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Kacey didn't want to raise eyebrows and alert the entire town to her return. She simply hoped to tame the beast that had roared to life when she spotted the billboard for the Gray Pony Saloon and Grill, off Rt. 2, on the outskirts of Mercy Falls.

The home of the best hickory rib sauce in the West.

From the look of things, the hangout on the edge of town hadn't changed in a decade.

Dim streetlights puddled the muddy parking lot, now crammed full of F-150s and Silverado pickups. The twang of a Keith Urban cover swelled as the door opened. A cowboy spilled out, his arm lassoed around a shapely coed, probably a summer intern for the park service. She wore Gore-Tex pants, a lime-green Glacier National Park T-shirt, and a too-easy smile on her face. Kacey watched as the cowboy wheedled her toward his truck. She tugged his hat down, and he braced his hands on either side of her, leaning down to steal a kiss.

The sight had the power to stop Kacey cold, reroute her down the country road of regrets.

Maybe she should simply keep going, head north to Whitefish, back to the anonymity of a town that couldn't catalog her mistakes.

Still, the brain fog of two days of driving, not to mention the drizzle of a nagging rain, could be the recipe for disaster on the winding roads that journeyed north through the foothills.

The last thing she needed was to drive headfirst off the highway and die in a fiery crash here in her own backyard. Some welcome home that would be.

Kacey parked just as thunder growled, lightning spliced the darkness, and rain began to crackle against her windshield. The soupy night obliterated the view of the glorious, jagged mountains rising in the horizon.

Another pickup rolled up next to her, the running boards caked with mud. A fleet of what looked like army types piled out, garbed in mud-brown shirts and camo pants. Fatigue lined their grimy expressions, as if they were just returning from a two-day march in full field gear.

With the nearest army base over 150 miles away, the appearance of soldiers had her curiosity piqued. She watched them go in, and a reprimand formed on her lips about donning utility wear off duty. But, like her army psychologist had suggested, some time away from her fellow soldiers might help her heal.

Keep her from derailing twelve years of distinguished service with an ODPMC discharge—or, to her mind, the old Section-8, Maxwell Klinger designation.

She wasn't crazy. Just ...exhausted. Maybe.

She couldn't let the war follow her home. Let it destroy the best part of herself, the part she'd left behind in Montana.

The part of her that desperately needed a definition of life that included words like *safe* and *normal*.

Instead of, oh, say, *deployment* and *Afghanistan*.

And acronyms like *PTSD*.

Which meant she had to start living like a civilian and keep her military secrets safely tucked away if she intended on putting herself back together and returning to base, healed and fit for duty, by the end of the summer.

Kacey scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes, then got out, hunting ribs and a frothy homemade root beer.

The Pony might not have updated their exterior, with the rough-hewn porch, the Old West style sign, and neon beer ads in the windows, but inside, they'd overhauled for the next generation.

The honky-tonk tones of some country musician met her as she opened thick double doors, and she walked into the distinct intoxicating aroma of hickory barbecue.

She glanced to the front and almost expected to see cowboy crooner Benjamin King on stage at the back of the room, past the gleaming oak bar. Work-hewn muscles stretching out his black T-shirt, one worn cowboy boot hooked onto the rung of his stool, and wearing his battered brown Stetson over that unruly dark blond hair, Ben would grind out a love song in his signature low tenor, wooing every girl in the room.

His devastating blue eyes fixed only on her.

Kacey blew out a breath, letting the memory shake out, settle her back into reality.

Stopping for dinner at the Gray Pony would be a very bad idea if Ben hadn't long ago sprung himself from the grasp of Mercy Falls, his guitar slung over his shoulder, nary a glance behind. No, she wouldn't find him, a big star now with the country duo Montgomery King, back in this one-horse watering hole tucked in the shadow of Glacier National Park.

Now, Kacey scanned the room, getting her bearings. Roy had kept the taxidermied moose, rainbow trout, and black bear still posed over the bar, but the rest of the joint, from the themed barrel tables to the sleek leather barstools, suggested an upgrade. Along the wall, every few feet, flat screens displayed sporting events—bull riding, a UFC fight, a golf tournament, and a fishing show. And the adjacent hall that once hosted a row of worn pool tables now sported a shiny mechanical bull riding pit.

Judging by the cheering of the fellas gathered at the rail, more than a few wearing Sweetwater Creek Lumber Co. shirts, the girl in the center of the ring offered up quite a show.

The saloon seemed to have upgraded their clientele from the obligatory cowboys and park workers to a large conglomeration of army, local law enforcement, and even what looked like young, long-haired hippies hoping to spend their summer in yurts and hiking the craggy routes of the Rocky Mountains, cameras hanging from their necks.

Waitresses squeezed through tables packed with hungry patrons, their trays stacked high with wings, onion rings, and nachos. An "oo-rah!" rose from a table of soldiers as one of the UFC fighters went down.

She recognized no one, which, of course, could be providential. Because they might not recognize her, either.

Kacey squeezed past a group of hikers perusing a map and nabbed the only empty barstool. She climbed up, took a napkin, and mopped up the remains of a frothy beer puddling on the counter.

"Sorry about that." This from the woman behind the counter, her dark hair pulled back in a long braid, her brown eyes quick as she surveyed the activity behind Kacey. She took a rag and wiped the counter. "I think the person sitting here stiffed me." She glanced at the door.

"Where did she—"

"He. I dunno. I don't see him. He wasn't in uniform, but he could be with the guard." She tossed the rag under the counter, grabbed a coaster. "We have specials on tap—"

"Do you still have the house root beer?"

A hint of a smile. "Home brewed, my daddy's recipe."

Her *daddy* ...seriously? Ah, sure, Kacey saw it now. Hair dyed black and about fifty pounds thinner. And of course, a decade in her eyes, on her face. She couldn't help but ask, "Gina McGill?"

The woman frowned. "Do I—"

"Kacey Fairing. I used to—"

"Date Ben King, yeah, wow, how are you?"

Kacey was going to say that she'd sat behind her in Mr. Viren's biology class, but she supposed Gina's version might be an easier association. "I'm good."

"I haven't seen you since, uh..." And there it was. The prickly dance around Kacey's mistakes. The ones that had driven her out of Mercy Falls and into the army's arms.

"Prom," Kacey filled in, diverting, trying to make it easier for both of them. "Nice of your dad to let us host it here. One of my favorite high school memories."

"What are you up to?" Gina said, pulling out a frozen mug from the freezer, filling it with frothy, dark, creamy root beer from the tap.

"I'm a chopper pilot. For the army."

"Really? Wow. I suppose they called you in, huh? Rescuing people off rooftops?"

Kacey frowned. "Uh, not sure what you're talking about."

Gina set the mug on the coaster. "Oh, I thought you were here with the rest of the National Guard. The Mercy River is flooding, and all these guys are working twenty-four-hour shifts sandbagging upriver all the way down to the bridge."

Ah, that accounted for dinner in their field dress.

Kacey took a sip of the root beer, let the foam sit on her upper lip a second before licking it off. "Nope. Here on leave for the summer, although, yeah, I'll be doing some flying for Chet King's PEAK." See, that came out easily enough, no hitch, no hint at the past. No irony.

And no suggestion that she might not be fit to fly. Keeping her chopper in the air had never been her problem, thank you.

Besides, she needed this gig, if only to keep her sanity during the daylight hours. Too much idle time only invited the memories.

Gina offered her a menu. "Well, don't be surprised if Sam Brooks comes knocking on your door. The Mercy Falls EMS department has the PEAK team on full alert, and he's recruiting volunteers for the sandbag brigade."

Kacey perused the menu offerings. "Why is Sam doing the recruiting? Is Blackburn still sheriff?"

"Yeah. He'll be in office until he retires, probably. Sam is the deputy sheriff. So, the smoked BBQ ribs are half off now that it's after 10:00 p.m., and I think I could score you a basket of the fried calamari on the house."

"The ribs sound perfect, thanks, Gina," she said, handing her the menu. "And I'm game for the calamari too."

Kacey grabbed the mug, sipping as she turned in her chair, glancing at the band on stage, the lead singer now leaning into the mic, plucking out another Keith Urban ballad.

"I'm gonna be here for ya, baby . . ."

Young, dark-haired, and not a hint of Ben's resonant twang. And yet just like that, Ben showed up, almost tangible in her mind, even after all these years. The smell of fresh air in his flannel shirt, his arms around her, lips against her neck.

Nope. She wrapped her hands around the cool glass.

She should probably also remember that Ben had made her believe in a different life. In the full-out happy ending. She should probably hate him for that.

On the dance floor, the cowboy and the coed from outside locked themselves in a slow sway. A few more couples joined them, and Kacey turned away, rubbing her finger and thumb into her eyes, slicking away the exhaustion.

“Working the flood?”

She looked up into the striking, almost teal eyes of the man who had slid onto the stool next to her. Brown, neatly trimmed hair and a smattering of russet whiskers, neatly clipped but just long enough to suggest a renegade attitude in a cultured life. He wore a camel-brown chambray shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up over strong forearms, a pair of faded jeans, scuffed hiking boots, and the smell of money in his cologne. A rich, cowboy-wannabe tourist. And he had a low, rumbly voice that should have probably elicited some response, if she weren't so tired.

Really tired. “Nope.”

From the end of the bar, a huddle of hikers roared as one of them landed a bull's-eye into the dart target. The man seemed to follow her gaze, frowned.

Huh.

“I suppose the rain's cutting short your vacation,” she said.

This got a laugh. Or a harrumph, she couldn't tell. “Naw. I'm over the park.”

“That's a shame. So much beautiful country.”

Did she imagine the shadow that crossed his eyes? Maybe, because in a blink it vanished. Instead, “Gina talked you into the calamari, huh?”

Gina had deposited the deep-fried squid, sided with creamy aioli.

Kacey reached for a twisty piece. “Why? Something I should be worried about?” She took a curl, dipped it into the spicy mayo.

He shook his head, took a sip of his own root beer. “I tried to tell Roy that nobody north of Denver has ever heard of calamari, but he wanted to add it. Something for the tourists ...” He lifted a nicely sculpted shoulder. “I think I'm the only one in five hundred miles ordering it.”

So, not a tourist. But not exactly a local either.

“Rubbery.” She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, probably Roy should have stuck with cowboy food.” She shoved the basket his direction. “Help yourself.”

“Not for you?”

“I'm spoiled,” she said, rinsing down the flavor. “I've spent the past year in Florida, seaside.”

He seemed like a nice guy—maybe the right guy—to help erase old memories, find new ones.

Not that she was looking, really, but maybe, away from her rules on base, and with a longer stint home than normal, she might . . .

A shout on the dance floor made her turn, and she saw that the cowboy she'd seen before on the porch was tussling with one of the hippies, this one wearing a park-logoed shirt.

Oops. Apparently that cute coed in his arms had cuddled up against the wrong demographic.

“We're dancing here,” Cowboy said.

“And she's not your girlfriend!” retorted the hippie.

Next to her, the man, Mr. Rumble Voice, rose. “That's not pretty.”

She glanced at him. “They'll be fine.”

He wasn't the only one on his feet, however. A couple of the hikers on the far end of the bar separated from the group and edged toward the dance floor.

And the table of USC fans stopped cheering, eyes on the spectacle.

She took another sip of her root beer.

The voices raised, a few expletives thrown.

When Cowboy pushed the hippie, Rumble headed toward the dance floor.

And, shoot—like a reflex, Kacey found herself on her feet, as if still on duty, the cool-headed soldier she'd been for twelve years.

Stay out of it. The voice simmered in her head.

“Hey, guys,” Rumble said, moving closer, hands up. “Let's just take this outside—”

Cowboy threw a punch at the hippie, and the room exploded. The hippies emptied their table, and of course Cowboy had a few hands he'd dragged in off the ranch.

And just like that, Kacey was dodging fists, zeroing in on the coed who started the mess. The girl held her mouth where someone had accidentally elbowed her.

Kacey maneuvered through the fray, caught the girl, and pulled her back toward the stage. “Are you okay?” If she remembered correctly, there was an exit just stage left . . .

“I didn't mean to start this.”

Kacey threw her arm over the girl's shoulder and ducked, heading toward the exit.

She didn't see it coming.

A body flew into her, liquid splashing over her as the weight threw her. Kacey slammed into the stage; pain exploded across her forehead.

The room spun, darkness blotchy against her eyes.

She sat there, just a moment, blinking.

Pull back, Kacey! Your position is compromised!

She shook her head to rid it of the voice but felt a scream rising when arms circled her, lifting—

“Oh no you don't!” Kacey shouted.

She thrashed against the embrace, elbowing her captor hard.

He made a sound of pain, but she followed with a hard uppercut to his jaw.

And landed on the floor.

The jolt of hitting the floor, the sense of movement around her, brought her back.

“What—?” She blinked, clearing her vision.

Rumble peered down at her, holding his jaw. “You have quite a right hook, honey.”

Oh. Boy. She made a face, but her forehead burned, and she pressed her hand against the heat of a rising bump. “Sorry. But—”

“My bad. But you need to get off the floor.”

Voices now, loud, punching through the tension in the room.

He hesitated a second, then held out his hand again.

She made a face, shook her head, and climbed to her feet. “I don't need help, thanks.”

But she swayed, trying to find her feet on the wooden floor.

“Seriously, you look like you could go down.”

“I'm fine.” Only then did she realize the wetness down the front of her white T-shirt. And ...oh no. The odor of beer from her soaked shirt rose to consume her. That would play well when she arrived home. She pulled the shirt away from her body and removed her hand from her head.

Then, “Wait ...that girl—”

“Jess has her.”

Jess? She looked around and found the girl being led to a table by a pretty blonde, one of the hikers.

Rumble seemed to be debating grabbing her arm, but she gave him a look, and he simply led the way back to the counter. On the dance floor, the factions had separated, the musician was setting his mic back to rights. The hippies, angry, a few of them holding back their champion, congregated at their table. The cowboy stalked out of the bar, holding his hat, his posse shouting epithet as they trailed.

“The flood has everyone keyed up,” Rumble said.

A man walked by, wearing a two-day scraggle of whiskers, dressed in a tight black shirt, Gore-Tex pants. Another one of the hikers. “Thanks, Ian,” he said, clamping her not-needed rescuer on the shoulder.

Ian nodded after him. “Miles.”

Apparently, this guy knew everyone in the saloon. “Ian? That’s your name?”

He nodded while reaching for a napkin. He fished ice from his water and folded it into the napkin. “You’ve got a nasty bump there.” He made to hold the makeshift ice pack to her head, then simply handed it to her.

“Thank you.” Kind. She should have seen that earlier. “Sorry I hit you. It’s a ...well, a reflex.”

“What, from your years cage fighting?” He raised an eyebrow, and she couldn’t help a smile.

“No. Just ...nothing.”

He frowned a second, but it vanished.

She anchored the ice pack in place, too aware of the fact that she should be attracted to this man who seemed so clearly interested in her.

Or maybe she was simply so out of practice she didn’t know how to flirt, or what flirting even looked like. Maybe he *was* simply being nice.

And she looked like a fool. She knew better than to dive into the middle of a barroom brawl—resurrect all her nightmares in broad daylight, or at least under the dim lights of a bar. Her specialty was picking up the pieces, not preventing the disaster in the first place.

Or at least it had been.

“I should go,” she said, pulling the ice away, fingering the bruise, testing it. “I still have an hour of driving tonight.”

Ian raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think so. You’re injured, and you’ve been drinking.”

Huh? “Hardly.” She picked up her glass. “This is *root* beer. Besides, I’ve been hurt worse than this and still managed to airlift eight marines out of a hot zone. Trust me, I can keep my Ford Escape between the lines from here to Whitefish.”

“You still can’t go.”

“*Enough* with the gallantry. Listen, I’m exhausted, I’ve just driven for two days without sleep and I have to report for my new job in the morning.” She turned to Gina just emerging from the kitchen with her ribs. “Can I get those to go?”

Gina nodded, turned back to the kitchen.

“You don’t understand—” Ian started.

“No, dude, *you* don’t understand. I’m simply not interested, and frankly, you don’t want to get messed up with me. Trust me on that one.”

He frowned then, but then reached out and cupped his hand over her key.

And that was just ...it. So what if he had six inches on her, looked like he worked out regularly, and knew how to handle himself. She only *appeared* helpless.

She schooled her voice, kept it even but with enough edge for him to take her seriously. “Ian. I know you don’t know me, and right now, I sort of wish we’d never met, but trust me ...You let go of my keys or that little altercation on the dance floor will look like a warm-up.”

And he actually, seriously, smiled?

“Huh. Okay.” She slid off the stool.

“Slow down, I’m not trying to start another fight.” He moved his hand. “You can’t go home because ...you can’t. Highway 2 is washed out just north of Mercy Falls. Unless you want to drive three hours back to Great Falls, then two hundred miles to Missoula, then finally north on 93 for another one hundred or so miles and end up arriving home around dawn, you’re hunkering down here tonight.”

Here. In Mercy Falls. She sighed and found the fist she’d made loosening.

“I was just trying to save you hours of driving.”

Gina came back out, plunked the bag of ribs on the bar. “Okay, here you go. By the way, Dad says hi. And that dinner is on the house for your service to your country. I didn’t know you won a bronze star.”

Kacey glanced at Ian, who raised an eyebrow. She turned back to Gina. “Tell him thanks.” She didn’t follow up on the medal comment. Because, really, she had her doubts about the validity of giving someone who’d just barely kept it together a medal.

“Listen,” Ian said. “The hotels from here to Great Falls are full of National Guardsmen and volunteers trying to keep the river from flooding. Why don’t you come home with me? I have a ranch not far from here.”

She stared at him. “You’ve got to be kidding me. What—do I have the word *desperate* tattooed on my forehead? Or *easy*, perhaps?” She grabbed the bag, her keys. “This may be a shocker, but no, I won’t come home with you, thanks.” She slid off the table, bumped her way through the crowd.

“Kacey!”

She ignored him, skirting past his friend Miles, who turned at his voice. She pushed outside, gulped in the fresh air. Wow, did that go south fast.

Apparently, it still wasn’t over because Ian emerged through the doors right behind her. “Stop, Kacey.”

She rounded on him. “And now this is starting to get a little stalkery. What’s your deal?”

But the way he was looking at her, something like determination in his eyes ...Now a little concern reached in, tugged at her. Her breath caught. “How do you know my name?”

“Take a breath. I’m not a stalker.” He held up his hands as if in surrender, his jaw tight. “But I’m right, aren’t I? You’re Kacey Fairing?”

She found herself stepping back, wishing she had a sidearm. She dropped her takeout bag onto a bench.

He noticed and softened his voice. “This is my fault. I should have explained myself better. I heard you mention PEAK and then figured it out when Gina mentioned the medal, which is, of course, exactly what Chet said when he told me about you.”

She took another step back. “Chet King told you ...about me?”

Which would only stir up questions, she had no doubt. The last thing she needed was for her reputation to precede her.

“What did he say?”

“That you were exactly who we needed to take over flight ops for PEAK. Military hero . . .”

Oh. That. Still, that meant maybe she was safe from anyone grounding her based on false assumptions. Just because she was a little jumpy didn’t mean she couldn’t still handle a bird.

Ian lowered his hands but kept them out, away from his body, where she could see them.

“You *are* the new pilot for PEAK Rescue, right? The one Chet hired to replace him and Ty?”

She nodded.

“Let’s start over. I should have introduced myself earlier.” He stuck out his hand, as if meeting her for the first time. “Ian Shaw. Local rancher and, well, founder of the PEAK Search and Rescue team.”

Founder.

She swallowed, wrapping her brain around his words, even while reaching out to take his hand.

He rubbed the other hand over his jaw, now red, even a smidgen swollen.

“In other words, I’m your new boss. Welcome home.”
