if ever I would leave you

A Montana Rescue Prequel
If Ever I Would Leave You

Montana Rescue Prequel

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Chapter 1

“Watching you die is the last thing I want to do on a Saturday morning.”

Sierra said it in a low mutter, nearly under her breath, but Ian heard it anyway, a slash across his chest, right between the ribs.

Honestly, he hadn’t expected quite so much vehemence from his assistant to his invitation to watch him skydive tomorrow. Not that she’d ever been interested in the stories he’d brought home after climbing one of the local peaks, or scuba diving in Australia, or even simply taking a ride in the Vanquish, presently sitting under a cover in his garage.

But this was different. This time he was jumping over his own property. And no, he didn’t plan on dying.

“Sierra, I’ll be fine,” he said, trying to keep his voice casual as he led Maximus toward the barn.

The sleek black Fox Trotter blew out a breath, sweaty from the ride home through the back field where Ian’s hired men were finishing raking and baling hay. He didn’t need to supervise—Kade, his ranch manager, had the work well in hand. He’d simply been lured by the smell of fresh-cut hay, the rise of the gray razorback mountains edging Glacier National Park to the east, and the arch of the unblemished blue sky over his thirty thousand acres.

The wide open spaces untwisted his brain, made him feel like he’d actually healed the past, found his fresh start.

“This is your first solo jump...” Sierra shook her head, her mouth a grim line that suggested the rest. She always looked so put together, her dark hair pulled back into a sleek bun. She wore a green shirtdress today, formless, but clingy enough to emphasize her curves, and um, maybe he shouldn’t be paying such close attention. But the color only managed to stir up the green in her hazel eyes and for a second he found himself caught there, in her gaze that bore too much worry.

Worry.
As if she cared.

Oh, shoot—*of course* she cared. After all, he was her employer.

“I would just prefer to know about it after you’re safely on the ground,” she continued.

Ian unbuckled the saddle, trying to ignore how the summer wind stirred her fragrance to him, catching a few wisps of her hair around her face. Rustled the contract she held in her hand, against her folder. “Really, Sierra—I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure you do, Mr. Shaw.” She gave him another tight-lipped smile.

*Mr. Shaw.* How he longed to hear his name on her lips, to tear down the barrier between them—but then again, probably he should be thankful for her professionalism.

He lifted the saddle and blankets off the horse, carried them over to a saddle rack. “Okay, but if you change your mind—”

“If you’d sign these please—oh!” The wind lifted the papers, scattered them out of her hands, along the ground and through the gate, into the nearby pasture.

She dropped her folder, the pen, and took off after the errant sheets.

He settled the saddle on the rack then ran after the closest paper. He stepped on it, picked it up, grabbed another.

Didn’t look up in time to stop Sierra from ducking through the gate into the pasture after more runaway sheets.

“Sierra, don’t—!”

But maybe Kade hadn’t moved Rooster into the nearby field yet. And even if he had, the bull usually hung around the back of the pasture, eyeing the females.

Or not, because Ian’s shouting must have roused the animal. It appeared just at the top of the knoll overlooking the Shaw ranch house. And the sixteen hundred pound coal-black Angus bull had figured out that someone had invaded his space.

Not unlike Ian’s disposition before Sierra stepped into his world. Crabby, dark, purposeless. Territorial.

“*Sierra!*”
Ian’s voice hung in the languid morning air. He was already moving, instinct propelling him back to Maximus.

Sierra looked around, as if hearing him.

Sixty feet away, Rooster picked up his pace, jogging toward Sierra, who returned to chasing down his stupid contract. Dedication—Sierra had it in spades, and he regretted asking her to stay late, get the contract finished today.

Sierra didn’t have a hope of surviving the bull’s hooves. Even a nudge from the animal could break every bone in her body.

If God was on his side—or rather, Sierra’s side, because Ian wasn’t kidding himself—then he’d get there first.

He grabbed Maximus’s mane and swung himself up, bareback. “Yah!”

Ian didn’t even slow as he approached the fencing, sure that Maximus could clear it. He felt the horse’s muscles bunch, and gave the animal the right encouragement.

Max flew over the fence, the stallion worth every penny Ian had paid for him.

“Sierra!” Ian shouted again and this time she turned, saw him.

“What are you doing—?”

Rooster had picked up his pace, lumbering toward her like a locomotive.

“Come here, to me!” Ian could just scoop her up, throw her behind him, and race back out of the pen.

She frowned, however, and because timing had never been his friend, right then Rooster moaned, a low bellow of warning.

Sierra turned and spotted the massive black beast, a ring in his wide nose, froth rimming his mouth, huffing and snorting.

Rooster lowered his head.

“Run to me!”

But she stood, paralyzed, and Ian did the quick math. He could reach her in time, but picking her up, getting her behind him—
Rooster would hit the jackpot—three intruders to bully, trample.

Avenge for trespassing.

Except, Ian had Max, who'd never liked the bull, the alpha stallion in him kicking in whenever he came near Rooster.

Fight or flight, both would give Ian a few precious seconds.

He rose up on the horse’s withers, then in one quick movement, swung himself onto the ground. Landed in a run while Max galloped in to intercept.

Ian’s momentum took him straight into Sierra. He hooked her around the waist, leaping off the knoll, pulling her against himself as he launched into the tall grass.

He landed hard, his arms around her as his horse collided with the bull ten feet away. The stallion reared, pawing, and Rooster stopped, snorting, angry.

Ian didn’t even stop to linger, to let the fact that he held, for the briefest moment, Sierra against him, her body trembling in his arms.

He pushed her up, found his feet, and grabbed her hand. “Run!”

Kade was just driving in with the ranch truck and must have caught sight of the calamity because he angled straight for the gate.

The bull bellowed, and Ian glanced over his shoulder, spotted the moment the animal broke away from brave Max. His powerful forelegs churned up earth as he charged.

Ian caught Sierra’s terrified gaze a split second as he yanked her around, in front of him. Her fear crested over and she opened her mouth and screamed, something bloodcurdling and high, rending the air as she ran.

Hooves pounded behind him and Ian realized he was racing his horse to safety, too.

Kade opened the gate, stepped through the opening, holding an electric prod, his expression fierce. He didn’t have to say the word.

Run.

Ian grabbed Sierra around the waist and lunged for the gate, diving through the opening just ahead of Maximus, who nearly trampled him. Ian hit the ground, pulling Sierra against him again, his
shoulder blooming with heat as he took the brunt of the crash.

She landed, her back against him, curled in a ball, breathing hard.

Kade shouted, slammed the gate shut, the prod sizzling in warning against the frothing animal.

For a second Ian just sprawled there, breathing, trying to catch up with his heart. A fist wrapped around his chest, wouldn't let go.

He still had his arms around Sierra, and now, felt her entire body shake. “Sierra,” he said, his voice broken with the exertion of breathing, “are you hurt?”

She pressed her hands against her face, shook her head. “Oh…oh—”

“Shh. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!” She sat up then, rounded on him and yeah, she’d been crying, her face red, a scrape on her jaw where she’d scrubbed it on the ground. “I nearly got us killed! I know better than to get in a field with a bull!”

He didn’t comment because she had certainly signed up to work for him without knowing all the dangers. Or maybe, rather, he’d been the oblivious one when she’d walked into his office under the word-of-mouth recommendation of his neighbor, Chet King.

Never did he imagine that he’d care about someone again the way he cared for Sierra Rose.

“Oh, Mr. Shaw, are you okay?” Kade reached down, extended his hand.

“I’m fine.” Except when Ian reached up to grasp Kade’s hand, his shoulder begged to argue, a deep burn penetrating the muscle. He held in a wince as he climbed from the ground.

He turned to Sierra to help her up. But she was staring at him, white-faced, her hazel-green eyes wide, wet with tears. “I’m so sorry, Ian.”

For a second, the world dropped away, the adrenaline of the escape, the burn in his shoulder, even the residual fear that still clung to his body like a burr.

Ian.

More, Sierra sat there, the look in her eyes telling him everything he longed for but couldn’t have.

Because how could he tell his assistant that he was in love with her? Or, hope that she could
love him back?

Aside from breaking a thousand taboos, Ian had had his chance at love, at happy endings, and managed to foul it up.

Push away the people he loved.

No, he should be happy with the fact that this time they’d all survived. Because he was no fool—despite his successes, his attempts at redemption, one of these days, life was going to catch up to him. Turn on him.

And despite his best efforts, he’d lose everything he loved.

Sierra bit her lip as she climbed to her feet. She dusted herself off and turned away, leaving only her profile, her dark hair caught in the wind. With everything inside him he restrained himself from walking over, taking her in his arms.

“I’ll reprint those contracts,” she said weakly.

“Are you kidding me?” Ian said. “Go home. I think we’ve had enough excitement today.”

She offered a wan smile, nodded. “See you Monday.”

“So, really, you’re not going to watch me jump tomorrow, huh? Even after I saved your life?”

She gave him a long, enigmatic look, something he couldn’t read, and his heart lodged in his chest. Please—

“Try not to die,” she said. But she chased it with a smile before she turned and headed back to the house.

And he made a promise, right then, to live.

“He saved your life?”

Sierra stared at her sister, her words jolting her out of the memory of feeling Ian’s amazing,
muscled arms around her as he launched them to safety only five feet from the lethal hooves of his terrifying bull. He insisted on keeping the beast pastured near his house like the animal might be a reflection of his successes. Or personality, because when Ian got it in his head that he wanted to do something, he ran people down to make it happen.

No matter who got hurt, including himself.

“I just stood there, trying not to dissolve into an ugly puddle.” Sierra sat across from Willow in the Summit Cafe. The local hangout made the best malts on the planet, not to mention hand-crafted burgers and homemade pie. With sports memorabilia from the local teams on the walls and specials named after hikes from the nearby Glacier National Park, the place had landed on a few top-ten lists when visiting Mercy Falls. Sierra knew it as the place to nurse her woes with a decadent chocolate malt.

Frankly, she was still early into her ranting, still trying to catch her breath, to shake herself free from the residue of her nightmare—or maybe a long buried dream, especially when she remembered the way Ian had looked at her, so much concern in his expression.

As if he cared for her.

Of course he did—she managed his entire life, right?

“And you didn’t leap back into his arms? Sierra, have you not read one romance novel? You missed the perfect opportunity to declare your undying love.” Willow stirred her O-rings into a concoction of mayonnaise and ketchup. She wore a sleeveless lace shirt and a pair of cut-off jeans and Converse tennis shoes. With her long brown hair braided and tied back in a bandanna, she looked every inch the nineteen-year-old trail guide who guided tourists into the backwoods of the park.

“What? No, Willow. I don’t live in your fairytale world where Cinderella gets the prince.”

“You should. It’s nice here. Besides, don’t act stupid. I know how you feel about Ian Shaw.”

“Mr. Shaw. He’s my boss.”

“He’s your dream man. Are you kidding me?” Willow picked up a napkin to wipe her fingers.

“Six foot two, reddish-black hair, blue eyes, and the man works out every day, not to mention he could buy Montana with his disposable income.”

“Willow, I’m not that shallow.”
Willow held up her hand. “Okay, how about the fact he insists on working his cattle along with Kade and the rest of his hired men?”

“That’s only because he was a real cowboy in high school, working as a hired man on a ranch in Texas.”

“Of course he was. What hasn’t Ian Shaw done? Pilot, cowboy, engineer, inventor, scuba diver, mountain climber, skier—the man has Tony Stark written all over him. All he’s missing is the iron suit.” Willow leaned forward. “And you, Sierra, are his Pepper.”

Heat filled her, but she brushed off the words. “If I remember correctly, Pepper left Iron Man because he risked his life too much.” Which was exactly what would happen—she felt it in her bones. Of course Ian had rescued her—he lived for adrenaline and danger. Hence his stupid skydiving stunt scheduled for tomorrow morning. But someday he wouldn’t escape, and she’d be left to pick up the pieces.

“No, Pepper has her own suit of armor that she uses to save the world,” Willow said. “You need to read the comics, not just watch the movies.”

Sierra offered a smile. “That’s what Mom had you reading for your home-school curriculum at the commune?”

Six years younger than Sierra, Willow was the product of her mother’s domestic years, when she’d settled down with a local handyman. A regular guy, Jackson McTavish became like a father to Sierra, feeding love to a child who’d never met her real father. And then tragedy struck—Jackson found Jesus and proposed to her mother, who promptly kicked him out for the audacious idea that they seal their relationship with a promise.

Brokenhearted, Jackson joined the military and Sierra’s mother moved the girls to a commune north of Mercy Falls. And, after Sierra, who’d driven them to school every day, graduated, her mother pulled Willow out of school in favor of homeschooling.

Sierra knew her sister felt abandoned when Sierra moved to Mercy Falls. As soon as Willow turned seventeen, she moved in with her big sister.

“One of the guys at the commune was a huge fan,” Willow said. “I read the entire series. But
here’s the important part. We both know that Ian needs you, even if he won’t say it. He’s probably in love with you, too.”

“I promise you, Ian is not interested in adding a plus-one to his life.”

“He made room for Esme, didn’t he? You even said that Ian changed after he took in his niece.”

He had changed over the past year since he’d taken over custody of his then sixteen-year-old niece from his disastrous sister.

“Yes, but that’s different. Esme is family. He dotes on her—spoils her rotten. I think she’s still pretty overwhelmed.”

“Wouldn’t you be if we had a rich uncle swoop in, bring us to his fairytale ranch, give us the world?”

The wish for a happily ever after ending in Willow’s eyes made Sierra hurt.

“Thankfully, it’s worked out. But I’m telling you—Ian is a closed book. He has secrets that even I don’t know. And demons he won’t share.” Demons that kept him up at night, slamming at the hanging bag in his personal gym. Or made him climb mountains, as if to give him a new view on life. Or even, push him into his next stupid adventure—skydiving.

She couldn’t believe he’d asked her to watch him risk his handsome neck.

Uh, no. Because if she nearly lost her heart to him today, barely stopped herself from flinging herself into his arms, letting her panic and blind relief trample her common sense, what might she do tomorrow when she watched him fly?

Iron Man, indeed. The man would fall from the sky and she’d stand there, watching him die.

“The problem is, Ian never does anything halfway—he’s like a dog with a bone when he puts his mind to something.”

“Hence, his billions,” Willow said.

“Yeah, maybe. But he’s too hard on himself. He refuses to back down from a challenge, even his own.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Willow said, finishing her O-rings.
“I’m not driven like that.”

Willow said nothing.

“I just don’t want to let him down. So yeah, I work hard. And it’s a great job, Willow. I’m not going to screw it up by falling in love with my boss.”

Willow raised an eyebrow.

“Really. Whatever feelings I might have aren’t worth risking my job. I am just his assistant, and I’ll never be more than that. I can’t think of him as Ian—he has to be Mr. Shaw. Period, end of conversation.”

Willow finished her malt with a loud, obnoxious slurp.
Chapter 2

Ian wasn’t stupid—he knew he’d filled his life with distractions that might someday get him hurt. Killed.

But he just couldn’t escape the urge to fly.

Besides, he’d waited exactly thirteen years, ten months, three weeks, and two days—and well, maybe a couple hours from liftoff for this view.

Looking down through the Cessna window, Ian could almost believe that life had a plan. An order about it that made perfect sense, that gave meaning to the chaos of the past decade.

Dirt roads bisected the green and brown pastureland at right angles, the plots stitched together, one patchwork after another, the houses lined up like Monopoly pieces. If he focused only on the broad sweep of the land below, he could believe that this moment was created just for him.

Life, coming together to make sense.

His pilot, Chet King, shouted from the cockpit. “I’m going to say it again—best place to stay is inside the plane!”

Chet knew his aircraft, from light jets to fire-bombers to helicopters. After serving as a chopper pilot during the tail years of the Vietnam conflict, then flying fire-bombers, rescue choppers, and even the occasional crop-dusting sortie, Chet could pilot a plane in a dead sleep.

Conveniently, he’d practically come with the property when Ian purchased Shaw Ranch. There to help Ian learn the local customs of Mercy Falls, Montana, introduce him to the nearby Glacier National Park, and generally butt his nose into every cranny of Ian’s life, like a crazy—okay, but beloved—uncle.

Jock Burns’s green eyes caught Ian’s. “Of course he’d say that—the guy flew every fire-bombing run without a chute in his plane. He’s afraid to jump.”

“Not afraid. Just the only one with any brains,” Chet retorted.
Jock laughed, a deep rumble that lit his entire face, nothing of fear in his eyes. When Ian suggested to Chet he wanted to skydive, Chet had reluctantly pointed him to the tutelage of the man who had trained and led smokejumping teams out of Ember, Montana, for nearly the past two decades. His own daughter was a legendary smokejumper, a fact Jock couldn’t stop mentioning.

Ian understood—he felt almost as proud of Esme, and he was just her doting uncle.

“Ready?” Jock asked. He yanked open the door, and the brisk air swilled in.

Ian scooted toward the door, his heart thrumming in his chest, his breaths quick. He let his feet dangle out of the doorway, taking it all in.

The longing to share it with Sierra could wrap around Ian’s chest, squeeze the breath from him. She, more than anyone, would understand the magnitude of this moment.

Understand the feeling of power and freedom as Jock opened the door, letting the crisp air slip in, rattle through the body of the plane.

She would probably even understand the rush of satisfaction Ian felt at seeing his ranch from the air, the undulating pastureland torn by craggy ravines and draws, thick with sagebrush and dotted with the black shapes of fat Angus. The sun had just lipped over the edge of the Rocky Mountains to the east, spilling gold into the nooks and crannies of the snow-capped crevices.

He still couldn’t figure out why she’d turned him down. He wasn’t going to die, for cryin’ out loud.

Besides, didn’t she know that she made him feel invincible? Especially after yesterday’s rescue. The way she looked at him, her voice as she’d called him by name, had nestled deep, found footing.

He’d been thinking about it all night.

What if, after all this time, he could start over, and this time do it right? Love a woman without breaking her heart? After all, he’d surprised himself, the way he’d committed to Esme.

Ian had woken with the sense of desire so strong, it nearly made him drive out to Sierra’s house and beg her to change her mind. He settled instead on the resolve that after he landed, he’d really take a leap and ask Sierra if she might like to take their relationship to the next level.

Girlfriend. Wife?
Oops, there he went, getting ahead of himself.

But Ian hadn’t expected any of this when he’d left Louisiana, broken, grieving, angry, alone…hating himself. Hadn’t even looked up, really, for years, while he was in North Dakota, stuck in a Siberian darkness while he was developing software, praying his work saved lives.

He’d only barely noticed the landscape when he moved to Montana three years ago, desperate to break free and begin another legacy, this time on a ranch, resurrecting his father’s dreams. He’d plopped some cattle on it and hired the right men. They’d doubled the herd, doubled it again, and he’d used the cash, plus more from his software, to add to Shaw Holdings.

Then Sierra had walked into his life, and everything really clicked into place.

She made him feel not broken. Not the man who’d disappointed the people he loved, but a man who could actually help others. And when she’d convinced him to take Esme, she’d actually healed him. Of course it was the best thing for Esme, but now, over a year later, Esme had become as dear to him as a daughter, with a exemplary future ahead of her. She held all Ian’s dreams for the next generation of Shaws.

Ian could hardly wait to get her away from that troublemaker Dante and into the kind of life he’d always hoped to provide for her mother, and maybe someday, a family of his own.

Although, really, they already felt like a family—him, Esme, Sierra.

He was getting ahead of himself again.

“Not getting any younger,” Jock said. “Anytime now.”

Below, to the south, Ian could make out the cowboy town of Mercy Falls, situated under the shadow of Glacier National Park. And to the north, the pristine greens of Whitefish Golf Club, where tonight he would invite Sierra to dinner. A non-professional, not-awkward dinner where he could suggest that he wanted her to be more—other—than his personal assistant.

The thought could fist his breath in his chest. Skydiving had nothing on the adrenaline rush of holding Sierra in his arms.

“Not too late,” Chet shouted.

Ian stared down at the expanse. Like leaping from a cliff, like he’d done in Hawaii. Only higher.
Much higher.

Maybe this was crazy.

And then he saw something kicking up a dust trail. A vehicle motoring toward his landing zone.

Sierra had changed her mind. The thought caught him up, put a hand over his heart.

Maybe not, but he desperately hoped it might be her. Her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, wearing her aviator sunglasses, maybe a pair of jeans and a T-shirt on this Saturday morning.

Off duty and up early, saying yes to his request to watch him fly.

Maybe dinner wasn’t such a risk after all.

He took a breath and pushed out from the frame.

Count.

Focus.

He spread out his arms, the air whipping against him, soaring, flying.

Ian didn’t look back for Jock—he’d see him as soon as they deployed. Instead, he glanced at his altimeter on his wrist, then back to the sight of the world rushing up at him, his log home nestled under a grove of black pine, the dirt road that led to Chet’s house on the edge of his property. The old white barn.

And below, Sierra, hopefully staring up at the sky.

He wanted her to see him like this—invincible, the kind of man who could rebuild his life.

Give her the one she deserved.

He glanced again at his altimeter, then reached behind him for his ripcord.

His shoulder let out a scream. Probably from the hard hit yesterday and the flow of the wind today, but it suddenly locked up.

Refused to move.

He couldn’t grab the cord.

Only then did he look up to see Jock falling nearby, gesturing hard for him to deploy.

Yeah, well he was trying.

Ian grit his teeth, reached back, but his shoulder turned to fire and he couldn’t finagle his grip
around the handle.

His altimeter hit the red.

The ground roared up fast.

And in that quiet, desperate second, it came to him.

He was stupid. Because he’d all but begged Sierra to drive out and watch him die.

The man she loved—yes, Willow was probably right—was going to splat! right before her eyes.

It took Sierra a second to figure it out—the way his chute wasn’t deploying, the way the other guy in the sky was groping for him.

Ian was in big trouble.

And worse, he’d never know how she felt.

Except, what, exactly, was Sierra supposed to say? Hey, boss, you know that excellent working relationship we’ve managed to cultivate? The best job I’ve ever had, really? Well, I quit—with the wild hope you’ll ask me out.

Hardly.

Regardless of Willow’s romanticism, a man like Ian Shaw didn’t date the vagabond daughter of a hippie, a girl with no actual degrees to her name.

Apparently her heart didn’t listen to her brains because here she was, on hand to watch him perish.

Her words to him had haunted her through the night until she got up, threw on clothing, and raced out to the pasture behind his house.

Apparently, she simply couldn’t stay away from him, despite his addiction to scaring her to death.

But, still, she couldn’t actually watch.

Sierra put her hands over her ears, closed her eyes, and screamed.
She didn’t exactly know how long she screamed—enough to run out of breath, then start again. And then, when that ran out, she just ducted her head and started humming.

Or maybe, she should pray. Because while Ian wasn’t big on church and prayers and hope, she had enough for both of them. At least right now.

*If you let him live, I promise not to ever ask for more. Not to pine for him, to put a healthy distance between me and my feelings for him and—*

“Sierra!”

She looked up, her heart in her throat and saw the fool man walking—no, running across the pasture, unhooking his chute, grinning.

It took everything inside her not to leap from the truck and wrap her hands around his neck. Or maybe her arms around his incredible shoulders and just hold on, weeping.

She couldn’t live like this.

As it was, she was shaking as she hopped off the truck bed, and yeah, she might have been crying, just a little. She wiped her face before he could see it, but nope, he’d caught her.

He released his helmet chin strap. Frowned. “Are you crying? Sierra—”

“Your chute didn’t open,” she snapped. Shoot, her voice shook and she didn’t want to sound that rattled. A good assistant never showed her emotions, never let her boss see her unravel. She swallowed, wishing she wasn’t the stellar assistant he expected but the emotional wreck she wanted to be.

*Would* be as soon as she got into the truck.

“My shoulder is buggered from yesterday, and I couldn’t get my hand on the release—had to deploy my reserve.” He reached up to rub his shoulder, gave a wry smile, as if *no problem.*

But, even as she stared at him, wordless at his nonchalance, and despite that cocky smile, she could see the tiny beads of sweat along his brow, one freeing to trickle down his handsome, stupid face.

Jerk.

She turned and headed to the truck.

“Sierra!”

“I have work to do!” Yeah, okay, it was Saturday, but she still needed to confirm his reservations
for tonight at the golf club and pick up his gift for Esme at the jewelers.

If he wasn’t so sweet with Esme, she might kill him on the spot—

Ian rushed up behind her, crossed in front of her, put a hand on the door of his truck. “Are you—mad at me?”

He looked almost incredulous, and probably no woman, ever, had the guts to be angry at Ian Shaw. Not with those incredible blue eyes, that dark hair. He hadn’t shaved this morning—a rare look for Ian, but he wore a growth of dark amber and gold whiskers on his chin and resembled a paratrooper in his jumpsuit, open at the neck, showing a black shirt underneath.

Then, he grinned at her, and it had her entire body threatening to puddle right there.

Oh, it wasn’t fair.

“Don’t be mad, Sierra,” he said softly. “I was fine. If I hadn’t deployed the reserve, I had an auto-deployment attached to the pack—”

“You scared me, okay?”

She didn’t mean for that to eke out, but yeah, there it was. And now she felt like an idiot.

So not cool, collected, personal assistant material.

His smile fell and he fixed his gaze on hers. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just—I’ve always dreamed of skydiving, and I’m really glad you were here for it.”

Huh. She hadn’t expected that, the softness in his voice, the way he touched her shoulder.

And now she had an entirely different set of hot emotions rushing through her. “Um...I-I have to confirm your dinner reservations.”

Lame. But what was she supposed to do, really, when the urge to take one lousy step into his arms could nearly possess her?

She reached for the handle, but he didn’t move. Just looked at her with an expression she couldn’t read.

“What?”

“Um...” He swallowed. Another line of sweat trickled down his face. “I was just...” He took a breath and looked away, behind her.
“Great landing, Ian!” said a voice, and she turned to find his instructor, a smokejumper from a fire base west of here, sauntering up to them. Jake, or something like that. A good-looking man in his fifties, he walked with the swagger of a man who knew his way in the skies. Wide shoulders, dark hair, a warm grin. “I thought, for a second there, you were going to auger in, but you pulled it off.”

“No help from you, thank you,” Sierra snapped. “He had to deploy his reserve!” The man’s smile disappeared, then he looked at Ian and raised an eyebrow.

Silence, and really, she should leave before she got fired. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. My wife used to hate to watch me jump.” He smiled at her and anytime, yes, the ground could open up, let her vanish.

She wasn’t Ian’s wife, had no claim over him.

Maybe, influenced by his buddy Jake’s words, Ian stepped away from the truck door.

But as she got in, he still wore that strange, enigmatic look. He held the door open as she reached for it.

“Make sure the reservations say three,” he said quietly, the slightest hint of a smile on his face.

Three? Was he inviting a date along on his dinner with Esme? She nodded, trying not to betray the fist that had landed in her gut. Just his assistant. “Do you need a ride back?”

He nodded and he and Jake climbed in the back.

She only glanced in the rearview mirror once as she headed back to the ranch, hoping she hadn’t just ranted her way out of a job. Best job ever—more than a job, really.

Working for Ian made her feel indispensable. Brilliant. Not that Ian needed her, really. The man was a downright genius—hence his billions for a piece of software that kept oil rigs from soiling the oceans and the vast prairie lands. But he led her to believe that without her, his life would somehow fall apart. As if he needed her to remind him of his meetings, his charitable events, and even Esme’s birthday.

She’d never seen a man more devoted to a daughter that wasn’t really his. And she knew—she’d had a pseudo dad who had loved her. A lot. Almost as much as he’d loved his own daughter.

Not quite, but almost.
So, when Sierra saw how Ian doted on Esme, it could make her forgive him of even stupidity like leaping from an airplane pretending he could fly.

Somehow, by the time they reached the house, his gorgeous, self-designed log home, her anger had died to a low, deep ache.

Sierra pulled into the gravel drive, parking between the house and the beautiful horse barn.

Every shiny, stained pine log of Ian’s multi-million-dollar, five-bedroom estate had been hand-tooled, the limestone on the front porch quarried from southern Montana, the ledge rock for the towering fireplace cut from Thompson Falls to the west.

Precision work that Ian himself had supervised, his discerning eye choosing everything from the reclaimed barn wood he’d used for the floor and customized into cabinets, the vintage horseshoes he’d fashioned into door handles and pulls, to the hand-cut granite countertops that surrounded the gleaming stainless steel appliances in his chef’s kitchen.

He’d even decorated the place himself—or mostly himself, with Sierra’s help. She’d found the handwoven Navajo rugs, the over-sized hand-tooled leather, brass-nail-trimmed sofa, and the four matching cigar chairs that all framed the two-story towering fireplace.

And, as if he needed more tab-dah!, the rugged elegance was back-dropped by a massive two-story window that just happened to overlook the blue-gray grandeur of the mountains. The icing on the proverbial awe-inspiring cake of the best, um, office she’d ever had.

Why couldn’t she keep her big mouth shut? Stay out of his business? Remember she was just an employee?

Ian and Jake piled out of the back and headed to his barn where he kept his horses and fancy toys, probably to talk about when, perchance, Ian could risk his life yet again.

Which, she absolutely, definitely would not be on hand to watch.

Sierra pulled her satchel over her shoulder, got out, and headed inside, down the long hallway to the office wing. She flicked on the light to her office, an ante room off his beautiful, expansive office suite. Ian’s office, with the desk handcrafted from a giant slab of redwood and built-in matching cabinets, overlooked that same grand view of the mountains.
Her office wasn’t so shabby either—a mini version of Ian’s. She opened her computer and did a quick check on his dinner reservations at Open Table, upgrading them to three.

For an irresponsible second, she wondered what it might be like to be the third member of tonight’s dinner.

More, to really belong in his life.

Nope. Not going there. She knew better than to try and dream her way to happily ever after. Girls like her didn’t get those kinds of endings.

Except, of course, if they had a rich uncle, like Ian. For a moment, her gaze stopped on a picture of Esme, her senior photo taken in the corral out back. Ian’s niece always possessed a sort of innocence in her pretty blue eyes, captured well in the picture, the back-dropped sun creating an almost halo behind her golden hair, glinting off diamond earrings. She wore a white blouse and ripped, faded designer jeans. Her bare feet and pedicured red-blush toenails peeked out from under the frayed cuffs.

The girl betrayed all the hallmarks of a princess—pampered, yes, but also sweet, if not a little naive. A complete transformation from the homeless, thin, and desperate teen that they’d rescued a year ago. Now, Esme had a real future ahead of her. Sierra had helped her with every single one of her college applications, had corrected the grammar on her essays and made sure they went out in the mail.

Now, the acceptance envelopes were piled on Esme’s desk in her room down the hall, waiting for her to commit.

Sierra had stopped at the mailbox on her way to the debacle in the pasture and now pulled the mail from her satchel. She sorted through the envelopes and found yet another acceptance letter, this one from Cornell.

Good girl. Probably Ian’s money helped a bit, although Esme had always taken school seriously, a trait she might have inherited from her uncle.

Sierra headed down the hallway and stopped in front of Esme’s closed door. Considered for a moment, then decided to knock.

No answer. Maybe Esme was out in the barn, or taking an early morning ride.

She turned the knob, found it unlocked, and eased the door open.
Stilled. A cold hand climbed through Sierra and closed around her throat as she stared at the form—no, forms—in the bed, two bodies, quiet in slumber under the floral comforter.

Oh. No—

She hadn’t exactly meant to let out a noise and now desperately wanted to back out of the room as something like a gasp or a whine burped out of her.

Especially when the comforter flipped back and someone sat up.

Not Esme, but dark-haired, wide-shouldered, track star and troublemaker Dante James. For a second they just stared at each other, his big eyes caught in hers.

And then she took another breath and whirled, intending to flee.

“Sierra!”

She froze at Esme’s voice. Closed her eyes.

“Shut the door and I’ll explain everything.”

No. No—

But she didn’t know what else to do. So she closed the door, turned.

Thankfully, Dante had vanished, probably running for Esme’s bathroom, and now Esme sat up, her hair askew, her blue eyes big, holding the comforter to her neck.

And Sierra couldn’t help herself. “Are you out of your mind?” She stepped toward Esme, her body practically vibrating with frustration. “Seriously?”

Esme held up a hand, her eyes filling. “Listen—it’s not what you think—”

“It looks like what I think—”

“I mean, it’s none of your business, really, but Dante and I are in love. We’re getting married.”

Oh, please. And Sierra jumped right over none of your business and onto— “I’m holding yet another college acceptance letter, and you’re telling me you want to marry this kid—”

“He’s not a kid. He’s going into the navy in just a few weeks, and then—”

“You’re going to college.”

Esme had sat up and thankfully, she was dressed—in a T-shirt and sweatpants. And, come to think of it, Dante had also been wearing a T-shirt.
Still. It didn’t mean anything. “You know if Ian caught—catches you—Dante is a dead man.”

“He won’t catch us, because you aren’t going to tell him.” Esme chased her words with a smile.

“Please, Sierra?”

“Esme—”

“Listen. I am going to college. But I love Dante and I’m going to be with him, even if we have to run away.”

“Run away? Esme! Please, don’t do that. You’ll regret it forever. Talk to your uncle.” She left off the “or I will” part but put the message in her eyes, her raised eyebrow.

Esme’s stance softened. “Okay. I will, I promise.”

“I mean right now.” Sierra walked over to Esme’s dresser and added the envelope to the stack of other hopefuls. When she turned, she found Esme looking at her, stricken.

Yeah, well, get in line.

She schooled her voice, however. “Esme. I know you think you love Dante. And I get that—”

And wow, did she, because for a second, she was right there, caught in young love, her brain tangled in the right nows and true loves and not thinking how her heart could shatter into a thousand pieces. Another stellar reason to keep her distance from Ian Shaw. “But Ian deserves better than this. And so do you. Promise me you won’t do anything foolish.”

Esme scrambled across the bed and came over to Sierra, grabbing her arms. Her eyes found Sierra’s. They were watery. Earnest. “Okay.”

Sierra raised an eyebrow.

Esme’s sighed. “I love Uncle Ian—and yes, you’re right. He deserves to know about Dante. I promise, I’ll tell him. Tonight. At dinner, okay?”

Dinner. And now Sierra felt profoundly sorry for Ian’s third party.

However, she couldn’t be Esme’s friend without adding, “It’s more than that, Esme. You—”

What? Have to watch out for boys who see a willing heart and take advantage? Have to save pieces of yourself or you’ll lose everything? Have to grow up and realize that happy endings are probably never really going to happen?
Except, maybe for Esme, they would, because Dante had come back out of the bathroom and now came up behind her. His dark hair was tousled, he wore whiskers, and he had the bluest eyes, the kind that held Sierra’s gaze as he put his arm around Esme.

“I love her,” Dante said. “And I’m going to ask her uncle for permission to marry her. Really.”

“You might want to start by staying out of her bed before you’re married,” Sierra snapped, and he reddened.

“It’s not like that,” he said. “We didn’t—”

“I don’t want to know. I just think you’d better get out of here before Ian catches you.”

He swallowed and then headed for, yes, the window, of all things.

Oh, for Pete’s sake—“Stop. I’ll check the hallway—you can use the guest entrance. He’s in the barn, so don’t go that direction.” And now, she was aiding and abetting.

Talk about losing her job.

“Thank you, Sierra,” Esme said, throwing her arms around her neck. “I knew I could trust you.”

Trust—“Um, just so we’re clear. You tell your uncle tonight, okay? Don’t make me get in the middle of this.”

Sierra didn’t know if that was an empty threat or not. Because truly, she couldn’t imagine that awkward conversation. Hey Ian, guess what I found today when I was, ha ha, delivering the mail?

“I promise. Really,” Esme said as she took Dante’s hand.

Sierra looked away as they kissed and headed to the hallway. She walked down to the entry and spied Ian chatting with his jump partner outside, in the driveway.

She gestured and Dante the skulker ran down the hallway the other direction, toward the back door.

Oh, boy. Next time, no matter what her heart said, she did not work Saturdays.
Chapter 3

Today hadn’t gone at all how Ian had hoped.

Sure, he had to congratulate himself just a little bit on the fact that he hadn’t belly dived straight into the earth but that he kept his head, caught his reserve.

Only to land and discover Sierra irritated. No, flat out furious. And in that moment, despite her ire, he saw it—

The niggle of hope that he was right. She cared about him—enough to be angry when she thought he might be risking his life. The kind of angry that meant she harbored feelings for her boss.

Maybe he wasn’t making the biggest mistake of his life.

But he’d blundered his request for her to join them at dinner. Obviously, his “dinner for three” needed some clarification, but when he’d finished with Jock and returned to the house, Sierra had gone.

He’d looked for Esme, but she, too, had disappeared, which left him alone at the house congratulating himself on a feat that no one seemed to appreciate.

Except for Jock, who declared him a smokejumping protégé and told him he could jump with him anytime.

At the moment, Ian just wanted to be able to jump out of his truck and make it all the way up the walk to Sierra’s cute little yellow Sears and Roebuck house, knock on the door, and…well, ask his assistant out.

Which should be a lot easier than it felt as he sat at the curb. For cryin’ out loud, he’d jumped from a plane—more, he’d met world leaders, even the president when he’d introduced his software to Congress, when they’d made it mandatory for every oil rig, every pumping station in the United States.

He’d climbed McKinley. Had dived the barrier reef, had heli-skied Whistler.

Frankly, it hadn’t even been this difficult when he’d asked Allison to marry him. Then again, he’d been a young twenty-two-year-old, and he’d suggested it during a study break, over popcorn, not
even serious. Until she was, and then he found himself in over his head and committing himself to something he should have never let her do.

But she’d been angry at her father and he seemed the best revenge.

Ian blew out a breath, ran his hand through his short hair, and glanced at the house. Sierra’s little hatchback sat in the driveway.

What if he screwed this up, too? He and Sierra worked so well together—what if he was simply reading too much into her reactions?

Or, his own. Because yes, every time Sierra walked into his airspace, especially lately, he couldn’t tear his mind away from the way she smelled, could barely tame the urge to reach out, run his fingers through her long, silky black hair, cup her heart-shaped face in his hands, run a thumb over her cheekbone as he drew her close, his eyes roaming her face for a long second before he lowered his mouth to hers—

Oh, boy.

But it wasn’t just the desire to kiss her. It was the fact that he didn’t want her to go home at the end of the day. He longed to spend evenings on the sofa, tangled in an easy embrace, reading or watching a movie. He didn’t want to have to say good-bye to her laughter, the way it rooted inside him and lifted him out of a darkness that could too easily devour him.

He wanted to be a part of her thoughts, those faraway looks she’d get when she didn’t know he was watching, the way she’d stare out into the mountainscape through her office window, cradling a cup of coffee. What was in those thoughts?

He longed to find out.

Ian opened the door and stepped out, took a breath.

Headed up to the house.

He knocked on the door and tried to figure out where to put his hands. In his pockets? Should he lean against the frame? He was still experimenting when the door opened.

A girl—not Sierra—with long brown hair stood in the entry. Oh, Willow, Sierra’s kid sister. A little older than Esme, Willow looked like her hippie mother—wearing a tie-dye dress, her hair in braids,
barefoot.

“Is Sierra here?”

Willow gave him a look up and down, then nodded and stepped back, shouting inside the house. “Sierra—your boss is here.”

Oh, perfect. Ian shifted, shoved his hands in his back pockets, and gave Willow a wry smile.

“Wanna come in?”

Hmm. But she didn’t give him a choice, really, just reached out and pulled him in. Closed the door behind him and headed up the narrow stairs.

The house smelled of cookies and his stomach growled. The tiny place had homey written all over it, the living room painted a cheery yellow, an old sofa covered in a patchwork quilt, watercolors in white frames hanging on the walls, a white-painted rocking chair in the corner, a bookcase made of bricks and two-by-fours along the wall, filled with novels.

“Ian—sorry, I was just taking a batch of chocolate chippers out of the oven. They’re for the camping trip this weekend. Willow’s youth group is going up to the Loop to do some overnight hiking.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It will be. I’m a chaperone. I think Esme’s going...” Her voice trailed off and for some reason her face flushed.

“Maybe I’ll go, too,” Ian said.

And how—why—did those words come out of his mouth? But yeah, if everything went well tonight, he should probably figure out ways to be a part of her world, right?

Except her face drained just a little even as she swallowed, nodded.

Shoot. She was clearly still simmering raw feelings from this morning’s epic events.

“Sierra—I’m sorry I scared you this morning. Really.”

She looked at him, blinking. Then she sighed. “I just—anyway, you’re fine and that’s what matters, right?”

A buzzer went off in her kitchen and she gestured with her head. “I gotta change racks.”

He followed her into the cozy kitchen. A dozen cookies cooled on a rack on a small center
She grabbed her hot pads, opened the oven, and switched the sheets from one shelf to another.

He stuck his hands in his pockets.

“Please, have a cookie.”

No, that’s not what he wanted, although yes, the smell could revive the dead. “Actually, I was hoping—well, um, you left so quickly today, and I wasn’t sure I was clear about tonight, so—”

“I heard you, and changed the reservation to three, no worries.” She closed the oven, turned, pulled off her hot mitts.

“I wasn’t—” He sighed. “Listen. I...I was hoping you’d join us.”

She just stared at him. Then—oh please, let him be imagining it—what looked like horror crossed her face. “Oh, I don’t think...I mean, uh, well, I’d love to join you, but it’s Esme’s birthday celebration and—”

“And you’ve been a huge help this year in getting her to this place. All those college applications and the way, when she first got here, you knew exactly what I should say, how I should approach her.”

“You did fine on your own.”

“No, that’s the thing. You really helped us connect, and I’m grateful and I just want to...say...thank you.” And shoot, that didn’t come out right at all. How did he tell her that she’d become so much more than his right hand, someone he desperately wanted in his life? “You seemed to care and—”

“Of course I care. I...I know what it’s like to be a confused teenage girl.”

She did? He didn’t know that, although he knew a bit about her years growing up in the commune with her flighty mother.

“But I’m not her uncle. She loves you. It’s really important you remember that.” She offered him a tight smile and he frowned.

“Okay.”

“And I just think you two need to have dinner alone tonight. I mean, it’s her birthday dinner, and you have that gift for her—which I picked up at the jewelers for you, by the way. I was going to bring it
out to the ranch as soon as I finished the cookies. Just a second.” She brushed past him toward the front door.

“Sierra, wait—”

Yes, he knew, deep inside, that it was possible she didn’t share his feelings, but he didn’t really expect her to stiff arm his dinner invitation.

He followed her into the foyer where she was rummaging around her satchel.

She emerged with a velveteen box. “It’s really pretty. She’ll love it.” She held it out to him.

Didn’t meet his eyes. And if he wasn’t mistaken, her hand was shaking.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just take it, okay?”

He frowned, took the box. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Shaw?”

Mr. Shaw? What happened to Ian?

And if that didn’t take a knife to his chest...

But, if she was going to pull the Mr. Shaw on him, he would use his business voice. “I really want you to go to dinner with us tonight. It’s important to Esme. To… Me. But that suddenly sounded so imperial, he couldn’t force the words out. “She’s leaving for college soon, and…” He blew out a breath and grasped for something that didn’t sound like an order. “Please?”

And with that word, that soft, pleading tone, there he stood, naked, his heart beating in his open, raw chest.

She caught her lip in her lower teeth, sighed. “Okay. Fine, I’ll be there.”

It might be his imagination, but she sounded a little like when he’d asked her to attend his sky-diving event. Dread thick in her tone followed by the slightest forced smile.

Nice.

“Super,” he said, without enthusiasm, feeling as if he’d already landed, splattered to the earth, and perished. “See you at seven.”
And now, oh joy, she’d landed smack dab in the middle of Ian and Esme’s revealing, dramatic dinner. Sierra slid the last of the cookies onto the cooling racks, dropped the pan in the sink to cool, and headed upstairs.

Because aside from the problem of how she’d gotten herself into this mess, she had nothing to wear.

Although, with the fireworks on the agenda for the evening, probably she could show up in a burlap sack and it wouldn’t matter. Ian’s gaze would fall off her and onto Esme the moment she mentioned Dante, marriage, the navy and, well, hopefully Sierra wouldn’t do something stupid and blurt out what she’d seen this morning.

She flopped onto her double bed, grabbed a pillow, and smashed it over her face, groaned into it.

“Is that a scream of joy?”

Sierra pulled the pillow away, found Willow standing at the door, her arms folded over her chest, grinning.

“No. That’s a scream of horror.”

Willow raised an eyebrow then came in, sliding next to her on the bed. “Ian Shaw shows up on your doorstep—finally—and this is horrible? What did he want?”

“He asked me out for dinner.”

“Yes, I can see where that’s a tragedy. Your dreams have come true—someone get a Kleenex.”

“It’s not like that.” Sierra sat up, cradled her head in her hands. “It’s Esme’s eighteenth birthday dinner. A family event.”

“Even better—family? Hello, Sierra. He wouldn’t invite you to a personal dinner unless he wanted to get, um, personal.”

Sierra gave her a look, something she hoped would shut Willow down. “He doesn’t feel that
way about me. Trust me—I barely kept my job today. He nearly died, and I freaked out—”

“And then he shows up on your doorstep, asking you out? Yes, your job is definitely in jeopardy.”

“Don’t be silly, Willow. It’s for Esme. To celebrate her accomplishments, apparently.”

Willow pushed herself off the bed. “I might be young and silly, but even you should be able to do the math, Sis. You freaked out and he realized you have feelings for him. Decided to act on it because he has feelings for you.” She headed to the closet. “Now, what can you wear that might bring out the more personal side of Ian Shaw.”

Sierra got up, shoved herself in front of the closet, bracing her hands on Willow’s shoulders. “Trust me, this is not going to go well.” She pushed Willow back to the bed until she sat on it.

“Why not?”

“Because I caught Esme in bed with her boyfriend this morning.”

Willow’s eyes widened, and see, this is why Sierra shouldn’t go to dinner tonight. She had this problem of just blurting things out.

“Seriously?” Willow asked on a breath of disbelief.

“Okay, in their defense, they were fully clothed, but…I don’t know. I do know she begged me not to tell Ian.”

“Of course not.” Willow scooted back to the headboard, picked up a pillow, cradling it. “I knew she and Dante were dating. But that boy is a passel of trouble, from his wide shoulders to his mischievous dark eyes. And charming—the kid has charisma dripping off him. Half the girls from the youth group have had crushes on him.”

“Oh, no—he’s not a player, is he?”

“No. I don’t think so. He’s a reasonably nice kid. He went on a mission trip last year and his faith seemed genuine. He’s going on the youth group camping trip this weekend. But, he shouldn’t be in her bed—even if they were only fooling around.”

“Exactly. I’m so angry at Esme. She’s been accepted to a dozen colleges, even wait-listed for Yale, and she hasn’t decided on any of them. My guess is it’s because of Dante. She told me they want to get married. I can see danger all over this thing. Sort of reminds me of—”
“A certain hockey player who shall not be named?” Willow made a face.

Memories. Pain. Sierra was still getting over Rhett, in many ways. “Exactly. She’s going to get in over her head, sacrifice her future, and get her heart broken.”

“No flashbacks there,” Willow said.

“Right. But I also know that she trusts me, and I don’t want to wreck that,” Sierra said. “So, I agreed to let her tell Ian about her plans on her own—tonight, at dinner.”

Willow’s mouth made a round O of understanding.

“So, you can see why this is not a date.”

But Willow didn’t nod. “Or…you’re there to help keep Ian calm. To make sure she tells him the truth, and to be his friend. Which is the basis of all good relationships.”

Sierra gave her a look. “It wouldn’t work, Willow. I’m not in Ian’s league—”

“Hardly! He’s not in your league!”

“That’s nice of you to say, but take one good look at my closet. Thrift store dresses, faded, worn jeans, yoga pants, and printed T-shirts. Do any of these outfits say ‘country club’ to you?”

Willow had gotten off the bed, came to stand beside her. “Funny, Ian never seemed very country club to me. But he’s got the hot, billionaire cowboy look down in spades.”

Yeah, Ian had all the big toys and fancy house trappings of his wealth, but no, he hadn’t exactly adopted the playboy lifestyle. Most of the time he hung around in his faded jeans and a T-shirt, occasionally throwing on a sports jacket, and wore cowboy boots instead of fancy dress shoes.

Although Ian could easily grace Page Seven of any paper with his rugged good looks, the way he kept himself toned, working out in his private gym. More than once Sierra had stood paralyzed in the hallway watching him workout, attack the hanging bag, his stomach muscles in ripples, his biceps thick in his arms.

This was getting way too personal for her own good.

“I should call and cancel.”

“Or—” Willow reached into the closet and pulled out a coral eyelet sundress with a scooped neck, conservative but pretty. “You could put this on, leave your hair down, paint those toenails, put on
a pair of sandals, and help distract Ian from the Drama Bomb Esme is about to drop.” Willow winked.

“Maybe even hang around for the messy aftermath and do some clean up.”

“You’re way too romantic, Willow. This isn’t going to end well.”

“You’re not romantic enough, Sierra. I promise, you listen to me, and you’ll end up in Mr. Wonderful’s arms.”

“Yeah, trying to keep him from strangling his niece.”

“Then you’ll save a life, too.”

Three hours later, Sierra felt pretty sure the life she should be saving was her own as she walked through the Golf Club dining room to Ian Shaw’s table. He’d chosen a table in a private alcove in the main dining room. A fire flickered in the giant river stone fireplace, a violinist accompanied the pianist at the grand piano in the corner.

Ian rose to greet her. Tonight he looked more billionaire than cowboy. He wore a gray summer suit, something tailored for his wide shoulders, trim waist, strong legs. A white shirt and gray tie. Behind his tight smile, something tentative hovered in his eyes, and it brought her back to that odd please he’d tacked onto the end of his request.

In truth—although she hadn’t mentioned it to Willow—it scared her how much it rooted inside her, stirred dangerous feelings.

Anything for you, Ian. Frankly, it was probably the please more than anything that made her put on makeup, curl her hair, let Willow paint her toenails and convince her to drive out to the greens of the Whitefish golf course.

Please let her be a help, and not a catalyst, to disaster this evening.

“You look really nice, Sierra,” Ian said as he came around to pull out her chair.

Esme sat across from her, dressed in a simple black dress, her sunshine blonde hair up in a messy bun. She smiled at Sierra, something tight and forced.

Oh, yes, this would be fun.

“Happy birthday, Esme.”

“Thank you. Uncle Ian just gave me my present.” She opened the square velvet box and showed
Sierra the gold necklace with the pendant Ian had had made for her. She handed it to him to put it on her.

“It’s beautiful,” Sierra said, and tried to put a *have you told him yet?* into her eyes.

“I hope it’s okay,” Ian said. “We ordered bruschetta.”

She didn’t want to say that, if she considered the writhing of her stomach, probably she should stick to clear broth.

Ian smoothed his tie, sat down. Took a breath. “So, I wanted to ask you, Esme, if you’ve settled on a college yet. You have quite a pile of letters, from what Sierra says. And…” He reached into his suit coat and pulled out an envelope. “This came from Yale.”

He added a smile, so much pride in it, Sierra wanted to reach out, touch his hand, give it a squeeze.

*Brace yourself.*

Esme, however, took the envelope with more excitement than Sierra would have expected.

“Really?”

“I called the admissions office, so I know—they moved you off the wait list. You’re accepted for this fall.”

Esme opened the envelope, scanned it. “You’re right—they’re holding a space for me.”

Without a doubt, Ian had something to do with this opportunity, but Sierra didn’t ask, just held her breath.

*Please tell him, Esme.* Because Sierra couldn’t bear all this joy on Ian’s face. Or his words.

“You know, if you want to go to Yale, your way is paid.”

He’d always been a generous man, but when Esme moved in, all that generosity had a focus, a plan.

It wasn’t Esme’s fault her mother had made one mistake after another, her life in constant financial and relational disaster. If Ian hadn’t taken Esme, they’d probably be living in their car. And if Esme didn’t choose, right now, this moment, she might end up—

“Thank you, Uncle Ian!” Esme got up, threw her arms around him.
Oh.
Um.

Esme sat back down. Her eyes were actually filled with tears.

Huh.

And what about Dante? Sierra stared at Esme, her smile fading, her gaze burrowing into her. Tell him. Esme avoided her gaze

The waiter came with bruschetta.

Sierra had lost her appetite.

Maybe the girl needed a little nudge. “I’m sure Dante will really miss you when you leave for college.”

Esme smiled. “He will. But he’ll be busy, too. I told Uncle Ian our plans—how Dante’s going to join the navy.”

Oh.

Sierra glanced at Ian. “And you’re okay with that?”

Ian reached for a bruschetta. “I think military service is perfect for a kid like Dante. He’ll thrive there.”

Now she was completely baffled.

“And what about Dante and Esme?”

Ian looked at her. “I suppose they’ll figure it out.”

Figure. It. Out.

She looked at Esme again, who just smiled at her. Bit into her appetizer.

Okay, something didn’t smell right, but Sierra hadn’t a clue how to sniff it out without outing Esme right here in the middle of the country club dining room. The drama just might make the Flathead Valley paper, and she couldn’t do that to Ian.

But, she had an obligation to Ian. “So, Esme, I was wondering if Dante is going on the camping trip this weekend?”

She expected Esme to flush, maybe shift uncomfortably, but the girl simply lifted a shoulder.
“Yeah. He’ll be there. We’re going to hike to the Glacier Park Chalet.” She looked straight up at Sierra, her blue eyes suddenly a very mature cold.

Something was rotten in the state of Denmark. Sierra had been a sneaky teenager once. Knew a few tricks. Sierra turned to Ian. “I was wondering if you were serious today, Ian, with your idea of going camping with us. It’ll be fun.”

Ian looked at her then, put down his bread. And suddenly his guarded look dropped, something of warmth lit his eyes. “Really?”

She glanced at Esme, whose smile had vanished, and yep, Sierra knew it. The girl hadn’t told him everything.

But Esme could hardly escape telling Ian the truth when it showed up right in front of him, as Esme and Dante gave in to the urge to snuggle in front of a campfire, or sneak off to go stargazing.

Sierra wouldn’t have to tell Ian anything—he’d figure it out on his own.

“Yeah. It’ll be fun. I made cookies.” And then, just for good measure, and because, well, she hadn’t thought it all the way through, she added a wink.

Really, Sierra? Maybe that was a little over the top. Especially when Ian gave her a surprised smile, a texture in his eyes she’d never seen before. Warmth, even delight.

It ignited inside her all those things she’d tried to keep tamped away, the dark wishes she harbored as she stood outside his world.

It was better, however, than the turn-her-to-ash glare Esme was leveling at her from across the table.

“I’m in,” he said. “Sounds like fun.”

Oh, yeah. Fireworks, parades, and bonfires.

Except, in her gut, she knew someone was going to get burned.
Chapter 4

Ian took a resounding hit to his jaw, the pain blooming through his face. He dodged back.

“Keep your hands up,” Deputy Sam Brooks said, a gleam in his eye as if Ian hadn’t landed a solid left jab in his gut only moments before, Ian had met the younger man through his sparring coach—Smoke Dillinger. Sam had no problem showing up to go a few rounds against Ian and, as evident from the darkness in his blue eyes and the way he went after Ian, he clearly had a few demons he was trying to escape.

Still, Sam was the closest thing Ian had to a real friend in Mercy Falls.

Around them, in Dillinger’s Gym, locals gathered as Sam and Ian sparred UFC style in the center ring. The musky smell of sweat layered the walls, hung in the air. Not far away, someone banged away at a speed bag. Others jumped rope. The low afternoon shadows streaked the wood floor a rich umber.

Ian’s body burned with the blows Sam delivered, his brain clearly not on the pseudo-fight.

Sam came around, hooked his leg around Ian, and threw him down. Ian rolled away before Sam could pin him.

“You okay, Ian? You’re usually faster than that,” Sam said.


But he couldn’t get Sierra’s wink out of his head. The second Sierra had looked at him with those incredible hazel-green eyes, the ones with the power to tunnel right through him, and winked, his heart had simply stopped beating.

Sam’s right hook spun Ian around into the ropes.

“Okay, that’s it. What gives?” Sam asked as Ian shook it off, found his feet.

“It’s nothing.”
Sam was unstrapping his sparring gloves. “Nothing enough for me to dust the floor with you.”

Ian unstrapped his own gloves. He threw them off as he stepped out of the ring, grabbed a towel. Sam swept up a water bottle, squirted liquid into his mouth, then let it dribble over his head.

“I want to ask Sierra out.”

Sam lowered the bottle. “Seriously? Isn’t that a breach of etiquette?”

“Maybe.”

“So are you going fire her so you can date her?” Sam wound a towel around his neck. “Seems like a drastic move to get a dinner date. I would think it wouldn’t be that hard for you to find a woman willing to spend a couple hours over candlelight and steak, McDuck.”

“Funny. I don’t want a date. I want...I like Sierra. She’s kind, and generous and thoughtful.” Actually, that didn’t even come close to all the ways she made his life feel whole.

“And, she’s your assistant.”

“I know.”

“So, then you are going to fire her.”

“No!” He picked up his own water bottle, headed to the locker room. Sam followed him.

Ian banged his way inside, opened his locker. Hung his hand on it. “I don’t want her to work for anyone else. Show up to organize some other man’s life, laugh at his lousy jokes, send him funny memes…” Generally, fill another man’s life with sunshine and hope? “No way.”

Sam had picked up his shampoo, another towel. “Which means what? An inappropriate boss-employee relationship? I’m starting to get a queasy feeling.”

Ian, too. He headed to the showers.

“She invited me camping,” he said over the spray.

“Alone?” Sam said from his cubicle.

“Alone?” Sam said from his cubicle.

“No—with the youth group, tomorrow.”

“I’m going on that, too,” Sam said. “But there’s your chance. You’re on neutral ground, champ. Woo her there, and then see what happens.”

Yes. Ian could take her on a romantic walk, let the sprinkle of stars and the stir of the night
sounds woo her into his arms. And then he’d softly suggest he didn’t want to be her boss—or only her boss—anymore.

He could have both, right? And he sort of hoped, crazily, that she might be thinking the same thing. Why else would she invite him along?

Yes, Glacier National Park, with its sweeping views, was exactly the place to convince her to see the bigger picture. That they could have both worlds.

He just had to get her alone.

He spent the next twenty-four hours armed with that thought.

About twenty-five kids jammed into the Mercy Fall Community Church the next morning. Ian had been surprised to see Chet King helming the expedition along with Ruthann, his wife. She looked better—her hair growing back, a little tan, only the slightest scars of the cancer that had ravaged her body this winter.

Sam pulled up in his truck and made a point of meeting Ian’s eyes, glancing at Sierra. Grinning.

Yes, she was there. Wearing a pair of green cargo pants, hiking boots, and a sleeveless shirt, her sleek black ponytail snaking out the back of a baseball hat. She looked about twenty-one, fresh, and suddenly way too young for Ian.

Oops. He’d forgotten that part. That, really, he had nearly eight years on her.

What had he been thinking? But Ian didn’t have a chance to flee, because Chet reeled him in as if he belonged instead of only stepping into church for the first time since arriving in Mercy Falls. “I need you to chaperone, keep an eye on the boys.”

“No problem,” Ian said, casting his gaze toward Esme hanging out with Dante. Ian hoped that she’d use this trip to break the news that she planned on heading East at the end of the summer. No need to lead Dante on or let him pine for her even if they had made plans to date long distance.

But, he made a point of pulling Willow, who seemed to be one of the junior leaders, aside to quietly ask her to assign Esme to Sierra’s tent.
It didn’t hurt to have another set of eyes on his niece. He’d been camping in the park before—things happened, people got hurt, went missing. Especially in a crowd this size.

The crew took a couple SUVs and the church van up to the Trail of the Cedars, where they parked, hauled in their gear to the campground, then started their adventure.

They hiked up Avalanche Creek to Avalanche Lake, an easy trek for the group on a boardwalk that cut through hemlock and fragrant red cedar. Ian barely noticed, his eyes on Sierra, who talked with one of the girls, the sound of her occasional laughter finding him like a breeze, urging him forward. He’d nearly sidled up to her at the footbridge that overlooked the gorge.

But he’d been distracted by the sight of Dante leaning in behind Esme. Uh, too close, buddy.

The group took off then, heading into a steep climb, and he’d stayed back, helping a couple of stragglers.

They passed an area of downed trees, the evidence of a recent avalanche, and then finally emerged to the expansive view of the lake, sitting at the base of Bearhat Mountain. The jagged skyline of the Rocky Mountains, the reflection of the pine trees and blue sky on the mirrored surface, all conspired to remind him, just for a moment, why he’d moved to Montana.

Peace. The hope of something new.

He spied Sierra sitting on the rocky beach of the lake, leaning back on her hands, soaking in the sun. Her eyes closed in repose as the sun kissed her skin.

She looked relaxed and not at all the jumpy assistant he’d asked to dinner.

Right then, Willow sat down next to her and Sierra opened her eyes. Caught Ian looking at her and smiled, something sweet.

He could count the hike worth it, right then.

And then he spotted Dante and Esme holding hands down by the water.

*Be rational, man.* He heard his own voice in counsel, but couldn’t breathe watching them, an irrational urge churning inside to stride across the beach and wrench their hands apart. Dante wasn’t a big kid, but sturdy enough, with broad shoulders and a look about him that suggested he could handle himself, maybe had some practice. He wore a thermal shirt, hiked up, a pair of faded jeans, Converse tennis
shoes. And a proprietary look in his eyes when he gazed down at Esme.

He kissed her, and Ian nearly came out of his skin.

“Calm down.”

Sierra, who could probably read his thoughts, of course. She’d come over without him realizing it and now touched his arm.

“He’s trouble,” he muttered and turned away, his mood sour.

He hiked back to the campground, his gaze fixed on Dante and Esme, who’d stopped holding hands, God rest their souls. When they reached the site, Chet assigned Ian duties to set up tents on the boys’ side.

Ian made sure Dante set up his tent about a mile from Sierra and Esme’s.

They divided into groups, making dinner. Esme and Sierra helped Willow, and Ian gladly fetched firewood for the bonfire located on the girls’ side of camp.

They ate dinner of pigs in a blanket—dough wrapped around hot dogs and grilled over the fire. A young man named Jared pulled out a guitar and led them in camp songs as the fire shot sparks into the sky. A thin breeze whispered through the trees and overhead, the stars blinked on.

He searched for Sierra, and found her seated across from him on a log. She sat next to, of all people, Sam, laughing at something he said. Ian didn’t mean to stare, but he couldn’t seem to look away, caught by her smile, the way she pulled her hair free, gathered it back up in a braid.

For a second, she looked up at him. Her eyes widened and then she looked away.

Interesting, and it ignited the urge to get up, move over to her side of the fire.

Then Esme slid down to the ground in front of Dante, and Dante began to give her a backrub. Every nerve along Ian’s spine buzzed and he wanted to shout hand-check!

No one else seemed to notice, however.

He looked again to Sierra for reinforcement, and discovered that she’d gotten up. He followed her to the table and found her opening a bag of marshmallows.

“S’mores?” Ian asked, and she nodded. The firelight caught the hazel in her eyes, turned it gold.

The moonlight shimmered on her hair.
“No camping trip is complete without roasted marshmallows.” She grabbed a plastic container.

“But you’ve never had s’mores until you’ve had them between chocolate chip cookies.”

“That’s why you were baking.”

She opened the container. “Help yourself, Mr. Shaw.”

His hand stopped in midair. “Sierra. Really? Out here, please, let me be Ian.”

She nodded, her smile tight.

“Okay, that’s it.” He took the container from her hands, set it on the picnic table. “Talk to me. What is it—are you still angry about the skydiving thing? I had everything under control—”

“I know.” She swallowed though, and her eyes drifted to the group, then back to him.

Huh. “Then why do I feel like I’m in the doghouse? You’re about as friendly as a polar bear—”

“I can’t tell you!”

She’d cut her voice low and sharp, and in the aftermath of her words, winced.

“What—?”

“Oh, Mr.—er, Ian—I’m so sorry.” She actually looked stricken, her eyes huge in her face, and for a second he thought she might cry. She set down the marshmallows and turned away from him.

“I’m handling this all wrong.”

Handling what— “Sierra, are you trying to tell me something. Like…” A thought came to him, swift and sharp. “You’re not quitting on me, are you?”

And he couldn’t douse the rise of panic, the way it twisted what-ifs inside him.

She whirled around, facing him. “What—no. I mean…I don’t want to leave you. I’m just trying to do the right thing here.”

Don’t want to— “What are you saying?”

She blinked at him. Swallowed.

And now he put his hand on the table. “Are you leaving me?”

She sighed. “Not unless you fire me. Which, oh, man…” She was shaking her head. “You might need to.”

What—? “Sierra,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to lose you.”
That silenced her, and again, her eyes widened.

He caught her gaze in his. And yeah, he meant it exactly that way. He didn’t know how they’d
gotten to the crux of the matter so quickly, but now that they were here, he wasn’t going to run. “Yeah,
you’re a great assistant—frankly, I don’t know what I’d do without you. But, if I have my choice—”

“I know, I know. Your private life is your own, and I shouldn’t stick my nose where it doesn’t
belong. I know that, believe me. And I really hate being in the middle here. But I can’t sit by and watch
you get hurt.”

And that’s what he needed. That glimmer of caring, the sense that he meant more to her than
just the guy who signed her paycheck.

He wanted to take her hand. Instead, he turned his voice warm. “Listen. I’m not going to get
hurt. I know what I’m doing. I’m careful, not reckless. And yeah, if it freaks you out too much for me
to skydive, then okay. I’ll shelve that for a while.”

She blinked at him. “Right. Okay. Yeah.” She blew out a breath. “I’d thought you’d figured it
out.”

Huh?

“Oh, Ian.” She sighed, looked away.

“Look out!” He turned and saw that someone had put a branch on the fire, something green
and full of pine cones. They snapped and exploded, hurling giant sparks into the night. Campers fled
as the sparks chased them.

The embers landed on the loamy soil, lighting old needles aflame. Ian jumped on one near his
foot, then another.

And then, with a whoosh, a spark landed on one of the nearby tents. It began to melt, the cin-
ders falling on the sleeping bags inside.

“Water!”

He wasn’t sure who yelled it—maybe Chet, but Ian grabbed the jug from the table and tossed it
to Sam, who caught it and headed to the tent.

Esme’s tent. Confirmed by Sierra’s gasp as her sleeping bag flamed.
“Where’s Esme?”

He looked around the fire, at the group, didn’t spot her. “Esme!” Oh, let her not have gone to bed—

“She went for a walk, with Dante,” someone said.

A walk. With Dante?

But his brain didn’t have time to flash over, because Sierra took his hand. “C’mon,” she said.

“We’ll find her.”

For a second, he didn’t move, her grip in his, and then she tugged him down the trail.

“Where are we going?”

“Think like a teenage boy,” Sierra said grimly, and he knew the answer.

“The bridge?”

“My guess, too,” Sierra said. She dropped his hand.

He could have used her grip, because as they jogged down the boardwalk, as the forest opened up, as the smell of the river layered the air, a sick feeling rose in his gut.

The kind that told him that maybe he hadn’t been as successful pulling Esme out of Dante’s arms as he’d hoped.

And maybe Sierra sensed that because as they came closer, the sound of their footsteps muffled by the night sounds, the rush of the river in the canyon, she took his hand. “Stay calm.”

Why?

But that was all the warning he got before he spotted them. Thankfully, still fully clothed—but he wasn’t kidding himself. The way they were tangled up on the overlook bench suggested that maybe they were way too familiar with each other’s bodies. Esme sat straddled on Dante’s lap, and even in the dim light of the moon, Ian could see Dante’s hand move out of the back of her shirt.

Stay calm?

#
“Are you kidding me?” Ian’s voice sliced through the night.

Sierra actually felt a little sorry for Esme as she sprang off Dante’s lap, rearranging herself. Thankfully, the darkness gave her padding, the evidence of their tryst murky. Which, for Ian’s sake, was probably a good thing. He didn’t need anything beyond his imagination to rile him.

“It’s not what it looks like—” Esme said.

Ian held up his hand, a stiff palm to her words. “Not. Now.” He turned to Dante, and even in the dim moonlight, Sierra thought she saw the boy pale. He’d already found his feet, now backed up against the railing.

Oh, now she felt guilty, despite the fact her plan had worked brilliantly.

“Dante, you need to let go of my niece and leave. Right. Now,” Ian said friendly enough, but enough fury right under his tone that Sierra held her breath.

Dante stood there, cast a look at Esme, back to Ian. “No. I love her and—”

“Now.” Ian repeated, and took a step toward him. Standing a good six inches over Dante, Ian exuded the girth and power of a man who spent time testing himself. His chest rose and fell, as if reining himself in. “That’s the last time I tell you.”

A little shiver snaked through Sierra. Dante swallowed, his expression stripped.

“Go, Dante,” Esme said from where she stood behind Sierra. “I need to talk to Uncle Ian.”

Understatement. But Sierra took that as her clue, too.

Except, as she turned to leave, Ian held out his hand and caught her. And when his gaze turned to her, his blue eyes solemn, rife with darkness, she couldn’t move. “Stay.”

Ho-kay.

And whose idea was it to invite Ian on this camping trip? Suddenly, Sierra wished she could time travel back to the moment when she knocked on Esme’s door and, well, not.

Except, then what? Esme gets her heart broken, or worse, derails her entire life? Sierra wanted to turn to her and say, Trust Me. If you walk away now, it’ll save a world of hurt.

Although, by Esme’s expression as she looked up at Ian, part hurt, part fury, Sierra guessed the pain was just starting.
“Uncle Ian, I was going to tell you—”

“Tell me what? I’m pretty bright. I think I can figure it out all on my own.”

And that’s when Esme looked at Sierra. Silence, and Sierra held her breath, met her eyes.

Really? She used her best ESP, and not a little body language—a raised eyebrow, a shrug of her shoulders to ask, *You want me to tell him about our meet-up in your bedroom?*

Esme, clearly thought Sierra already had because she blew out a breath, what seemed like relief, and Sierra braced herself for more lies.

“Dante and I are in love.”

Okay, good start.

“We want to be together.”

And she had to give the girl points for courage.

Ian didn’t move, his jaw tight, the slightest wind bullying his hair. The night had thickened with the sounds of the creek, the swish of the trees, a screech of an owl, bobcats, and cicadas.

“What about Yale?” Ian asked quietly.

Sierra could admit she expected something louder. Not that Ian was a violent man, but he certainly lived life in large and exuberant ways. Strangely, he just stood there, letting the silence punish Esme as she shifted, drawing her arms around herself.

Then Sierra looked at him and her breath dropped away. He wore so much hurt in his eyes, he looked as if Esme had driven her fist into his heart.

“I want to go to Yale. I really do. But I don’t want to lose Dante.”

Ian took a breath. “I know, to you, this will sound trite, but if you truly love each other, then distance won’t tear you apart.” He sounded a little like he might be negotiating a deal.

Esme bit her lip, looked away.

And Sierra got it. “You’re afraid if he leaves, then he’ll forget about you. Find someone else.”

Esme lifted a shoulder, and in that second she wasn’t the rich niece of a billionaire uncle, but the daughter of a woman whose life was in ruins.

And quickly believing the lies that landed her mother in one dubious relationship after another,
and every time, deeper in trouble.

“Esme, sweetie,” Sierra said. “This has nothing to do with Dante. I know you’re scared—going
to college is a huge step. But you are smart and beautiful and you need to believe in yourself and your
abilities enough to take this chance. To go to Yale and do something with your life. That chance is right
now.” She touched Esme’s shoulder. “And if you don’t take it, you’ll never know what you could have
been. What you could have had.” No testimonies here, but if she needed it, Sierra would sit her down,
unravel a few of her own mistakes.

Not that she particularly minded where she’d ended up. But God had done that part—given her
this amazing job. And right now, she desperately hoped she hadn’t blown it.

Esme looked up, met Sierra’s eyes. “But Dante loves me.”

Sierra dropped her hand. Sighed.

“So do I,” Ian said, his tone suddenly tight, no more negotiations. “Which means that I’m not
going to let you throw away your life. After we get home from this camping trip, you’re saying good-bye
to Dante, and we’re packing up and heading East. We’ll find a place there, get you settled, and you’ll at-
tend Yale in the fall.”

He made it sound very much like he’d be there to make sure it happened, too.

Esme’s mouth tightened as she looked at Ian.

“You can’t make me—”

“No,” he said. “I can’t. And I won’t. What I will do is remind you that you can’t have it both
ways. Either you hold onto Dante and throw away an incredible opportunity, or you choose your future.
Be smart, Esme.”

She stared at him then, and Sierra saw where she got her quiet, angry strength.

“Fine,” she said finally, her eyes watery. “You win, Uncle Ian. I’ll break up with Dante in the
morning.” She turned and headed up the trail.

Only then did Sierra remember they didn’t have a tent anymore. She started after her, but Ian
took her arm. “Let her go. I have no doubt Ruthann will find her a place to sleep. I am also sure Chet
brought extra blankets.”
Sierra didn’t mention her own lack of bedding. But Ian added, “And you can have my sleeping bag.”

“Ian. I need to tell you—”

“You knew.” His simple words put a knife through her chest.

“I...I knew they wanted to be together.” She didn’t mention Esme’s plan for them to run off and get married—it seemed moot now anyway. Nor did Sierra add where and how she’d found out.

Ian was already so hurt. He nodded then, turned to walk up the trail.

“Ian, I’m sorry.”

“That’s why you wanted me to come on this camping trip, wasn’t it?” His question was soft, almost resigned.

She nodded, unable to say the words. And with the solemn expression on his face, she knew he was adding it up. She’d finagled the entire drama so she didn’t have to get in the middle. Which, of course, put her exactly in the middle.

He said nothing as they walked back to camp. The other campers had put out the fire in the tent and managed to pull out her blackened sleeping bag. Miraculously, Esme’s remained unharmed and she had joined the girls in the next tent.

Ian went straight to his tent and grabbed out his bag, brought it to Sierra.

“What about you?” she asked, not touching it. “I dragged you into this mess, I think you should keep it.”

“Don’t make me into a jerk. Take the bag, Sierra.” He used his boss voice.

But she still couldn’t touch it, so he tossed it onto a bench, then sat down in front of the fire, his back to a log, arms folded.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t sleep. Might as well make sure we don’t have any other catastrophes tonight.”

Around them, the tents were zipped, lights shone against fabric walls. The fire crackled, and she picked up a piece of firewood, tossed it onto the embers. A flame reached up, curled around the log.

Then, she took the sleeping bag, zipped it open, and sat down next to Ian.
“What are you doing?”

“Sitting with you.” She put the sleeping bag over her lap, extended it to him.

He looked at her, the firelight flickering against the red of his hair, into his dark blue eyes. “You don’t have to do that.”

Her heart bled a little for him. “I want to.”

He swallowed, looked away, into the flames. His jaw was so tight, the flames flickering against the harsh planes, and she had the feeling he’d like a go at his hanging bag in his gym.

Silence, and then, quietly, “You know why I jump out of planes and climb mountains, and drive fast cars?”

“No.”

“I don’t have a death wish or anything. It just…it fills me up. Makes me feel like I’m not the guy who once slept in his car for three months. Not the guy who used to collect pop cans so I could turn them in for pennies to buy hot dogs for me and my sister. When I climb a mountain or dive deep into the sea I remind myself that I’m not that desperate, terrified kid anymore. And if I’m afraid, it’s because I choose to be, not because life kicked the stuffing out of me or put me on my face.”

She longed to touch him, to put her hand on his. Instead, “I didn’t know you were so poor, Ian.”

He lifted a shoulder. “We probably should’ve been in foster care. My mom bounced in and out of our lives and my father tried—he worked as a hired man for the local ranches. But we didn’t always have good housing, and then we’d sleep in the car. We went to school every day, so we were safe and fed there, but at night... Sometimes he didn’t come home.”

“Your dad left you in your car?”

“It was an old station wagon—the seats went down. And I was maybe ten or twelve, so big enough to take care of myself and my sister. She was three years younger than me.”

“You were ten, Ian. You think you were old enough to keep you and your sister safe in a car, alone?”

“It wasn’t all the time—just when he was desperate, or in between gigs. He’d get depressed and
then he’d start drinking…”

She went quiet. The fire snapped and a log crashed into the bed of embers. Sparks bit the sky.

“The worst part wasn’t sleeping in the car. I didn’t mind that—we had cardboard we’d put up over the windows, and blankets and pillows. It was south Texas. It wasn’t cold. Often. And Dad tried. But life always seemed to crash over him, take him down.”

He grew silent, as if he were watching something replay from his past.

“The worst part was when Mom came back. She’d find us—usually because my dad would track her down in some small-town bar, or we’d run into her with another cowboy. And then Dad would try to convince her to come back. Sometimes she did. For about two years, she and Dad moved in together and he got a long-term job at a stockyard. We got this little house, and she was mostly home when we got home from school.” His face grew hard and he drew a breath. “I let my guard down. Started to expect her to be there. Sometimes she’d make us graham crackers with frosting on it, and have it waiting for us. Just like a real mom.”

Sierra couldn’t stop herself. She slid her hand over his arm, wrapped her hand around his bicep, holding on. He didn’t move.

“And then, one day I came home and she wasn’t there.”

Her throat thickened, imagining a russet-haired, freckled, skinny kid looking for his mother, his heart breaking at the echo in the house.

“I had this permission slip to join the football team. I was harboring this hope that she’d come to my games, that she’d be proud of me…” He shook his head. “I never joined the team. Debate club instead. And the science fair. I actually won as a senior.”

He didn’t say it, and she imagined that the worst day of his life might have been when his mother hadn’t shown up for that win.

“I decided somewhere in there that it didn’t matter—that if I wanted something, I couldn’t wait for people to show up in my life and give it to me. I graduated at the top of my class, got one of the highest SAT scores in the state, which is how I got into Stanford. My father was there when I graduated high school, sitting in the back, sober and shaved. He died about a year later.”

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“While you were at Stanford.”

“And my sister was sixteen, wild, angry and by that time, pregnant with Esme. I came home, tried to get her to move to California with me, but she insisted on living with Esme’s father. The next time I saw her, she was in the hospital. He’d beaten her, and she’d given birth early.”

“Oh my.”

“I should have figured it out then—that she couldn’t pull herself out of the darkness. And I was too selfish to step in and save her. I had my own life, my own plans.”

“But you did step in.”

He glanced at the tent, then scrubbed a hand down his face. “Maybe too late.”

“No. Esme is smart. She loves Dante, but she isn’t going to sacrifice her future for him.” Please, let her words be true.

But Sierra well remembered herself, the day Rhett walked out the door, his hockey bag hanging over his shoulder, on the way to Minnesota, one airline ticket in his hand.

He hadn’t even looked back. And the only memento of their three years of dating, two of them with his ring on her finger, had been a basket of smelly socks and his torn Whitefish Wolverine’s jersey.

Ian closed his eyes, shook his head. “I’ve spent the past year hoping I wasn’t too late. Hoping that maybe this was my chance to make things right. And then, when everything seems golden, I see Dante with his hands on her—”

He fist his hands on his knees, flexed them. “I really wanted to hurt him.”

Sierra swallowed, kept her voice even. “I know. And I shouldn’t have invited you on this trip—or…I don’t know. I wanted you to find out and stop her, but…”

He looked at her, his blue eyes on her as if seeing her, really, for the first time since they sat down. “You were caught in the middle.”

She nodded. Then, to her surprise, he touched her hand, still clutching his arm. “You’re a good friend, Sierra.”

Oh. Because at his touch, her mouth dried, and suddenly her entire body heated, a warmth that could only mean trouble. “I’m just, um, doing my job.”
Nice. Because, no, her job description didn’t include sitting under a sleeping bag with him while the campfire crackled and stirred sparks into the night.

A lot of sparks, especially with his strong, warm, fingers woven into hers. She was curled up against him, her shoulder tucked behind his, his leg pressed against hers, and suddenly she was very, painfully, aware of his body, solid and warm next to her.

A good friend. Yeah, well, perhaps she was trying to be, but right now all sorts of crazy not-just-friend thoughts scrambled into her head. Like the desire for him to move his arm, put it around her, pull her close to him.

And then, he did.

As if he might be reading her mind, he simply lifted his arm, as natural as if they’d been together for years, and drew it around her.

Heaven help her, she let him, nestled in his embrace.

“You cold?” he said.

No. “It’s nippy out.”

He nodded. “You should go to bed.”

“And leave you here in the cold? I don’t think so.”

Oh, Sierra, what are you doing?

He smelled smoky, a hint of pine in his flannel shirt, and she gave in to the urge to relax against him.

It was more delicious than she’d imagined, his body firm and safe, his shoulder the perfect pocket for her head. She closed her eyes, sighed...

Really, what was she doing?

She took a breath, sat up. “Sorry.”

“For what?” He hadn’t pulled his arm away.

“I just...I’m sorry. I’m not trying to come on to you.”

“What—? Sierra, you’re not coming on to me. It’s cold out and—”

“I mean—you’re warm, and comfy and there’s lots to like, but—”
And now her face felt hot as their words tangled. Lots to like?

Yes, lots and lots, but, “I’m sorry, Mr. Shaw.”

His mouth tightened. “C’mon, Sierra. Why are you calling me Mr. Shaw again?”

She pushed away from him and he released her with a sigh. “Because you’re my boss. And I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I am your friend. But I’m not trying to be anything else but that.”

She held his eyes then, hoping to hide the traitorous what-ifs still lingering in them.

He considered her without speaking, and she just wanted to slink away, but the man had been through enough hurt tonight. And he did need a friend, so, “I just want you to know that I’m always here for you…as a friend. And an assistant, of course.”

Then he sighed. “Right. Thank you, Sierra.”

“You’re welcome—”

“Please don’t say, ‘Mr. Shaw.’”

Oh. Fine. “Ian.”

His smile was sad though, his eyes so blue in the firelight that she just wanted to take back her words, pull his arms around her. Even—yeah, sink into the romance of the campfire, the dark velvety sky overhead, the dance of the wind in the pine.

Open up her heart and confess that she’d never leave him. Because, sadly, while she could only be just friends, she hadn’t learned her lesson from Rhett.

She gave her heart away to men who didn’t really want it. So, yeah, that made her pitiful, but frankly she couldn’t imagine her life without Ian Shaw.

Didn’t want to. And even if he never loved her back, she’d be here.

Ready to pick up the pieces.

So she settled in next to him, relishing the warmth of his shoulder, resigning herself to be content as she pulled the sleeping bag up to her chin.

Ian hunkered down next to her, said nothing.

So she filled in the words for him. “Everything is going to be all right.”

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Chapter 5

No, no it wasn't going to be all right. Because while Esme might have given in to his demands—and he felt a little like a prison warden when he'd issued his or-else, tonight Ian had gotten exactly what he'd hoped for.

A clear and present picture of just exactly where he stood with Sierra.

I just want you to know that I'm always here for you... As a friend. And an assistant, of course.

Of course.

Sierra's words lingered in Ian's head as she slipped into quietness, nestled beside him. And yeah, after she relaxed into slumber, he gave in and put his arm back around her because despite the sleeping bag, she was shivering a little.

He could kid himself all he wanted with that justification but really, if he were honest, he just needed to hold on to her, let all that warmth and hope seep into him.

And sure, it stirred to life that long simmering urge for more, but really, she'd drawn the line between them.

I am your friend. But I am not trying to be anything else but that.

If he'd had any hope lingering after the revelation that she'd invited him on this trip to reveal Esme and Dante's relationship—something he could hardly blame her for, really—it died with the way she made it abundantly clear that she wasn't coming on to him.

Roger that.

He'd tried to talk some sense into her, but she'd shut him down again with that lethal Mr. Shaw and then he had nothing.

He longed to tell her how much it meant to him to have her talk sense into Esme. How yeah, he wanted to be her friend, and more, but every time she called him by his formal name it screeched all his feelings to a halt. Not just because it made him feel like her boss, but right then, he became her old
boss. The man years older than her, and he couldn’t shake the image of the old, rich guy chasing his
cute assistant.

Then, all he had to do was remember how Sierra had laughed while talking with Deputy Sam, or
the girls on the trail, or even how she related to Esme to see how impossibly young and sweet she
was.

Ian didn’t have a right to pursue her. Just because she was in his life every day and had promised
to never leave him didn’t mean he had the right to see her as anything but what she’d claimed.

His assistant. No, lucky him, his friend.

Okay, really, he was lucky to have her as a friend.

An incredibly beautiful, kind and way-too-tempting friend. Especially when she sighed in her
sleep.

Overhead, the sky scattered stars across the bold darkness. The fire was dying, but he didn’t
want to jostle her to add fuel, so he simply leaned his head back on the log. He slid his arm away from
her and folded it over his chest. She stirred, but curled in even more to him, and he took a long, low
breath and tried to sedate his heart.

Just—only—friends.

He stared at the sky, searching for a star to wish on.

It was the clank of pots that roused him. The strike of a match, the hiss of a gas stove, the
clack of a whisk against dehydrated eggs. Then, the sizzle of bacon, and he opened his eyes.

The sun had just begun to glimmer through the trees. Someone had fed the fire—a fresh log
-crackled, the flames curling around it, and he simply longed to stay still and savor the moment.

Sierra was still curled next to him. Sometime in the night he’d turned, nestling her close. He
swallowed, and the realization that maybe others had seen them rushed through him.

He sat up, removed his arm.

Which, of course, only caused Sierra to emit a little sleeping moan.

Her eyes opened. She looked up at him, the wrinkles of his jacket pressed into her face, her
dark hair in tangles, her eyes big as she blinked, orienting herself.
“Good morning,” he said, and offered a smile.

She pushed away from him, a sheen of what looked like panic in her eyes.

Yeah, he knew what it looked like. A couple chaperones cuddling up.

He felt a little hypocritical after his reaction to Dante and Esme’s own cuddle-fest last night, but this was hardly the same thing.

Thankfully, only Chet and Ruthann were up, and now Chet came over and dropped a load of firewood next to the ring. “I was about to give you the nudge,” he said to Ian. He glanced at Sierra, who had gotten up, was brushing herself off. She took off for the facilities down the path.

Ian, too, got up, grabbing his sleeping bag.

Behind him, Ruthann was turning bacon. His stomach rumbled.

“I’m perking some coffee,” she said, not looking at him.

He didn’t know why, but he felt like a misbehaving teenager. He glanced at Chet as he began stuffing the sleeping bag in its case. “It was a cold night.”

“Mmmhmm,” Chet said, crouching by the fire. He always reminded Ian a little of Hans Solo, only older, with graying hair, a grim set to his mouth. Capable, down to earth, and pulling no punches.

“Nothing happened.” Sadly, except, well, maybe that was for the best. Because the minute Ian got back today, he was making flight arrangements for Connecticut.

Or maybe Sierra would make those arrangements. Because she was his assistant, not his girlfriend, and he knew that better than anyone. “Really, Chet. We were cold, we shared a sleeping bag, and we fell asleep. Nothing we need to go to confession about.”

Chet got up. “I’m not judging you. But I am wondering what took you so long.” He winked then, walked away, and Ian couldn’t move.

Oh, no, was it that obvious?

Clearly not to Sierra, who came back, her face refreshed, her hair tidy. She headed over to the picnic table to help Ruthann.

She only glanced once at Ian.

Gave him a smile, something cool, every bit of Mr. Shaw in it.
Ian packed his gear, noting that the boys in his assigned tent were just stirring, then returned to the smell of eggs over the campfire. Sierra handed him a tin cup of coffee.

“Thanks.”

“Everything is better with coffee.”

Yeah, maybe. And with the sun tipping the ragged pines, gilding Little Matterhorn to the south and the air fresh with the scent of the running creek, the loamy earth, yes, maybe Sierra was right.

Everything was going to be all right. And probably, he should start the day by telling Esme that.

He walked over to her tent, still zipper shut. But he could hear movement inside—the girls waking. “Hey, Esme, could I talk to you for a second?”

Silence, and Ian stood there, feeling Sierra’s gaze on him.

“Esme?”

“She’s not here, Mr. Shaw,” said a voice.

“What do you mean?”

The door zippered open, just a fraction. He could see inside—the tumbled, rumpled sleeping bags. Then a face. “She wasn’t here when we woke up—we figured she’d gone to the bathroom.”

“How long ago?”

“Maybe twenty minutes?”

He looked at Sierra, who’d stepped out of the campground ring, coming toward him. “I didn’t see her at the bathroom.”

He stared at her, nonplussed.

“The bridge?” he suggested, and she nodded.

He shoved the coffee into her hands and took off, not at a run, but yeah, something didn’t feel right. He put everything into the fact that she was probably just at the bridge, maybe thinking about her future. Figuring out the right words to say to Dante.

But, no—he stood in the expanse, listening to the rush of the creek below, just breathing, listening to his heartbeat.

Maybe she was already talking to Dante. He turned and ran back to camp.
Sierra was waiting, her arms folded over her chest, and he pinpointed her expression as worried. Especially when she looked up, bit her lip.

“She’s not there.” He marched over to Dante’s tent. “Dante, are you in there?”

No response.

He unzipped the tent.

The boys were still sleeping—and Dante’s bag lay empty. Cold, and practically untouched.

“He’s not here,” Ian said, then looked at Sierra. “He’s gone.”

Sierra was advancing toward him even before he stood up. She caught his arms, her hold firm around his biceps, her eyes pinned to his. “Ian. Just breathe. I’m sure she’s around here somewhere. You told her last night to break up with Dante, right? Maybe she’s doing that right now.”

He stared down at Sierra, so much calm in her hazel-green eyes, and it centered him, kept the panic from rising to choke him. “You’re right. She’s around here somewhere. I’m sure they’ll be back by breakfast.”

But he couldn’t eat, and by the time they’d fed the crew and the sun cleared the mountain, Ian was pacing the camp.

“Before we jump to conclusions, maybe we should send someone to Avalanche Lake,” Deputy Sam said.

“Didn’t she say that Dante was going to show her Granite Park Chalet?” Sierra added.

Ian nearly took off at a run.

Sierra grabbed his arm. “Ian—wait. We need a game plan.”

“I’m going up the trail—”

“Fine. I’m going with you. But we should spread out—send a few people down the trail toward McDonald Lodge.”

“I’ll do that,” Willow said. “Jared can help me.”

“Ruthie and I will bring the kids back. Ben’s in town, in between tours, and if we haven’t heard from you by then, he and I will head back here,” Chet said.

Ian forgot that Chet’s son, country music star Ben King, had once worked as a trail guide in the
park, during the summers.

“Thanks, Chet.”

“I’m sure they’re around somewhere—we’ll find them,” Sam said, clamping him on the shoulder. He took off down the trail to the lake.

Sierra still had a hold of his arm. He turned, about to shrug away, but to his surprise she reached down, took his hand, squeezed. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “We’ll find her.”

And right now he was very, very glad that Sierra Rose was his friend.

Ian wasn’t unraveling.

At least on the outside. However, as he bent over his massive dining room, maps of the park spread out, markers and Post-it notes detailing where the volunteers had already searched, she could see the tiny frayed edges of his control in his blood-red eyes, the ragged edge of his voice.

He hadn’t slept in three days—she was sure of that. He wore a scraggly growth of whiskers, the same shirt, now grimy from his off-trail searches, and his demeanor bespoke a man focused, driven.

She set a cup of coffee in front of him and he took it without glancing her direction. “Thanks.”

She wanted to put her hand on his back, ease the strain from between his shoulders, his neck, but that might be crossing a line in front of Deputy Sam and Sheriff Blackburn, Chet King, and his son, Ben. They stood around the table, each nursing an idea of what to do next.

She had dropped into an exhausted ball after practically running up the river to the Loop Trail, then climbing to Glacier Mountain Chalet. Although by the time they reached the chalet, the sun long past the apex of the sky, Sierra knew Esme wouldn’t be waiting for them at the top.

It simply didn’t make sense that they’d walk that far on their own. Maybe Dante didn’t realize the distance, and if Esme wanted to get him alone to break up, then the nearby bridge, or even the
quick mile hike to Avalanche Lake would have sufficed.

Unless she had different plans. The kind that included escaping the park all together with the man she couldn’t leave behind.

Sierra went to Ian’s gourmet kitchen, finished making the sub sandwiches from the fixin’s she brought from town, then put them on a plate and returned to the conversation.

“We need to check the river again. She and Dante might have had a fight, maybe fallen in…” Ian was saying, running his finger down Avalanche Creek.

“Ben and I walked that yesterday. Slowly. Took a good look down the gorge,” Chet said. “No sign of them.”

Across the table sat Ben King, who was a younger version of his father, with dark hair, pretty blue eyes, firm jaw, and a rugged, whiskered look that had every girl from Nashville to the four corners of the world swooning.

Except Sierra. Because she knew what he’d done to her best friend, how he’d broken her heart, abandoned her when she needed him most. Left Kacey to pick up the pieces and restart her life. So no, Sierra wasn’t enamored with country-singer/star Ben King. Barely spoke to him as he’d joined the search.

Especially since he hadn’t asked once about his daughter. And if he wasn’t going to ask—she wasn’t going to tell.

“It would help to get aerial eyes on the off-trail areas, just in case they’re hurt,” said Sam.

Maybe they came upon a bear and it dragged them off the trail.”

Sierra saw Ian’s breath catch, saw him draw up, sort through Sam’s words. In three days, despite the initial panic, Ian hadn’t spiraled out of control, hadn’t raised his voice, hadn’t shaken apart with fear. She had no doubt that he’d coiled all those feelings inside, into a roiling, simmering ball.

No wonder he hadn’t reached for a sandwich.

“We need more manpower, more searchers,” Ian said.

“We just don’t have it, Ian. Even if we could get volunteers, we can’t let people loose in the park. It’s too dangerous,” Sam said.
“Then we'll hire people with know-how. Trained guides and searchers. Hotshots from Jock's Jude County team—didn't you say your brother works with them?”

Pete Brooks—Sierra knew him from high school. A few years younger than herself, Pete had left town a few years ago to become a smokejumper.

“Yeah, if they're not deployed, they have the skills to help,” Sam said.

“Good. And if we can get volunteers from town, we'll give them First Responder training, teach them how to search.” He turned to Sheriff Blackburn. “Does the Mercy Falls EMS department have a chopper, or anything we can use? We could get in the air, search off-trail.”

In his early forties, with dark hair and pensive gray eyes, Randolph Blackburn had served the community his entire life, taking the helm of sheriff a couple elections ago. He stared at the map in silence, as if contemplating Ian’s words. Then, “No. We don’t have that kind of money here in Mercy Falls. There’s a rescue chopper from the hospital in Kalispell, but they don’t do Search and Rescue.”

“Then we need to get one,” Ian said. He leaned up and looked at Sierra.

Oh, the desire to go to him, pull him, even briefly, into her arms, to soothe away the cracked, red tension in his eyes with words of encouragement, poured over her.

But at the moment he was fierce and ragged and untouchable.

Besides, what would come out of her mouth probably wouldn’t be a help.

Dante and Esme weren’t in the park. Sierra knew it in her gut, her heart. Maybe Esme had meant to keep her promise, to break up with Dante. Maybe she’d even sneaked out of her tent to tell him that. But Sierra had been in love once, or thought so. And would have gone to the ends of the earth with Rhett if he'd asked her to. Would have packed up and moved to Minnesota to cheer him on as he played for the Blue Ox.

Sierra had been just that broken, just that young to believe she couldn’t live without him. And she’d seen that same look on Esme’s face that day in the bedroom.

No, they were probably in a wedding chapel in Vegas by now. But Sierra didn’t exactly know how to say that to Ian.

Not when he turned to her with so much confidence, so much need in his expression. “I need
you to find me a chopper. A rescue chopper. I don’t care what it costs—I want it here by tonight.” He
looked at Chet. “Can you fly it?”

Chet raised an eyebrow. “Of course.”

“Good.” He turned back to the table. “I’ll call Jock and see if he can send us some manpower.”

“Ian, you’re not in charge of this search,” Sheriff Blackburn said suddenly. “The last thing we
need is for you to go rogue and risk other people’s lives. Let our department handle this.”

“With what—your handful of out of shape deputies?”

“Hey—” Sam said, but Ian didn’t stop.

“I need real manpower here, Randy. I need equipment and supplies and even K-9s if we can get
them. Esme is out there, hurt, maybe dying, and we have a short window to find her. I have resources
your department couldn’t even dream of, and you haven’t a prayer of standing in my way. So, either
help me, or get out of my house.”

Sierra stilled, watching as Blackburn straightened up from the map. His jaw tightened. “I’ll give
you one more week of resources, and then we’re pulling the plug on this. It’s getting pretty cold in the
park at night, so if she’s not found in the next few days, it’s a recovery, not a rescue, anyway.” Sierra
thought Ian might go over the table at him. He sucked in a quick breath, his entire body seeming to
hum. His fists clenched at his sides. “Get. Out.”

“You have to be realistic here, Ian. She’s been gone three days. And with no water, the tempera-
tures dropping…and if she’s hurt, she would have attracted animals.”

“Sheriff, I think maybe—” Sierra started. But to her shock, Ian whirled around and strode away,
across the massive room, down the hall and straight into his office.

She stood there for a moment, then shot a glance at Sam and took off after Ian.

Ian stood with his arms braced against the window frame, staring at the mountains, visibly
shaking.

“Ian?”

“Don’t come in here, Sierra.” His voice sounded dragged from some brambled place inside.

“I’m not doing well.”
And that’s why she was here. “I know,” she said. “You can’t give up hope, no matter what Blackburn says.”

She came over to him, stood behind him, the urge to wrap her arms around his waist nearly possessing her. For a second, she was back at the campfire, his warm body against hers, protecting her from the chill of night.

She wanted to protect him back.

“Maybe she’s not even in the park,” she said tentatively. “Maybe she and Dante ran away—”

“No.” He rounded on her. “No, Sierra. She did not run away with Dante.” His eyes betrayed the stress of no sleep, of worry. But his voice didn’t waver. “She told me she would break up with him. Said she’d move East, to Yale…” He ran a hand through his hair. “She wouldn’t lie to me.”

Sierra wanted to open her mouth, contradict him, but tears had welled in his eyes.

So he’d been thinking the same thing she had. Except, he didn’t know about their plans to marry, right? But he was still talking.

“She knew I just wanted to help her—and she wouldn’t just…just leave me. Just run away.”

He closed his eyes then, his jaw tightening, as if scrabbling for control.

“Ian, she is a teenager in love, not rational, not smart—”

“Shut up!”

She stilled as he walked away from her. “That’s not how it happened.” He took a breath. “Dante did this.”

Sierra went cold at his tone, his words.

“She probably woke him up early, walked him away from camp to tell him that she was leaving him, and he lost it.” His voice sounded funny as he looked up at her, and she could nearly see the scenario playing in the back of his desperate imagination. “He got angry and did something terrible to her. Left her there in the woods to die, and ran.”

Ian swallowed, his blue eyes thick with emotion. “She’s out there, hurt and dying, and she needs me. I’m not giving up on her.”

Oh, Ian. She couldn’t let him wander down this road, all the way to fury, to grief.
“Ian, think about it for a moment. Esme agreed to your terms so easily. Could it be that she was already planning on running away? Eloping?” She bit her lip, hoping her words might clear the fog.

“Dante even stood up to you, said he wanted to marry her. That doesn’t sound like a kid who would kill the woman he loved.”

“It could have been an accident,” Ian said softly.

“Ian—”

He held up his hand, stiff arm to her words. Then he closed his eyes, winced, rubbed a thumb and forefinger through them. And when he opened his eyes again, something had shifted. A darkness, a resolve.

“She’s out there, Sierra. And I’m going to find her.” His jaw hardened. “And either you’re with me, or you, too, can leave.”

She blinked at him, his words hollowing her out, leaving her raw, undone. Especially when he stared down at her, nothing of warmth, all business.

And what could she do? Because, what if he was right? She had no right to convince him to give up the search. Not if Dante had freaked out, done something horrible. Not if Esme was out there, lost and hurt.

“I’ll find us a chopper, Mr. Shaw,” she said quietly, and headed to her office.
Chapter 6

Cold and grimy, Ian stood in the shower, bracing himself against the tile as the hot water sluiced over his shoulders. He closed his eyes, fatigue rattling through him, threatening to take him out, collapse him right here under his rainfall showerhead.

Two weeks.

He’d galvanized all his resources. He’d purchased a Bell 426 chopper and hired Chet to fly it. Then he hired the Jude County Hotshots, as well as a few smokejumpers, to tramp through the woods and search every craggy overhang, root through the crannies and caves of Avalanche Creek canyon. Deputy Sam had recruited volunteers from Mercy Falls and put them through a quick First Responder course, assigned them into search groups, and they’d covered all the camping sites as well as the more traveled trails.

Ian spent hours studying aerial maps and rode along with Chet on countless search grids, binoculars pressed to his eyes. He even brought in a K-9 unit from Colorado.

And then, last night, snow fell on the mountains to the north, evidence that winter edged down upon them. Sure, it was probably two months away, the crisp, icy nights, but with the temperatures dropping into the low thirties, Esme could easily descend into hypothermia.

Unless someone had found her already. He considered that possibility and purchased time with the local affiliates, creating Have You Seen This Girl PSAs. He’d made posters, put her picture in every paper in a hundred-mile radius. Interviewed every hiker who’d stayed at the Avalanche Campground that night.

No one saw a teenage boy trying to kill his girlfriend.

Esme had simply vanished. With Dante.

Ian couldn’t bear the thought that she’d run away.

He stood up, shut off the water, and grabbed a towel. Outside, thunder rolled and rain chipped
at his window. He wound the towel around his waist and wiped a hand across the moisture in the mirror. His hollow eyes stared back, revealing a gaunt worn, whiskered face.

He’d lost about ten pounds over the past fortnight, but even now, he had no appetite, his stomach in knots.

_God—where is she?_  
The thought bubbled up from him, surprised him, and he shook it away.

God hadn’t been around to help him, ever. Ian didn’t know why he even thought of turning to Him now.

Except, maybe he could blame Sierra, who’d told him that people at the church had formed prayer groups, keeping a vigil. Not that he was opposed to God stepping in to help.

He just wasn’t holding his breath.

He towed off his hair—didn’t bother to comb it or shave, and got dressed in a pair of track pants and a white undershirt and went barefoot downstairs. He pressed his hand against his growling stomach.

“Sierra?” He stopped by his office, saw hers dark, and his jaw tightened. Not that he expected her to be there late on a Sunday afternoon. But he would have liked to have someone to help him talk through today’s failure, the fact that the rain had sent him and Chet home. The chopper he’d purchased now sat in the yard by Chet’s big barn. The Jude County Hotshots had deployed to a fire in Idaho. Even Sam, who’d stayed on the search after Blackburn ordered the office to stand down, had gone home, soggy, despondent. Ian had read the words in Sam’s eyes. Time to call it quits.

Yeah, he needed to talk to Sierra. Even with the distance she’d put between them since their showdown in his office. She’d returned to calling him Mr. Shaw, her demeanor perfunctory and diligent, lining up search schedules, feeding the crew, keeping track of the search grids, even downloading weather maps and flight conditions.

Sierra had turned into an SAR machine.

She had clearly chosen to be _with him_, and he could hardly believe he’d given her that ultimatum. Had turned into such a jerk. How he’d wanted to take the words back as soon as they were issued, but
perhaps, yes, it was for the best.

Ian had no room in his life for anything but finding Esme.

The silences echoed in the house as he walked down the wood floor, barefoot. His giant stone fireplace loomed over the family room, casting shadows into the vaulted area, the dark leather sofas. The maps still draped the tables, marked up, revealing their failures.

He walked to the kitchen, opened up his fridge, and stared at the contents. A half-jar of mayonnaise, one lone pickle, three slices of bread, a bottle of ketchup. Ian closed the fridge, pressed his hand on the cool stainless door. Maybe he didn’t deserve to eat—not with Esme out there, starving.

Where hadn’t they looked? What had he missed?

He walked over to the map, around it, leaning over it, scanning through the countless nooks and crannies they’d searched. He sighed and ran his hand down his whiskered face. He felt just as rough on the inside. Hollow. Cold.

He needed something—bracing. Warm. Something to put a little fire back inside him, keep him moving forward.

Almost without thinking, he turned and opened the wet bar behind him. He kept only a few rail drinks on hand—mostly for guests. Now his grip found a bottle of Johnnie Walker—a gift, he thought, from one of his business partners.

He opened it and poured a couple fingers into a low ball.

Stared at the amber liquid.

He’d never been a drinker—filled his life instead with other highs.

But he didn’t have that choice today. No skydiving, no mountain climbing. Even a ride on Maximus would only put the horse in danger with the downpour outside.

Ian downed the drink in one gulp. Let the alcohol settle into his gut, a blaze of heat and power. It sluiced through him, and he could feel it hit his bones, fortify. Empower.

Dull the raw, sharp edge of his frustration.

He poured himself another shot. Stared at it. For the first time he could understand, maybe, his father’s cravings. How a man could feel so emotionally thin he might turn to something to make him
feel stronger, or at least braver. He understood the urge to pour something—anything—into the emptiness of losing someone he loved.

Ian threw back the shot, and this time the booze hit his head like a blow, and the room spun. His throat burned and his empty stomach clenched, roiling.

He set the glass down, his hand shaky.

He needed to eat something, probably. But after a moment, the world stopped spinning, the heat sinking into him, warming him through.

He grabbed the bottle, his glass, and headed for the sofa. Sank into it. Stared out his picturesque window at the mountains, littered with cloud cover.

And it hit him.

Esme had run away. From him. From the future he’d offered her, from the love he’d given her—too much love. Yes, that was it. He’d loved her too much. Put too much hope into the fact she’d love him back.

And now he was really turning into his father, pitiful. Trying to scrape the pieces of his life together.

He stared at the whiskey, his empty glass.

Then with a roar he threw the decanter across the room. It hit the stone fireplace, shattered in a dangerous spray of glass.

The sound, spiking into the silence, startled him. Snapped him out of his haze, and he stared at the mess, the shards of glass, the bourbon staining his carpet.

The rank smell rose into the expanse of the room.

“Ian—oh my gosh, are you okay?”

The voice made him turn.

Sierra stood in the entryway, holding two bags of groceries in her arms, the door open behind her.

Oh no. He scrubbed his hands down his face, then nodded. “I just…” But he had nothing.

Her expression turned grim, sad. “Sit down,” she said. “I’ll clean this up.”
“No, Sierra—” He started for her, but she rushed in, put the grocery bags on the table.

“Stay where you are, there’s glass.”

Not a problem. He came over the back of the sofa. Picked up the grocery bags and followed her to the kitchen. Set them on the counter.

Wow, he was glad to see her. Something about just having her in the same room chased the shadows away, lifted the anvil off his chest.

And, she’d called him Ian.

“I can use this bag for the glass if we empty it.” She began to pull groceries from the bags. Fruit, lunch meat, eggs, cheese, milk, chips, more pickles—

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

She glanced at him, a container of coffee in her hand. “For what?”

Really?

“For everything. I don’t know what I would do without you.” And then, crazily, his eyes burned and he turned away, found a sack of potatoes at the bottom of the bag. Lifted them out and handed them to her like an offering.

She met his eyes, so much kindness in her own, he couldn’t bear it. He looked away.

“Ian—what’s going on?” She put the potatoes on the counter.

There it was again. Ian. And now he couldn’t stop the flow of emotion. He’d blame it on the alcohol, but his eyes blurred and to his horror, real tears edged his eyes. Get a hold of yourself!

So he walked away, to the sink. Pulling out a glass, he filled it with water. He had to get the whiskey taste from his mouth. He spat the water into the sink, filled the glass again. Stared out the window to the dismal gray clouds hanging low over the mountains.

“Did I ever tell you that my wife died in Katrina?”

She stilled behind him.

His gaze stayed on his wretched reflection in the window. “The storm was coming and I was stuck on an oil rig in the Gulf. She begged me to come back, but…” He took another drink; the whiskey taste remained. “But, see, I couldn’t get back. We were having problems with the pumps, and I
knew we’d have a spill if I didn’t stay, so she was left on her own. I tried to make her stay, but she was terrified. And she and my son Daniel got caught in the surge.”

He turned to Sierra, and she was watching him, her beautiful eyes big, fixed, worried. “It took me ten days to find their bodies.” He rubbed his thumb over the glass, unable to bear the concern in her eyes. “I just don’t think I can go through this again. I can’t go through waiting and wondering and letting my heart hope every single time we get a clue. Hope is dangerous, and lethal and…cruel.”

He hadn’t noticed that she’d taken a step toward him, close enough to reach out, to touch him. Except, she didn’t. Just stood there, her dark hair tumbling down, still damp from the rain. She didn’t wear any makeup—didn’t need to, the long lashes framing her beautiful eyes. And her expression was so unmasked it just might make him weep with the compassion in it.

“I can’t give up, Sierra. I can’t stop searching. If I do, then none of it matters. The search. My resources—all of it means nothing if I don’t find her.”

“That’s not true. Just because you haven’t found her doesn’t mean the searching doesn’t matter. It would matter to me.”

“It would?”

“Sure. To know someone loved me enough to try and find me? That would mean everything to me. And Esme knows that, wherever she is.”

He tightened his jaw. “You don’t think she’s in the park, do you?”

Sierra shook her head. “I think she…I think she and Dante are together. Safe.”

He nodded, not sure why her words felt like a knife, serrating his chest. “Then, she left me.”

“No. She simply couldn’t leave Dante.”

Sierra touched him then, her hand on his arm. “But you’re not alone. We’ll keep searching until we find her.”

And that did it. Maybe it was the whiskey, blurring the line. Maybe just the wretched ache inside. Maybe it was her words of faith, making him yearn for something he didn’t quite believe in.

Or maybe it was just the way she’d never left his side, just like she promised.

But he needed her. And not just her smile, the way she organized his life, or even the way she
gave him hope.

_Her._

He set down the glass, turned to her. She didn't move, her gaze caught in his as he touched her face, lightly, his fingertips caressing her cheekbone. “Sierra. I don’t deserve you.”

She swallowed, suddenly still, understanding flickering in her eyes. But she didn’t move away, and foolishly, maybe, he took that for a yes.

He curled his hand around her neck, let the warning sirens fade from his brain, bent and kissed her.

_Sweetly, because it felt right. Exploring her lips, the taste of them, another wall of reserve fell when they went soft, accepting his touch. Still, she didn’t move—and he was about to get a grip on himself, pull away, when suddenly her hand touched his chest._

_Her palm, right against his heart._

_And then, she kissed him back._

_Opening her mouth, letting him in, moving deeper into his kiss._

_That’s all it took. He curled his arms around her, pulled her to himself, and dove in. She tasted sweet, as if she’d drunk a Coke on the way over, and her body melded to his. She fit into his embrace, and proved it by wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him down to herself, adding a little noise of approval._

_Sierra._

_Oh, wow, Sierra. Her long hair tangled into his hands, her curves soft against the hard planes of his chest, and his body thundered, suddenly very, very awake. Alive._

_A thousand, million times better than whiskey._

_He gave himself right over into her arms, drinking her in, needing her. He bumped her up to the counter, put his arms around her waist to pull her up to it, and stepped closer, to pocket himself into her embrace._

_She didn’t resist. In fact, pulled him closer. And that’s when he realized, for the first time in two weeks, he just might survive._
Because he wasn’t alone.

He pulled back, breathing hard, caught her face in his hands, and met her beautiful hazel-green eyes, now filled with surprise.

And not a little confusion.

Clearly, he had to take this slowly.

Especially when her eyes widened and all at once she seemed to come back to herself. “Oh no,” she whispered.

Oh no?

“Sierra—”

“Oh, Mr. Shaw…I’m so sorry.” She pushed on his chest and he stepped back, trying to get his footing.

Wait—what?

“I shouldn’t have let myself do that. You were just so sad and—oh my gosh.” She hopped down off the counter, began to back away. “I never thought I was the kind of person to take advantage of someone when they’re drunk—”

“I’m not drunk!”

“Okay. Shh…let’s get you upstairs. You’re exhausted, I know that. And I’ll make you a sandwich—”

“I don’t want a sandwich. I want—” You. Except suddenly it seemed that she didn’t want him.

Or maybe— “Sierra, are you afraid you just came on to me?” Not to quote her, but he had nothing else. “Do you think I’m going to fire you?”

Her eyes widened, and he’d hit the nail on the head.

Wow, he felt like a jerk. Just like he knew he would— Shoot. “Please, don’t worry. This is on me.” And he hadn’t a clue how to make this better. Because yeah, she did work for him. And he needed her.

But he also needed her. Kissing her just then might have actually saved his wretched life.

“Sierra, this is not your fault. I kissed you. And yeah, I’m a little strung out right now, but I’m
not drunk. Really.”

“Okay, Mr. Shaw,” she said, and he heard the tone of appeasement.

“Stop calling me Mr. Shaw!” Oops. Now he sounded drunk. And a little out of control. And, by the way she began to back away, he’d scared her.

Nice, Ian. He schooled his voice. “Please stop calling me Mr. Shaw. It makes me feel old. And a little imperial. And creepy, since I just kissed you.”

She bit her lip. Nodded. “Okay. Ian.” She took a breath. “But I’m worried about you. So, please get some rest, let me bring you something to eat, okay?”

Something to—fine. Maybe he did need a little food in his stomach, help him sort out his thoughts.

Especially when he nodded, and the room spun.

Not drunk, but maybe a little…woozy.

“Oh. But please, don’t leave. Promise me you’ll stay so we can talk this out.”

She looked at him, and then, silently, nodded.

“Oh, Willow, what have I done?”

Sierra sat on the front porch, the cicadas buzzing around them, the sky dark overhead, the air soggy from today’s storm. Her driveway resembled stew, and not far away, toward the center of town, the Mercy River thundered.

Willow sat beside her, wrapping a sweater around her. “So, let me get this straight. You were standing there one second, the next—kissing him.”

“Yeah, I think he kissed me first, but I certainly didn’t stop him. He just smelled so good, like he’d just gotten out of the shower, and his hair was tousled and curly around his ears. I just kept looking at it and wanting to twist it around my fingers and… Oh, Willow, he looked at me as if he might cry
and all I could think of was putting my arms around him. And then he kissed me. Or maybe I kissed him, I don’t know—we were just standing there, and suddenly, my hands were on his chest, and his amazing arms were around me and…I’m such a terrible person.”

“Uh, pardon me, but I don’t see the problem here. The man you’re in love with has finally kissed you? Cry me a river.”

“Stop—don’t you see? He was vulnerable and tired, and drunk, Willow. He didn’t know what he was doing!”

“Oh, c’mon—Ian Shaw? Drunk? Wrestling an alligator, I’m all over that, but drunk?”

“I’m serious. I’m not sure how much he had to drink, but he’d barely eaten, was exhausted, and frankly, I don’t know how he was even standing. And yeah, he might have kissed me, but I certainly didn’t stop him. He kept talking about how alone he was, and I said something about having faith, and then—I just wanted to be in his arms. To have him tell me that it was going to be okay. That we would find Esme.”

Willow tucked her hands between her knees. “So, then he kissed you.”

She sighed.

“And clearly, your head exploded.”

Willow had a way with words.

“Fine. Yeah. I’ve never been kissed quite like that before. Like we’d dropped from a plane, holding onto each other, falling together. He kissed me like he needed air, and I was it. And his arms—oh, Willow, the man has arms. He picked me up, put me on the counter without breaking stride and for a long moment, I completely forgot who I was. And why I was there.”

“I feel like I should avert my eyes.”

Sierra laughed, but it fell into a groan. “And then, of course, I remembered. Because there I was, in Ian’s arms, and he was staring at me like I could save him and I realized—I’d just taken advantage of my boss.”

“And that’s a statement you don’t hear every day. But, Sierra, you hardly took advantage of him. Ian has six inches and about a hundred pounds on you. Besides, when have you known Ian not to know
exactly what he’s doing.”

“This was it. The man has barely slept, he’s desperate, out of his mind with worry, and even if he wasn’t intoxicated, he’s vulnerable. And now he’s going to wake up in the morning with a headache and this dark, fuzzy nightmare of kissing his assistant.”

“Nightmare?”

“Yeah, because if he remembers anything, it’ll only mean I’ve managed to put a big A for Awkward in the middle of our business relationship. I should probably quit before he fires me.”

“He’s not going to fire you.”

“I don’t know—he said he wanted to talk, but by the time I made his dinner and brought it up to his bedroom, he’d fallen asleep. Just, out cold.”

“Oh.”

“See what I mean? So I cleaned up the glass—”

“Wait—what glass?”

“He threw a bottle of whiskey across the room. It shattered.”

Willow stared at her, eyes wide. “Was this before or after the kiss?”

“Before. See? Not himself. And trust me, when he wakes up, he’s going to want me to forget what happened.”

“Or not.” Willow turned to her. “Remember when he came over and asked you out for dinner?”

“He didn’t ask me out for dinner. He asked me to Esme’s birthday dinner. Big difference.”

“Says you. But maybe that was a romantic cry for help?”

Sierra closed her eyes. And Ian was right there, his blue eyes roaming her face a moment before he kissed her. She could still taste him—and yeah, whiskey, but something else, deeper. The sense of longing realized, maybe. A hunger that spiraled out into his touch, the way he wove his fingers through her hair, the angle of his head as he deepened his kiss.

The thrum of his heartbeat under her hand before she wove her arms up around his neck and pulled his sculpted body against hers. Ignited her own heartbeat.
I kissed you.

Maybe. Yes.

“I don’t know, Willow. Maybe we just go forward, try and forget it. Besides—he’s consumed with finding Esme. And I don’t blame him. The last thing he needs is the complication of, well, his love-struck assistant lurking in a corner to kiss him.” She put her face in her hands. “I am so embarrassed.”

Willow’s arm went around her. “Okay, now we’ve left reality for Sierra-land, where everything is Sierra’s fault.”

Sierra lifted her head. “What?”

“Sis. This is you—something goes wrong, and you blame yourself. And frankly, take the punishment, too. Like Rhett. You poured everything into helping him land his tryout with the Blue Ox. And when he left you behind and moved on to another girl, you looked at yourself and decided it was because you weren’t enough. Not pretty enough, not devoted enough.”

“Rhett didn’t want me, Willow.”

“And he’s the loser there. But that’s not on you. And if Ian Shaw decides to kiss you, that’s not your fault either—”

“But—”

“No. He’s a big boy. And my guess is that he’s kissed plenty of women, so he knew exactly what he was doing. Even drunk.”

The words sank in, grabbed hold. He had kissed her. And then, before she’d pushed him away, it looked very much like he’d like to pull her close and keep kissing her.

Right then, for a moment, Mr. Shaw had vanished, and before her stood just Ian. A little broken, maybe, and needing her in a way that had nothing to do with her job.

Maybe they could be more to each other, get beyond the titles to not just a working relationship but a relationship.

Equals.

Sierra listened to the splash of cars in puddles along Main Street, the night sounds rising
around her, wondering if Ian had gotten up, searched for her. She promised him she’d stick around.

That she’d never leave him.

“I should get back there—what if he wakes up and I’m gone?” She started to get up, and Willow pulled her back down.

“Have you lost your mind? Let him come to you.”

“But he asked me not to leave—”

“It’s not like you’re in Siberia. He has wheels—fancy ones. And he knows where you live.” Willow leaned back on her hands, staring up into the darkened sky. “If he wants you, he’ll come for you.”
Chapter 7

The roaring headache could collapse Ian into the fetal position.

But it had nothing on the blow that came as he eased his way downstairs and found Sierra’s office empty.

She’d never once, in the two years of working for him, shown up late on a Monday morning.

He stood there, the sun too bright in the room, his eyes burning as he stared at her vacant desk. At least she hadn’t cleared it—then again, everything in here belonged to him. The computer, the supplies, and yes, now that he noticed, her appointment calendar, the hardback one he’d given her for Christmas that always sat beside her in-box, was gone.

He put his hand on the door frame, steadying himself.

Maybe she’d left a text. But when he went to the kitchen to find his phone, he found only a missed call from Sheriff Blackburn.

It gave him the smallest twinge of dark hope, a bitter weed twining through his chest. He pressed the button to return the call.

It went to voice mail, and he hung up.

Staring at his tidy living room. In a rush he remembered the shatter of glass, the rank smell of whiskey.

She’d cleaned it up.

He returned to the kitchen and got a drink of water. Listened to their conversation in his head. Clear, unforgotten, despite the whiskey. Sierra, this is not your fault. I kissed you.

And boy howdy, had he. He could still taste her on his lips, still feel her in his arms, the way she surrendered to him. A trickle of heat went through his body at the memory of her hands around his
neck, playing with his hair. How he hadn’t intended on slowing down, not at least until the look of horror came over her face. And then, Oh no, she’d said, right about the time he’d been thinking, Oh yes.

But any spark of hope died with her embarrassment. I never thought I was the kind of person to take advantage of someone when they’re drunk—

Yeah, well, he hadn’t been drunk. In fact, he’d known exactly what he was doing.

And why.

Because without Sierra his house simply echoed, empty, shadowed despite the sunshine.

And now he’d driven her away. Or maybe, she’d simply run from him. Just like Esme.

Ian’s stomach pitched and he hovered over the sink a moment just in case he lost it. After a moment, he went to the fridge, grabbed a protein drink, and headed upstairs.

He needed to hurt as badly on the outside as he did on the inside.

He changed into a pair of compression shorts, trunks, and a T-shirt and headed to his workout room. There, he wrapped his hands then connected his music system and turned on his playlist. Churned up the music. Centered himself in front of his hanging bag.

Are you ready to tear it up?

He’d started boxing in college, someplace to channel his energy. Relieve tension. It kept him sharp, focused. And, it burned away the chaff of his frustration.

He began to move. Finding his rhythm. His shoulders burned, his abs on fire as he threw his punches. His body began to burn off the headache, the toxins releasing in sweat.

And then, he let go.

He didn’t even hear the footsteps until he saw a profile at the door.

“Ian!”

Ian caught the bag, put his hand against it to keep it from slamming against him. Sheriff Blackburn stood in the doorway, dressed in his uniform.

For a second, everything inside Ian froze.

Oh no. They’d found her.

Ian couldn’t breathe, his legs suddenly buckling. He hung on to the bag.
The music blared as his head swam.

No—please.

Randy came in and Ian turned the music off with his voice command. Silence thundered in the workout room.

Ian backed away, bent over, his hands on his knees, breathing hard. Hoping he didn’t throw up.

“Just tell me.”

“I’m here for your own good, Ian. I think it’s time to shut it down.”

What—? Ian blinked at him. Straightened, staring at him. He walked over to the bench, grabbed a fresh towel, and scrubbed the sweat off his face. Looped it around his neck. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s not in the park, and if she is, she’s… I’m sorry Ian. It’s over.”

“What does it matter to you? I’m not using Mercy Falls resources—”

“No, but you’re disturbing the tourists. You’ve got everyone on edge with your ads, your PSA announcements, your flyovers. There are so many theories about what happened to Esme and Dante, people are afraid to go into the park.”

“And it’s an election year,” Ian snapped. “Let’s not forget that.”

Blackburn’s jaw tightened. “It’s not about that. I’ve seen this too many times before—kids run away. They get hurt, and yes, sometimes they get lost in the park. Esme and Dante aren’t the first, and they won’t be the last. But if she’s in the park, and didn’t run away with this boy, then she’s not… she’s not alive, Ian. And I’m sorry about that. But I hate seeing you killing yourself for an outcome that will devastate you.”

“I’m not giving up. I can’t give up.”

Randy sighed. “Okay. But I’ve got to take Sam back into the fold. He’s been spending too many hours at your disposal.”

He expected this, had been noodling on a solution. “I have an idea. How about if I let you use the chopper for Mercy Falls EMS services in exchange for Sam’s help? He can be a liaison—help me scour the park, and you can utilize the chopper when you need it.”
“And Chet? You’re going to pay for him, too?”

“If he’s willing—sure.”

Because he couldn’t give up. Even if Randy’s words had claws, dug in, reinforced by Sierra’s soft voice, I think she and Dante are together. Safe.

Please.

Still. “So, we have a deal—you can use my chopper, but I get Sam’s help.”

“I just can’t see spending all that time and money continuing a fruitless search.”

And really, it was good Ian had already worked out his stress, because he could go a round with Randy, right now.

“It’s not fruitless. I will find her. And when I do, she’ll know I never stopped looking. Never stopped hoping.”

But even as he said that, Ian knew there was only one way that could ever happen.

Sierra.

Only she stuck by him, gave him the hope he needed. And if he had to, he’d surrender the hope of having her in his arms for the reality of having her by his side as his assistant. He’d simply wait until they brought Esme home to show Sierra that yes, they belonged together.

“You’ve got a deal, Ian,” Randy said. “But the sooner you come to terms with the truth, the sooner you can move on.”

Ian didn’t want to move on. He just wanted to survive. At least, for now.

Ian unwrapped his hands then pulled off his sweaty shirt and headed upstairs for a shower to put on his very best Mr. Shaw.

Sierra didn’t expect Ian to show up on her doorstep first thing in the morning. Not really.

Okay, maybe she hoped it, just a little.
Nor did she intend to oversleep—never in her life had she not gone in to work on time.

But what if she didn’t have a job this morning—?

Okay, that might be overkill. So, she’d kissed her boss…

She’d kissed her boss.

Sierra sank on the bed, watching the clock tick away her future, and stared at herself, her hair up in a messy bun, a hint of lipstick, and the memory of kissing Ian adding heat to her face.

She should stay home. Hide.

Make a run for Wyoming. Because the thought of facing him…

Maybe he’d woken up this morning, had forgotten the entire thing. She should, too.

Except, she so didn’t want to forget it. She’d come upon that truth last night, maybe early this morning.

She refused to be one of those girls who fell in love with her rich boss for his money. But it was never about money. She loved Ian—everything about him, from the way he cared about Esme to the fact that he lived a big, exhilarating, yes, terrifying, but passionate life. And his story about his childhood—the fact that they weren’t so different—made her believe that maybe, inside, Ian didn’t see the gulf between them.

Besides, most of the time he didn’t feel like her boss. And that, probably, was the problem. But if it didn’t bother him, then maybe she should be running toward him.

“Sierra!”

Feet on the stairs, and Willow was banging on her bedroom door.

Sierra opened it and Willow came in, slammed it behind her. Sotto voiced, “Guess who’s here.”

Her mouth opened. “Really?”

“I told you.”

Yes, yes she had. Sierra went to the window, and there he was. Dressed in…what? A suit and tie? A light gray suit with a French blue shirt—she’d ordered it for him for a charity event in Texas. He wore his black Stetson and hand-tooled alligator boots and looked every inch the billionaire rancher.

Striding up her chipped cement sidewalk.
“Get downstairs!” Willow said and nearly pushed her from the room.

Oh.

Sierra felt like a hobo in her secondhand dress, a boring light-blue smock. Apparently, she needed to start dressing up for work.

He was knocking as she yanked the door open.

They just stood there, staring at each other, Ian freshly shaved, smelling like he’d just walked off the pages of GQ. The suit only made his shoulders wider, his torso leaner, and if she ever regretted kissing him, she couldn’t remember.

“Oh,” she said softly.

“You weren’t at work this morning.” His blue eyes were in hers, and for a second, she thought she might be in trouble. Then a hint of a smile tugged on his face and she couldn’t breathe, let alone remember her name.

“No, I, uh…am sure that I have a good reason?”

His smile widened and he gave a nod. “I’m sure you do. Can we talk?”

Oh. Right. “Ian, I’m so sorry I left last night. But you’d fallen asleep and—”

He reached out his hand and she stared at it.

“I won’t try and kiss you again,” he said softly, and leaned close. “I promise.”

Oh, shoot.

But she took his hand, and he led her out to the front steps. He sat down on them, right where she’d sat last night bemoaning her stupidity.

Right where Willow had said, If he wants you, he’ll come for you.

And how.

Sierra couldn’t breathe.

He unbuttoned his suit coat as she sat down beside him.

He stared out toward his car. Oh my, he’d brought the Vanquish to fetch her. It gleamed a soft gold in the morning sunlight.

“Oh, I’ll just say it—I’m sorry for last night,” he said.
He was?

Oh. She stilled, surprised at the ripple of disappointment that snaked through her.

“I—”

“You don’t have to explain, Mr. Shaw. I understand.” She managed to say it without her voice wavering. “Really.” Because what did she expect? For him to show up on his shiny steed, sweep her off her feet?

“No, I do need to explain. Because I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you like that. I behaved poorly, and I made you feel awkward. I put you in a terrible position, and I apologize.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Let me finish. You’ve been trying to keep it professional, and I let my feelings for you cloud my judgment, and my honor.”

His feelings for her?

“So, while I don’t want you to call me Mr. Shaw, I do promise that I won’t let this happen again.”

She swallowed, dredged up a smile from the hollow scrape of her throat.

He looked at her now and she couldn’t bear the need in his eyes. “I’m using my best manners to ask you to stick with me. Esme is out there, and I can’t stop looking.”

“Of course you can’t,” she said gently. “But, maybe we should expand our search—”

“I agree. You’re probably right.” He swallowed and it almost hurt her, the way his shoulders rose and fell. “The thing is, I can’t do this alone. I…I need you, Sierra. You’re the best assistant I’ve ever had. No one knows me like you do—you anticipate my needs, fill in for my mistakes. You hold my life together, and I can’t run my businesses and look for Esme without you by my side. So, please, stick with me, okay?”

Her breath caught. She closed her eyes, looked away before she let his words make a fool out of her. He needed her. Yes.

But not in his arms. She’d been foolish to let herself think anything different.

Besides, this was enough. Really. She found a smile. “You have me, Mister…Ian. I’m not going
to leave you.”

He looked away, and he stared out at his car, a muscle pulling in his jaw. It seemed as if his eyes glistened, but perhaps it was just the sun.

His voice, however, was a little ragged as it emerged. “Good. Because I’m not sure how I’m going to live through this again. It feels like God is against me.”

That stymied her for a second. Because Ian Shaw, handsome billionaire, had everything he could want.

Except, apparently, the belief that God loved him.

“I know I’m not a good person, Sierra. I’ve tried to be. I keep hoping that maybe I’ve done enough to make up for my sins, that God will save Esme anyway. That wherever she is, He’ll keep her safe.”

“Ian. God doesn’t make deals—you don’t have to make up for your sins in order to finagle God into loving you. Or protecting Esme. Your worth to God has nothing to do with your actions. He loves you because He wants to. Because He chooses to.”

Ian seemed to ponder her words for a second, then shook his head. “But what if God doesn’t choose to love me, Sierra?”

Yeah, she got that. Because she could take a good look at her life and fear the same thing. “For God so loved the whole world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ That’s the whole world, Ian, including you.”

He closed his eyes, winced. Then opened them and shook his head. “I don’t know, Sierra. Two weeks ago I was standing at the top of the world, and now I feel like I’ve fallen off a cliff. I don’t know how to climb back up.”

“Ian,” she said softly, “Psalm 84 says that God brings us from strength to strength—but in between those moments of strength, those mountaintops, are the valleys. And of course, they’re dark and they’re frightening and shadowed, and sometimes so deep we can’t see our way out of them. But there is a mountaintop on the other side of that valley—there must be for it to even be a valley. And God is in the valley, too, filling it with nourishment as we stumble along. So the only thing that we can do is keep
walking through the valley and believing in the mountaintop ahead.”

He gave a harsh chuckle, nothing of humor in it. “You make it sound easy. Too easy.”

No, not at all, really.

Ian stared at his hands, rugged and cut from his two weeks of searching. “I don’t have what you have. I don’t have faith.”

Oh, Ian. Her heart expanded to fill all the space between them. “But I do,” she said softly. And then, she followed her heart, reached out and took his hand. Wove her fingers between his and closed her grip. “And I’ll hold on to you until your faith shows up.”

He stared at her then, and for a second, she saw it—really saw it. The emotions behind the words, even behind the kiss, something rich and deep right below the surface.

Waiting.


She gave his hand a squeeze. Then she let go and stood up. Walked down the steps and stopped, looking up at him. “So, are you going to give me a ride to work in your fancy car? Because I’m really late, and my boss is a little uptight.”

For a second he just sat there. Then a slow grin edged up his face. He stood and slipped on his aviators. Walked out to his car. “I met your boss. He’s a real piece of work.”

“I know. But I like him,” Sierra said, following him. “He’s got a good heart. I’m going to ask him for a raise.” She opened the car door, slid into the smooth, buttery leather seat. Sheesh, the thing still smelled new. She’d have to ask him for more rides to work.

He slid in beside her, fired up the Vanquish. It hummed under his touch. “My guess is that you’re going to get it.”
Thank you so much for reading *If Ever I Would Leave You*. I hope you enjoyed this glimpse of Ian and Sierra and the start of their adventure. You can meet the entire PEAK Rescue team that Ian has put together, continuing the search for Esme, and discover Ian and Sierra’s continued adventures in *Wild Montana Skies, Book 1 of the Montana Rescue series*. (Check out the excerpt on the next page!)

I’d love to hear from you—not only about this story but about any characters or stories you’d like to read about in the future. Write to me at: susan@susanmaywarren.com. And if you’d like to see what’s ahead, stop by www.susanmaywarren.com

I also have a monthly update that contains sneak peeks, reviews, upcoming releases, and free, fun stuff for my reader friends. Sign up at www.susanmaywarren.com.

Thank you again for reading!

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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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She 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.

“What 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 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 barbecue ribs are half off now that it’s after ten, and I think I could score you a basket of the fried calamari on the house.”

“The ribs sound perfect, thanks, Gina,” Kacey 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 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 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 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!” she shouted.
She thrashed against the embrace, elbowing her captor hard.
He made a sound of pain. 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 epithets 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 went 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, fingerling 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, skirted 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.”

****

Wild Montana Skies

Book One: Montana Rescue

~ Excerpt ~

Add Wild Montana Skies to your collection! (http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/wild-montana-skies-susan-may-warren/1123279874?ean=9780800727437)

1

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“What are you up to?” Gina said, pulling 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.

“Prom here on leave for the summer, although, yeah, I’ll be doing some flying for Chet King’s PEAK.” See, that came out easy 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 barbecue ribs are half off now that it’s after ten, and I think I could score you a basket of the fried calamari on the house.”

“The ribs sound perfect, thanks, Gina,” Kacey 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?”

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 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 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 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.
P a ll 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!” she shouted.
She thrashed against the embrace, elbowing her captor hard. 
He made a sound of pain. 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—” 
“Tough. 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.” 
“She’s 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 epithets as they trailed. 
“The flood has everyone keyed up,” Rumble said. 
A man walked by, wearing a two-day scraggly 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 went 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, fingerling 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.”

****

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 Route 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 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.

She 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 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.

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“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.

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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.”

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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 went 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, fingerling 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 be-
cause…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 vol-
unteers 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 con-
cern 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 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.
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 re-
putation 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 assump-
tions. 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.”

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