



A Matter of Trust

Montana Rescue Book #3

~ Excerpt ~

Ella Blair had three days to find Gage Watson and talk him into saving her friend Dylan's life.

All he had to do was say no. She might be overreacting, underestimating Dylan's freeriding abilities, but she knew in her gut that if the kid died on the mountain, she would be at least partly to blame.

Her and her big mouth, waxing on about Gage Watson and his freeriding fame. Not that anyone would truly blame her if Dylan got hurt—after all, he made his own impulsive decisions. But she'd been a little unimpressed by Dylan's bragging, so she'd sort of put him in his place.

Which she realized had completely backfired when he told her he was road-tripping to Canada.

She should have predicted it—after all, she'd seen the look in Dylan's eyes when she'd pulled up one of Watson's YouTube videos.

Even she felt the tug of adrenaline, the hot whirr of danger stirring inside when Watson aimed his board downhill, off the lip of a treacherous, powder-fresh mountain face, a tail of snow, not unlike that of a peacock, flaring behind him.

Gage Watson had style and sheer guts.

And Dylan possessed more wannabe than brains or skill, and she dearly hoped her freshly minted trial lawyer skills could convince Gage to walk away from Dylan's no-doubt financially enticing offer.

That's what happened when your family ran one of the largest maple-syrup plantation in all of Vermont. All that sugar went straight to the maple prince's head.

Probably her own too, because what on earth had possessed her to think she could don a swimsuit in the middle of January, hang out by the steaming pool at the Outlaw Resort, at the base of the best powder in Canada, and somehow attract Gage's attention?

Yes, she'd left a message for him at the desk, described herself, and asked him to meet her by the pool. But she hadn't counted on the level of spring break crazy.

The resort had built a long chute of snow, and now the snowboarders and skiers alike, dressed in board shorts and stocking caps, wearing their ski gear, raced down the slope, onto the two-story ramp, executing flips and twists before splashing down into the massive pool. Spectators packed three and four deep cheered them on. Country music thrummed against the twilight, girls and guys alike dancing on top of tables, wearing swimsuits, UGGs, and stocking caps. Barbecue ribs sizzling on two huge pits set up in the snow stirred the area with the aroma of celebration.

The pre-party to the Outlaw Freeriding Championships.

Ella stood next to the pool, scanning the crowd, then the jumpers, for any sign of Gage Watson.

Occasionally, her gaze landed on the door. She'd worn a flannel shirt over her one-piece, along with a pair of fuzzy sheepskin UGGs, and had never felt more ridiculous.

A boarder dressed in a furry Russian-style shopka and long johns bumped into her, sloshing his beverage over her. The liquid, cold and bracing on her skin, made her jump away.

"Sorry, sweetie," he said and actually looked like he might lift his hand and wipe it across her legs.

She caught his reach. "Not your sweetie."

He rolled his eyes, bounced away.

Even if Gage were here, she could bet he wouldn't be in the mood to have a serious conversation with her. She should simply call up the front desk, maybe order a pizza sent to his room with an offer to meet her, platonically, in the lounge for a conversation.

She was very good at conversations. This party angle—not her best strategy.

She started to move through the crowd, working her way out of traffic, when she heard the yell.

Off to her left, a scream, more like a war whoop, raised the hairs on her neck as she turned to find the source.

A mass of boarders fresh out of the giant hot tub, dashing for the pool.

The sound gave her a millisecond of warning, however, enough to lift her arms in protection before the horde hit.

They rushed past her, turned her around, and she stumbled.

“Hey!”

An elbow smashed into her face, and in a flash of pain she fell back, arms windmilling.

She hit the water on her back. Her feet crested over her head, and suddenly she was head-down in the water.

Feet kicked her, bodies trapped her, hands pushed her under.

Breathe!

She punched out, connected with a body, and managed to get her feet under her.

Clawed for the surface.

A foot bashed her in the side and she gasped, her mouth opening.

She sucked water, hard, into her lungs. She doubled over, the world turning white even as she fought, pushing—

She found the surface, began to cough, trying to sight the edge of the pool, but another random kick pushed her under.

Panic made her rabid. She fought for air amidst the bodies.

At once, an arm curled around her waist like a vise. She clawed at it, but her rescuer kicked hard, lifting her.

Her face broke the surface, and she hauled in air. But she coughed it out, retching as her rescuer hauled her to the edge of the pool.

Hands pulled her up and out, and she sat on the deck, gulping air.

“Give her room!” someone yelled a second before a man crouched in front of her. He cut his voice low. “You’re okay. Just breathe.”

Water dripped from his brown, curly hair, which was nearly shoulder length and pushed back from his forehead. He was in his jeans and wore a dark shirt that was now plastered to his lean torso, outlining his sculpted shoulders. A platinum snowboarder pendant hung gleaming from his neck, the Freeriding World Championship logo imprinted on the front.

And if that wasn’t the first clue, the layer of brown whiskers that outlined those enticing lips, the dark brown eyes, filled with mystery and danger, and the tiny cut over his left eyebrow told her exactly who’d rescued her.

Gage Watson.

She couldn’t speak, and Gage took her hands in his. “You’re shaking.”

More than that, her entire body trembled, so violently it shook her grip right out of his.

He somehow procured a towel, wrapped it around her.

Then, he didn’t even ask before he bent down and simply picked her up.

Just like that. Holding her against his sopping chest as he headed toward the deck doors toward the two-story fireplace of the Outlaw lounge.

Now, she *really* couldn’t breathe. Because she’d harbored a crazy fan crush on Gage Watson since he’d taken that run down Heaven’s Peak, posted it on YouTube, landed on the cover of *Snowboarder* magazine, and with those brown eyes and renegade smile pretty much cajoled her heart right out of her chest and around his little finger.

He set her down on a worn leather sofa, tucked the towel in around her, and motioned to someone nearby. “Can we get some hot cocoa here?”

Then he turned back to her and smiled. “Are you going to live?”

With the warmth igniting inside her? Um, probably. She swallowed, her hand on her chest, finally able to nod.

“I was looking for you when I saw you go in the water,” he said. “I’m sorry I was late. I got your note but had a little trouble finding you in the crowd.”

A waitress arrived with the cocoa, and he took it, then handed it to her. He wrapped her hands around the mug, holding his on top. “Take it slow.”

She took a sip of the cocoa, let it soothe her raw throat.

“Better?”

She nodded, and he let go of her hands and rested one muscular arm along the top of the sofa, his wet jeans dripping onto the leather. Every once in a while, a shiver rippled through him, although he didn’t in the least acknowledge it. But she felt like an idiot now, remembering the panic that took her, the way she’d thrashed. In fact . . .

She spied a welt on his cheek. “Did I hit you?”

“I’ve had worse,” he said, and winked. “But you did pack a wallop.”

“I panicked.”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” He grinned, though, a pretty smirk. He had such enchanting eyes, and for a second she simply forgot where she was.

Until.

“So, what did you want to see me about? It seemed like a pretty desperate note—something about life or death?” His gaze trailed over her. “I’m hoping that wasn’t a suicide attempt.”

“No—no.” And now she just wanted to crawl away. Why was she always so dramatic? “I was . . . I’m here to ask you for a favor.”

“A favor. Really.” He raised a shoulder. “Okay, I’m game. Shoot it at me.”

“Please don’t ski Terminator Wall.”

His smile dimmed. A frown dipped across his forehead. “Uh . . . you know that’s why I’m here, right? There’d be a horde of disappointed people, not to mention my sponsors, a few magazines, and a couple hundred thousand YouTube subscribers if I didn’t shred the Terminator. So, maybe you could give me a good reason why I should decimate my entire career?”

When he put it like that . . .

“Because you want to save a life?”

He considered her a long moment, his lips curling up one side.

“Whose life? Because if it’s yours—”

“Dylan McMahon.”

His smile dimmed. “Oh. Him.” He scraped his hair back from his head. “Don’t tell me he’s your boyfriend.”

“What—no! *No*. He’s just a friend. Actually . . . I put the stupid idea in his head, and now . . . I just know that if you go, he’ll go and—”

He held up his hand. “Pump the brakes. I’m not letting Dylan McMahon follow me down the T-wall, so just take a breath, okay? He’s not ready. And I don’t need anyone getting killed following my line.”

She probably blew out a breath of visible relief because another smile lit his face, his eyes. Oh, those eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You can’t believe what this means to me.” She knew she sounded over the top. But she’d just nearly drowned, and sitting here, wrapped up in Gage Watson’s presence—yes, she might have lost her mind a little.

“Okay. Anytime. What was your name again?”

“Ella. Ella Blair.”

“Okay, Ella Blair. Gage Watson.”

“Uh-huh,” she said.

“I’m sort of curious,” he said, leaning toward her. “How *much* does it mean to you?”

Oh. Um . . .

He raised an eyebrow.

She stared at her cocoa. “I don’t think—”

“Oh no. Wait. That sort of came out wrong,” he said suddenly, and for a second, when she looked up, all the suave had vanished, leaving behind someone real, someone not quite as polished.

Someone endearing. And slightly reddening at his awkward statement.

“I just meant, well, I was trying to figure out a smooth way to ask you if you might want to hit the slopes with me tomorrow. I mean, you are a skier, right?”

The way he bobbled around his words, it made his invitation sound sweet and innocent and had her heart doing all sorts of leaps.

“Actually, a snowboarder.”

“Really,” he said, warmth in his eyes.

“Yeah. And I’d love to ski with you tomorrow. If you promise not to take me anywhere I could get killed.”

Her towel had loosened, and he reached out and tucked it back around her, his hands strong as he cocooned her in heat.

“I promise to keep you safe.” He gave her a wink. “Because, you know, I’m all about saving lives.”