



*November*  
IS FOR

**MATE**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS  
**EVE LONDON & DYLANN CRUSH**

# NOVEMBER IS FOR NATE

MOUNTAIN MEN OF MUSTANG MOUNTAIN

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# CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Preface](#)

1. [Nate](#)

2. [Ainsley](#)

3. [Nate](#)

4. [Ainsley](#)

5. [Nate](#)

6. [Ainsley](#)

7. [Nate](#)

8. [Ainsley](#)

9. [Nate](#)

10. [Ainsley](#)

11. [Nate](#)

12. [Ainsley](#)

13. [Nate](#)

14. [Ainsley](#)

15. [Nate](#)

16. [Ainsley](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Mountain Men of Mustang Mountain](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also By Dylann Crush](#)

[Also by Eve London](#)

[About Dylann Crush](#)

[About Eve London](#)

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*To the Match of the Month Patrons, especially...*

***Jackie Ziegler***

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



Dear Reader,

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

XOXO,

Dylann & Eve

## **November is for Nate**

**Two hearts, one fateful reunion, and a love that never faded.**

### **Ainsley**

I've spent the past eight years climbing a corporate ladder an ocean away, though my heart stayed in Montana. The man I was willing to sacrifice everything for turned his back on me, so I left and didn't look back. I haven't seen him since, but the memories still linger. While I'm home visiting family, I sneak over to Mustang Mountain for a couple of days, hoping to catch a glimpse of the life he chose without me. Then an invitation to a Friendsgiving dinner becomes a reunion I didn't expect. After all these years, I'm face to face with the man I've never gotten over.

### **Nate**

Living in the quiet embrace of Mustang Mountain, I've tried to move on from the past, from the memory of Ainsley and the heart-wrenching decision to let her go for the career she deserved. Every now and then, I let myself remember. Until the pain of losing her becomes too much. When I see her walk into that Friendsgiving dinner, all the emotions, the what-ifs, the years apart, they all come rushing back. I let her go once, and it almost killed me. We belong together, and this time I won't give up without a fight.

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



# CHAPTER 1

## NATE

I CROUCHED LOW, my breath coming out in short white puffs thanks to the frigid early morning temps. The huge bull elk swung its head around, aware of, but unbothered by, my presence. My office had received a report of suspected illegal hunting taking place in the area, and I'd made it a point to get out here early this morning to check.

So far, the only living creature I'd come across was the massive twelve-point beast in front of me. He lifted his head, putting his antlers on full display. Then he let out a high-pitched bugle. The haunting sound carried through the crisp morning air—a warning to other nearby males to stay away from his territory during rutting season. I loved my job as a wildlife conservation officer based out of Mustang Mountain and couldn't believe I got paid to spend my days monitoring the miracles of nature.

After spending more time than I should have observing the elk, I retraced my steps to where I'd left my vehicle. This was my favorite time of day. The calm and quiet of early morning lingered. Frost covered the withered grass, and the sun was just starting to peek above the mountains. If only I could spend every day wandering around the woods instead of sitting behind a desk and tackling the administrative tasks that went along with my job.

I was about to climb into my truck and head back to the office when something red snagged on a nearby tree branch caught my eye. Moving closer for a better look, I scanned the immediate area. A set of large footprints led past the tree, and they appeared to be recent. Thinking whoever was in the area might be one of the suspected illegal hunters, I took a few pictures with my phone before following the tracks.

The prints disappeared once I reached the edge of the clearing where I'd seen the bull elk. With nothing to go on but a piece of red flannel, there wasn't anything else I could do. It pissed me off to think that some asshole might be hunting without a license.

Though I'd grown up hundreds of miles away, I now considered this part of Montana my home. Mustang Mountain had provided a place of refuge for me when I needed it most, and I'd sworn to protect the land and the animals who lived here.

I was still fuming twenty minutes later when I stopped at the cafe, hoping I'd catch the sheriff before he finished his breakfast. I was in luck. Sheriff Cade sat in his regular booth near the back, his nose buried in the pages of the weekly paper.

"Hey, John. Care if I join you for a few minutes?" I didn't wait for a reply before I slid onto the padded seat across from him.

"Make yourself at home." He waved at the server, who was already on her way to the table with a fresh mug of coffee.

"Thanks." Grateful, I wrapped my fingers around the handle of the mug, wishing I was sitting down at the counter in back of Nelson's Mercantile instead. Everyone knew Ruby made the best coffee in town.

“What can I do for you this morning, Nate?” Sheriff Cade folded the paper and set it by his empty plate.

“I had a report of some suspected illegal hunting. While I was checking out the area, I came across some footprints and a piece of fabric.” I held out the patch of red flannel. “It’s probably nothing, but I was wondering if you’ve heard of anything going on in the area?”

He shook his head. “We’re still trying to figure out who’s behind that string of break-ins. You didn’t happen to capture images of the prints, did you?”

“Already emailed them to you.” I’d also sent a text out to my fellow Mustang Mountain Riders to see if any of my MC brothers might know what was going down. We kept a close eye on everything happening in Mustang Mountain and oftentimes knew about shit before the sheriff even heard about it.

Sheriff Cade signaled for his check, then slid his hat on over his salt-and-pepper hair. “I’ll see if they match any of the prints we picked up at the most recent break in. Looks like my day’s off to a busy start.”

“Thanks, John. Let me know if you come up with anything.” I stood, ready to move on.

“I will. And hey,”—Sheriff Cade pointed to the newspaper—“good luck this month.”

“What are you talking about?” I squinted down at the local paper. It only came out once a week and didn’t feature any real news. Usually, it was filled with announcements about upcoming weddings and babies being born. We’d seemed to have a string of both in recent months thanks to Ruby’s ridiculous matchmaking efforts.

“She got you, Nate.” He held up the paper and pointed to a picture of me standing by the river. I didn’t have on a shirt and my beard was much thicker than it was now.

“What the hell?” I snatched the paper out of his hand and scanned the article. Ruby Nelson, self-proclaimed successful matchmaker, had declared me November’s Mountain Man of Mustang Mountain. The picture had to have been taken at last year’s Chill Thrill fundraiser when a group of us jumped into a frozen Bliss Lake for charity.

“Figures she’d work her way around to you.” Sheriff Cade clamped a hand on my shoulder. “Good luck. If Ruby’s got you in her sights, you’re going to need it.”

“No way.” My jaw clenched so hard it seemed like my molars might crack. I’d seen what happened to my friends when Ruby decided they needed to settle down and find a mate. They’d all crumbled. From Jackson to Owen, not a single one of them had been able to avoid her efforts.

That was about to change. There was no way Ruby would be able to tie me down. I’d given my heart away once, and I’d never gotten it back. Unlike the other guys, I was incapable of love.

Unless Ruby could find a way to turn back time so I could go back and change the past, she’d be wasting her time, and I couldn’t wait to prove it to her.

## CHAPTER 2

## AINSLEY

I'D BEEN on the road for almost six hours when I finally pulled up in front of the Nelson Mercantile in downtown Mustang Mountain. The drive from Bozeman had given me more than enough time to question my intentions multiple times. I still wasn't sure why I felt the need to get eyes on Nate. It had been eight years since we'd seen each other. Eight years since he broke my heart and sent me away. My best friend thought I'd completely lost my mind—and maybe I had. I just knew that if I went back to London without seeing him, I'd always regret it.

My neck pinched as I climbed out of my dad's old SUV. Even though I'd grown up in Montana, it had been a long time since I'd driven more than a few miles. Living in London, where I could hop on the underground or grab a cab, meant I wasn't used to spending much time behind the wheel. I rolled my head from side to side, trying to loosen up the tightness in my shoulders. Maybe I could schedule a massage when I got back to Bozeman before I had to fly home.

My boss had given me a few weeks off to come back to the States and visit my dad. This time of year was always especially difficult for him since the three-year anniversary of my mom's death was coming up. Being at home with him, where her clothes still filled the closet and little reminders of

her covered every surface of the house, had been hard. Even if I didn't get to catch a glimpse of Nate while I was here, it would do me a world of good to get a little space from home.

I grabbed my purse and headed into the store to pick up the keys and map to the cabin I'd rented for the next few days.

A woman waved from behind the front counter as I entered. "Welcome to the Nelson Mercantile. Can I help you find something?"

The scent of cinnamon and nutmeg hung in the air. My stomach grumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything since the single serving size of trail mix I'd grabbed when I stopped to buy gas.

"Hi. I'm looking for Ruby. I'm supposed to pick up a key and map to the cabin I rented."

Her lips spread into a wide smile and she rounded the corner, her hand outstretched. "You must be Ainsley. I'm Ruby, and it's nice to meet you. What brings you to Mustang Mountain?"

"Oh, a friend recommended the area as a great place for a quick, quiet getaway." I offered a reassuring smile in return and hoped she took me at my word. The last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself. I hoped to be in and out before anyone found out why I'd come. In small towns like Mustang Mountain, word traveled faster than a downhill skier on fresh snow. The last thing I needed was Nate finding out I'd come to spy on him.

"We get a lot of women looking for a little escape around here. Anything in particular you're trying to get away from, hon?" Ruby set a hand on her hip and tilted her head, studying me like she knew there was more to my story.



“Nothing in particular. It’s been a busy season at work, and I just need a day or two to recharge.” I bit down on my lip, hoping she’d leave it at that. When she didn’t say anything, I shifted my weight from one foot to the next. “About the cabin, you said there’s a full kitchen. Does that mean a regular size refrigerator?”

“Yes. You’ve got everything you need up there, but you won’t want to spend all of your time cooking for yourself when we’ve got the best biscuits in Montana at the cafe right next door. If you’re in the mood for something a little fancier, there’s the steakhouse up at the ski resort.”

“Thanks for the recommendation. I think I’ll pick up a few things here so I don’t need to venture out too much.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and do that while I get your key and welcome basket ready?” Ruby waved a hand toward the back corner of the store. “I’ll send breakfast fixin’s with you, but if you want anything for lunch or dinner, you’ll find it back in the grocery section.”

“Thank you.” I picked up a plastic shopping basket and made my way past displays of homemade goat milk soap and huckleberry-scented bath bombs to grab a few things. The mercantile reminded me of an old-time general store but with modern offerings like gluten-free frozen pizza and fresh-ground bison burgers. I nabbed a few cans of soup and stuff to make a salad before I headed back to the front.

“I hope that’s not all you’re planning on eating while you’re here.” Ruby scanned the items and packed them into a brown paper bag. “You’re liable to shrivel up and blow away.”

“Hardly.” I wasn’t the kind of girl who could lose weight by restricting calories. Thanks to my sturdy German ancestors,

I'd had to work at it my entire life, which meant I'd be taking a few hikes while I was in the area.

"You'll need a good meal while you're in town. We're having a Friendsgiving dinner tomorrow night with turkey and all the trimmings." Ruby slid an orange flyer onto the checkout counter. "I can pick you up on my way into town if you'd like."

"Thanks so much for the invitation, but I wouldn't know anyone."

"You'll know me, and we could use an extra set of hands to set up. I can swing by around three and have you home in time for Wheel of Fortune."

I'd always been horrible at saying no to people. That's how I'd ended up living in a cramped flat in a questionable part of London for the past eight years. My mom used to say I was a people pleaser. I didn't think so, but didn't argue with her at the time.

"Just for a couple of hours?"

Ruby nodded.

"I suppose I could stop by."

"Great. I'll pick you up around three. It's on my way, and I could use some help unloading the car when we get there, if you don't mind."

"Sure. That would be great." I handed over enough cash to cover my purchases and lifted my head to meet her gaze.

That's when I caught sight of the piece of paper tacked up on the wall behind her. I squinted at the black-and-white photo. My heart stuttered to a stop. The man in the picture smiled at the camera through a dark, full beard. He had on a

pair of shorts and no shirt, even though snow piled up around him.

Ruby put her hand on mine. “That’s Nate, our Mountain Man of the Month for November. You don’t happen to be single, do you?”

## CHAPTER 3

## NATE

“HOW LONG DO you think we have to stay before we can escape?” I glanced over at my buddy Dean, who was riding shotgun in my truck. Ruby had roped us into picking up tables and chairs she’d borrowed from the church just outside of town so she’d have enough seating for her annual Friendsgiving dinner.

“You’ll never hear the end of it if you leave before the pie.” Dean adjusted the baseball cap he had on and gave me a half-hearted grin. “Lily’s in charge of dessert, so you know it’s going to be good.”

“Yeah, that woman can bake.” I was happy for my MC brother Mack for finding the love of his life, especially since Lily made the best cookies in town and didn’t mind baking extras.

“I saw the flyers. How does it feel to be caught in Ruby’s crosshairs?” Dean asked.

“You’ll find out soon enough when it’s your turn.” I shook my head as he chuckled. “It’s how I imagine a trophy buck feels on the first day of hunting season.”

“So you’re comparing yourself to a trophy buck? You think you’re all that?” Dean cracked a grin.

“You know what I mean. It’s like I’ve got a target on my back now. Ruby thinks she’s ten for ten. She’s going to want to finish the year strong. I wouldn’t be surprised if she bussed in single women from the all over Montana to try to pin me down.”

Dean was quiet for a few miles. The bright leaves on the trees flashed by the window as we got closer and closer to town. Fall was my favorite time of year on the mountain. The trickle of tourists petered out as the temperatures dropped, and the folks who lived here year round had the mountain to themselves. I could spend an entire day not having to say a single word to anyone.

“You ever think about what it would be like to settle down for good?” Dean broke the silence.

I didn’t talk about my personal life too much, and since I’d grown up miles away in Rye Creek, California, the details of my past weren’t well known around town. There were some things a man needed to keep to himself. So instead of telling Dean that hell yeah, I’d thought about what it would be like, that once upon a time I’d pictured a much different future than the solitary, quiet life I led, I shook my head.

“Settling down isn’t for me.” I stopped the truck near the back door of the community center. “Let’s get this over with.”

Within minutes, we’d unloaded the tables and chairs and I’d pulled the truck into a proper parking spot in front. I sat behind the wheel, hoping to catch a few minutes of the Cat-Griz game on the radio before I went inside. Satisfied the Bobcats were in the lead, I forced myself to head toward the front door.

It’s not that I didn’t like getting together with the folks who treated me more like family than a friend. Hanging out

with my fellow Mustang Mountain Riders was always a good time, and I was sure several of them would stop by. I was just pissed at Ruby for singling me out. Being the center of attention had never been my thing.

I walked through the front door, figuring I'd finish setting up, grab a bite to eat, nod along to a few conversations, and head home within an hour to catch the rest of the game.

Then I saw her... a ghost from my past.

The woman across the room had the same color of strawberry-blonde hair. She had her back to me, but I could tell by the flare of her hips and the curve of her full, round ass that she had the same build, too. My eyes were playing tricks on me. There was no way the woman wrapping plastic silverware in turkey-printed napkins was the same one who'd captured my heart all those years ago.

"Nate!" Ruby came up behind me and linked her arm with mine. "I want you to meet my special guest. She's just in town for the weekend and is staying in one of my rental cabins."

Everything faded into the background as Ruby led me across the room. I couldn't tear my gaze away. Each step took me closer and closer. Ruby chattered on, but all I could hear was a loud buzz ringing in my ears. My throat went as dry as the creek bed during a summer drought.

"Ainsley, this is Nate. He's our Mountain Man of the Month for November." Ruby's smile seemed too wide, the arch of her brows too high.

Ainsley turned around. Her eyes widened while her jaw dropped. A flush of pink swept over her cheeks, and I stared at the woman who'd owned my heart for as long as I could remember. Time had been kind to Ainsley Cowell. The same

sprinkling of freckles danced across her nose. She'd been stunning when we fell in love our freshman year of college, and in the years apart, she'd grown even more beautiful.

Oblivious to the fact that the bottom had just fallen out of my carefully constructed world, Ruby kept talking. "I'm sure the two of you will have plenty to chat about. Ainsley mentioned doing some hiking, and Nate, you're the perfect person to show her around since you're so familiar with the area."

"Hi." She spoke first, her voice as sweet as homegrown honey.

Seeing her standing there with her big blue eyes staring up at me made the knots in my stomach hitch even tighter. Questions flooded my mind. What was she doing in Mustang Mountain? Had she been trying to find me? Did she hate me for how things ended between us?

"Nate?" Ruby mumbled my name under her breath, and I realized I'd been standing there staring for too damn long.

"Hi." Forcing that one word past my lips took all the strength I had.

"I need to go check on the turkeys. If you'll excuse me..." Ruby rushed off before either of us could speak.

"So..." Ainsley glanced up and briefly met my gaze.

"Do you want to go somewhere to talk?" There were too many people around, and I was too keyed up to try to keep our conversation on the down low.

She nodded, and the familiar scent of brown sugar and vanilla drifted from her skin. Memories flooded my system... me with my hands tangled in her long hair... the look in her



eyes right before my lips touched hers... and how it felt to move like one body when I was buried deep inside her.

Before I said or did something I would regret, I reached for her hand and led her out to my truck. Once we were both inside, safe from prying eyes, I turned toward her. “What are you doing here, Ainsley?”

## CHAPTER 4

## AINSLEY

IT WAS A MISTAKE TO COME. I could tell by the deep, haunted look in his eyes that I should have left the past alone. Seeing him brought all of it back. Memories I'd been trying to forget forced their way through my head. He was still the dark-haired, dark-eyed man I'd fallen for all those years ago, but there was a hardness about him now, too.

"I'm sorry." I could barely say the words before my eyes filled with tears and emotion choked my throat.

"How did you find me?" Shock seemed to have given way to curiosity. He cocked his head and waited for me to respond.

I didn't owe him a thing. He was the one who'd ended things between us. I'd been willing to give up everything for him, and even that wasn't enough. I should be the one demanding answers, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him that. Not while he was looking at me with a heat in his eyes that could chase the late fall chill away. A heat that made me wish things had been different between us.

"Ainsley. What are you doing here?"

There was always a chance I'd run into him. I'd told myself it wouldn't matter, that I'd be able to keep it casual and pretend like it was a happy coincidence. That was before I knew anything about Mustang Mountain. Now that I was here,

way after the tourism season ended, it would be ridiculous to pretend that I would have picked this tiny town as a destination for a weekend away.

My mind raced, grasping for words. “Um, I was in the area and Ruby invited me to her Friendsgiving dinner.”

“But why were you in the area? Last I heard, you were still living in London and putting in twelve-hour days at the office.” He looked away and shook his head slightly, like he was mad at himself for letting on that he’d been keeping tabs on me.

“I’m home for Thanksgiving. My boss gave me a few weeks off, so I decided to take a few days and do some exploring. There are supposed to be some decent trails around here, and I want to check out the hot springs.” My voice cracked as I offered up the half-truths.

“Why Mustang Mountain?” Eyes narrowed, he searched my face for clues as to why, after all this time, I’d shown up in his world again.

I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat. This was what I’d wanted, wasn’t it? To find him and see if there were any signs that he regretted pushing me away all those years ago. Based on the gruffness and grumpiness he’d shown me so far, he wasn’t happy to see me.

Suddenly, tracking him down didn’t seem like such a good idea. I’d wanted closure, but the rough mountain man in front of me wasn’t the same man who’d held my heart in his strong, capable hands.

“This was a mistake.” I opened the door to the truck and stepped down onto the pavement. Eager to put distance between us, I didn’t know where to go. Ruby had driven me

into town, so I didn't have my car. I could either head back into the community center and hope Nate would leave, or try to call a taxi or ride share to take me back to the cabin.

I didn't look back when I heard his door slam. He caught up to me easily since he only had to take one giant stride for every two or three steps of mine.

"Ainsley, wait." His hand landed on my shoulder. I wanted to turn toward him and bury my face in the soft flannel shirt he had on under his jacket. Years had passed, but he still had the same grip on my heart as he did back then.

I shrugged off his hand and turned. "What's left to say?"

Cold drops started to fall from the sky. Great. I'd left my jacket inside.

Nate glanced up at the desolate gray clouds. "I just want to ask you one question. Will you answer it?"

With nothing left to lose, I nodded. "What is it?"

"Are you happy?" His forehead creased as his brows knit together. The rain fell harder.

Icy cold drops slid down the back of my neck. "What kind of question is that?"

He grabbed my hand and tugged me back toward the truck. "Come on, you're getting soaked."

"I'm not getting back in that truck with you." It was too much. Being that close to him made me wish for things that weren't possible. I switched directions and pulled him toward the porch of the community center so at least we'd be out of the rain.

Nate leaned against the building, his dark eyes full of emotion. I couldn't tell if he was angry or feeling the same

mixture of loss and regret that filled my chest. “Just tell me, are you happy?”

“Work is great. I’m up for a big promotion. And I love living in London. I’ve got the cutest flat that’s just steps from the underground, so I can get anywhere I need to in minutes. Sure is different than having to drive for an hour just to get to the next ranch like you do around here.” I was rambling, but I couldn’t stop myself.

He nodded. A raindrop slid down his cheek, and he reached up to wipe it away. “I’m glad everything’s turned out so well for you.”

“Thanks.” Forcing my lips into something I hoped resembled a smile, I hugged my arms into my chest. “I’m going to go back inside and see if I can find something to use to dry off. It was nice to see you, Nate.”

He didn’t try to stop me. I left him standing on the porch, his wet hair plastered against his forehead, and headed inside.

“What happened?” Ruby rushed over as soon as I entered the room. “Honey, you’re soaked right through.”

“I’ll be okay, but I’m not feeling very well. Is there a ride share in town I could call to take me back to the cabin?” The thought of sitting around with a bunch of strangers and trying to make small talk for the next few hours appealed to me just about as much as walking back to the cabin on foot did.

“I can drive you back.” Nate filled the doorway.

Ruby swiveled her head from me to Nate and back again. “That sounds like a wonderful idea. Let me pack up some food for you to take with you.”

## CHAPTER 5

THE DRIVE to Ruby's cabin seemed to take forever, but at the same time, not nearly long enough. Rain pelted the windshield, providing the only sound as I tried to think of something to say to Ainsley. She sat in the front seat, her arms wrapped around her middle as she faced the passenger-side window.

"You warm enough?" I reached out to adjust the temperature. Damn windows kept fogging up, making it difficult to see the road ahead.

"I'm fine." The way her shoulders shivered told me otherwise, so I turned the heat up on her side of the cab.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the long drive that led to Ruby's rental cabins. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to Ainsley. There hadn't been a day that had gone by over the past eight years that I hadn't thought about her. That I hadn't questioned my actions and wondered if I'd done the wrong thing.

"Which cabin are you in?"

"The one to the right up here." She picked up her bag like she was ready to bolt as soon as I stopped the truck.

I pulled up as close as I could to the front door of the modern but rustic-looking cabin. "Can I come in and get a fire started for you?"



“I’m sure I can handle it.” Her fingers wrapped around the door handle. Within seconds, she’d be out of my life again. I couldn’t let that happen. There was a reason she’d shown up in Mustang Mountain. I wouldn’t get my hopes up that I deserved a second chance, but I’d give just about anything for a few more minutes with her.

“It’s one of those cranky old hunting stoves. You sure you don’t want me to get it going? It’ll only take me a minute or two.”

She hesitated—a good sign. Then her shoulders slumped, and she opened the door. “Fine. I’d appreciate it.”

The pressure in my chest eased to a barely noticeable degree. I raced around the front of the truck to meet her on the porch. Her fingers fumbled with the key, then she opened the door and we stepped inside.

Ainsley flipped on the light, and a warm glow spread through the cozy front room. Ruby had done a great job with the cabins. What they lacked in square footage, they made up in character. A large picture window provided a sweeping view of the mountains. She’d decorated the interior with professional photos of the area showing the beauty of all four seasons.

I kicked off my boots and headed toward the wood-burning stove that sat in the center of the cabin. It was original to the structure and probably weighed as much as my truck. I got to work building up a base to start a fire in its belly while Ainsley climbed the steps into the small loft area that served as the bedroom.

As I broke twigs into smaller pieces to use as kindling, I imagined her shedding her wet clothes. She’d always been beautiful—the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen. Thinking

about her made my skin heat, so I shrugged off my damp jacket. If things hadn't ended between us, we might have spent a weekend in a place like this.

While I'd grown up in a small town in northern California, Ainsley had lived in Montana her entire life before she took a job in London right out of college. We met our freshman year at Montana State. She sat in front of me in our Interpersonal Relations class, and it took me a month of staring at her long, thick hair before I got up the nerve to ask her if she wanted to have coffee.

From then on, we were inseparable. She'd been the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I threw it all away. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time, and it was killing me to not know if the sacrifice I'd made had been worth it.

The first flames flickered to life in the middle of the big black stove. I sat back and waited, watching the thin twigs curl as they fed the fire.

"Looks like it's off to a good start." Ainsley came down the steps. She'd traded her wet jeans and button-down shirt for a pair of yoga pants and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt. Her hair piled on top of her head, leaving her neck exposed.

Heat burned low in my belly. Looking at her made my gut clench. "It should start heating up the place in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Nate." She stood a few yards away, like she didn't trust either one of us enough to move closer.

I got up from where I'd been crouching in front of the stove. "You didn't get a chance to eat anything. Can I heat up some of the food Ruby sent back with you?"

“Why don’t you take it? I’ve got stuff here.” The rigid set of her shoulders said she’d rather not spend any more time with me than necessary, but that’s not what I had in mind.

“I bet you don’t have her grandma’s sage stuffing or homemade pumpkin pie from Mountain Delight.” Ignoring the urge to protect myself and leave like she wanted me to, I moved toward the small table in the kitchen where I’d left the bag. “You’ve got to try the turkey, too. I’m pretty sure it’s fresh. One of my MC brothers usually takes care of bringing the birds.”

“Seems like you’ve made a life for yourself here. I’m happy for you.”

Hopeful that maybe she’d be willing to talk a little over a meal, I searched the cabinets for a couple of plates. “There wasn’t anything for me back home, so I stayed in Montana after graduation. I’m working as a conservation officer now. Except for all the political stuff I have to deal with occasionally, it’s a dream job.”

“I bet. You always loved the great outdoors.” Her lips curved into an almost-smile.

I took that as a good sign as I loaded two plates with the makings for a proper Thanksgiving dinner. Ruby didn’t cut corners and had sent back enough food to last for days. The microwave would only fit one plate at a time, so I heated up the first and looked for a wine opener to uncork the bottle of white wine she’d tucked into the bag.

“You don’t have to go to so much trouble.” Ainsley stood by the sink, looking more relaxed than she had when we first arrived. “I can feed myself, you know.”

“No doubt.” I chuckled. She was the most independent woman I’d ever met. “It’s okay to let people do things for you every once in a while. Or is that a lesson you still haven’t learned, my little firefly?”

Her eyes widened at the mention of the nickname I used to call her.

“Sorry, that slipped out.” I bit down on my lip and cursed myself for crossing that line.

“Nobody’s called me that in years.” Her voice came out soft and sad.

I crossed the kitchen and put my finger under her chin to tip her head back. Locking my gaze with hers, I searched her eyes for a sign that I was about to make a big mistake. All I saw was a desperate need that rivaled my own.

“I’ve missed you, firefly,” I whispered.

She took in a shaky breath. “I’ve missed you, too.”

Knowing I had no right to her, I lowered my head and captured her mouth with mine.

## CHAPTER 6

## AINSLEY

THE MOMENT OUR MOUTHS TOUCHED, the years between us disappeared. I clung to his shoulders as the torrent of feelings I'd been holding back broke free. His presence invaded my senses. My fingers brushed over the soft flannel shirt as the scent of sun and pine flooded my nose. His whiskers scraped my cheek. Then he slid his tongue into my mouth. My blood heated. I hadn't been with a man since I'd given myself to Nate. My brain might have been trying to forget him all of these years, but my body remembered.

My knees gave way, and I sank into him. He reached down and scooped me into his arms without breaking our kiss. The rational part of my brain tried to put on the brakes. I'd barely been able to piece myself together the last time he left me. There was no way I'd be able to survive this.

Even knowing that, I wanted him.

"It's you, Firefly. It's always been just you." He mumbled the words into my mouth. I didn't know if I could trust anything he said, but I wanted to believe him.

The microwave dinged, but he was already carrying me up the narrow flight of stairs. He eased onto the bed with me still in his arms. I didn't want to let go, didn't want to break the connection we'd forged.

“Your pants are wet,” I whispered into the darkness.

He shifted to hover over me while he worked his jeans down his legs and kicked them onto the floor. I couldn't believe we were about to do what I thought we were about to do. I'd never been a big risk taker. Opening myself up to Nate again would be the riskiest thing I'd ever done.

“We don't have to do anything you don't want to,” he said. I knew he meant it. Nate might look invincible, but that tough exterior covered up the most gentle heart.

A hollow ache pulsed deep within my core. I wanted him. Wanted him with a desperate need I couldn't explain. So I slid my hands between us and started to unbutton his shirt.

“Ainsley...” The raw emotion in his tone tugged at my heartstrings as I worked his shirt down one arm, then the other. With nothing separating my hands from the sculpted planes of his chest, I ran my fingers over the fabric. He shivered. Goosebumps popped up on his skin.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I needed to know he wanted me. Needed to hear him say it out loud, to admit that he'd made a mistake when he cut me out of his life. I wanted to know he regretted it.

“It's the only thing I've ever wanted.” He pulled back enough to meet my gaze. The dim light from downstairs shone just bright enough for me to see the regret in his eyes. There would be time for talking, but for now, seeing his pain was enough.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and reached up to kiss him. It seemed that was all the encouragement he needed. His hands skimmed up my sides and back down again, then found their way under the hem of my sweatshirt. I hissed in a breath

at the first touch of his palms against my skin. I'd forgotten how much he could make me feel. My heart pounded as blood whooshed through my ears.

He worked my shirt over my head and took his time kissing his way down my body, each touch of his lips adding a spark to the fire burning deep in my core. By the time he reached the cleft between my breasts, I couldn't take any more.

"I need you, Nate. I need you, now." My body hovered on the edge already, and I wasn't about to let myself go until he was seated deep inside me. It's what I craved. The only thing that could fill the empty place inside my soul.

He kissed down my belly. "I don't have anything with me, but I'm going to make you feel so good, baby."

"No." I cupped his cheeks with my palms and tried to pull him back up my body. "I need you inside me."

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I haven't been with anyone since you, Firefly."

"Me neither." When I first saw him, I wanted to fill his head with lies and make him think that I hadn't thought of him at all since we'd been apart. But the love between us was still there. He'd have to be a robot not to feel it. All that mattered now was the connection.

"I've been so stupid." He shook his head as he pulled his shirt off. "I'm going to make it up to you, even if it takes me the rest of my life."

I shimmied out of my yoga pants and eased my shirt over my head. "Just take me, Nate."

He slipped the scrap of lace between my legs to the side and slipped one of his thick fingers inside me. My hips bucked



at the contact, and I clenched the walls of my pussy around him.

“I can’t believe I let you go.” He fell forward, claiming my mouth as he grazed my clit with his thumb. “My beautiful, beautiful girl.”

I moved against his hand, eager for more.

“I’m not going to last long, little firefly.”

“It’s okay. Neither will I.” Not with the way his finger sought out the spot that would catapult me over the edge. “I want you. Now, Nate.”

He rolled on top of me, protecting me from his weight by leaning on his elbows. Before I could miss the touch of his hands, the head of his long, thick cock nudged against my entrance.

“You’re so fucking wet.” He lifted his head and stared deep into my eyes. “Don’t look away, baby. I want to see you when you come.”

I nodded, then angled my hips to take him.

## CHAPTER 7

## NATE

I ENTERED HER SLOWLY, holding myself back as I sank into the heat of her core. We fit together like two halves finally being reunited. For the millionth time, I wondered why the hell I'd let her go.

Her nails dug into my shoulders as I seated myself deep inside her. She was so close to losing control. We'd always been good together. The time we spent apart amplified my need. I was almost afraid to move.

“God, Nate. You feel so good.” Her lids closed, and she tilted her head back, giving me better access to her throat.

“No, baby. We feel good together.” I kissed a path from her collarbone to the spot behind her ear that used to send chills racing up and down her spine. She shivered underneath me.

“I used to love it when you did that.” A trace of sadness laced through her tone.

Lifting my head from where I'd been tasting her sweet skin, I stared deep into her eyes. “It's not over between us, Firefly. It can't be.”

She bit down on her lip, and her lower lids filled with tears. Dammit. I didn't want to make her cry.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you.” I rolled onto my back, flipping her over to lie on my chest.

She straddled my waist, taking me even deeper. Then she braced her palms on my pecs and shifted forward. The friction made my eyes roll back in my head. I was so fucking close, but was determined to give her what she needed.

“Do you want to stop?” I offered.

Her head shook as she lifted her hips, sliding up and almost all the way off my cock. Before I had the chance to miss her heat, she dropped back down. I put my hands on her waist, slayed by the sight of her riding me. My girl had never been afraid to take what she wanted. I was glad to see that hadn’t changed, even though so many other things between us had.

Her eyes locked onto mine as she ground her hips into me. I’d always been able to read her body. While she slid up and down my cock, I pushed forward and sucked one of her hard nipples into my mouth. Without breaking eye contact, I swirled my tongue around the peaked bud. She moved faster until her breath came in short bursts. I switched to her other breast, so fucking hard for her that the promise of pleasure bordered on pain.

She wrapped her hands around my shoulders and let out a low moan.

“That’s it, Ainsley. Come for me, Firefly.”

Her teeth caught her lower lip and her forehead furrowed in deep concentration. Nodding, she let go. I lifted my hips, plunging even further into her as she clenched around me. As the last waves of her orgasm washed over her, I finally stopped

holding back. My release pumped into her, and I claimed her as mine. Only this time, I had no intention of letting her go.



“YOU OKAY?” It had been over an hour since Ainsley collapsed on my chest. I’d cradled her against me while she napped, marveling at the fact that I was actually holding her in my arms again.

“Yeah. You?” She looked up at me with sleep still lingering in her eyes.

“I’m in heaven.” I brushed the hair away from her face. The rain had turned to snow, and the silvery light of the moon came through the large skylight in the ceiling.

“I don’t know what happened.” She looked away, almost like she was embarrassed.

“I do. We found our way back to each other.”

A deep sigh sent her warm breath racing across my chest. “You left me, Nate. If I hadn’t come looking for you, we wouldn’t be here right now. I’m the one who found you.”

“You’re right, and I’m so fucking grateful for whatever reason brought you back to me. We need to talk, but first you’ve got to have something to eat. Your stomach’s been rumbling, and I bet you haven’t eaten all day.” Ainsley always put everyone else’s needs before her own. That was going to stop right now. “Come on. I’ll see if there’s anything we can salvage from the leftovers Ruby sent.”

I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and climbed out of bed. My jeans were still damp, so I pulled on my boxers and

headed downstairs. Ainsley came down a few minutes later in the yoga pants and sweatshirt she'd been wearing before.

“How about pie for dinner?” I asked. I'd tossed the food from the plate I'd fixed for her earlier, but Ruby had cut two big pieces of pie, one pumpkin and one pecan. She'd even filled a container with homemade whipped cream to put on top.

Ainsley grabbed two forks from the drawer before sitting down at the table. “Pie for dinner sounds perfect.”

My pulse steadily increased as I picked up the pie and sat down across from her. I'd dreamed about this moment for years—the moment I'd get another chance with her—but now that it was here, I was afraid I was going to fuck it up. She deserved to know the truth of what happened back then.

“So?” she asked, her fork poised over the container holding the pumpkin pie. “Are you going to tell me why you sent me away?”

Pressure filled my chest. “I didn't want you to give up your dreams for me, Firefly.”

“What dreams? The only dream I ever had was to build a life with you, but you put an end to that.” The light in her eyes dimmed, and she set the fork back down.

“That's not true. You should have seen the look on your face when you got that job offer in London. I couldn't let you give that up.” The pain of losing her crashed over me again. “You've spent your whole life putting everyone else first. I wanted you to put your own needs first for once.”

“So you broke up with me.” She stated it like a fact, not an accusation. “Yeah, once I learned how to live with a broken

heart, I realized you thought you were doing me a favor by ending things.”

I sat back, stunned, and a little relieved that she’d figured it out on her own. Feeling like I needed to justify my actions, I tried to help her understand. “It worked, didn’t it? Look at you now. You’ve got an awesome job with a great company. You’re seeing the world, not stuck in some podunk town in the middle of nowhere.”

“You know what’s really sad about the whole thing?” She stabbed her fork into the piece of pumpkin pie and broke off a bite.

I could think of a few things... not being able to see her every day was at the top of the list. “What’s that?”

“Did you ever think about what I wanted?” She dipped the bite of pie into the container of whipped cream, then lifted her head to meet my gaze. Her blue eyes drilled into mine. It was like she could see beyond the front I’d put up for the rest of the world. Like she could see straight into my soul. “The really sad thing is, if you’d asked me, I would have told you all I wanted was to stay with you.”

## CHAPTER 8



## AINSLEY

AROUND THREE IN THE MORNING, Nate and I reached a truce. We'd wasted so much time apart that I wanted to make the most of the few days I'd be in Mustang Mountain. I had no idea what, if anything, would come from our reunion, but the only way to tell if our feelings were genuine and not just left over from our shared past was to spend time together.

The first thing we did was head to Nate's place so he could grab a change of clothes. He'd always loved his solitude, so I wasn't surprised when he pulled into a narrow drive at the end of a mountain road.

"How did you find this place?" An inch or two of the snow we'd received last night covered the ground. I was glad I'd thought to bring my snow boots as I stepped out of the truck.

"It was just a patch of land when I saw it." Nate rounded the back of the truck and took my hand.

"Wait, you bought the land first, then had this cabin built?"

"I had help. A lot of my friends have built their own places around here." He gave me a one-shoulder shrug, like it wasn't a big deal.

As we stepped onto the porch, I gained a new appreciation for the gorgeous log cabin we were about to enter. He'd

always been good with his hands, but I had no idea he had it in him to build something like this.

“You ready to see where I live?” He looked nervous, like he was worried I might not like his home.

“I can’t wait.”

He pushed the door open and gestured for me to go first.

“So you don’t even lock your doors around here?”

“Who would bother me this far up the mountain?” His lips quirked up into a reassuring smile.

I couldn’t imagine living somewhere I felt safe enough to not lock my door. I’d even added a couple of locks to the front door of the flat I had in London. Knowing we lived such different lives made a knot of nerves tighten in my belly.

“What do you think?” Nate nodded toward the far wall.

I switched my attention from worrying about our differences to check out the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace. Tall picture windows flanked the massive structure, providing a sweeping view of the snow-covered peaks.

“This is amazing.” Natural light filled the room. I tried to take it all in, from the rack of antlers hanging over the mantle to the soft, fluffy blanket draped across the back of his giant sectional sofa. His place was warm and welcoming, with signs of him everywhere.

Being in his space felt like stepping into one of his huge hugs. It felt like coming home.

“Thanks. It took a couple of years to finish everything, but I think it was worth it. There are two bedrooms upstairs, along with a room I use for an office. Do you want the grand tour?”

“Show me everything.” I kicked off my boots, then linked my arm with his.

Nate walked me through the cabin, pointing out little details along the way. He’d put so much thought into this place. It was just like him to do that, though. He’d always been the kind of guy who took his time making decisions. While some of his brothers tended to be impulsive and jump into things before thinking them through, Nate was more deliberate.

He’d saved the bedroom for last. The vaulted ceiling made it feel much larger than it was. A king-size bed took up most of one wall. My heart squeezed tight as my gaze stopped on the blanket he had draped over the foot of the bed. The hodgepodge of colors looked out of place, but I recognized it right away.

“You kept that?” I moved closer and reached out to run my hand over my first knitting project. It was full of mistakes since I had no idea what I was doing when I tried to teach myself how to knit. The gauge was uneven, and there were too many missed stitches to count. Nate had encouraged me to keep going, so I’d gifted him the misshapen rectangle that loosely resembled an afghan.

“Of course I kept it.” His lips ticked up in an embarrassed grin. “I kept everything, Ainsley.”

My heart filled with warmth. He’d always been my biggest supporter, and I’d missed having someone I could count on. Grief over how things could have been between us threatened to suck me down, but I reached for him instead. There was no point dwelling on the past. He’d done what he thought was best for me at the time. Even though I disagreed, he’d done it out of love. I could spend my time letting regret eat me up

from the inside out, or be grateful we'd found our way back to each other.

"I've missed you so much, Nate." Tilting my head back, I stared into his eyes. I could get lost in him again if I let myself. It would be so easy to pick right back up where we left off.

"I've missed you too, Firefly." His hands went to my waist, immediately finding their way under my sweatshirt to skim over my bare skin.

I'd never been able to get enough of him back when we were together. Nothing had changed. If anything, the time we spent apart made me even more desperate for his touch. My fingers went to the waistband of his jeans.

Last night, I couldn't wait to feel him inside me. This morning, we took our time getting reacquainted with each other's bodies. I'd put on weight since college. My hips had spread and my chest had filled out, making me self-conscious about baring myself to him.

Nate kissed down my neck, then broke contact to lift the sweatshirt I had on over my head. "You're even more beautiful now than you were then, Ainsley. I can't get enough of you."

My inhibitions faded. He'd always made me feel like the only woman he wanted. As his lips moved down between my breasts, I reached behind to unclasp my bra.

"So fucking gorgeous." He pulled back and met my gaze as his rough hands reached up to cup my breasts. The pad of his thumb brushed over a nipple. It immediately hardened and sent an aching need pulsing through my core.

"I thought you were going to show me around town this afternoon." Cocking my head, I offered up a sassy grin. I was

more than okay with a change of plans. Spending time with him was the only thing I cared about.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you to town this afternoon. First, I need to remind you what you’ve been missing out on.” Then he nudged me back toward the bed and worked my pants down my hips.

“Come here.” I reached for him, but he shook his head.

“This is all about you, Firefly.” He got down on his knees and lifted my legs up to rest on his shoulders.

Anticipation rushed through me as he bent his head between my thighs and circled my clit with his tongue.

## CHAPTER 9

## NATE

THREE BIG “OS” later, Ainsley and I held hands as we walked down the sidewalk in downtown Mustang Mountain. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the shops along Main were filled with folks getting a head start on their holiday shopping. Ruby’s Friendsgiving took place the first weekend of November and marked the start of the winter season. Store owners had swapped out their Halloween decorations for turkeys and pumpkins. It wouldn’t be long before they’d be hanging stockings and putting up trees with tiny twinkle lights.

I pointed out my favorite shops, like the outdoor store the Pike brothers owned and the bakery where Lily sold her mouth-watering baked goods.

“We should pick up some cookies or another pie for dessert,” I suggested.

“I thought I was dessert.” Ainsley laughed and nudged her cheek into my shoulder.

“Baby, you’re the main dish.” I kissed the top of her head and led her into the shop.

“I forgot how super cheesy you could be.” She playfully pushed at my chest. “Oh my gosh, what smells so good?”

Lily ran the Mountain Delight Catering Company, but had a small retail shop set up in the front where she sold cookies,

pies, and ready-made meals to take home and toss in the oven. I was a regular, and usually stopped in at least once or twice a week since I didn't like cooking just for myself.

“Hey, Nate.” Lily came out of the kitchen in back, her eyes lighting up at the sight of Ainsley on my arm. “Who's this?”

Word would get around Mustang Mountain sooner rather than later, thanks to the close-knit gossip mill. I didn't care, though. “This is Ainsley. She was my girlfriend in college, and we reconnected at the Friendsgiving event yesterday.”

Ainsley blushed. “I'm just in town for the weekend. Those pies you made were amazing.”

“Thanks.” Lily reached over the counter to shake Ainsley's hand. “I'm Lily. Welcome to Mustang Mountain. I hope we'll be seeing a lot more of you now that you and Nate have reconnected.”

A dull ache pounded in my chest. There was no way Ainsley would be spending more time in Mustang Mountain. Her life was thousands of miles away, across a damn ocean. Still, it was hard not to picture her here. Lily had fallen for one of my MC brothers, Mack, a few months ago. Poor guy had been named Ruby's mountain man of Mustang Mountain in May, though it had worked out for him. Now the two of them were practically joined at the hip.

Seemed like a lot of my MC brothers had found love over the past year. Ruby tried to claim the credit, but I wasn't sure she deserved it. No one would be able to tell her that. I'd have better luck arguing with an angry bobcat than I would with Ruby Nelson.

“What can I get for you?” Lily moved behind a case holding a variety of desserts. “I've got a caramel apple



cheesecake that will melt in your mouth. If you didn't get enough pie yesterday, I just put out a mixed berry with the last of the huckleberries from the summer."

"That one." Ainsley didn't hesitate. Born and raised in Montana, she loved anything and everything made from the small, tart berries.

"You got it." Lily packaged the pie in a box and slid it across the counter. "It's on me today. I hope you enjoy your time with Nate and will be back soon."

"I hope so, too." Ainsley picked up the pie. I couldn't read her expression beyond the friendly smile. Was she just saying that to be nice? Did she really see herself coming back to Mustang Mountain? A sliver of hope wedged its way into my chest.

"Where to next?" I held the door for her, then took the pie. "I can run you up the mountain to meet Lily's other half. Mack trains sled dog teams and might be taking a few of them out to get a taste of the fresh snow. Or we can stop in at Ace's Place and grab a spiked cocoa to warm you up."

"I don't care what we do, as long as I'm with you." She stood on the curb, putting her almost at eye level since I'd already stepped down onto the street.

I didn't want to ruin the moment, but the more time we spent together, the more invested I was. Letting her go back to London like nothing had changed wasn't an option.

"We need to talk." I held the pie in one hand out to the side so I could pull her against me with the other.

She nodded into my chest.

Before I could nudge her chin up to get a read on how she was feeling, my phone rang. Fuck. I dug it out of my pocket.

Sheriff Cade's number scrolled across the screen.

"Damn. I really need to take this." Way to ruin a fucking moment.

"Go ahead." Ainsley took the pie. "I'll pop into the Mercantile and grab a few things for dinner."

I nodded, then pressed the phone to my ear while I watched her walk away. "Nate here."

"Nate, I'm following up on that set of prints you captured."

"You found something?"

"Yeah." Sheriff Cade clucked his tongue. I could picture him leaning back in his chair and resting his cowboy boots on the edge of his desk. He probably had a damn toothpick sticking out between his lips, too. "I'm pretty sure they don't belong to your illegal hunters. They match a partial print one of my guys grabbed from a recent break-in."

I'd always considered Mustang Mountain a safe place to live. Folks around here rarely locked their doors, and the crime rate was so low it didn't even register. Lately we'd had a series of burglaries that were unusual for the area. The sheriff's office had been trying to connect them, but hadn't had success yet.

"Do you have any leads?" I'd never worried about taking care of myself. Growing up in a small mountain town as the youngest in a family of all boys taught me how to fight when necessary. But with Ainsley around, I didn't like the sound of a bunch of unsolved break-ins taking place.

"We're still working on it. I do have something that falls into your area of expertise I want you to take a look at though. One of my deputies called in an accident up by Lake Bliss.

While he was up there, he swears he saw a pair of caribou in the area. I tried to tell him he must have been seeing things, but I thought I'd pass it along in case you want to check it out."

It had been five years since someone spotted caribou in Montana, and even then I didn't get the chance to check for myself. "Thanks, John. I'll take a look."

"Thought you might enjoy that. I'll keep you posted on those prints."

"Sounds good." I hung up, wondering if Ainsley meant it when she said she might be up for a hike. There was only one way to find out.

## CHAPTER 10

## AINSLEY

I HADN'T BEEN able to deny Nate when he asked if I'd be up for going with him to check on a report of caribou sighting. We'd been trekking through the woods for the past thirty minutes. Even with my winter boots and coat on, the cold still had me shivering.

"We're almost there. Just a little bit farther." Nate gripped my gloved hand in one of his. He carried a case holding a trail cam and other equipment in the other.

Seeing him in his element, doing something he loved, reinforced the fact that he'd never be happy living anywhere near a big city. Nate Fisher was made for the mountains of Montana, and I was made for him. I hadn't figured out how we would handle the future, but I knew with one-hundred percent certainty I couldn't ask him to leave this place.

"Right here ought to be good." He stopped and set down the case holding the camera. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine." I shoved my hands in my pockets, thankful for the hand warmers he'd given me when we got out of the truck.

"Give me a few minutes to set up the trail cam and we can start heading back."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I felt useless standing around watching him get to work.

“You can look for scat.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great. I was hoping you might give me something more exciting to do than search for reindeer poop.”

Nate laughed as he unpacked the camera. “I won’t tell you how much of my time is spent studying shit. It’s one of the most glamorous parts of my job.”

Obviously, he loved his job. The flush on his cheeks and spark in his dark brown eyes were more than enough proof. I wandered away, my eyes on the ground, scanning the snow for something that looked like the picture of the caribou pellets he’d shown me. The woods held a quiet peacefulness I’d never felt anywhere else. Nate and I used to hike around the base of the mountains in Bozeman year round. Some of my favorite moments we shared happened in those woods.

It didn’t take him long to get the trail cam set up. He checked to make sure it was recording, then packed everything up. “You ready to head back?”

“My toes and fingers are, but I hate to leave. It’s so beautiful here.”

Nate crossed over to where I stood. He wrapped his arms around me and leaned down for a kiss. “Remember our overnight camping trip freshman year of college?”

“How could I forget?” We’d been dating a few months when he invited me to go camping with him for the weekend. I’d already fallen head over heels for him by then. Our first night out, we made love under a million stars. My cheeks heated at the memory.

“I knew then that you were the one for me.” His grip around my waist tightened. “We haven’t talked about what’s

going to happen when you leave, but I'm prepared to follow you this time, Firefly."

"What?" I tilted back to meet his gaze. He was serious.

"I made a mistake when I sent you away."

"Nate, we've already talked about this. You thought you were doing the right thing. That's in the past—"

"I did do the right thing. You needed to take that job and go after something you wanted." He reached up to smooth my hair away from my face. "But I should have gone with you."

"You belong here. You would have hated it in London." I tried to imagine him walking down the cobblestone streets by my flat or riding the underground to a job that made him feel hollow and empty inside. The image wouldn't come. He belonged in the city streets of London just about as much as a wild bison did.

He shook his head. "The only place I hate is anywhere away from you. I lost you once, Ainsley. I won't do it again. If you'll have me, I want to come with you."

"If I'll have you?" Was he for real? I'd spent the past eight years trying to forget him. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't force him out of my head or out of my heart.

"I was an idiot, but I'm smart enough not to make the same mistake twice. I'm yours, baby. Wherever you go is the only place I want to be." His mouth slanted over mine and warmth rushed through my limbs. I forgot I was in the middle of the woods in northern Montana. Heck, I even forgot my own name as he claimed me with that kiss.

A twig snapped, the sound piercing the silence around us. Nate glanced up, and his eyes widened. I followed his gaze to where a pair of caribou stood about a dozen yards away.

I was too afraid I'd scare them away to say anything. Nate's eyes softened at the edges as he stared at the beautiful animals. The larger one's ears perked, then the two of them darted away, heading into a thick part of the woods.

"Did you see that?"

Nodding, I tightened my grip on his shoulders. "Do you think you caught it on the trail cam?"

He let go of me to check. "You're my lucky charm, Ains. My boss isn't going to believe this. They probably wandered down from Canada."

The excitement in his tone was contagious. I waited while he jotted down a few notes and took pictures of the tracks the caribou left behind.

"We need to celebrate. What would you think about heading back, getting cleaned up, and letting me treat you to dinner at the ski resort?"

Going out on a real date—the first date I'd been asked on since I left Nate for England—sounded amazing. But with time running out, I wanted to have him all to myself. "What if we celebrate with a warm bath and huckleberry pie instead?"

He shot me a lopsided grin. "I like your idea better than mine."

"I thought you might." Eager to get back to his cabin and back in his bed, I turned in the direction where we left the truck.



## CHAPTER 11

## NATE

FOR THE FIRST time in eight years, I took a personal day off from work. There was still so much to show Ainsley around Mustang Mountain. I didn't want to miss a minute with her. While she curled up in my bed, I finished filling out my report on the caribou sighting and sent it off to my boss. Then I looked into flights to London. She was leaving to head back to Bozeman tomorrow and would spend another day or two with her dad, but I had no intention of letting her leave the country without me.

“What are you doing?” She entered the spare bedroom I used as an office and came up behind me. The scent of sex drifted off her skin. I'd taken her multiple times last night and this morning, but I'd never get enough.

“Looking at flights.” I spun around in my chair and pulled her onto my lap. “I meant it when I told you I want to come with you.”

Her palm cupped my cheek. “You're really willing to leave all of this behind? I'm not even there most of the time. We're opening up locations in Panama after the first of the year, and I'll probably be gone for at least a month.”

My stomach twinged with a pang of doubt, but I ignored it. “I told you, home is where you are. I'd rather be in London,

surrounded by things that remind me of you than half a world away with nothing but memories.”

“Nate...” Her voice trailed off, but I could see the raw emotions playing through her eyes. “Are you sure? In two or three years, I’ll have put in enough time that I can probably pick where I want to work. I can come back then and work remotely. You’d have to remodel the office, though. I’m not sure my co-workers would understand the appeal of having wild animals hanging on the walls.”

I grinned as I glanced around the room. One of my co-workers had been training to open a taxidermy shop. Whenever he came across an animal that died of natural causes, he used it to practice his technique. Thanks to his efforts, I had a variety of critters sharing my office space.

“You can redecorate however you want,” I offered. “I’ll donate this stuff to the Mustang Mountain Riders’ clubhouse. I’m sure some of the older guys would get a kick out of it.”

“Wouldn’t you be happier staying here? We can make the long distance thing work for a year or two. I’ve got enough miles to come back and forth at least every couple of months.” Her fingers skimmed the scruff on my cheek. I leaned into her touch.

“That’s not enough. I want to be there when you come home from work. Want to be the last face you see at night before you close your eyes and the first person you see when you wake up in the mornings. I’m willing to give up everything to try to make up for letting you go.” I touched my nose to hers. “Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll leave you alone.”

“You know I can’t do that.” She sighed. “But you’ve built a life here, a career. What would you do in London? There

aren't a whole lot of wide open spaces."

"Hell, I don't know. Pull pints at the local pub? Does it matter? I can close up the cabin and take a leave of absence from my job for a year or two. We can make this happen." She looked doubtful, but I could feel her resistance slipping.

"What about your family?"

"What about yours?" I countered. "You get back to see your dad a few times a year, don't you?"

She nodded.

"I'll do the same." The more I thought about it, there wasn't anything holding me to Montana.

"Do you even have a passport?"

"Just renewed it last year. The guys like to go fishing at this remote lake up in Canada in the summers. Admit it, there's no reason why I shouldn't come with you." The taste of victory was within reach.

Ainsley held up her pointer finger. "I'm saying yes under one condition."

"Name it." Nothing could keep me away from her. Didn't matter what her condition ended up being.

"If you hate it there, you have to tell me. We can make it work, but I don't want to be the reason you stay somewhere you can't stand. Promise?"

"I'm going to love it because I love you." Saying those three words opened a floodgate of emotion inside. I hadn't uttered them to anyone except my mom since the day I broke up with Ainsley.

“I love you, too.” Her arms went around my neck and our lips mashed together.

The lines between us blurred, and I lost track of where her body ended and mine started. I’d felt like a huge piece of me had been missing for way too long. With Ainsley in my arms, it slid back into place. My future held promise again.

It might have been hours or just minutes that passed. I never had a good sense of time when I was all wrapped up with my girl. When we finally broke apart, I tapped my forehead to hers.

“Sounds like you’re hellbent on coming with me. What do we need to do to make that happen?” she asked.

The reality of what I’d need to do in the next few days to pull this off washed over me. “I’m not sure I even know where to start.”

“You probably should start by asking about that leave of absence.” She climbed off my lap. That’s when I noticed what she had on—one of my button-down flannel shirts over nothing at all.

“What have you got on under there?” I slid my hand up her backside, loving the feel of her bare ass on my palm.

“You have work to do. There’ll be plenty of time for that later.”

My cock had been hard since the moment she sat down on my lap. “You think I’ll be able to concentrate with this going on in my pants?” I teased.

“Poor baby.”

She didn’t look sympathetic to my situation, so I moved my hand around to graze her clit with my thumb. “You still

want me to get to work?”

“Maybe we could take a quick minute or two before you start on that to-do list.”

I lifted my hips and eased my sweats down my thighs. “Come here, Firefly.”

She climbed onto my lap and slid onto me, her pussy wet and ready. It only took a minute before her nails dug deep into my shoulder and she called out my name. I followed her right over the edge, my hands on her hips, clinging to her like a life raft in a raging river. My love for her had almost ripped me apart. Now it was the soothing balm that pieced me back together.

## CHAPTER 12

## AINSLEY

HOW RUBY MANAGED to pull together a going away party for Nate on such short notice amazed me. Even though I'd only spent a couple of days in Mustang Mountain, my chest tightened as we walked into the community center. Nate's friends had strung lights around the edges of the room and hung a banner across the entrance. He wasn't just leaving his co-workers and a few MC brothers behind, he was leaving his found family.

"Congratulations, honey." Ruby caught me in a hug as soon as we entered. "I thought naming Nate as the mountain man of the month was a risk, but now I'm eleven for eleven."

Nate had filled me in on Ruby's goal of matching up all the single men in Mustang Mountain. He also told me how she'd had little to do with some of the guys finding love, but they let her take the credit. She reminded me of one of my great aunts—well-intentioned with questionable methods.

"I guess that means congratulations are in order for you too," I told her. "Do you have any idea who you'll pick for December?"

She leaned forward and whispered in my ear. "Surprising them is ninety-nine percent of the fun. You'll have to wait and see."



Nate gently took hold of her shoulders and gave her one of his big bear hugs. “Thanks, Ruby. For everything.”

I teared up a little at the emotion in his tone. Fanning my cheeks in an effort to keep the tears from falling, I headed toward the group of women standing by the buffet table. I’d met most of them on my whirlwind tour of town. Lily smiled as I approached.

“It’s nice to see Nate so happy. He’s like a totally different person with you around.” She held out a brown box tied with a holiday ribbon. “I thought you two might be able to use some cookies to keep up your energy while you finish closing up his place.”

“Thanks.” I took the box and looked around the circle, trying to remember all the women’s names. Emma stood next to April, with Courtney right behind her. Madeline bounced a baby on her hip while Luna bent down to tie a ribbon that had come loose in Izzy’s hair. Even though I’d just met them, I could feel the bond between them. Assuming everything worked out between me and Nate, hopefully they’d become like sisters to me when we moved back to Mustang Mountain.

Nate came up behind me and offered a shy smile to his friends’ significant others. “Mind if I steal her for a few minutes?”

“Not at all,” Lily said.

I excused myself with a promise to come back, and Nate took the box of cookies from my hands. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Okay.” I followed him out the back door of the center. Snow had started to fall again, and I wondered why he’d be

taking me outside to introduce me to someone. “Where are we going?”

He let out a low whistle and looked toward the treeline. A huge wolf ambled over, his muzzle crusted with snow.

Nate had told me about Hades, the resident wolf, but hearing about him and seeing the giant beast in person were two completely different things. I tightened my grip on Nate’s arm and took a step back.

“He’s not going to hurt you.” Nate reached out and ruffled the fur behind the wolf’s ears. The animal closed his eyes and brushed his head against Nate’s hips.

I held out my hand and grazed the thick fur on the wolf’s back. He held still, like he knew how scared I was.

“See? He’s like a big puppy dog in wolf’s clothing.” Nate’s smile lit up his whole face. I’d never seen him look happier. Worry threaded through my belly, knotting my fears together that he’d be miserable in London.

“It’s not too late to change your mind.” I kept my gaze on Hades’s back. I’d started this conversation over a dozen times in the past two days.

“Ainsley...” His voice dropped an octave. “I told you, I’m not letting you go this time.”

“But there aren’t wolves in London. There won’t be friends to grab a pint with or incredible bakers who make your favorite kind of cookie just to be nice. The only person you’ll know is me. You’re not just leaving your job and your cabin behind. You’re leaving your whole life. You’re leaving your family.” I couldn’t let him do it. Not after seeing the kind of life he’d built in Mustang Mountain. Not after seeing how happy he was here.

“You’re all I need. Yes, I’ve made a life here, but it’s half the life I’d have with you.” He slid his palm behind my neck and cradled my head. “Wherever you are is where I want to be. Besides, you said yourself it’s temporary. Hopefully, we’ll be back in Montana in a few years, right?”

I nodded, both relieved that he was so insistent on us staying together, but also still worried I was making a big mistake by letting him sacrifice so much. “That’s my goal, but there are no guarantees.”

He dipped his head and mumbled against my lips. “We’ll figure it out when the time comes. Together.”

I wrapped my arms around him and surrendered to his kiss, vowing I’d do everything I could to get us back to Mustang Mountain.

When we pulled apart a few moments later, Hades was gone. He’d disappeared into the woods, but he’d left something behind. A smudge of red stained the snow.

Nate dropped the box of cookies and knelt down. “He’s bleeding.”

My heart dropped into my boots, and I looked at the treeline where the wolf had first appeared. “What should we do?”

“I need to go after him.” Nate stood and tugged me toward the door. “Let me grab my coat and a couple of things from my truck.”

“What can I do to help?” It was getting dark, and I didn’t like the idea of Nate being out in the woods all alone. “Can I come with you?”

He shook his head as we entered the big room where the party had kicked into high gear. “I’ll get a few of the guys to

come. Tell Asher to be ready for us when we bring Hades back. I won't know what we're dealing with until I find him.”

## CHAPTER 13

## NATE

**NO TELLING** where Hades might be by the time I shrugged on my coat and traded my shoes for snow boots. Jonas and Jensen ran into town to grab some gear from their shop and said they'd meet up with me on the trail. With night falling, the sooner we found the wolf, the better off we'd all be.

Miles and Ford were scouting the roads and Jackson headed back to his cabin, hoping Hades might turn up there. The rest of the guys stayed at the community center. Dean had received some info through one of his older brother's connections that a few members of a one percent MC club had been spotted gassing up at a station not that far away.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end when he shared that news. Mustang Mountain was a quiet community. Except for the occasional bar fight or rowdy tourist, we avoided trouble and trouble seemed to avoid us. That's the way we liked it.

My boots crunched on the fresh snow and the dead leaves underneath. Out here, I was all alone. The first stars of the night twinkled overhead, and the faint smell of someone having a fire in the hearth hung in the air. I did my fair share of trekking through the woods for my job, so I was comfortable being on my own. Only, I'd never left someone I cared about behind. There'd never been someone waiting for

me to come back. Knowing Ainsley would be worrying about me made me hyper vigilant about my surroundings.

All the strange and unexplained happenings around Mustang Mountain had to be related. From the recent break-ins to the footprints. There had to be a connection. Even the report of illegal hunting in the area might fit into the puzzle we were trying to piece together.

A patch of red-stained snow caught my eye. Hades had been here, and not too long ago. I radioed the other guys to see if any of them had come across anything.

“Hey, Nate here. I just saw a footprint. I’m just east of the creek about a half a mile from the old mill. Anyone else have anything?” Static crackled, then Jackson responded.

“He hasn’t been at my place. I’ll head toward you on foot. The only thing between the two of us is the Hutchinson place. Maybe we’ll find him there.”

The other guys chimed in to say they hadn’t seen anything. Sounded like our best bet was meeting up at the Hutchinson’s cabin to see if there was any sign of Hades around there. They usually spent the winters in Arizona, so their place had been winterized and sealed up for at least a month by now.

As the moon rose, the temperature dropped. By the time I reached the edge of the Hutchinson’s property, my toes were frozen, even in my heavy-duty winter boots. I walked toward the cabin, keeping my eyes and ears open for any sign of Hades. There hadn’t been any vehicle traffic since the snow fell. The long drive through the woods was free from tire tracks.

Off to the side of the road, I caught a few footprints. Jackson would be coming from the other direction, so they

wouldn't have been from him. I crept through the woods, all of my senses on high alert. Rounding the cabin, something caught the light from the moon that filtered through the trees. Shards of glass covered the snow. The front picture window had been shattered.

A figure came out of the woods. Based on the size, I assumed it was Jackson, but wanted to be sure. I let out a low whistle—the one I usually used to call Hades.

“It’s me.” Jackson called out, his voice gruff. “What did you find?”

“Someone’s been here. We need to get the sheriff over here as soon as we can.” I stepped around the area where glass scattered on top of the snow. A few paw prints led away from the area, some of them stained red. “Looks like Hades might have cut his paw on the glass.”

“Hades! Come here, boy.” Jackson pulled something out of his pocket. The foil crinkled as he unwrapped it.

A dark shape moved through the woods. Hades bounded over, his tail wagging. He came up and took the piece of granola bar Jackson had broken off and held out.

“We need to get a look at that paw,” I said. “If he’s still bleeding, there’s a good chance he stepped on a piece of glass and it might still be lodged in his paw.”

Jackson nodded. “You call the sheriff, and I’ll see if Asher can head this way.”

I dialed Sheriff Cade as I walked around the perimeter of the building. He’d had his hands full with the recent break-ins. It was frustrating he hadn’t made any headway yet. I filled him in and told him we’d wait on the front porch and not do anything else to disturb the area.



As I made my way to the front, I swept my flashlight over the snow, hoping to catch some sign of who might be responsible for this latest crime. Buried in snow, halfway under the front porch, the glint of metal reflected the light. I bent down to get a closer look.

It was a knife—the kind a lot of guys who lived around the mountain carried on them all the time. I picked it up and held it in the palm of my glove. There wasn't anything special about it. Then I flipped it over. Someone had carved two letters into the bottom of the handle—S.B. If we could figure out who S.B. was, we might be on our way to unraveling the mystery of who'd been breaking into all the cabins.

Lights flashed through the trees, and the sheriff pulled into the drive. I met him on the steps to the front porch to tell him what had happened. Asher arrived a few minutes later, and he and Jackson were able to get Hades into the back of his truck to check his paw.

All I wanted was to get back to Ainsley. She'd only been back in my life for a few days, but her happiness and safety had become my top priority the moment I set eyes on her.

“You'll let me know if you think of anything else?” Sheriff Cade asked. He'd been grilling me about every detail since I'd arrived at the Hutchinson's place.

“Yes, sir.” I'd told him everything, including handing over the knife. “Can I go now?”

“Be careful out there, son. We're going to catch the perps who are responsible. Leave it to me and my team.” He disappeared inside the cabin, and I headed over to the truck to check on Hades.

“Is he all patched up?” The big wolf laid on his side, taking up half of the truck bed.

“For now.” Jackson rested his hand near the wolf’s head. “Took Asher longer than expected to dig that piece of glass out of his paw.”

I glanced over at a three-inch shard of glass covered in blood. “We’re going to find whoever’s responsible for this.”

“I’m sorry your going away party got fucked up.” Jackson gave me a grim smile.

Asher finished stitching up the gash in Hades’s paw. “I’m going to take him over to Mack’s so someone can keep an eye on him for the next few days. You want to catch a ride back to the party?”

Even though I didn’t feel like celebrating my departure any more, I nodded. “I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll ride back here with Hades,” Jackson said. “He’s pretty out of it thanks to the meds, and I don’t want him to try to jump over the side.”

“You’re going to freeze your ass off, man.” Asher shook his head, then pulled a couple of blankets from the backseat and handed them over.

Then the two of us climbed into the cab and headed back to town. Even though we’d found Hades and Asher had patched him up, I couldn’t help but think that we hadn’t gotten the answers we wanted. Now there were new questions running through my head. Questions I wasn’t sure I’d be able to leave behind when I got on that plane with Ainsley.

## CHAPTER 14

## AINSLEY

THE FESTIVE MOOD had disappeared the moment the guys took off to try to find Hades. I would have given anything to go with Nate. Knowing he was out there in the woods, tracking the wolf all alone, made me sick with worry. When he finally called to check in and let me know everyone was okay, including Hades, I finally let myself breathe in a sigh of relief.

I met him on the porch of the community center. He climbed out of the front of the truck Asher was driving, then pulled me into his arms.

“I’m so glad you’re back.” I buried my face in his neck and tried to breathe him in. He smelled like snow with an undercurrent of damp earth. “I was so scared something bad was going to happen to you.”

He smoothed a hand over my hair. “Nothing bad was going to happen. I know this area like the back of my hand. Hell, I know it even better than the back of your hand, baby. The guys around here look out for each other. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Emma told me about all the break-ins that have been happening, and now Hades is hurt? What are they doing to find whoever’s responsible?” Now that Nate was back in my arms, my focus shifted to the safety of the town. Mustang

Mountain was a close-knit community. Someone had disrupted the peace, and I could feel the tension in the air like a thick, damp blanket.

“Sheriff Cade is handling it. He’s got a good team of guys. They’ll figure out what’s going on.” Nate was saying all the right things, but I wasn’t sure he believe them.

“How long has this been happening? One of the girls said it’s been months.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. Let’s head inside before you get sick. I can’t have you flying back to London with a cold.” He put his arm over my shoulder and led me inside.

As soon as we entered the room, his friends swarmed us, looking for an update on what had happened. I excused myself to go get him a cup of coffee. He looked like he needed something to warm him up, and I was looking for a chance to catch my breath away from the crowd.

“Are you okay?” Lily found me in the kitchen.

I finished filling a cup from the urn of coffee and offered her a weak smile. “I don’t know. Nate keeps saying I shouldn’t worry, but I can’t help it.”

“He’s right. The guys will figure it out. They’re always there for each other, no matter what.”

“But that’s just it. I’m taking Nate away. What if something happens to one of you while he’s gone? He’d never forgive himself for not being here. He’d never forgive me.” Nate and I might not have spent a lot of time together over the past several years, but I knew his heart. He’d never leave a friend in need. He was always the first one to pitch in to help,

whether it was helping someone move or driving through the night to get home when one of his brothers needed help.

Lily set her hand on my arm. She was probably trying to reassure me, but it just made me more aware of the found family Nate was leaving behind. “He needs you. I’ve known Nate since he moved here, but I’ve never seen him so happy, so full of life. He always kept to himself and never seemed interested in dating or even talking to women. Now I know why. He loves you, Ainsley. And if he’s anything like my Mack, he’ll follow you to the ends of the earth, even if that means leaving his friends and family behind.”

I nodded, already knowing that deep down inside. He’d leave everything to be with me. But was I strong enough to do the same for him?

“I’d better get him this coffee before it gets cold.” I set the cup down on the counter. “Can I have a hug first, though?”

Lily laughed as she swept me into her arms. It had been so long since I’d felt the kind of camaraderie I did with the women in Mustang Mountain. Even Ruby, bless her heart, cared so much about the town and the people who lived here, though she could spend a little less time focusing on her matchmaking efforts.

“I can’t wait to see what the future holds for you and Nate.” Lily pulled back. Nothing but genuine affection shone in her eyes.

“Me too.” I picked up the coffee and found my way back to Nate. He and several of the other guys sat in a wide circle, their conversation focused on sorting through the facts they knew about what had been going on over the past several weeks.

“Thanks, Firefly.” Nate took the coffee and patted his lap. There weren’t any available chairs nearby, so I snuggled into him and pressed my cheek against his chest.

The soft flannel of his shirt made the perfect pillow, and I fell asleep to the vibration of his deep voice rumbling through his chest.



“HEY, baby. It’s time to go.” Nate’s lips touched my forehead. I opened my eyes to him staring down at me, a smile teasing the corners of his lips.

“How long was I out?” Groggy, and a little confused, I glanced around the almost-empty room.

“A couple of hours. All the excitement must have worn you out.” He rubbed a palm over my back and helped me sit up. “The party’s over. You ready to head back to the cabin?”

“Sure.” Like a baby deer taking its first steps, I awkwardly stumbled to my feet.

“Easy there.” Nate steadied me with a hand on my elbow. “You’re so cute when you’re asleep. You make the most adorable sounds.”

Heat prickled my cheeks. “Oh my god, did I snore?”

“Just a little.” His grin spread wider, showing off his teeth.

Mortified, I shook off the sleepiness and searched for where I’d left my coat. “You’re not allowed to let me fall asleep in public anymore. Got it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve heard some of the guys snore. The little noises you make wouldn’t even register compared to them.”

“For some reason, that doesn’t make me feel better.” I shrugged my coat onto my shoulders. I’d left my phone in the pocket and it buzzed against my hip. I pulled it out to check the time and realized I had several texts and a couple of missed voice mails from my boss back in London.

“Everything okay?” Nate asked.

“Yeah.” I rose to my tiptoes and planted a kiss on his full lips. “Let’s go.”



# CHAPTER 15

## NATE

I **KNEW** something was bothering Ainsely the moment we got in the truck, though she denied it. After everything we'd been through over the course of the evening, I figured I'd let it go until morning. She was exhausted, and all I wanted to do was wrap my big body around hers and hold her close. I'd done my best to convince her Sheriff Cade would get to the bottom of what was happening, but I'd been putting up a front.

The truth was, I had more confidence in my fellow Mustang Mountain Riders than I did local law enforcement. But I was heartsick at the idea of leaving, especially when they needed me most.

I tossed and turned all night long. Sleep completely evaded me, and by the time the hazy rays of the sun started to peek over the mountain, I still hadn't found peace. The only thing I knew with any certainty was that I couldn't let Ainsley go.

She'd found her way back to me once. There was no guarantee that if I stayed back in Montana, we'd ever get another chance at a future together. I'd done what I thought was the right thing before, and it had almost killed me. As much as I needed to stay in Mustang Mountain to protect the people and land I loved, I had to follow my heart. Ainsley was my life now.

“How are you feeling this morning?” I asked. She’d just opened her eyes.

“I’m okay. How are you?”

I pulled her close, my cock already going hard as her soft skin brushed against me. We’d slept in the buff together the past few nights, and I seemed to wake up every morning eager to get lost inside her.

“You feel more than okay to me.” Her shy smile warmed my heart. Then she reached between us and wrapped her hand around my cock. “Is it always going to be like this between us? I feel like I can never get enough of you.”

“We’ve got a lot of time to make up for.” I rolled her onto her back and slipped a finger between her legs. “Damn girl. You’re already soaking wet.”

The most adorable shade of pink flushed her cheeks. “I dreamed about you last night. It was a really good dream.”

“Feels like it. Show me.”

She spread her legs and angled her hips to take me. We didn’t have anywhere to be, so I took my time making love to her as slowly as I could handle. Life was so bittersweet. Being with Ainsley felt like finally coming home, but staying with her meant leaving the home I’d made for myself over the past eight years.

I could feel her climax gathering by the way the walls of her pussy clenched around me. “Come for me, Firefly.”

Her nails dug into my shoulders as she lost control. I let myself go the second she started to come down. After, I held her, slowly tracing the faint pattern of freckles across her chest. “I love you, Ainsley.”

“I love you, too.” The honesty in her eyes shone through bright and clear. I’d be the dumbest man alive to let her walk away again.

“I’m so sorry for letting you go before. I was just doing what I thought was best for you.”

“You’re what’s best for me.” She cupped my cheeks in her hands. “You believe that now, don’t you?”

Nodding, I leaned forward to kiss her. That’s when her phone rang. It had been chiming all morning, but she’d ignored it.

“Do you need to get that?” I asked.

She groaned and reached for it on the nightstand. “It’s my boss again. I’m on vacation.”

“If you want to take it, it’s okay with me.” As long as she didn’t plan on leaving my arms, I didn’t care what she did.

A low groan rumbled from her lips. “I’m sorry. This will only take a minute.”

I pulled her close as she answered. The man on the other end of the call started talking immediately. I could hear his clipped British accent through the phone, and was able to make out every other word.

Ainsley didn’t say much, just punctuated the conversation with a “yes” or “I see” every so often. Her expression didn’t change as her boss said something about needing her back as soon as possible. Something about new stores opening soon. I swear I heard him mention Egypt, but I could have been mistaken. By the time she hung up, every muscle in her body had gone taut.

“What was that all about?” I asked, a little concerned about her reaction to the call.

“He needs me in Egypt at the end of the week. The guy who was supposed to handle the launch of three new stores just quit. I’ve got to get out there to save the grand opening.” She shook her head. “I’m supposed to be on vacation. I wanted to spend a few more days with my dad before we flew back to London.”

“It’s okay. I’ve never been to Egypt.” I cracked a smile, trying to make the best out of the situation. “We can ride camels in the desert and check out the pyramids.”

She offered a smile that withered into a frown. “I’ll be working non-stop. You might as well stay here and help your friends.”

“No, that’s not how this is going to work. I meant it when I said I go where you go. If I have to sit around in a hotel room all day long just so I can hold you at night, that’s where I want to be.” I wouldn’t let her go alone. Not now. Not when we’d reconnected, and I got a taste of what a future with Ainsley could be like.

“You’ll be miserable.” She blinked back tears. “You broke up with me before because you knew I wouldn’t leave without you. That I’d sacrifice everything to be with you.”

I nodded. “That’s right. I couldn’t let you put your dreams aside just to be with me. It wouldn’t have been fair. You would have eventually grown to resent me.”

“Don’t you see? That’s exactly what’s happening again. Now you’re the one willing to put everything aside for me. I can’t let you do that. Not now. Not ever. Your place is here, Nate. Your friends need you, and you need Mustang Mountain.

You'll never feel whole away from here. I can't let you do it." She flung the covers away and got out of bed.

My heart cracked down the middle because I knew she was right. I'd hate being away from the mountains. The thought of being walled in by buildings made my skin crawl. "I don't want to live without you, Firefly."

"I don't think we have a choice." She'd tossed on the same clothes she'd worn last night at the party. "Can you please take me back to my cabin? I have a plane to catch if I want to keep my job."

## CHAPTER 16

## AINSLEY

NATE DROPPED me off at the rental cabin, promising to come back in an hour. I told him I needed some time alone to think, but my mind was already made up. I wasn't going to let him sacrifice everything to follow me to London. I couldn't. No doubt he'd hate me at first, but I hoped he'd come to understand and appreciate that I'd done it for him.

It only took about fifteen minutes to throw everything I'd brought to Mustang Mountain into my car. With tears running down my cheeks, I drove through the middle of town. I didn't have the heart to stop at the mercantile to turn my key into Ruby. I planned on calling when I felt like I could hear her voice without breaking down.

I might have only spent a few days in Mustang Mountain, but it had already felt more like home than anywhere else I'd ever lived, even Bozeman, where I'd spent the majority of my life.

A song came on the radio—the same one Nate and I had listened to the other day while he drove me through town. Even fate was working against me, twisting the blade that pierced through my heart. The highway up ahead blurred. I could barely see the dashed line separating the lanes thanks to my tears.

What was I doing?



Was I really willing to sacrifice the love of a lifetime for a job?

I didn't even like my job anymore. I'd only been holding on, trying to survive until I got that promotion that would allow me to move back to the States. Being so far away from the only family I had left had taken its toll, and now that Nate and I had reconnected, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get on that plane.

I pulled over to the side of the road and fished a tissue out of my purse. The more I thought about it, the more sure I became. I'd blamed him for breaking up with me all those years ago, but I was the one who let him. I could have fought for him. I'd suspected he was lying about not having feelings for me, but all I wanted was for him to be happy, even if that meant being happy with a life that didn't include me.

Screw that. Nate was right. I needed to stop putting others' needs before my own. The first thing I needed to do was tell my boss I wasn't going to be his "yes girl" anymore. It was time for me to look out for myself and do what would make me happy. Starting with making a U-turn and heading straight back to Mustang Mountain.

I wiped my tears away with the tissue and checked my reflection in the rearview mirror. A stronger, more confident version of myself stared back at me. This was my time. My life was up to me.

Easing back onto the divided highway, I looked for somewhere to turn around. Exits were few and far between, but usually there were spots every so often where emergency vehicles could cross the median. I'd gone about a mile when I noticed something in the road up ahead. A few trucks lined up

on either side of the road. I slowed down, wondering if there'd been an accident.

As I approached, a man got out of the driver's side of a truck parked on the right shoulder, and he motioned for me to stop. I recognized that build, that dark head of hair, that grumpy, growly look on his gorgeous face. Nate put his hands on his hips as I pulled to the shoulder.

Happiness took flight in my chest. I threw my door open and flung myself into his arms. "I'm so happy to see you."

"Really? Looks to me like you were trying to run away, Firefly. Were you planning on leaving me behind?" He didn't look angry so much as he looked hurt. My heart shriveled, knowing I was the reason for the pain in his eyes.

"I thought it would be for the best. You would have hated London. I couldn't take you away from here." My thoughts poured out in a jumble of words as I tightened my grip. I never wanted to let go of him again. Not even for a second.

"That's not your decision to make. Where you go, I go, remember?" The scruff on his cheeks scraped against my ear. His hands went under my ass, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"Then you can take me back to Mustang Mountain. I'm staying."

Nate pulled back, his forehead creased. "What about your job?"

"I'll find something to do here. I don't want to be without you."

"Are you sure about this, baby? I'm ready to leave everything behind for you. I'll follow you wherever you go so we can be together."

“I know.” His love was the only thing I was one-hundred percent sure of in this world. That and my love for him. “Take me home, Nate. Please?”

His lips crashed down on mine and we stood on the side of the highway, oblivious to the traffic whizzing by. His grip on my butt loosened and I set my feet on the pavement, finally noticing the other trucks and SUVs on the side of the road.

“What is this? Were you and your friends planning on preventing me from leaving town?” I swept my gaze over some of the guys I recognized. Miles bit down on his lip and looked away. Owen kicked at a rock with the toe of his boot.

“They were going to help me stop you and force you to take me with you. I figured you’d be gone by the time I got back to the cabin. You’re kind of predictable, Firefly.” He tossed the guys a sheepish grin. “You can all go home now. She’s come to her senses.”

“You think I’m predicable, huh?” I asked, a little disappointed that he knew me so well, and also bound and determined to find a way to surprise him.

“I know you, Ains. You’ve been the best part of me for as long as I can remember. Nothing you can say or do will surprise me anymore.”

He nuzzled his lips against my neck. Goosebumps exploded over my skin. “I’m going to take that as a personal challenge, Nate Fisher. Why don’t we go back to your place? I’ve got a few ideas that might make you change your mind about me not being able to surprise you anymore.”

“Is that so?” He nibbled on my earlobe. “I can’t wait to see what you have in mind.”

I handed my keys over to Dean so I could ride back with Nate. “How long would you say we have until we pull into your driveway?” I asked him.

“A good twenty minutes.” He looked over at me sitting in the passenger seat of his truck. “Why?”

I leaned toward him, my fingers already going to work on the button at his waist as he pulled onto the highway. “That ought to be long enough to make sure you more than enjoy the ride.”

It might have taken us a while to come together, but I planned on making sure we never grew apart. Wherever he went, I’d go. And right now the only place I wanted to be was back in Mustang Mountain, where a future I never saw coming waited for us.

Together.

# EPILOGUE

“CONGRATS, Dean. Looks like you’re next on Ruby’s list,” Jenna says as I walk into the Merc to grab an order for the women’s shelter.

“Are you kidding me? I stop in the middle of the sidewalk, and that’s when I notice the Mountain Man of the Month flyer in the window of the mercantile. “Dammit,” I mutter.

I know there is no point in making a scene. What’s done is done. I’ve watched it happen to my brothers-in-arms for the last eleven months. With eleven wins under her belt, Ruby sure as hell won’t stop now.

“I’m sorry,” Jenna says, placing a hand on my arm before passing me and heading to her car.

I take a deep breath, step into the mercantile, and head to the back to get the order for the women’s shelter so I can take it and the Christmas trees up there. It’s a favor Jensen and Courtney asked of me, but now I wonder if they were conspiring with Ruby.

“Dean! Good to see you. Have you seen the new peppermint line? I just got it in for Christmas, and it’s already been a big hit. I brought back the peppermint bark you liked last year,” Ruby says with a wink. “Orville, go grab the bags

that Jensen and Courtney ordered,” she says to her husband, who’s working with her today.

As the town mayor, Orville wears many hats, including offering extra help when Ruby needs it. All these years later, that man is still in love with her, as much or more so as the day they met. That’s the kind of love I’m holding out for. I don’t dare tell Ruby that because she will take it as a personal challenge, and that’s the last thing I need right now.

“You could have at least given me a heads up about this match of the month crap, Ruby,” I say as we wait for Orville to grab the stuff from the back.

“Now, why would I do that? With all the holiday events coming up, why would I give you a heads-up so you can get out of it like you tried to do for the harvest festival? Not a chance, boy,” she says with an evil glint in her eyes.

I can’t even say anything because she’s right. I probably would have found a way to get out of town for the entire month if I had known. Now, it’s too late, and she knows it.

“Fine. When that doesn’t work, and I’m your first failure, you can end all of this and leave the rest of the guys alone.”

“Oh, but I’m not going to fail. I can feel it in my bones. You’re going to be the best match yet.” She walks off to help another customer, and my gut says she already has plans to set something in motion.

Orville helps me move the some boxes and some mail into my truck, along with a few bags of stuff Courtney has ordered for the shelter, before I head out of town.

After Jensen and Courtney got together, they needed some help at the shelter, and Jensen asked me. I agreed, and have

been semi-regular there. Mostly fixing things that break, that sort of thing.

But I guess something is going on they need to talk to me about, and they asked me to pick up their order in town and bring some Christmas trees for the families to set up and decorate.

So now I'm making the drive through the mountains, circling around a few times, ensuring I'm not being followed or watched before I pull up to the gate and enter my code.

You can't see the building itself from the road, so it's a bit of a drive after I get through the gate, and then there's another gate around the building as an extra layer of security. They get notified inside when anyone comes to the first gate, so Courtney and Jensen are waiting for me by the back door by the time I get there.

"We just got done pulling out all the Christmas decorations and ornaments, and the kids are really excited to get going on the trees," Courtney says with a smile, but I can tell it's strained like something's wrong that she's not wanting to talk about.

I learned that she will talk when she is ready, but not always in front of the people at the shelter.

"Everything okay?" I ask, even though I'm pretty sure it's not.

"We can talk about it later. Let's get these trees in," Courtney says. We unload everything and set up the trees so the families can start decorating.

A boy who looks to be about Izzy's age walks over, holding the hand of a younger girl who looks to be a spitting image of him.



“My sister wants to help put decorations on the tree. Can we?” he asks with so much hope in his eyes that I can tell it also means a lot to him.

“Of course, you can. Max, why don’t you help Jensen here with the lights? Gracie, why don’t you start going through that box of ornaments to get an idea of where you want to hang them once the lights are on,” Courtney says before she gets pulled away.

The lights go on pretty quickly as the little girl sits on the floor looking through the box. When we’re done, she pulls out the star that goes on top of the tree.

“Oh, can I put the star on the top? Please, please, please, please, please?” she asks, and even sticks out her bottom lip for good measure.

“You okay with that?” I ask her brother.

“Yeah, it’ll mean more for her to do it,” he says, shrugging his shoulders and digging into the box.

“Can I pick you up to help you put the star on the top?” I ask her, and a huge smile lights her face as she nods her head enthusiastically.

I pick her up around her waist and lift her up so that she can put the tree topper on. She takes an extra minute to ensure it’s on straight before I set her back down.

I take a step back and let her and her brother start decorating the tree as Courtney walks up beside me.

“I don’t know what to do with that family. The kids are super sweet, but the mom has extended family involved with some not too good people,” Courtney says, never taking her eyes off the two kids.

“Who’s her family involved with?” I ask, now that she’s got my attention.

“Savage Bones,” she says and then looks at me with worry in her eyes.

She has every right to be worried. Savage Bones is a one-percent motorcycle club that has been causing problems in the area. They are not good people, and if they think one of their own is getting out or someone with information might share that information, they would rather see the person dead.

“I can get her and the kids into a shelter in Bozeman, but not until after the first of the year. Until then, they need a safe house. We’re hearing motorcycles going by several times a day, and it’s just too close for comfort at this point.”

“Shit. It’s getting that bad? Why hasn’t Jensen said anything to the rest of the club?”

“I think he’s getting ready to soon. We are out of options. We have tried a few other shelters, but we just got a call today from the last one. They’re all booked up because of the holidays. There’s no place else we can send her. I’m sure as hell not going to turn her out on the street, but it’s not safe for her to stay here either.”

“She can stay at my family’s old hunting cabin. My brother Six is the only person who knows where it’s at other than my parents.”

I don’t know what came over me to offer the cabin. I didn’t even realize the words were coming out of my mouth. I really should check with my older brother before I offer it out, but since Six is the Mustang Mountain Riders club secretary, I know he’ll be more than willing to help.

“Really?” Courtney says with so much hope in her voice that all I can do is nod my head.

“Holly, come here,” Courtney calls, and the most beautiful curvy woman with dark brown wavy hair steps up. “Dean, this is Holly. She is Max and Gracie’s mom. Holly, Dean here just offered you his hunting cabin that’s a bit off the grid, and only his family knows how to get there.”

“I really appreciate it, but I just talked to a friend who is going to let me stay with her. It’s going to be a day or two before I can get there. We’re working out the details now.” She smiles and then walks off when her daughter calls her over.

I don’t understand the sudden loss I feel of her not coming to stay with me or this fierce need to know all about this friend she is supposedly staying with. I’ve never been overly protective of someone like this. I know that I’m not going to be able to just let her walk away.

“Ugh, oh, I know that look,” Courtney says.

“What look?” Jensen asks, walking up beside her.

“The look on Dean’s face is the same one each of you guys had right before the fall. Looks like Ruby might be going twelve for twelve.”

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

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# ABOUT DYLANN CRUSH

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

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

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

You can find her at [www.dylanncrush.com](http://www.dylanncrush.com).



# ABOUT EVE LONDON

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

Now she's a USA Today Bestselling Author who spends her days writing about the kind of men she likes – sexy, shameless, and just a little bit sarcastic.

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