go. I need to remember you. The way you  
me... The way you touch me... The way you make me feel... It will  
me back to the mountain. Over and over again.”

il down I glance sideways. “It will?”

stuff. I She nods, her hands sliding from mine. “Always.”

I launch forward, my mouth attacking hers.

rip her, Tomorrow she will find out who I am. Tomorrow my lies will be

Hannah will see me for who I really am... A cold, desperate man, so  
down, I’ll stoop to the lowest level to keep her here.

death us. “Colt,” Hannah breathes, her kisses ravaging across my cold skin.

love to me.”

enough One last night. That’s all I’ve got.

e to go.

o leave

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from a

lie. She

ved her,

the glint in her eyes trusting that I can fix anything.

“Then, Colt...” She grabs my hands and pulls me in. “There’s only one more thing left to fix before I go...”

My hands go to her chest, the heat of her palms holding my hands to the perfect roundness of her breasts.

“Hannah,” I breathe, guilt riddling through me. “Hannah-”

“Make love to me, Colt.” Her voice is breathy, hot and desperate. “I want to feel you again before I go. I need to remember you. The way you fuck me... The way you touch me... The way you make me feel... It will bring me back to the mountain. Over and over again.”

I glance sideways. “It will?”

She nods, her hands sliding from mine. “Always.”

I launch forward, my mouth attacking hers.

Tomorrow she will find out who I am. Tomorrow my lies will be seen. Hannah will see me for who I really am... A cold, desperate man, so lonely I’ll stoop to the lowest level to keep her here.

“Colt,” Hannah breathes, her kisses ravaging across my cold skin. “Make love to me.”

One last night. That’s all I’ve got.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hannah

**O**UR LIPS NEVER UNHINGE as we stumble through the cabin, against the wall. Colt rips my shirt over my head, doing the same to himself. My hands fumble over his chest, my fingers gripping him hard. The searing hot warmth of his strength consumes me, makes my chest ache and sets my body alight.

“Colt,” I breathe. He growls and nibbles my lip. “Colt...”

He forces me against the wall just outside his bedroom. My body is pressed against the timber, and I must be insane, because I swear I feel the movement of wind in my hair. A solid pillar of heat surrounds me, every fibre of his hulking strength towering over me. He’s big. So big. Then he lets out a groan, his chest heaving with short, sharp breaths as he slowly rises in front of my eyes.

The dark stare pulls me in.

He stands before me, studying my flushed skin.

“I want to make you mine,” Colt grunts, his voice deeper than before.

“I’m yours.”

He leans in, nudging my nose with his. It’s aggressive, and then he

like a wild bear.

“You’re mine.” He’s not asking. His forehead drops to mine, a tight grip around my waist holding me against the wall. “I could do this forever with you here.”

“Yes,” I breathe, allowing his teeth to sink into my skin. “Yes. Colt.”

His big hands cup my ass, and he tightens his hold. My skin is screaming and he lifts me up the wall so my legs wrap around him. Our mouths pressed together in a wet, hot kiss that’s so messy and unnaturally beautiful that I force myself to hold Colt as close as I can.

He means the world to me. He’s set a matchstick to my life, igniting my heart, falling heart and gave me a sense of living again.

My mouth is busy, slicking against his tongue as he deepens the kiss. I’ve never been happier. Colt allows me to fall to my feet. Breathless, he slides down my body, unhooking my bra and catching my breast in his mouth. A warm tongue swirls over my nipple, his palms massaging me. I find the long, golden locks of his hair.

He drops until he’s kneeling down, unbuttoning my pants.

“So perfect. So fucking perfect.”

My jeans fall down and my panties quickly follow. My body bursts into a low heat, my pussy so fucking wet.

The way my body reacts to this man has me questioning my decision. Should I leave tomorrow? What for? To be bossed around by my little brother again? To be a disappointment to my parents? To live the same routine day out?

Fuck that.

“Colt...”

“Spread your legs, baby girl,” Colt demands, a warm hand dividing

legs.

I look down my naked body, the lumps hidden behind a light grip. Keep confidence. My nipples are stiff peaks and I pluck at them when Colt comes closer to the heat splitting my thighs apart. His eyes are greedy. Like a bearded animal relishing a hard-earned feast, staring at my glistening clit. His tongue swipes his lips and he presses a hard, wet, kiss to my clit. My spine slams against the wall. My knees buckle and I'm holding myself together.

"Oh, Colt," I moan, clutching his hair.

He doesn't hesitate. His lips press against my clit, a swipe of his tongue sending a molten hot wave of pleasure right through me. My hips raise. Colt holds me steady against the wall and I start to ride against his face. "Yes, baby," Colt grunts, lapping at my entrance. "Fuck my face like you do in his." My body pulls taut, and I close my eyes. Colt laps at the fresh sex until I cream bursting from my pussy, his tongue flapping wildly. I moan, enjoying the way his hands are gripping my ass so tight, guiding me as I thrust against the roughness of his stubble.

"Fuck, Colt," I breathe, holding the back of his head. "I'm going to come with you." My hips raise, a twitch in my belly deepening. His tongue slides in and he grunts in a way that vibrates against my pussy. He fucks me with his tongue, a warm hand sliding around me, reaching between my legs and brothercircling my back door.

"Colt!" My leg lifts and hooks over his shoulder, allowing him to touch my ass with his finger as he devours my slippery softness. "Oh! That's so good."

My nipples sting and I pinch them if only to release some pleasure from my body. My body tightens and thank fucking God. *It's coming.*



and needles shoot through my legs as Colt tempts a fingertip against my inner thigh. When he applies enough pressure, and a new sensation makes my pussy move with wetness.

a wild, “Colt! OH!”

more. He laps at my clit, flattening his tongue so it glides the length of my sensitive mound. My cheeks are burning hot, flushed and heavy as waves of heat release against his mouth. *Can I really leave?* A hiss escapes it’s all I can manage – as Colt’s eases me down and rises to meet my lips.

“That was a happy sound, right?”

I nod, looping an arm around his neck. I pull him into me, missing but desperate to feel him. Thick muscle, a big slab of pure man with a laugh as strong as a giant tree. I feel like he’ll never be close enough, something has taken over. Something powerful and needy is surging through my veins, forcing me to drag Colt through the door until we collapse on the bed. He’s hovering over me, his tongue licking down my neck.

so I’m “Colt,” I moan, my breath catching. “Colt... I need you.”

I bite my lip and close my eyes, hoping I remember the sensations come tomorrow. His belt buckle clinks and I’m burning hot, unable to resist as he explores every inch of my body. The next thing that I see is his naked body above me.

and “I’m gonna come inside you, Hannah.”

“Yes, Colt. I want that.”

He reaches down and thumbs my clit. I’m not sure if he pinches it, but it’s so good whether it’s just something involuntary that my body does.

But wow.

“Oh, Colt!”

I grip his shoulder, pull him down until I feel the long, hard

ny tightpressuring my slick entrance. A knot of tension burns between my legs, but slowly I feel relief when he nudges his cock against my

slowly sliding inside until the impossibly tight feeling transforms my body

“Fuck,” Colt grunts, his fists plastered either side of my face. Part of my broad, hairy chest is above me as he drives slowly inside me, allowing my afterchannel to open for him. “You’re so fucking wet, baby. Holy shit.”

Every thrust has me burning hotter. A storm of sensation grips me, and I’m clamped tight around his shaft. He works faster, stealing my breath and making me moan. He keeps thrusting, his dark eyes cast over me like he’s bodyprotecting me with a forcefield around us.

His hair shifts around his gorgeous face, and I find his hairy chest g fiercenails dragging across his skin. My hips meet him thrust for thrust and veins, ploughing into me, hard and fast. His eyes slam shut, and when he silently, his jaw clenches tight and a deep, serious sounding grunt leaves the back of his throat.

A wet warmth bursts inside me and I’m moaning his name, watching as in my way his face shudders through his release. He throws his head back and it stays so loud I swear the timber walls splinter around us. Fuck, my body is trembling beneath him, my clit throbbing as my own climax grips him and he milks every last drop of his cock.

He falls down, our bodies hot as we lay there.

It’s like my head has just been filled with all these dangerous thoughts and one burning thought is cutting through the rest, viciously forcing me on my side, catch Colt’s eyes and say the words I never thought I would say to another man.

“Colt, I need you to know something before I leave.” My breath is lengthshaking with every enormous word I can’t control.

gs. It's He rolls on his side, his naked body hot against mine.

pussy, His giant hands catch mine, cupping them in his big paw-like hands.  
body. I'm going to fucking miss these hands.

his big, "What is it, baby girl?" Colt says, his dark eyes still hooded and weighing my  
I draw breath, look him in the eye, and for the first time in my life  
control of my life.

and I'm "I-I love you."

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heavy,

He rolls on his side, his naked body hot against mine.

His giant hands catch mine, cupping them in his big paw-like hand. *Shit.*  
I'm going to fucking miss these hands.

“What is it, baby girl?” Colt says, his dark eyes still hooded and weighty.

I draw breath, look him in the eye, and for the first time in my life, I take control of my life.

“I-I love you.”

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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## Colt

*I LOVE YOU. I love you. I love you.*

I bite down, throwing the axe through another log so it splits perfectly in half. The sun is starting to peek through the gray clouds. The chill of fresh morning air still lingering as sweat begins forming along my brow.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

I smash another log, quickly setting the next one up.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

My head is spinning, the streaming blood racing around my brain not helping. I couldn't sleep after hearing those words. The way Hannah flashed up at me, her long lashes blinking as the air lodged in my lungs, making me unable to respond.

I blitz the next log, the image of Hannah sleeping so soundly under the stars invading my mind.

I don't get it.

She said she was leaving... and now she's declaring her love for me.

The pile of split logs continues to grow. The ache in my shoulder is hot, but I don't stop swinging the axe. I don't even need any more.

chopped, the shed is brimming with the last load I split in my wild fury.

It's a distraction. A disturbance to the torture occupying my mind.

I've looked over the vehicle, using a flashlight to see if I can try and the damages I've caused. There's no recovering a cut fuel line, though up here in the mountains. Now she's said those precious words, those that mean more than anything in the world.. Now that I have her love gone and done something to ruin it all.

When she finds out... when she discovers what I've done... will she feel that way about me?

*I'm so fucked.*

My big, swollen hand scrunches my face. My palm is red raw, hot from hours of chopping wood in the dark taking their toll on my skin. I growl at the wind, finally giving in to the pain pulsing in my shoulder. I lift the axe and wedge it against the chopping block with a frustrated whack that fucking hard, I'm not sure I'll be able to pull it out later.

I take a walk around the garden, scowling at the dewy moisture on the lush, deep green leaves of kale. I draw back long breaths, squeezing my eyes shut in the hope I stem the flow of emotion threatening to take over.

My eyes catch at the patch of grass I've set aside for more garden beds, a project I've been putting off for years, just like the rest of the cruelties in my armcabin. For so long, I've been unable to find the motivation or drive to do it. What's the point? It's only me.

A single tear rolls down my cheek. I stand on the spot, staring at the empty pasture. My throat aches from holding it all in.

Then I see something I've never seen before.

Small children are running around, laughing and screaming together.

rage of gentle slope of the green grass. They have big, beautiful smiles on the  
as they race around playing. I take a step forward, my eyes creasi  
admire the deep green in their eyes. Their grins are wide, an infecti  
d repair and happiness instantly lifting my spirits as I watch them chase eac  
h – not down, the older of the two boys tackling the smaller child to the groun  
e words They roll in the grass, laughter echoing inside my head. An overw  
ve, I've feeling of love makes my chest burst, but a clunking by the back doo  
cabin breaks the noise.

she still My gaze snaps to see Hannah cupping her mouth through a yaw  
stretches in the morning sun, looking more like an angel appearin  
nowhere than someone who's just woken up. My heart stills in my  
urs and She's damn near perfect, all curving hips and pert tits.

owl into "You're up early," Hannah calls out, stepping across the deck.

the axe I nod, looking back to the pasture.

at's so It's empty.

No laughing. No playing. No happy children.

on the I scratch the back of my neck, wishing they would come back. I cou  
ny eyes use some of their enthusiasm and joy of life right now.

"Yeah," I answer, calling back to Hannah as she settles on the steps  
eds. It's to start early... One less pair of hands today."

umbling I don't even look at Hannah when the words leave my lips, but  
bother. she's looking at me. Tension is building in my chest again and I can se  
watching me. I just hope I'm disguising the pain enough as I stomp c  
e empty garden and meet her at the steps leading up to the cabin.

*Oh God, I can't do this.*

"Did you sleep well?" I ask, settling down on the step below her.

r on the She smiles and nods. "Yes. Thank you."

ir faces A smile catches my attention, but I force myself to look away. I hav  
ng as Iher everything, and I'd rather not have the memory of her sweet  
ous joyheavenly aura when she slaps my face because of what I've done to he  
h other The words repeat over and over again in my head. *I love you. I lov  
d. love you.*

ielming "Listen," I begin, holding the air in my chest. "Baby, there's some  
r of theneed to tell you."

*Fuck.*

vn. She Hope flashes in her eyes. I'm not sure what she expects, but the wa  
g fromleaning forward, reaching out for my hands has me dreading this ever  
7 chest. She doesn't suspect I'm about to tell her how I've betrayed her trust  
I've held her here against her will. How I've gone against everything  
wanted just for my own selfish needs.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

"What is it, baby?"

Hannah's hands wrap around mine. They're so small and soft. So pe  
ild sure I glance up at her and take a long, deep breath. Just as I open my n  
see the rosy, red color of her lips, catching the rays of the sun as they  
. "I hadso magically.

I can't help but lean in for one final kiss.

I know I cup the side of her face, groaning into her mouth. My mouth draw  
nse herher and the moment our lips meet, I'm questioning everything. Som  
ver theexplodes inside, a sudden explosion detonating in my chest.

She's so beautiful. So warm. So soft and tender.

Do I really have to tell her? What if I just grab her and drag her  
mountain? No one will ever find us up there... will they?

She likes it up there, I know she does. I could see it in her eyes.



e to tell I groan, kissing her harder. I picture our life in the wilderness, all  
t, pure, my heart pounding at the thought. I grip the back of her head, my  
r. plunging through her silky hair. My tongue strokes over hers and  
e you. I want it to stop.

“Colt...” Hannah breaks the kiss.

ething I I snatch back, rising to my feet. My breath quickens, my cheeks su  
scorching hot as I pace back and forth. Hannah is watching me, h  
darting across at me, her brow crinkled at my sudden urgency.

ly she’s “Colt...” Her voice is tight. “What’s going on?”

n more. Fuck, I love her so much. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

st. How I drop to my knees, grab her hands and hold them as close to my he  
g she’s possibly can. I stare deep into Hannah’s glowing green eyes, holding h  
as best as I can through the moisture pooling in my own.

“Okay, this is it. This is it.”

“What is it?” Hannah’s expression scrunches. “Colt, you’re freak  
rfect. out. What’s going on?”

mouth, I I suck in one final breath.

glisten Then, I let go.

“Hannah, I love you so fucking much. I’m sorry I didn’t say it be  
night. The truth is...” I pause, because fuck, there’s so much tru  
vs up to deserves to know. “The truth is, I’m not worthy of your love. I don’t  
nothing it.”

“Colt-”

“No. Hannah, I need to say this. Please. Please just let me.” I cle  
up the hands in mine, my vision blurring. “I’ve loved you for so fucking long  
you showed up at my gate, everything came flooding back. Those f

I alone, I've tried to forget, the feelings I never could forget. I left you behind, fingers once did I ever let go, baby girl. I never let go."

I never My shoulders square up as the sunshine meets the edge of the doorway. My body feels like a thousand razor sharp axes have been thrown at my chest.

"You have to understand I was desperate. You know that, right, baby girl? Suddenly you know that?" I squeeze her hands, staring into her eyes, waiting for her eyes to say something... anything. "You know I would do anything for you."

She just sits and waits with a blank look. I try another squeeze, gripping her hands so tight a knuckle cracks and she pulls back. A cold, chilling shiver penetrates right through me.

Part as I "Hannah. There is no mechanic coming. I never went to see a mechanic. Her gaze other day. Such thing doesn't exist."

Her mouth opens, ever so slightly. "I-it doesn't? Then... then what?"

I close my eyes. "I kept you here as long as I could so I could eventually move over. So I could prove I'm worthy of your love. I only did it because of a swear. You love me now, Hannah. You *love* me."

She shuffles to the edge of the step, a thunderous frown splitting her expression. "... only did what?"

Back last I swallow hard.

With she "I cut your fuel line." The words hurt, but not nearly as much as they deserve on Hannah's face. "I wanted you to stay and it left me with no choice. I can't start your car because I tampered with it, Hannah. I'm so, so sorry."

I take a deep breath and watch as Hannah storms inside and slams the door. She punches her fist into my face.

3, when It's nothing less than what I deserve.

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he door

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hannah

THE SLAMMING OF THE door isn't enough.

I force my way inside, fists clenched by my side as I storm across the room without really knowing what I'm doing. *He cut the fuel line? fucking fuel line?!*

I'm burning red, pacing across the floorboards. My head is an absolute mess. The table is set, cutlery laid out for two places, empty plates remain in the middle below some coffee mugs. A candle sits in the middle of the table, not lit yet, but a small box of matches lays beneath.

“ARGH!”

My heavy legs carry me to the edge of the table, and with a swift swipe across the surface, sending the plates smashing to the ground. The silver knives slide across the floorboards, spiraling in violent circles until they collide with the wall. I hear the door open behind me as I reach for another go at the mugs that remain on the table.

A sudden gust of cool air irritates the hairs on the back of my neck. A loud scream has my arm stopping just short of sending the mugs to their fate at the broken plates scattered on the floor.

“Hannah! Please!”

I snatch one of the mugs in my fist and spin around. “NO! Get away from me, Colt!”

I throw the mug across the room, narrowly missing Colt’s face. It smashes on the door behind him and I’m reaching behind me for the second one to take aim.

“Hannah! Calm down, please... Just talk to me.”

“Controlling asshole! You can’t just do that!” My throat burns. “What the fucking hell? Are you serious, Colt? Are you fucking serious?!”

I’m shaking so much when I storm across, I drop the mug. It shatters on the floor, but I don’t care. I stumble and the emotion forcing me forward makes me fall into Colt’s filthy, betraying arms.

*Cut the* My body is simmering, veins pulsing with wrath and a violent fury I didn’t know existed.

absolute “You want to talk, Colt? Fine. Let’s talk.” I slam a hand into his chest, but he doesn’t flinch despite my best efforts. Goddamn. “Do you even know what it’s like, having your entire life controlled?”

He shakes his head, eyes alarmed and shaken.

“Of course you don’t. You’re Colt...” I spit the words with pure hatred, venom. Two things I’ve never associated with the man standing in front of me. “You just up and run whenever something gets difficult. That’s what you do, isn’t it, Colt?”

*It* across “Hannah, please-”

My chest bounces off his as I lift my hardened nose to look him right in the eye. “That’s why you left, isn’t it? Because you didn’t want to hang around and fight for me. I wasn’t worth it, so what the hell makes me worth it now?”

Colt remains deadly still, the heat of the cabin making my skin itch.

“Hannah, I love you. I always have.”

My eyes roll. “Oh really? So after all this time, that gives you the stop me from leaving?” I stare into his dejected eyes, my neck craning as I mash my lips together. Did you ever stop to think that maybe if you asked, maybe if you asked me, ready like a normal fucking person, perhaps, *perhaps* I might have actually stayed anyway.”

“Hannah, I did ask-”

My arms flail about, every muscle in my body thrash wildly as if anything Colt is trying to say out.

“...but no! You can’t just force me to stay and expect me to be okay almost.” “Don’t say that, Hannah.”

“You know what, you’re just as bad as them. I thought you were different, Hannah. I really did.”

Colt takes a step forward, a hand trying to find my shoulder. “No, no, no. This isn’t a mistake. I made a mistake, that’s all this is.”

“No.” I shake my head and step back. “No, no, no. This isn’t a mistake. This is you being just like them. After all these years, I never thought I would be just like my parents. Like my brother. Like every single person who’s ever known me.”

“I’m not, Hannah!” Colt roars a mighty huff. “I’m not like them. I’m not like you.”

My head is still shaking, disbelief burning uncontrollably through my mind. I need to get out of here. I can’t look at you right now.”

I turn and race up the hallway, tears streaming down my face. My heart is pounding with anger. Or is it sadness? I burst through the bedroom door, frantically swiping at my eyes. I start gathering everything I’ve left scattered

around the room, my hands shaking with emotion. I bunch it in a pile right tobed and draw some deep breaths to control the sobbing.

. “Fuck Colt appears in the door, his broad frame blocking the light filtering u actedwatches me with a serious face as I begin speeding around the room, th stayedof his face spurring me on to get the hell out of here. *Fuck*. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, all I know is I need to get out of this cabin.

I block “Hannah, come and sit down. We can work something out. I can ta home, please, just let me help you.”

with it.” “No. I think you’ve done enough, Colt. This was a mistake. A big mistake.”

fferent, I find a bag in the corner of the room, trying my best not to look into eyes. I fluff the bag out and peer inside. It’s old and tattered, but “I am exactly how my broken heart feels right now so it’s fucking perfect.

*I trusted him. I fucking trusted him.*

mistake. I start shoving my phone, laptop and other scattered pieces of paper ght youthe bag, my mind racing. All the laughter. All the happy memories. Th personin the forest and all the lessons I’ve learned.

The touching, the feeling and thinking that maybe... just maybe, thi I *need* be something real. This was my shot at everlasting love. It felt so ri perfectly natural.

me. “I Now?”

It’s for nothing.

heart is I search the floor, swiping at my eyes. I look for something wa n door,perhaps a blanket or two. I’m leaving this mountain one way or anotheatteredif my vehicle is completely fucked then I’m left with no choice.

I grab a big sweater that’s piled on the floor and throw it in n

Stepping over to the door, I look Colt in the eye, trying to stop the racing of my heart when he pins me with a concerned gaze.

“What’s your plan?” Colt asks, his voice stiff as he glances at the bag in my hand.

I shrug. “The plan is for you to move out of my way, thank you. I don’t care what everyone thinks, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

Colt remains blocking the door. “Hannah, just take some deep breaths and calm down. You’re not thinking clearly.”

I growl in a way I never have before. Maybe I learned it from Colt. “These fucking mountains really are starting to rub off on me.”

All the more reason to get the hell out of here.

I spin and reach down to the floor, plucking Colt’s tiny little bag that he showed me the other day. I hold his stare, my eyes shaking as I dive in and retrieve the pocketknife from the bottom of the bag.

I point it at him and with nothing less than fierce determination, I say, “Move. Now.”

“Hannah, come on. You’re being ridiculous.”

“NOW!”

Colt shakes his head and slowly, steps out of the doorway. I burst past him, so quickly grabbing some old tinned fruit from the shelf beside the firewood. I throw the jars in my bag and storm towards the front door.

Colt stomps behind me. “I have an old four-wheeler in the shed. Come with me today and I can get it going again...”

My heart is exploding when I open the cabin door and the cold air hits my face, and my nose, Colt’s voice somewhere in the distance behind me.

“It won’t make it down the mountain, but you might find the closest campsite nearby. I’ll show you the way. Please, Hannah. *Please.*”



icing of I'm huffing, desperate for breath already. Shit. I haven't even started  
descent down the mountain. I step outside, the slam of the door caught  
puffed-large hand that stops it.

I keep going, stomping ahead.

Despite "What's your plan then?" Colt asks from behind me.

I throw the bag over my shoulder and tread down the steps. The  
flash and glow of the car catches my eye and just the sight of it makes my nose  
with disgust.

Maybe How could I be so stupid? Why didn't I check it? Why did I just throw  
word that he was trying to help me?

"I'm going home."

that he I pace forward, reaching the gate and unhooking it, Colt strutting  
my handme. "You'll die out there, you know that, right?"

I swallow. "I can look after myself." I spin on the spot, aiming the  
, I say, dark scowl imprinted on my face directly at Colt. "And unless everything  
taught me up at the springs was also a big fucking lie, then I think I can  
survive a little hike back down the mountain." A shaky hand raised  
point a firm finger directly at his chest. "Don't follow me, Colt. Don't  
disturb him, think about it."

ridge. I Colt grunts, a giant hand scruffing his hair. "Hannah, please don't disturb  
me."

I tighten the strap over my shoulder. "Goodbye, Colt."

give me My legs are wobbly down the dirt road, but by the time I allow myself  
to  
look back, Colt's just a tiny man standing at the top of the hill. I feel my  
throat  
meet snapping, but I fight down the bile trying to rise up my throat and go  
back  
plan one more time.

st cabin *Stick to the roads. Take rest. Drink water.*

And whatever I do, don't ever fucking fall in love again.

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# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## Colt

I CAN ONLY WATCH Hannah disappear, her beautiful silhouette fading down the mountain until her bright, glowing hair escapes sight. The enormous trees are a scary reflection of the task ahead of the woman who's claimed my heart. A dark green canopy of swaying branches is closing over the rocky road that descends miles and miles down the dangerous incline.

My heart beats for what feels like the final time as I choke back the tears.

I want to chase her. Scruff her and hold her against my chest. I want to clutch her body, tell her how much of a fool I am and drag her back to the cabin.

But I can't.

That's what got me here in the first place.

I never should have done what I did. Desperation reeks, but a lonely heart stinks even more. Hannah is right, after all. Of course she's right. She's so different to anyone else who's ever loved her – a controlling, manipulative asshole who's too fucking insecure and vulnerable to win her heart fairly.

I trudge up the steps of the freshly laid porch, the new scent of fresh

feels like I'm opening a fresh wound even further. My throat is tight and I crouch inside and crouch down, collecting the larger pieces of smashed ceramic from the floor. I toss them in the trash and stumble across to the sofa and finally allow myself to crash and fall.

The weight of my body is caught by the cushions. The cabin shakes as much as my chest chokes through the tears as I sob uncontrollably. Heartbroken. Overwhelmed. Yes, I fucking deserve everything, but I can't. Hannah was everything to me and I've fucked it up.

I can't shake the feeling of hopelessness as I sit upright, the back of my hand swiping across my eyes. She's out there all alone, the deep, dark, slowly-wilderness of the mountain. I push off the sofa, finding the scattered cutlery and placing it in the sink. I pace around the cabin, sniffing back emotion with deep, painful sobs. My lungs fill with her lingering scent, and although she's gone, weirdly, she's still here.

"Fuck, Hannah..." I step into the sink, doing my best not to look at the window. I can't. I just can't. "Hannah... Hannah..." My hand slips from the tap when I try to twist the water on and the weight of my heavy arm forces me to collapse to the floor. I scrunch in a heap with my arms gathered around my ankles as I weep loudly with a choked wail.

Some big tough guy I am.

I'm supposed to be a rugged mountain man. A big, burly bear that's full of heart and emotion, no heart, no *soul*.

I'm not. But it's her.

It's Hannah.

I force the devastation bursting in my chest to halt, even just for a moment. I suck in some deep breaths, staring across the room. This cabin is my

is I stepa world I've created for myself. A life of my own – far, far away from  
omic ondisappointed looks of the people I once loved.

where I I've worked hard to build a life that doesn't rely on anyone other  
myself.

akes as Hannah changed everything. She changed my life before I moved u  
ollably, and now she's laid her claim on me up here in the mountain, there's n  
lammit, can continue on without her.

When she's here, this cabin is a home.

of my A home worth fighting for.

p, dark I launch to my feet, moving quickly towards the kitchen. The bur  
my eyes stings as I try to pick some food to shove in my pockets. The  
e sink. Itins all look the same, the scribbly writing somehow just a blur as n  
rts. Myraces.

y, she's "Fuck it," I growl, waving a hand. "She can't have gone far."

I storm towards the door, unhooking a coat and quickly forcing r  
out the down the steps. The grass is wet, I didn't notice that before when  
chasing after Hannah.

weight *Don't follow me. Don't follow me.*

ap, my Her words ring in my head as I open the gate, but I can't just let her

There is a slight heat in the sun as it rises from behind the majestic  
A fiery orange glow basks across the soft, grassy pasture, but it  
has no changes to rough, rocky terrain as I reach the edge of my property ar  
the gate.

A symphony of birds singing is a tell-tale sign of the day that lies ahead  
storm is brewing. I scrunch a hand through my hair, glancing up at the  
moment. I walk off my property for the first time in years.

7 home, Gray clouds threaten to roll across the vivid blue sky, a gentle how

from the wind eery in the silence of the approaching danger. Wildflowers line the road, bright and colorful oranges and yellows popping in the corner's periphery than eyes as I focus on the footsteps in the dirt.

My boots grip the slippery terrain around the first bend and I wonder how much time I've lost. Hannah was furious, but I know that emotion no way I only carry her legs so far. I continue following the road, my heart pounding every time I see the thick imprint of the soul of her shoes.

As I move, the air cools and the imprints become lighter.

And lighter.

It creeps towards the edge of the road and then, it disappears in the lines of woods.

My head *Fuck.*

A skip meets my step as I venture off the road, a sudden sense of panic and anxiousness creeping in. I thought I would have found her by now. After any way an hour of walking, with the sky darkening with every lonely step I take I was creeping in just as I reach the bank of the river that flows down the mountain.

I crouch down by the water, hoping, wishing, *praying* to see a glimpse of Hannah.

The once sparkling surface of the water is dull and gray. The life and light that once peaked when Hannah caught her first fish in the depths of this very stream quickly completely gone. My chest burns at the memory of her lips, the way she had openkissed me that day in the forest. The softness of her body, the connection we shared as we held each other and made love.

My head – a We laughed. We had fun.

The sky as I showed her my world and how she belonged here with me.

I huff a long, drawn-out sigh that floats across the moisture in the air of the forest. That same river rushes against the rocks, the rough patter of water on stone.

ine the water is now a melody of mourning, a song of loss and heartache.

s of my I cup my hands in the river, splashing the freezing cold water against my cheeks.

der just *I have to find her. If she dies out here... If she dies because of me...*

1 would My legs straighten instantly at the thought. I shake my head defiantly, my body tensing at the very idea that Hannah could well be in grave danger now. She's not dying on my count, so I ignore the crashing of the waves above the forest and follow the river down the mountain.

It feels like another hour passes, another painful, gut-wrenching hour. I find not even a footprint to lift my breaking heart. Rain has started to fall heavily, the towering trees and daylight beneath the darkened forest fading to black. The thunder rattles the ground and lightning strikes the open wound in my chest. My stomach lurches and I double over, rain smacking against the back of my head. The bitter taste of bile fills my mouth as I retch, my stomach spasming with a painful twist that forces me to my knees. Cool air mixes with the heat of sweat across my forehead and I'm heaving, wave after wave of nausea forcing my empty stomach onto the forest floor.

Rain falls harder, the leaves, branches and damp earth cushioning the fall. I find joy in my exhausted body. I'm curled in a ball, roaring with agony and grief. My current eyes begin to fade, the darkness in my mind coming closer. The soft sound of rain pattering around me offers some relief, but the thought that if I, a weak acclimatized mountain man can't go on... then how the hell is Hannah to survive?

My eyes close and as I drift into the unknown, shivering and shaking, the haunting sound reminds me of my failure.

ie dank The gentle sobbing of a nearby woman, the whimper and cry of fresh sounds more like a scream in my head. It reminds me this is all my fault.



noise suffocating me until... I feel nothing.

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hannah

IT'S EARLY MORNING WHEN I walk up the street, busy with people moving all around me on the sidewalk. The clouds that tortured me last night hang in the sky – they're softer, gentler now than when I was stuck in the depths of the forest, the rain bucketing down over my limp body.

My belly grumbles with a painful roll that twists and pulls my insides. My longest night of my life is finally coming to an end. I did it. I made it down the mountain, and now my legs are carrying me across the solid pavement of Falls Creek's small streets.

But only just.

I thought I was going to die. I hated myself for leaving Colt, for the winding roads and through the horrible, wet forest, I ate myself up with cursing and swearing for being so stupid.

But something funny happens when your life is in jeopardy.

No matter how weak you feel, no matter how betrayed, how broken and scarred you are...

Life must go on.

A few sideways glances from passers-by have me dipping my

powering forward as best as I can towards the office. I don't want anyone to see me like this and when I reach the steps leading up to the office, I've been so happy to see the small concrete building.

Can I just resume my old life? Can I pull the chair out at my desk, let Matilda blabber about whatever it is that's troubling her today and continue on like nothing happened? Can I file the report and just move on like I never just experience the most intense, most beautiful feeling I've ever known? Is that what I want?

"Excuse me, Miss," a dark-haired security guard that I recognize hands me a card and hand out, stopping me from entering the office. "Only employees and workers' Estate are permitted beyond these doors."

I look at Jeffery and hold my hands out. "Um, Jeff? It's me, Hannah." His eyes go wide with shock. "Shit, Hannah?! Holy shit, it is you!"

Panic takes over and he's fumbling around, pushing me in the center of the hallway and back through the doors. My tired legs drag across the tiles but Jeffery helps me forward, appearing at my side as he loops his arm through mine and guides me towards the elevators.

The doors ping open, and he pulls me in. "Hannah, everyone has been looking for you." I frown, suddenly feeling dizzyier than when I was walking in circles inside that deep dark forest last night.

"Well they can't have looked too hard," I say, my voice croaking and exhausted.

Jeffery's jaw is locked open, his eyes fixed on me. He's standing close to me, and I can see the patch of his light blue uniform is wet from his clothes soaked into his as he rushed me across the ground floor of the building. It's only then that I look down and see just how drenched I am.

yone to I'm a mess.

e never My jeans are dark blue, soaked with rainfall, sweat and tears. The  
around my ankles are covered with a thick layer of mud, splatters of sl  
isten to grime from my unwanted adventure covering every inch of my body.

ontinue I wince with pain, the sudden heat of the elevator coasting over my  
I didn't muscles. Jeffery won't stop staring, his eyes surveying the length of m

n? They catch on a big tear that has ripped my knee open. It's throbbin  
that I think of it and I can't help but wonder what my face looks like.

olds his "Fuck," I groan, a piercing pain ripping through my body so sudde  
of Mellunexpectedly it makes me wince and shriek loudly.

I've survived a long, dark, lonely night in the mountains. My plan  
i Mell."shit pretty early on, but determination is a great thing – I pushed ahe  
plan always being that I wouldn't stop. If I stopped, I wouldn't get up i

r of my So I pushed. And pushed. And pushed.

r forces I did everything Colt taught me to when we laid awake at night,  
id pulls about life on the mountain. I laid a trail of my belongings, leaving  
everything at short intervals. I snapped sticks with my tired legs, scuf  
as been muddy forest floor to leave tracks.

Without being there, Colt helped me survive.

s in the His lessons, his knowledge... but most of all... his *love* saved me.

"Hannah!" The deep voice of my brother catches my fading consci  
ky and as my body begins to shiver.

A warm arm wraps around me and guides me across the carpeted f  
pposite hint of citrus hits my nose, a familiar smell that should awaken my  
iere my but it doesn't. All I can see is the cheap flooring of the office speeding  
office. me, my head hanging heavy, my feet dragging on the floor as two stro  
pull me from the flutter of excited voices echoing around the office.

A door slams and I'm gripping my brother tight, unable to get my bearings.

"Hannah, where have you been? We've looked everywhere!"

I glance up, my head heavy. "Xavier..."

My body sways, Xavier's eyes hard with furrowed concern. He looks down at me. I try to steady myself, but the room is spinning. *Fuck*. I think I'm in his office, but I'm not sure, everything is moving too much.

"Xavier..." I breathe, my chest jolting with a sudden stab of pain. "Xavier... Colt... Colt..."

My vision flickers, and slowly, I fade into nothingness.

I

wake up

again.

\*\*\*

*The wood-paneled walls glow in the subtle light of the fireplace, warm and toasty, like a giant marshmallow roasting in the comfort of a cabin. I move over the stovetop, a wooden spoon stirring the pot of beefed stew. It smells earthy and natural, filled with nutrients and bursts of flavor.*

*A soft glow seeps through the window as I move across and look out. Smoke fills the air, a small campfire surrounded by three logs burns in the center of the paddock. Two small children sit on one log, a big, burly man with a red flannel shirt gripped tight around his hulking shoulders on the floor. At their right.*

*They're all laughing and smiling in front of the mountainous backdrop below that's turning orange as the enormous glow of the sun dips below the trees. A warm feeling tightens my chest, but the broth bubbles on the stove. I quickly move across to keep stirring. The countertops are cluttered with*

her mymess from meals past, the sink piled high with dishes.

*I let the broth settle and turn the gas down, lifting the apron around my neck to dab at the sweat beading across my brow. As I lift it, my eye catches on the fancy handwriting printed onto the apron.*

vers me *I mouth the words ‘Best Mommy Ever’ as I read the pink writing on the apron.*

*“And don’t you forget it,” Colt says, his bright blue eyes appearing to grieve.*

*He curls his arms around my belly, holding me tight.*

*It’s perfect and a feeling of pure wholesomeness wafts over me. It’s knocked sideways by two flying children, one gripping each of my arms as they cling on and interrupt the embrace of the man I love.*

*“Mommy! Mommy! We had the best day with Daddy!”*

2. *I feel I look down – two blue-eyed boys staring up at me with big, round eyes. The wide with excitement they make me melt. “Did you sweetheart? I bubbled catch a fish this time?”*

ing with *The taller of the two boys flashes a grumpy look to Colt. He looks just like his father when he does that.*

outside. *“I did. But Daddy let it go.”*

3. *in the Colt shrugs lazily. A deep laugh bursts from my chest and we all fall together in a tight hug, laughing by the stovetop, enveloped together in the one ambience of our perfect little home.*

*My heart pounds in my chest, love and happiness the only feeling flooding my veins.*

errain. *“Hannah? Hannah?” A far away voice calls to me. “Hannah, come here and I time to wake up now.”*

with the *My eyes open, the beautiful cabin disappearing before my eyes.*

savory smell dissipates, instead it's replaced by a neutral, stale smell and my forces me to jolt upright.

As I catch "Colt?" I burst out, my eyes wide. "Colt? Where are you?"

I look around, my head spinning. I'm draped in blankets, soft cushions propping me up in a bed that feels familiar. I'm comfortable, but as I look around, the walls aren't rustic timber like I had dreamed of. No. I'm behind white curtains hang loosely in the light, my bedroom filled with photographs and trinkets that I've treasured for so long.

"Hannah," Xavier's voice catches my attention. I look to him, seeing quickly other people in my bedroom as I frown at my brother. "Hannah, your legs are safe. You're safe."

"Where am I?" I ask, still not sure this is *actually* my house. "How did you get here?"

Xavier pats my back, slowly guiding me so I fall back against the pillows.

"Just relax, Hannah." Xavier settles on a chair that's been pulled up to the side of my bed. "They're the nurses who helped you. You've been comatose for an hour or so, but we brought you home so they can check you out."

"I... I did it."

Xavier frowns. "Did what, Han?"

"I made it down the mountain. In one piece..." I allow myself to snuggle into the huddle. Xavier is just shaking his head, a straight face that looks so agonizingly familiar it hurts. *Here we go.*

"Hannah, listen-"

I sit up, my stomach tensing. "No, Xavier. Don't-"

He holds his hands up, the bright green in his eyes softening. "Just listen, Hannah. I'm not going to preach to you... I think I've learned my lesson. The Running to the hills will do that, you know?"



ell that I hold my stare.

“I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“And I got the report done...”

ushions Xavier’s expression changes. It’s an odd look, one I’ve never seen  
; I lookbefore. “How did you manage that? We went to the address on the  
Delicatesoon as you didn’t return to the office... There wasn’t a cabin in sig  
ographsfile is void now, chalked off the records.”

I hunch forward, my brows pulled together. “What do you mean  
ing tworight place? I found the cabin... I’ve completed the report.”

I’m ok. Xavier shakes his head. “Impossible.”

A nurse appears at my side, a stethoscope pinned in her ears, the ot  
w did Ibetween her fingers. “Sorry to interrupt, I just need to do your hourly.”

She presses the cold metal to my skin, but all I can think about is  
llows. that someone *was* looking for me. The only reason I wasn’t rescu  
to onebecause the address on the file was wrong? But how is that possible  
out to itdid I find Colt’s cabin if it wasn’t the right place?

first.” “All good, sweetheart,” the nurse smiles. “Please rest. Your broth  
excuse you soon, won’t you?”

The brunette glares at Xavier and he nods sheepishly. “I’ll let you g  
nile butsleep, I have to get back to the office anyway.”

prisingly Xavier taps my leg and leaves. The nurses are quick to follow after  
me they’ll be back to keep track of my hydration levels and appl  
ointment to my wounds.

Slowly, daylight fades in my bedroom. The air cools and I’m pull  
it relax,blankets to my neck, holding them close. My thoughts drifts  
lesson.unconscious dream, the feeling of warmth and comfort overpowering.

A tear catches in my eye and it’s then that I realize I’m not warm

I'm freezing cold. My body is shaking and all I want is...  
Colt Brander.

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I'm freezing cold. My body is shaking and all I want is...  
Colt Brander.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY

## Colt

I HAVEN'T BEEN IN Falls Creek for over five years. The streets are just as small as I remember. The green parks are filled with life, children playing and laughing in the gleaming morning sun. Their hair oozes enthusiasm for life while their dreary-eyed mothers sip coffee from takeaway cups like it's an endless supply of life.

A storm brews in my stomach. It's nothing like the one I weathered last night, but the sight of a tiny piece of Hannah's shirt, ripped and shreds tossed to the ground like a sign of life from above. My heart flashes in that moment it caught my eye.

Drenched and soggy, I was awoken by the earth shaking beneath my defeated frame. There wasn't any time to waste. The storm clouds were thundering down, the forest doing nothing to stop the downpour around me. I followed my smart girl's trail.

"Mommy! Mommy, look!" I hear the cry of a small child nearby.

"Hudson, don't point!" A hushed voice snaps as I pass by a park bench.

I glance at the child, expecting him to be shivering at the sight of a large sasquatch trudging through the middle of a middle-class town. Instead,

beaming, his hands clasped together like he's just seen fucking Santa Claus.  
"Bigfoot! It's Bigfoot, Mommy!"

"Hudson! Stop!"

I would laugh, but a fierce determination to find Hannah has me going through a grumpy expression. The mountain has pushed me to my limit, now I've surfaced and I'm forcing myself to once again mingle with the people of the town, I'm not giving up.

I roam the streets, dodging the judging looks and disparaging comments thrown my way.

I have no idea where I'm going.

I know Hannah works for her brother. I know he has a real estate business – small. I can't ask anyone for directions because they either scream in my face or walk away before I can open my mouth.

I curse from *Fuck*.

I smash a fist on the pole at the traffic lights, waiting for some cars to pass. I red light through the green light before a green walking signal allows me to cross. The red, gray clouds have passed over, the bright sun that usually drenches my face with valuable heat on the mountain is scorching down here.

My skin burns, but my heart burns hotter.

Why didn't I ask her more questions? Why do I know nothing about life in Falls Creek? I mean, shit, I don't even know the name of my workplace.

Frustration begins to build as I move up and down the rows of houses, searching for any sign of Hannah. I'm racking my brain for any memory, recalling the conversations we shared. But they're all about me and my beard on the mountain.

And then, like an angel glowing before my eyes, I see it.

Claus. “*Mell Estate and Planning*,” I grunt under my breath, recalling that Hannah introduced herself in what feels like an eternity ago now. “Of it is.”

grunting Across the street, a red car pulls from the sidewalk that runs parallel to the multi-story building. It’s dull and boring – just like most things on this side of the mountain if you ask me. But one thing about this building has me hammering inside my chest. It has me racing across the road, unaware of the cars honking wildly at me as I dash in front of them, staring up at the company logo that I’ve seen before.

The sight of her eyes flashes before my mind. I can see her scribbles on that clipboard, her face glowing so beautifully, hair blowing in the wind. I’ve never been so stupid, but now, as I look up at the logo that matches the one on the paperwork Hannah filled out about my cabin, I’m about to make everything.

to pass I storm forward, pushing past some men in suits to force my way through the front door.

garden “Sir! Excuse me, sir!” A voice calls out, but I keep moving through the lobby. “Sir! I need some ID please!”

A hand clasps over my shoulder, forcing me to turn. A well-built man with dark hair looks up at me, his eyes holding firm but his body shaking.

of her “I need to see Hannah. Tell me where she is,” I demand, inching closer. The man has to bend his neck further to meet the pull of my eyes.

streets, “I-I n-need to escort you o-out,” the man says, his security badge tucked in his sweaty hand. “Authorized access-”

my life I grab a handful of his shirt and grip hard. A small crowd has gathered, a collection of suited men and well-dressed women all watching the scene unfold.

he way “Hannah Mell. Where is she?”

course The man’s body shakes. “I will take you upstairs.”

I drop him back to his feet, smirking beneath a snarl that tightens my jaw. He leads the way to an elevator and I duck down to stand beside him as he rides up a few levels. His breathing is shaky, and by the time the door opens again, his face is red and blotchy.

of the “This way,” he says, a skip in his step.

at the I look around, the old, stale smell of paper and ink combines with the perfumes of the staff who’re all staring at the giant man stalked by a scampering security guard. I give a sarcastic smile to them, wave my hand. I’ve seen this before. I tap my fingertips and continue following the security guard to a door that has a plaque in the center.

up for *Xavier Mell - CEO*

“Mr. Mell?” The man rolls his knuckles on the wooden door. “Excuse me, Sir... I think you’re going to want to—”

The door flies open.

ugh the Instantly, I see a man sitting behind a desk. He has dark hair that’s combed to one side and his eyes are a duplicate of the ones I’ve fallen for. He’s well-dressed, a red tie showing the striking figure that speaks of authority and power. There’s an air of confidence that not many men have when they come eye to eye with me, but the stiff expression tugging at his jawline tells me he’s a man of business.

wisting “Who are you?” Xavier Mell snaps, his elbows meeting the edge of the desk as he pulls his chair forward.

ered, a I step into the office, eyes locked on Hannah’s brother.

scene “Colt Brander,” I say, my voice booming. “I want to see Hannah.”

Xavier chuckles. “Is that so? And why should I tell *you* where she is?”

I take three strides forward. That's all it takes for me to meet the man behind his desk. I kick the flimsy steel chair opposite him to the side, my eyes meeting his as I place my palms on the desk.

"I'm in love with her. And I need her to know just how much I need her to open my life."

There's silence.

The striking figure in front of me pauses, his torturous eyes surveying me as strong just like his sister's do. My heart damn near stops, wanting to see him smiling. I'm pretty sure the entire planet has stopped spinning by the time he finally opens his mouth.

"You're in love with Hannah? H-how did this happen?" Xavier asks, eventually, rocking back on his chair.

I shake my head. "There is time for that later. For now, I need to use you, please, Xavier, as her brother, as a man... You have to take me to her."

Xavier breathes out, his cheeks puffing. "Fine. Tell me in the car." He jumps from the chair, moves around the desk and I'm standing there in surprise when his chest slams into mine. "But I'm telling you now *Colt Braun*—in love you've so much as laid an unwanted finger on my sister, I'll have to fucking kill you. You understand that?"

I nod. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Xavier shows me the way from the office, a simple click of his hand sending his employees back to their stations. Before I know it, I'm speeding in a red convertible down the street, my bulky shoulders squeezed in the pocket-sized sportscar.

Xavier is quick to hear my story. My words are rushed but I start from the beginning, right back in high school. We get a few red lights which make me to delve deeper into the night we shared *that* kiss. I tell him about



edge of pathetic escape to the mountains. I tell him how my life changed with  
as fixed inspection on my cabin and finally I open up about how I went and finally  
all up.

and her in “We’re here,” Xavier says, pulling the park brake up in front of  
apartment block. “Colt, whatever you do, listen to my sister’s wishes. If  
everything you say is true, if everything you’ve told me isn’t just another  
thing you’re using to hurt my sister... then everything will be ok.”

for again. I nod my head, stretching my arm for a handshake. “Thank you.”

Xavier Xavier leads the way up a flight of stairs. I follow behind, my stomach  
a ball of nerves as he unlocks a door that leads into a dark apartment  
where she says smells like wild strawberries and vanilla. Xavier tosses his keys to a table  
before I know it, he’s holding a door open, showing me into a room where I  
can see her. I see the brightest red hair fanned out messily on a white pillow.

” My heart kickstarts and doubles down.

for.” He “Hannah,” I whisper, my voice choking.

in shock She twists quickly in the bed, kicking the covers off as her eyes  
meet mine. “Colt... Colt, you’re here?”

and you A smile touches her lips and that’s all I need. I burst forward, dropping  
my knees, grabbing her hand and holding it to the tears streaming down  
her face.

my fingers “Hannah, I’m an idiot.” I kiss the back of her hand, threading my  
fingers through hers while squeezing so tightly. “I should never have done  
what I should’ve. You’re right – I’m a coward. I don’t know any other way  
who I am.”

and at the “Colt,” Hannah sobs, a yank of her arm guiding me to the edge of the bed  
where she allows My vision is blurry, my chest heaving beneath the emotion flooding  
out of me.

with the “I can be a better man, Hannah.” I draw breath, hooking her eyes i  
icked itShe’s so damn beautiful. “I *will* do better. When you’re around,  
magical. I’m happy when you’re with me.”

: of an Hannah stills for a second, her cheeks flushed a soft pink color. I’m  
shes. Ifat the edge of the bed, shaking with raw emotion that I didn’t know  
other liecapable of.

“Colt,” Hannah says softly, guiding my hands to her face. “Do yo  
what kept me going down that mountain? Do you know what put the  
mach amy belly, forcing me to take *just one more step* over and over again?”  
ent that I shake my head.

ble and “You, Colt.” The tiny corners of Hannah’s mouth curl in a tight  
where I“You kept me going. That big, mountainous heart of yours. You tau  
how to be strong and to look after myself. You gave me the freedom t  
and the tools to flourish. You showed me what it means to *live*.” She s  
down the bed so her face is inches from mine. “Forget what you did  
snap tothat, everyone makes mistakes. I know your heart was in the right pla  
maybe...” She grins a half-smile at me. “...maybe next time just ask  
ping to want me to stay.”

own my I swallow back the lump in my throat. I don’t even think about coi  
her with the fact that I *did* ask her. Only about a million times. Instea  
fingersthe only words that matter leave my mouth.

e it... I “I love you, Hannah.”

ay, it’s “I love you too, Colt,” she says.

I lean across and press my lips to Hannah’s. Our fingers intertwine  
ie bed. mouths lock. A spark of pure love and devotion that I know will last  
ng overignites between us, sealing our unbreakable bond for eternity.

I pull back and drop my forehead to hers. “I can’t believe you

n mine. down the mountain, baby girl.”

life is Hannah chuckles. “I can’t believe it either. But the nurses said the  
will scar, so I’ll always have proof I’m more mountain than you are.”  
I sitting I frown. “Hey! I was called Bigfoot today, so you can retrace  
v I was statement.”

Hannah’s brows waggle suggestively. “I don’t know about Big-foot.  
u know She pulls me in closer, her tongue invading my mouth. I wrap m  
fight in around her, determined to never, ever let go again.

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made it

down the mountain, baby girl.”

Hannah chuckles. “I can’t believe it either. But the nurses said these cuts will scar, so I’ll always have proof I’m more mountain than you are.”

I frown. “Hey! I was called Bigfoot today, so you can retract that statement.”

Hannah’s brows waggle suggestively. “I don’t know about Big-*foot*...”

She pulls me in closer, her tongue invading my mouth. I wrap my arms around her, determined to never, ever let go again.

My best friend. The love of my life and now, mine forever.

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# EPILOGUE

Hannah

## *SIX MONTHS LATER*

My boots crunch on the floor of the forest and I find Colt at the edge of the springs. He's shirtless, a thick smattering of hair across his chest. I catch a glimpse of a moist path that's well travelled now – our dedication to turn our favor on Falls Creek Mountain into a magical, secluded escape is beginning to take shape after weeks of work.

I settle down beside Colt, passing the bottle of water in my hand and leaning in for a peck on the cheek.

"It's looking good," I say, looking behind us to the small wooden structure Colt has been working on.

Colt nods, a grin lighting his handsome face. "I should be finished tomorrow."

Cool air fills my lungs as I settle down to catch my breath. I'm feeling better. Ever since I moved in with Colt and left my day job, the

lifestyle of living on the mountain has consumed me. It's hard work, day out, providing everything we need to survive.

There's no rest, but we manage to do it. Together.

The soft tinkle of the warm thermal springs is soothing and I can't help but think about the hard work Colt has put in today. The structure behind us is taking rough-sawn timber, chopped and cut all by hand from a nearby fall. The small hut is nestled amongst the towering pine trees, right about where I remember falling in love with Colt for the very first time.

The freshness of the mountain air washes over me as I see pine and fresh timber shavings scattered at the base of the strong, tall structure. The pitched roof and open-air window match the picture Colt drafted and his vision of creating a secluded sanctuary is coming to life.

"Do you really think it will hold warmth?" I ask, snuggling into the arms of Colt.

Colt chuckles so his chest bounces against my cheeks. "Yes, baby girl, it's a miniature version of the cabin, just without all the bits of timber falling to take up space everywhere."

I blink, smiling up at my best friend, my partner. "Well, you're doing better with your hands than you used to be."

He beams down at me, nuzzling his nose against mine and pressing his cheek to mine. "Just think, in six months time we'll have a place to set up our precious little baby girl down while we take a quick dip in the springs."

I snuggle in close, dragging Colt's bottom lip in my mouth as a protective hand coasts over my growing belly. "Is that right? Are you getting ahead?"

"Oh, I just know. And if she's anything like her mother, she's going to be the most gorgeous little girl in the world."

day in Colt's arms wrap around me and I bury my face in his bristly throat. His skin is damp, hot and delicious as I kiss him, allowing his hands to roam my body. It feels good, toasty warm and safe up here in the wilderness. He massages me with big, strong hands.

My life is perfect with Colt. Every day is different. The moment I wake up in the open air is filled with surprises, I never know what the rising sun will bring. We're one with the land, the weather and the elements, and nothing is taken for granted.

He lifts my chin and looks me deep in the eye, a hand resting over my belly. The bundle that's growing inside me. Soon, we will have it all. A peaceful life together. A wonderful life filled with friendship that's blossomed over years of knowing each other. Filled with laughter and love.

Most of all, our perfect little home will be spoiled by the sound of a newborn baby.

"Feels good, huh?" Colt grunts, his hand sliding up my shirt.

"Yes. God, I love you, Colt."

His hand cups my breast and a tight pinch of my nipple has me desire much more.

"I love you, too." Colt's feet splash at the edge of the springs as he rises to his full height. He holds a hand out and smiles. "Now what should we test out the strength of the hut?"

I curl my arms around him as he lifts me up, carrying me to the shelter. He kisses me, gazing down at me with love in his eyes.

My life on the mountain is complete.

**THE END... For now.**

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# Excerpt from Curvy Cabin

## Mountain Men of Falls Creek: Book One

**M**Y HANDS GRIP THE steering wheel firmly around another bend. The headlights show just how close I am to losing my rearview mirror in the tall pine trees that line the steep, bumpy track on the mountainside. My knuckles have gone beyond white. I'm holding on for my life. The boggy dirt road is only getting worse the higher up the mountain I go, and I swear if I take my foot off the accelerator the car will flip on its side from the steepness of the incline.

"Come on," I slap the steering wheel and grit my teeth. "Come on, you can do it!"

In hindsight, I should have rented a proper vehicle. Or a tank. That would have been the smart option. But no. I'm loyal to my cute pink Corolla. All she's the only thing left in my life that's honoured my loyalty. She returned it without question.

*Don't even think about him. He's gone.*

The rugged terrain of Falls Creek Mountain is a new endeavour I didn't think too long about. I booked the first weekend getaway that I

available, and despite being overloaded with demanding clients wanting online stores updated and tweaked, I've taken a few days off for myself.

The truth is, I haven't allowed myself to think much at all lately since my asshole ex-fiancé sent me a text message – that's right, a text message – to tell me the wedding is off, I've shut the world out. I'm not even talking to the wedding planner, and I've never been more humiliated in my life.

I push my foot down on the pedals, ignoring the cry from the engine as I squint ahead when the speakers start ringing and the Bluetooth connection from my phone allows me to answer the phone with a push of a button and a dash.

A sharp rattle “Hello?” I answer, focusing on the fallen log on the road ahead. My car's side almost touches the roof when I speed over it with a clatter.

“Oh, thank God you're ok.” The familiar rushed voice of my sister, Brianna, echoes through the speakers of the car. She's been a rock for me these past three weeks. Hell, she's been a rock for my entire life, even when all four of my parents died all those years ago, so it's no surprise she's checking in on me - yet again. “Where the hell are you?”

“Um...” I look through the windows of the Corolla. All I can see are tall trees, rising so high they block out the rare winter sunshine. The road ahead would disappear rapidly turning into a thick sludge that's making the wheels slip around the curve in a way that has my heart lodged firmly in my throat. “I'm not exactly sure.” “What do you mean ‘you're not sure’?” Brianna growls. “Hello, Aurora... We've been over this-”

“Calm down,” I say, flapping a hand despite the fact my sister can't hear me. “I'm doing what you said I should do. I'm halfway up Falls Creek Mountain on my way to a cabin retreat for the weekend.”

Brianna is silent for a second before muttering, “Oh. Well, good. It's

ng theirtime you started listening to me.”

f. “Well, you are the one who told me that marrying Frank was a bad i  
y. Ever I can almost hear her nodding in the matter-of-fact way she’s pe  
fuckingover the years. “Don’t worry about that. Frank is a dick. I’m just gl  
He leftnever slept with him.”

y life. Another log on the road forces me to pull the wheel quickly a  
ne. I’mmounting the soft bank of the road. I gasp and squeal before steering  
nectionthe sludgy mud road, narrowly missing a pine tree and letting out a dec  
1 on the Brianna is right. Of course, she always is.

I had saved myself for Frank. I’d wanted to wait until I knew eve  
ly headwas going to be just perfect. You know, marriage, kids and the big

That was my dream.

· sister, Our wedding night was going to be the first night we sealed our lo  
for methe deepest connection possible. It would have been the night I l  
er sincevirginity. We had dated for just over a year, and Frank swore he was h  
g in onwait. Brianna said the only reason he proposed was because he wanted  
in my panties.

are tall “Did he actually sleep with her?” Brianna’s voice fills the silence  
d aheadcabin as I allow my thoughts to drift dangerously.

nd slide “Um, I don’t know. To be honest, I don’t care. All I know is this  
y sure.”get away for the weekend might just be the death of me...” The engin  
onestly,and I feel a crunch beneath the vehicle. “You could have warned  
roads were this terrible.”

t see it. Brianna huffs so her breath muffles the phone. “Um, when I said r  
ountain,meant one with a pool and one of those swim up bars where you coul  
yourself silly. Not a fucking cold, wet mountainside in the mic  
s aboutnowhere.”

“Huh,” I grunt, passing a handcrafted sign that reads *Falls Creek Mountain Resort: Your Greener Escape*. “That does sound relaxing...”

I must nearly be there, no point in turning back now. The signal from my Navman keeps cutting out so I can't be sure how much further I have to go up the mountain. The sunshine is beginning to fade in the treetops, and I'm forced to squint through the glare which is reflecting off the snow beginning to appear on the edges of the roads.

“Holy shit, there's snow, Bri!”

“What? I can't hear you...” Brianna's voice begins to sound through the speakers. “Hello? Aurora? Are you there?”

“Snow!”

There's cracking and more muffled noise from the speakers before the disconnect noise of the Bluetooth connection vibrates through my phone. I glance quickly to my phone and see my service has been cut.

“Shit,” I whisper to myself. “Now I really am in the middle of nowhere.” The engine revs weirdly, like it's had enough of my shit decisions.

A long bend in the road has me on level ground for the first time since I began to ascend the mountain. The earthy smell of fresh rainfall and new timber seeps into the car, but just as I begin to think I could enjoy the idea to get away, a giant gulf of steam explodes from the bonnet.

“What the—” I scream, screeching to a sudden stop so quickly the car cuts into my neck.

The engine cuts out. A loud bang explodes from the exhaust and around the freezing cold, empty woodlands. Suddenly the sunshine is gone and the air is damp and gloomy. I glance down at the dashboard and see the temperature dial tipping over the edge.

“Fuck.”

ountain My forehead smashes against the steering wheel. I'm sinking into the  
defeated yet again. I've boiled my tiny little car to the point where  
on my bellowing smoke and steam. It begins filling the car and I'm forced to  
e to go from inside, coughing and spluttering.

and I'm I flap a hand over my face, clearing the thick steam surrounding  
ginnig vehicle as I crawl to the edge of the muddy road. I stare across at what  
decent picture of how my life feels right now.

Abandoned and wrecked. Lifeless and utterly exhausted.

echoey A tear stings my eyes. I could sit here and wait for someone to drive  
road, but that could be days from now. This is the middle of nowhere  
all. I know I'm almost there, the scattered signs every few turns on the  
ore that told me that much.

body. I "It can't be too far away," I tell myself, running a hand over my face  
I bite down, the warm tear rolling down my cheek somehow acting  
ere." stimulant that kicks my pulse back into gear.

too. A I can't cry. Not here. Not now.

started Hell, I'm done taking life's shit. I refuse to be walked all over all the  
wly cut I used to be happy and filled with joy, laughter, and an eagerness to live  
oy this moment.

Bad stuff doesn't always need to happen to me, but for it to stop, I  
seatbelt make a change.

I shoot up on my legs, brush myself down and stiffen my lip.  
echoes purposeful step, I open the trunk and gather my wheely suitcase and  
s gone, handle. I gather my belongings and stumble up the road through the  
see that didn't sign up for a hike. It's freezing cold, and the snow is much thicker  
it appears on the surface.

But I find a trail in the centre of the road and follow the

he seat, determination and the promise of a warm fire place in a remote cabin  
ere it's me on.

escape I walk for twenty minutes, glancing up at the fading daylight ab  
very few steps. Dark clouds gather quickly and soon I'm spinning  
ing my spot, wondering if I'm going around in circles. I haven't passed my ca  
hat is although, so I must be going the correct way, right?

"I swear I've seen that log before," I say aloud, my brow creasing  
heart pounding.

up the I'm breaking out in a sweat for the first time in years. Exercise  
e, after don't mix. I'm a plus-size girl, not because I'm unhealthy or ar  
he road Believe me, name a diet and I've tried it. Twice. Three times even. I  
built differently to the girls in the magazines. I'm fine with it, my b  
a. wide ass and generous breasts are a gift I'll share with someone wh  
ng as appreciates them one day.

But a body like mine isn't made for hiking up mountains.

I move towards a fallen trunk, needing to take a time out and ca  
ie time. breath. The trunk is layered with snow and as I swipe a dusting off ic  
e in the ground, I take an exhausted step forward. The weight of my body falt  
my ankle twists and bends beneath a deep hole.

need to "Argh! Shit!"

My body slumps to the ground and I collapse into the snow. Snow  
With abe soft and forgiving, but this stuff is as hard as the rocks beneath it.  
grip the down and there's a huge dip in the ground where I stepped, the gaping  
snow. Ino longer disguised with a generous covering of fresh snow.

cer than Instead, the imprint of my sneaker is pressed in the hole, and I'm l  
heap on the ground. My suitcase starts rolling down the road and pain  
e path, through my body, my twisted ankle throbbing the length of my leg.

willing A loud crack of thunder rattles the ground and though I can't feel the sound of heavy rainfall patters loudly above me in the tops of the pine trees, I shuffle up and try to use the giant log to guide me to my feet, but the second I put any pressure on my ankle, I'm wincing with a sharp shooting pain against me staggering back to the ground.

*Fuck. What do I do? I can't even walk.*

and my No car. No legs. Suitcase quickly disappearing down the mountainside. It lasted all of half an hour, but my renewed determination to stop and my life's shit isn't going to plan.

anything. Maybe I can't do this alone. Maybe I do need someone to hold me through life. Brianna's been doing it ever since my parents died and my hips, Frank's gone, I have no one around to keep me out of harms way.

to truly Gulping down, I clear my throat and do the only thing I know I can do well.

“Help! Help! HELP!”

catch my  
breath to the  
ground and

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should  
I glare  
at the chasm

left in a  
flash shoots



A loud crack of thunder rattles the ground and though I can't feel it, the sound of heavy rainfall patters loudly above me in the tops of the pine trees. I shuffle up and try to use the giant log to guide me to my feet, but the second I put any pressure on my ankle, I'm wincing with a sharp shooting pain that sends me staggering back to the ground.

*Fuck. What do I do? I can't even walk.*

No car. No legs. Suitcase quickly disappearing down the mountainside.

It lasted all of half an hour, but my renewed determination to stop taking life's shit isn't going to plan.

Maybe I can't do this alone. Maybe I do need someone to hold my hand through life. Brianna's been doing it ever since my parents died and now Frank's gone, I have no one around to keep me out of harms way.

Gulping down, I clear my throat and do the only thing I know I can do well.

"Help! Help! HELP!"

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