



# Found By the Mountain Man

**Author:** Tessa McRae

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** I came to this mountain to be alone.

No noise. No people. No damn feelings.

But then she crashes into my world—lost, limping, and too damn pretty for her own good. Delilah Monroe. All curves and chaos, with a mouth that won't quit and eyes that see straight through the walls I built to keep everyone out.

She's stranded, injured, and has no business being this far off-trail. I should've left her for Search and Rescue.

Instead, I carried her to my cabin and gave her my bed.

Now I'm watching her dance barefoot on my porch, smile at my dog, and fill my silent world with color I didn't know I missed.

She says she's leaving when the roads clear. That this was just a stop on her way to finding herself.

But I've already found everything I didn't know I needed.

If she walks away, I'll let her go.

But I won't stop hunting until she finds her way back to me.

Because once a McKenna man claims something, he keeps it.

And Delilah?

She's mine.

Found by the Mountain Man is a steamy, snowed-in, forced-proximity romance featuring a grumpy, reclusive hero with a fierce protective streak, a sunshine heroine with a wandering heart, and a soul-deep connection that burns hot in the middle of a blizzard. Escape to Grizzly Ridge, where the men are wild, the love is possessive, and the only thing stronger than the storm is the way he looks at her. HEA guaranteed—no cliffhangers, just rugged devotion and all the feels.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

1

LILA

I'm not lost.

That's what I keep telling myself as I check my phone for the hundredth time. No service, because of course there isn't. I'm in the middle of nowhere Montana, surrounded by trees that all look exactly the same.

The trail disappeared two hours ago. Or I left it. Details.

"This was supposed to be therapeutic," I mutter, wincing as I put weight on my throbbing ankle. "Reconnect with nature. Find yourself, Lila."

What I've found is that nature doesn't care about my post-breakup healing journey. Nature just wants to remind me I'm a city girl who has no business hiking alone in the mountains.

My ex would laugh himself sick if he could see me now. This is why you need me, Lila. You can't do anything on your own.

The memory of Peter's voice in my head straightens my spine. Screw him. I can do this. I am an independent woman with a sprained ankle and a rapidly depleting phone battery, but I can figure this out.

The light is fading fast, shadows stretching between the pines. I check my

watch—6:42 PM. It'll be dark soon, and the temperature's dropping with the sun.

My extensive wilderness training of one REI class and several YouTube videos, suggests I should find shelter, build a fire, and wait for rescue. But no one knows I'm here. I told the clerk at my hotel I was taking a day hike on the main trail. That was twelve hours and several wrong turns ago.

"Focus, Lila," I whisper, fighting the panic rising in my chest. "What would Bear Grylls do?"

Probably drink his own pee, which I'm absolutely not doing.

I force myself to stop, take a deep breath, and assess. My ankle hurts but isn't broken. I have half a protein bar, a nearly empty water bottle, and a light jacket that's doing nothing against the mountain chill. My phone is at 12% with no service.

"Could be worse," I say to no one. "Could be raining."

On cue, I feel the first drop hit my cheek. Because the universe is clearly enjoying this karmic payback for my hubris.

"Seriously?" I yell at the darkening sky.

My only answer is more raindrops, fat and cold, speckling my face and arms. I pull up my hood and limp forward, looking for anything that might provide shelter—a rock outcropping, a particularly dense tree, a random luxury cabin with a hot tub and Wi-Fi.

The rain picks up, soaking through my supposedly waterproof jacket within minutes. My teeth are chattering now, and my ankle screams with every step.

"Just keep going," I tell myself. "One foot in front of the other."

But which direction? The GPS on my phone died ten minutes ago, taking with it any hope of finding the trail. I'm officially, completely lost.

As darkness falls, the forest transforms from picturesque to predatory. Every sound—the rustle of leaves, the creak of branches—becomes a threat. My imagination conjures bears, mountain lions, wolves, and ax murderers lurking behind every tree.

I stumble over a root and go down hard, crying out as pain shoots through my already injured ankle. Mud soaks through my pants, and tears mix with the rain on my face.

"Help!" I shout, knowing it's useless. "Anyone?"

Nothing but the steady drum of rain and the mocking whisper of wind through the trees.

I curl into a ball at the base of a massive pine, shivering violently. This can't be happening. I came to Montana to find myself, not die of hypothermia in the wilderness. What a stupid, cliché way to go.

Woman on Post-Breakup Soul-Search Found Dead in Woods. Ex-Boyfriend Says 'I Told Her So.'

The headline is so clear in my mind that I laugh, a slightly hysterical sound that turns into a sob.

"I'm not dying here," I say through chattering teeth. "Not like this."

But as the rain soaks me to the bone and the temperature continues to drop, I'm

running out of options. My limbs are growing heavy, my thoughts sluggish. I know enough about exposure to recognize the danger signs.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

That's when I hear it—a sound different from the rain and wind. Footsteps. Heavy and deliberate, coming closer.

Hope surges, quickly followed by fear. What if it's not help? What if it's something worse?

I fumble for my phone, turning on the flashlight with trembling fingers. The weak beam illuminates nothing but rain and trees.

"Hello?" My voice cracks. "Is someone there?"

The footsteps stop. Then resume, faster now, heading straight for me.

I push myself up against the tree trunk, heart hammering against my ribs. The flashlight beam catches movement, and suddenly there's a massive shadow stepping out of the trees.

For a wild moment, I think it's a bear.

But bears don't wear flannel.

The figure looming over me is unmistakably human, but barely. He's huge—at least six-four, with shoulders that block what little light remains in the sky. A thick beard covers the lower half of his face, and beneath the hood of his jacket, I can just make out eyes narrowed in what looks like annoyance.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" His voice is deep, rough, like he doesn't use

it often.

Relief and wariness war within me. "I—I got lost. My ankle?—"

"You're three miles from the nearest trail." He cuts me off, crouching down to my level. In the dim light, I can see his face better now. He's younger than I first thought—mid-thirties maybe, with sharp eyes that miss nothing as they scan over me.

"I know," I admit, embarrassment heating my cheeks despite the cold. "I thought I was taking a shortcut."

He makes a sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. "There's no shortcut through the northern ridge."

"I realize that now, thanks."

His eyes narrow further at my tone. "You got a name, princess?"

"Delilah Monroe," I say, bristling at the nickname. "But everyone calls me Lila."

"Caleb McKenna." He offers nothing else, just studies me with those intense eyes. "Can you walk?"

I try to stand and immediately collapse as my ankle gives out. His hands shoot out, catching me before I hit the ground. They're huge, calloused, and surprisingly gentle.

"That's a no," he says.

Before I can respond, he's scooping me up like I weigh nothing, one arm behind my back, the other under my knees.

"What are you doing?" I sputter, instinctively grabbing his shoulders.

"Getting you out of the rain before you die of exposure." His voice is matter-of-fact, like he's commenting on the weather. "My cabin's half a mile north."

"You live out here? In the middle of nowhere?"

"That's the point." He starts walking, his stride steady despite carrying my weight. The rain seems to bother him as much as my questions—which is to say, not at all.

I should be terrified. I'm literally in the arms of a stranger who looks like he stepped out of a horror movie about backwoods killers. But something about him—the careful way he holds me, avoiding my injured ankle, or maybe the annoyed but resigned expression on his face—tells me I'm safer with him than I was alone.

"Thank you," I say softly. "For finding me."

He grunts in response, eyes fixed ahead.

"How did you find me, anyway?" I ask. "Were you out hunting or something?"

"Heard you yelling. Was checking my trapline."



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Oh." I fall silent, suddenly aware of how intimately I'm pressed against him. He's radiating heat like a furnace, and despite the circumstances, I instinctively curl closer.

"Don't get comfortable," he says, catching the movement. "As soon as this rain lets up and your ankle can handle it, you're out of here."

"Wow, your hospitality is overwhelming."

"I don't do hospitality." His voice is flat. "I do survival."

We emerge from the trees into a small clearing. In the center stands a cabin—not the rustic luxury of a vacation rental, but a true woodsman's dwelling. Solid logs, a metal roof, a porch wrapping around two sides. Smoke curls from the chimney, and a warm light glows from the windows.

"Home sweet home," I murmur.

Caleb shoots me a look I can't quite decipher. "It's not much. But it's dry."

He carries me up the porch steps and manages to open the door without putting me down. As we cross the threshold into warmth and light, I have the strangest feeling—like I'm leaving something behind and entering something new.

Something I wasn't looking for but might have found anyway.

CALEB

Idon't bring people to my cabin.

That's rule number one. The whole point of living this far up the mountain is to avoid exactly this—strangers invading my space, asking questions, expecting things.

Yet here I am, a soaking wet woman in my arms, dripping all over my floor.

"You can put me down now," she says, those bright eyes fixed on my face.

I realize I've been standing in the middle of the room, still holding her. Like an idiot.

"Right." I set her down carefully on the worn leather couch, stepping back quickly.

"Stay put."

"Not a problem," she says, gesturing to her ankle. "I'm not exactly marathon-ready."

I grunt in response and move to stoke the fire. It gives me something to do besides look at her—this Delilah Monroe who crashed into my carefully constructed solitude.

She's too pretty for someone who nearly died in the woods—all curves and chaos, with dark hair plastered to her face and mud streaking her cheek. City girl, written all over her. From the expensive hiking boots she probably bought last week to the manicured nails now chipped and dirty.

What the hell was she thinking, wandering off the main trail? These mountains kill tourists like her every season.

"Nice place," she says, looking around my cabin. "Very... rustic."

I add another log to the fire. "It's a roof and walls."

"And a surprisingly good collection of books." She nods toward my shelves. "Hemingway fan?"

I don't answer. Don't encourage the small talk. Instead, I grab a towel from the bathroom and toss it her way.

"Dry off. I'll look at that ankle."

She catches the towel with surprisingly good reflexes. "Thank you. For all of this. I know I'm an inconvenience."

"Yep."

Her eyebrows shoot up at my bluntness, but then—unexpectedly—she laughs. The sound bounces off the cabin walls, bright and out of place.

"Well, at least you're honest."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

I kneel in front of her, ignoring the way her laugh does something weird to my chest.  
"Let me see."

She extends her leg, wincing. I carefully unlace her boot and ease it off. Her sock is soaked, her ankle swollen but not discolored enough to suggest a break.

"Sprain," I diagnose, my fingers gentle as I check the joint. "Bad one."

"How long before I can walk on it?"

"Few days, minimum. Week to be safe." I look up at her, finding her eyes on me, curious and way too direct. "I'll radio the ranger station tomorrow. They can send someone up when the weather clears."

"Radio? Your phone doesn't work up here either?"

I'm surprised the disappointment doesn't crash the cabin roof. "No cell service for three miles. That's why I live here."

She absorbs this information, biting her lower lip. Another city girl tell. They all do that when they're trying not to panic about being disconnected.

"So... I'm stuck here?" Her voice is carefully neutral.

"Until your ankle heals or rescue comes. Whichever's first." I stand, putting distance between us. "Hope you like silence."

Her laugh returns, unexpected. "Not particularly. But I'm adaptable."

She doesn't look adaptable. She looks like someone who orders complicated coffee and posts every meal on Instagram.

I move to the small kitchen area, mostly to have something to do with my hands. "Hungry?"

"Starving," she admits. "I finished my trail mix hours ago."

I pull out a pot and start throwing together a stew—venison, potatoes, carrots. Simple food that fills the belly and warms the blood. My hands move automatically, the routine familiar and grounding.

Meanwhile, she's toweling her hair, leaving it a wild tangle around her face. She's shivering despite the fire.

"You need dry clothes," I say, cursing inwardly at the complication. "Bathroom's through there. I'll find you something."

She stands, testing her weight on her good foot. "Thank you. Again."

I watch her hop awkwardly toward the bathroom, refusing to help. Every interaction is another thread connecting us. I need fewer threads, not more.

In my bedroom, I dig through drawers for the smallest things I own. It's all going to swallow her whole anyway. I settle on an old flannel shirt and sweatpants with a drawstring she can tighten.

When I knock on the bathroom door, she cracks it open. Steam escapes from the small space, and I realize she's washed her face. She looks younger without the mud,

more vulnerable.

"These'll be huge," I warn, passing the clothes through the gap.

"Beggars can't be choosers." Her fingers brush mine as she takes the bundle. "I appreciate it."

I return to the stew, stirring more aggressively than necessary. My cabin suddenly feels too small. I'm used to sharing these four walls with nothing but silence and the occasional company of my dog, Ruby, who's currently out patrolling the property.

As if summoned by my thoughts, I hear her familiar scratch at the door.

"That'll be my dog," I call toward the bathroom. "Don't scream or make sudden movements."

"Is she a wolf or something?" Her voice echoes from behind the door.

"German shepherd. But she's particular about strangers."

I let Ruby in, her fur damp from the rain. She shakes, spraying water across the floor, then immediately tenses, nose in the air. She's caught our guest's scent.

"Easy, girl," I murmur, hand on her head. "She's staying awhile."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

Ruby looks at me like I've lost my mind, which is fair. I'm wondering the same thing.

The bathroom door opens, and Delilah emerges wearing my clothes. Something primal stirs in my gut at the sight—she's drowning in fabric, my flannel hanging to her mid-thigh, sleeves rolled up multiple times. She's still the most feminine thing that's been in this cabin... ever.

Ruby growls low, positioning herself between me and the intruder.

"Hey there," Delilah says softly, not moving forward. "You must be the welcoming committee."

I'm impressed that she doesn't show fear. Ruby picks up on that immediately, her posture relaxing slightly.

"This is Ruby," I tell her. "She's a good judge of character."

"I hope I pass inspection." Delilah slowly extends her hand, palm down, letting Ruby approach on her terms.

After a tense moment, Ruby sniffs her fingers, then nudges her palm. Not quite approval, but acceptance.

"Good girl," I murmur, more to my dog than my guest.

"She's beautiful," Delilah says, carefully making her way back to the couch. The sweatpants trail under her heels, and she's cuffed them several times at the ankle.

My clothes look ridiculous on her. But also right, in a way I don't want to examine.

I return to the stew, adding salt and dried herbs. My grandfather taught me to cook—said no man should depend on anyone else for basic needs. Food, shelter, warmth. Provide these for yourself, and you're truly free.

I've lived by that code for years. Free and alone. Just how I like it.

"Something smells amazing," Delilah says, interrupting my thoughts.

"Venison stew. Need the protein in this cold."

"You hunt?" She asks it like a question, though the answer should be obvious.

"Everything I eat comes from these mountains or the garden out back." I stir the pot, avoiding her gaze. "Except coffee. I draw the line at hand-grinding beans."

That gets another laugh from her. "A man has to have standards."

The sound of her amusement is too natural, too easy in this space that's known only my silence. Danger signals flash in my mind. This woman is temporary. A complication. An interruption to my peace.

I don't do temporary connections. They only leave holes when they end. I ladle stew into bowls, bring them to the small table by the window. "Can you make it over here?"

She stands carefully, using the furniture for support as she hobbles to the table. Ruby watches her with curious eyes, then settles by the fire with a heavy sigh.

"Traitor," I mutter to my dog. She's supposed to be as antisocial as I am.



Delilah eats like she hasn't seen food in days, which might be close to the truth. I try not to watch the way she closes her eyes with each bite, the small sounds of appreciation she makes.

"This is incredible," she says between spoonfuls. "I expected, I don't know, beans from a can or something."

"I'm a hermit, not a savage."

Her lips twitch. "Is there a handbook on the difference?"

I almost smile. Almost. "Common sense and good boots. That's the difference."

"Says the man to the woman he just rescued from certain death." She winces slightly.

"Sorry. That was supposed to be a joke, not ungrateful."

I shrug. "You'd have died out there. These mountains don't care about gratitude."

"Well, I care." Her eyes meet mine across the table, too earnest by half. "Thank you, Caleb. Really."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

I look away, uncomfortable with her sincerity. "Eat your stew before it gets cold."

She does, and we finish the meal in silence. Not my usual comfortable silence, but something charged with questions unasked. When she yawns, I realize how late it's getting.

"You should sleep," I say, taking our empty bowls. "Been a hell of a day."

"Where should I..." She glances around the cabin's single main room, eyes lingering on the door that leads to my bedroom.

"Take my bed," I say before she can finish the question. "I'll sleep out here."

"I can't take your bed." She protests immediately. "The couch is fine."

"The couch is too short for me, and you're injured." My tone leaves no room for argument. "It's just a bed, Delilah."

"Lila," she corrects. "And it's your bed. I'm already imposing enough."

"Lila." Her name feels strange in my mouth, too soft for this place. "Take the damn bed before I carry you there myself."

Her eyebrows shoot up at my tone, but then she smiles—a real smile that reaches her eyes. "Well, when you put it so charmingly..."

I help her to the bedroom, keeping my touch clinical, impersonal. The room is

sparse—just a bed, a dresser, a lamp. No personal touches. I don't believe in cluttering space with sentiment.

"Bathroom's stocked with whatever you need," I tell her, already retreating. "I'll check your ankle again in the morning."

"Goodnight, Caleb." She sits on the edge of my bed, looking too right there. "And thank you. For everything."

I nod once and close the door, exhaling slowly.

One night. Maybe two. Then she'll be gone, and my life will return to normal. The silence I crave will settle back around me like a familiar coat.

I make up the couch with spare blankets, Ruby curling at my feet with a confused whine. She senses the shift, the disruption in our routine.

"Just temporary," I tell her, scratching behind her ears. "She'll be gone soon."

But as I lie in the dark, listening to the rain against the roof and the occasional soft sound from the bedroom, I can't shake the feeling that Delilah Monroe has already changed something in my carefully ordered world.

Something I might not be able to fix when she leaves.

3

LILA

I wake up disoriented, surrounded by unfamiliar scents.

Wood smoke. Pine. Something earthy and masculine that makes me bury my face deeper into the pillow.

Then it all comes rushing back. Getting lost. The rain. The pain.

Caleb.

I sit up slowly, wincing as my ankle throbs in protest. Morning light streams through a small window, illuminating the spartan bedroom. There's almost nothing personal here—no photos, no clutter, nothing that tells me who Caleb McKenna is beyond a man who needs a bed to sleep in.

The sheets smell like him, though. That's personal enough.

I swing my legs carefully over the edge of the bed, testing my weight on my injured ankle. Still swollen, still painful, but maybe a tiny bit better than last night. I'm not running any marathons today, that's for sure.

My borrowed clothes are rumpled from sleep. I attempt to smooth them down, but there's no saving this look. I'm drowning in Caleb's flannel, my hair is a rat's nest, and I'm pretty sure I look like something that crawled out of the woods—which, technically, I did.

I hear movement outside the bedroom door. Caleb is awake, probably has been for hours. He strikes me as the rise-before-dawn type.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

Using the wall for support, I hop to the bathroom, cringing at my reflection. Yikes. There's not much I can do without my toiletry bag, but I find an unused toothbrush still in its packaging and splash water on my face.

When I finally emerge from the bedroom, I find Caleb at the woodstove, his back to me. The muscles beneath his flannel shirt shift as he stirs something that smells like heaven.

"Morning," I call softly, not wanting to startle him.

He turns, eyes flicking over me in a quick assessment. "Ankle?"

"Still attached." I hop toward the table. "But definitely not happy."

He nods, returning to whatever he's cooking. "Breakfast in five. Coffee's ready."

I spot the coffee pot on the counter and make my way over, trying not to put weight on my bad ankle. The kitchen—if you can call this small cooking area that—is organized with military precision. Everything has a place.

"Mugs?" I ask.

He points to a cabinet without looking up. Inside, I find a mismatched collection of mugs. I select one with a faded National Parks logo and fill it with the darkest coffee I've ever seen.

"You like it strong," I observe, taking a cautious sip. Then my eyes widen. "And

good. Really good."

"Told you. Standards." There's the barest hint of satisfaction in his voice.

It's the first time I've seen him in full daylight, and I try not to stare. He's even more imposing than he seemed last night—taller than my original estimate, with broad shoulders and arms built from actual labor, not gym sessions. His dark hair is cut short on the sides but longer on top, and the beard that I thought might be trying too hard for mountain man aesthetics is actually... really working for him.

He's ruggedly handsome in a way that makes my city boys look like children playing dress-up.

Ruby rises from her spot by the fire, stretching before padding over to greet me with a cautious sniff.

"Good morning to you too," I say, carefully extending my hand. She allows a quick scratch behind the ears before returning to Caleb's side. Loyal. I get it.

"Hope you like oatmeal," Caleb says, bringing two steaming bowls to the table.

It's not the sad packet oatmeal I'm used to. This is thick, hearty, loaded with what looks like dried berries and nuts.

"Looks amazing," I say, genuinely impressed. "Did you forage these berries too?"

"Picked and dried them last summer." He sits across from me, immediately digging in.

I take a bite and nearly moan. Who knew oatmeal could taste this good? "You know, for someone who doesn't like people, you're a surprisingly good host."

"Not a host. Just practical." He doesn't look up from his bowl. "You need food. I have food."

"Right. Super practical." I hide my smile behind my coffee mug. "What's the plan for today? Are you going to radio the rangers?"

He nods once. "After breakfast. Storm's passed, but roads might still be washed out. Could take a day or two."

I absorb this information, surprised by my lack of panic. Yesterday, being stuck in the woods with no cell service and a sprained ankle felt like the end of the world. Today, it feels almost... peaceful.

"I'm sorry to impose on you," I say. "I know you value your solitude."

His eyes flick up to meet mine, startled by my perception. "It's fine."

He's a man of few words, but I'm starting to read the variations in his grunts and clipped phrases. This one translates to: It's not ideal, but I won't let you die.

"How long have you lived up here?" I ask, trying again for conversation.

"Five years." He takes a sip of coffee, then surprisingly elaborates. "Came up after my last fire season."

"Fire season?" This is new information. "You were a firefighter?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Smokejumper." There's no pride in his voice, just fact. "Eight years."

My eyebrows shoot up. Smokejumpers are the elite—the ones who parachute into remote wildfires too dangerous for anyone else. The connection clicks.

"That explains a lot," I say. "The first aid knowledge, the survival skills, the..." I gesture vaguely at all of him, "...physical capacity."

Is that a hint of color on his cheeks? Surely not.

"Just training," he mutters, standing to take his empty bowl to the sink. "I'm going to check your ankle."

The abrupt subject change is obvious, but I let it slide. He kneels in front of me, and I try not to think about how intimate this position feels as he carefully examines my ankle. His hands are rough with calluses but impossibly gentle as they support my heel.

"Swelling's down a little," he reports. "Still need to stay off it. I'll make you a crutch."

"A crutch? Like, from a tree branch?"

His mouth twitches. Almost a smile. "Something like that."

He disappears into a back room I hadn't noticed before and returns with a first aid kit more comprehensive than anything I've seen outside a hospital. With quick, efficient movements, he wraps my ankle in a support bandage.



"That should help," he says, sitting back on his heels.

"Thanks. Did they teach you this in smokejumper school, or are you secretly a doctor too?"

"You learn fast in the field. Injuries happen." There's something darker in his voice now, a shadow I don't understand yet.

He stands, gathering his jacket. "Need to check my lines and radio the ranger station. Will you be okay here for a couple hours?"

"I think I can manage not to burn your cabin down," I say lightly. "Go do your mountain man things."

That almost-smile again, gone so quickly I might have imagined it. "Ruby stays with you. She'll let me know if there's trouble."

The dog perks up at her name, looking between us with intelligent eyes.

"Guard duty, girl," Caleb tells her. "Keep an eye on the city slicker."

"Hey!" I protest, but there's no heat in it.

He pauses at the door, awkward suddenly. "There are books. If you get bored."

It's such a small, thoughtful thing to offer that it catches me off guard. "Thank you. I'll find something to read."

He nods once, and then he's gone, the door closing firmly behind him. The cabin feels different without his presence—quieter, but somehow emptier too.

"Just you and me, huh?" I say to Ruby, who watches me with skeptical eyes from her spot by the fire. "Don't worry, I'm not trying to take your man. Just borrowing him until my ankle heals."

I hop over to the bookshelves, curious what kind of reading material a hermit smokejumper keeps on hand. There's a surprising variety—wilderness survival guides and plant identification books, sure, but also classics. Hemingway, London, McCarthy. Dog-eared paperbacks of Thoreau and Muir. Philosophy texts that look well-read.

This is not the library of a simple man. This is the collection of someone who thinks deeply, who wrestles with big questions in his solitude.

I select a Jack London novel and make my way back to the couch, settling in with a blanket. Ruby eventually relaxes, stretching out near my feet, one eye still watching me suspiciously.

The cabin is peaceful in a way I've never experienced. No traffic noise, no notifications, no endless to-do list. Just the crackling fire, the occasional sound of wind in the trees outside, and the weight of a good book in my hands.

I think about my apartment in New York—sleek, modern, always slightly sterile no matter how many decorative pillows I add. I think about the life I left behind, the one I'm supposedly "finding myself" away from.

Peter's voice echoes in my head. You're too high-maintenance for camping, Lila. Too soft for anything real.

I push the memory away. Peter was wrong about a lot of things. Maybe he was wrong about that too.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

Hours pass in comfortable silence. I finish several chapters, doze a little, and am startled awake by the sound of the door opening. Ruby is on her feet immediately, tail wagging as Caleb returns.

He's carrying what looks like a perfectly crafted wooden crutch, the kind with a padded arm support and ergonomic handle.

"You made this?" I ask, incredulous. "From scratch? In two hours?"

"Had most of it done already," he says, setting it against the wall. "Just needed to adjust the height and add padding."

I stare at him, trying to reconcile this man who builds custom medical equipment in his spare time with the gruff hermit who barely speaks.

"You're full of surprises, Caleb McKenna."

He shrugs off his jacket, hanging it by the door. "Radio's out. Storm took down the tower. They're working on it, but it'll be a few days."

"Oh." I absorb this information. A few more days here, with him. I should be panicking. "That's... okay. I mean, if it's okay with you that I stay."

He moves to the stove, putting on water for coffee. "Not much choice. Can't exactly throw you back into the woods."

"Gee, when you put it like that, how can a girl not feel welcome?" My sarcasm earns

me another almost-smile.

"Try the crutch," he says. "See if it fits."

I stand carefully, testing the crutch under my arm. It's perfect—the right height, sturdy but not too heavy, with a smooth wooden handle that fits my grip.

"This is incredible," I say, taking a few experimental steps. "Where did you learn to make things like this?"

"My grandfather. He built furniture." Caleb watches me with critical eyes, assessing my movement. "Too tall?"

"No, it's perfect." I make my way to the kitchen, delighted by my new mobility. "Seriously, this is better than anything I'd get at a medical supply store."

Something like pride flashes in his eyes before he looks away, busying himself with the coffee.

"Thank you," I say, softer now. "Really."

He nods once, accepting my gratitude without comment.

As the day progresses, we fall into a strange but comfortable routine. He works outside for a while, checking traps and bringing in firewood. I read, try out my crutch, and eventually ask if I can help with anything.

"You can chop these," he says, setting a pile of vegetables on the counter. "If you want."

It's the first time he's let me contribute, and I take the task seriously, chopping carrots

and potatoes with meticulous care. It feels good to be useful, to be part of whatever he's creating.

By evening, the cabin is filled with the rich aroma of another stew, this one with rabbit meat. We eat in what's becoming our usual silence, but it's less tense than before. Almost comfortable.

After dinner, he builds up the fire and settles in the armchair with a book of his own. I return to the couch with my Jack London novel, and for hours, the only sounds are the turning of pages and the occasional pop from the fireplace.

It's the quietest day I've spent in years. Maybe ever. And strangely, it doesn't make me anxious or bored. It feels... restorative.

As night falls, I watch him over the top of my book. The firelight plays across his features, softening the hard lines of his face. He's so still when he reads, completely absorbed. I wonder what's going on behind those intense eyes.

"What?" he asks without looking up, catching me staring.

"Nothing," I say quickly. "Just... have you ever been in love?"

The question comes out of nowhere, surprising even me. It's too personal, too direct for our careful dance of polite distance.

He looks up slowly, expression unreadable. "Once."

I wasn't expecting an answer at all, let alone this one. "What happened?"

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

He's quiet so long I think he won't respond. Then, closing his book: "She didn't love the mountain like I did."

The simplicity of his answer hits me like a sucker punch. In those eight words is a whole story—of choices made, of values that couldn't align, of a fundamental incompatibility no amount of feeling could overcome.

"I'm sorry," I say softly.

He shrugs, but there's tension in his shoulders now. "It was a long time ago."

"No one since?"

"Hard to meet women when you avoid people on principle." There's a dry humor in his voice that makes me smile.

"Fair point." I curl deeper into the blanket. "Though you seem to be handling this unexpected houseguest pretty well."

"You're not as annoying as I expected." It's the closest thing to a compliment he's given me.

I laugh, the sound echoing in the quiet cabin. "A rare compliment from the mountain hermit? I'm honored."

Something shifts in his expression, softens almost imperceptibly. "You should sleep. Your body needs rest to heal."

I want to protest, to stay in this moment of unexpected connection, but exhaustion is pulling at me. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'll help you to the bedroom." He stands, extending a hand.

I take it, warmth spreading from where our skin connects. His hand is so much larger than mine, so much stronger. He helps me to my feet, steadying me when I wobble.

"I really can take the couch tonight," I offer as we make our slow way to the bedroom. "I don't want to keep putting you out."

"No." The firmness in his voice brooks no argument. "You need proper rest."

At the bedroom door, I pause, turning to face him. We're closer than we've been all day, close enough that I can see the flecks of amber in his hazel eyes, smell the pine and smoke scent of him.

"Thank you, Caleb. For everything."

His eyes search mine for a long moment. "Get some sleep, Lila."

He steps back, breaking whatever strange spell had fallen over us. I slip into the bedroom, closing the door with a soft click.

As I settle into his bed, surrounded by his scent, I realize something unsettling. For all my talk of "finding myself" on this wilderness adventure, I never expected to find someone else in the process.

Especially not someone who makes solitude seem like the most honest way to live.

CALEB

I can't stop watching her.

It's been three days since I found Lila Monroe half-dead in the woods, and instead of getting used to her presence, I'm becoming more aware of it by the hour.

The way she bites her lip when she's deep in a book. The little hum she makes when she stretches her arms above her head. The soft padding of her uneven steps as she moves around my cabin on the crutch I made her.

I'm noticing things I have no business noticing.

"You're staring again," she says without looking up from her book. Her mouth curves into a small smile.

Caught. Again. I turn back to the knife I'm sharpening, focusing on the smooth slide of steel against stone.

"Just making sure you're not putting weight on that ankle."



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Uh-huh." She doesn't believe me. Smart woman.

The radio's still out. Rangers say it'll be another day or two before they can get a vehicle up the mountain. The tower's fixed, but the roads are still a mess from the storm.

Which means more days with Lila in my space, filling it with her presence, making it harder to remember why I prefer being alone.

She's adapted faster than I expected. Doesn't complain about the lack of cell service or modern conveniences. Doesn't fill the silence with pointless chatter like most city people do when they're uncomfortable. She just... exists alongside me, finding rhythm in the simplicity of my days.

It's unnerving.

"Can I help with dinner?" she asks, setting her book aside. "I feel useless just sitting here while you do everything."

I slide the knife back into its sheath. "You're injured."

"My brain and one leg still work perfectly fine." She grabs her crutch and makes her way to the kitchen. "What are we having?"

"Trout. Caught two in the stream this morning."

"Fresh fish? Fancy." She smiles, that easy, bright expression that does something

uncomfortable to my chest. "Put me to work, mountain man. I can chop, stir, whatever you need."

I should say no. Every shared task creates another connection, another thread between us that I'll have to cut when she leaves.

But I nod. "Potatoes need cleaning and slicing."

She beams like I've given her a gift instead of a chore. "I'm on it."

We work side by side in the small kitchen, her movements surprisingly efficient despite the crutch. She doesn't fill the silence with nervous chatter, but when she does speak, her questions are thoughtful.

"Where did you learn to fish?"

"My grandfather. Same one who taught me woodworking."

"He sounds like an important person in your life."

I nod, scaling the trout with practiced motions. "Raised me and my cousins after my parents died. Taught us everything that matters."

The words come easier than they should. I don't talk about my family, especially not with strangers. But Lila has a way of asking that makes answering feel natural.

"The McKenna brothers?" She remembers the name I gave her that first night. "You mentioned cousins. Are they nearby?"

"Some. Sawyer's the sheriff in Grizzly Ridge. Cade lives up another ridge. Others scattered around."

"Do you see them often?"

I hesitate, focus on gutting the fish. "Not anymore."

She catches the tone, doesn't push. Instead, she bumps her shoulder lightly against my arm, a brief touch of solidarity.

"These potatoes are officially sliced to perfection," she announces, changing the subject. "What's next?"

I show her how to season them with herbs I've dried from the garden, how to arrange them in the cast iron skillet so they'll cook evenly. Her fingers are delicate, nails short but neat, skin softer than anything that belongs in this cabin.

"You're good at this," she observes as I prepare the fish. "Better than any of the chefs I dated in New York."

"Dated a lot of chefs?" I shouldn't ask. Don't want to know about the men before me. But the question comes anyway.

She laughs. "Just one, actually. Peter thought he was God's gift to the culinary world. Turned out he was better at serving bullshit than food."

The bitterness in her voice is fleeting but unmistakable.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"He's the reason you're out here, isn't he?" I slide the skillet into the oven. "In the mountains, alone."

Her eyes widen slightly at my perception. "That obvious, huh?"

I shrug. "People don't wander into dangerous wilderness unless they're running from something or looking for something."

"A bit of both, I guess." She leans against the counter, weight off her bad ankle. "Wanted to prove I could do something on my own. Be independent. After he..." She trails off, shakes her head. "It doesn't matter."

But it does. I want to know what this man did to her, what put that shadow in her eyes. Want to find him and explain with my fists why that was a mistake.

The violent impulse startles me. I don't care about other people's problems. Don't get involved. That's the whole point of living up here.

"He cheated," she says quietly, reading something in my silence. "After two years together. With my friend. Classic story."

"He's an idiot." The words come out harder than intended.

Her smile is small but genuine. "That's what my mom said. Right before she signed me up for that wilderness retreat I was supposed to be on before I got lost."

"Some retreat. They didn't even notice you were missing?"

"It doesn't start until next week. I came up early to do some solo hiking, get in the right headspace." She winces. "Clearly that was a spectacular plan."

I snort. "Could've been worse. Could've ended up at one of those rich people camps where they make you chant and hug trees."

Her laugh fills the kitchen, bright and unexpected. "Oh God, is that what you think city people do in the woods?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Well, there was a sound bath on the itinerary. And something about forest bathing, which I'm pretty sure doesn't involve actual bathing."

"Told you." I check the oven, hiding my own amusement. "Rich people shit."

"Hey, I'll have you know I was really looking forward to harmonizing my chakras," she teases.

"Your chakras seem plenty harmonized to me."

That earns me another laugh, and something inside me shifts. Loosens. It's been so long since I've made someone laugh. Even longer since I've wanted to.

Dinner is simple but good. She compliments the fish honestly, not with the fake enthusiasm city folks usually show when eating "rustic" food. After we eat, she insists on washing the dishes, claiming she needs to earn her keep.

"You don't owe me anything," I tell her, but she waves me off.

"Let me do this. Please."

So I let her, watching from across the room as she stands at my sink, humming softly to herself. She looks right there, like a piece of a puzzle I didn't know was missing.

Dangerous thoughts.

When she finishes, she makes her way to the couch, where Ruby has claimed the prime spot in front of the fire. My traitor dog actually moves over to make room for her. Three days, and Ruby's already chosen sides.

"Good girl," Lila murmurs, settling beside my dog. She stretches her injured leg out on the coffee table, wincing slightly.

"Hurting?" I ask, moving to check her ankle without thinking.

"Just stiff. I'll be fine."

I kneel anyway, carefully unwrapping the bandage. The swelling has improved dramatically, but there's still bruising along the outside of her ankle.

"Better," I assess. "Still needs elevation and rest."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Yes, doctor." She salutes playfully, then sober. "Seriously, though. Thank you for taking care of me. I know this isn't what you signed up for."

I reapply the bandage, trying not to notice the delicate bones beneath my rough hands, the softness of her skin.

"Wasn't going to leave you out there."

"No, you wouldn't," she says softly. "Because underneath all that gruff hermit exterior, you're a good man, Caleb McKenna."

Her words make me uncomfortable. I'm not good. I'm selfish, isolated by choice. I left behind responsibilities, connections, obligations. Ran from the world when it got too hard, too painful.

She doesn't know who I really am. What I've done. What I've failed to do.

I finish with her ankle and stand, needing distance. "Fire needs wood."

Outside, the night air is sharp with approaching autumn. Stars blanket the sky, so bright and clear they seem close enough to touch. This view—this peace—is why I stay. Why I chose this life.

At least, that's what I tell myself as I stack logs in my arms.

When I return, she's dozed off on the couch, head tilted back, book open on her lap. Ruby watches me from her spot at Lila's feet, as if daring me to wake her.

I set the wood down quietly and stand there, unable to look away. She's beautiful in the firelight, all soft curves and warm colors. Her dark hair falls across her cheek, and my fingers itch to brush it back.

This isn't just attraction. It's something deeper, more unsettling. It's recognition.

I shake the thought away and grab a blanket from the back of the couch. As I lay it over her, she stirs, eyes fluttering open.

"Sorry," she murmurs, voice thick with sleep. "Didn't mean to doze off."

"It's fine. Your body's healing." I tuck the blanket around her, a gesture more tender than anything I've done in years. "You should sleep."

"Mmm." Her eyes drift closed again. "Wake me if I'm in your way."

But she's not in my way. That's the problem. She fits here, in my space, in my routine. Like she belongs.

She falls back asleep almost immediately, her breathing deep and even. I add wood to the fire, then settle in the armchair across from her, telling myself I'm just making sure she's comfortable before moving her to the bedroom.

I don't mean to watch her sleep. Don't mean to notice how the firelight catches in her hair, how her face softens in rest, how one hand curls beneath her chin like a child's.

Don't mean to feel this tightness in my chest, this protective urge that goes beyond basic human decency.

I should wake her. Help her to bed. Sleep on the couch with Ruby like I have the past three nights.



Instead, I stay in the chair, watching over her in the quiet cabin. Letting myself imagine, just for a moment, what it would be like if she weren't leaving. If this weren't temporary.

If she were mine to protect, not just for a few stormy days, but for all the days to come.

It's a dangerous path for my mind to wander down. I've chosen my life for good reasons. Solitude is safer. Simpler. I don't need complications, don't want the mess of caring about someone who will inevitably leave.

Everyone leaves the mountain eventually. The wild isn't for most people—especially not bright, beautiful women from New York with friends and careers and lives waiting for them.

She makes a small sound in her sleep, something between a sigh and a murmur, and shifts beneath the blanket. Ruby adjusts, settling her head on Lila's feet with a contented huff.

I close my eyes, trying to remember what my cabin felt like before her. The silence I cherished. The routine I built. The perfect, empty solitude.

But all I can see behind my eyelids is her smile. All I can hear is her laugh, bright and unexpected in my quiet world.

All I can feel is this unwelcome certainty that when she leaves—and she will leave—she'll take something vital with her. Something I didn't know I had until she stumbled into my life.

And I'm not sure I'll be able to live without it once it's gone.

5

LILA

My ankle is better.

I test it cautiously as I stand by the bedroom window, watching dawn break over the mountains. There's still pain, but it's manageable. I can put weight on it without wanting to scream.

Which means I can leave.

The thought should fill me with relief. Five days stranded in a rustic cabin with minimal amenities and a grumpy mountain man isn't exactly the wilderness retreat I signed up for.

Instead, I feel a strange hollowness in my chest.

I grab the crutch Caleb made me—though I probably don't need it anymore—and make my way to the main room. He's already up, of course. I've yet to beat him to consciousness, no matter how early I wake.

"Morning," I say, watching him at the stove.

He turns, eyes immediately dropping to my ankle, noticing my improved gait.  
"Better?"

"Much better." I set the crutch aside, balancing without it. "Almost good as new."

Something flickers across his face—so brief I almost miss it. Disappointment? Surely not.

"Radio's back up," he says, returning to his cooking. "Ranger station says the road to town cleared yesterday. They can send someone up today."

"Oh." I should be thrilled by this news. Freedom. Civilization. Cell service. "That's... great."

He sets a mug of coffee on the table, avoiding my eyes. "Should be able to reach your retreat place by nightfall, if that's still your plan."

Is it still my plan? Five days ago, it was all I could think about—getting back on track, joining my wilderness group, continuing my journey of self-discovery or whatever I was calling it.

Now, the thought of awkward group activities and forced bonding with strangers holds zero appeal.

"Actually..." I take a seat, curling my hands around the warm mug. "I might skip the retreat."

He glances up, surprise evident. "Thought that was the whole point of coming up here."

I shrug, suddenly self-conscious. "It was. But I'm not sure it's what I need anymore."

"What do you need?" His voice is low, neutral, but there's something in his eyes that makes my heart beat faster.

What do I need? I need to stop making decisions based on proving my ex wrong. I need to figure out what I really want, not what I think I should want. I need...

I look at Caleb standing there in his cabin, solid and real in a way so few things in my life have been lately.

"I'm still figuring that out," I admit.

He nods like he understands, then brings over plates of eggs and bread toasted on the woodstove. We eat in companionable silence, our routine familiar now after days together.

"There's a McKenna family barbecue tonight," he says suddenly, staring down at his plate. "At my cousin Sawyer's place in town."

I blink, surprised by the non-sequitur. "That's nice?"

"You could..." He stops, clears his throat. "If you want a ride to town, I'm heading that way."

It takes me a moment to realize what he's offering. "Are you inviting me to your family barbecue?"

"Just offering a ride," he says quickly, but the faint color in his cheeks tells a different story.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"I'd love a ride." I pause, then add softly, "And company for dinner, if that's on the table."

His eyes meet mine, searching. "You'd want to meet my family?"

"Why not? I've been curious about the famous McKenna cousins." I keep my tone light, trying not to make this bigger than it is. "Unless you're embarrassed to be seen with the disaster hiker you rescued."

"Not embarrassed." He stands, taking our empty plates. "They're just... a lot. Loud. Nosy."

"I think I can handle it." I smile, feeling strangely excited at the prospect. "I promise not to tell them how you snore."

"I don't snore."

"How would you know? You're asleep."

The corner of his mouth quirks up—that almost-smile I've come to look for. "Pack your things. We'll leave in an hour."

I realize with a jolt that I don't have much to pack. My hiking clothes, washed and dried by the fire. The few toiletries I had in my small backpack. That's it.

Everything else I've been using belongs to Caleb. Leaving feels like shedding a skin I've just grown comfortable in.

After I've gathered my meager belongings, I find him outside on the porch, talking in low tones to Ruby. The dog looks up as I approach, ears perked.

"All set?" he asks, straightening.

"Such as it is." I hold up my small pack. "Traveling light."

He nods, then gestures to a rugged pickup truck I hadn't noticed before. "Radio said the roads are passable for vehicles now."

"No horseback journey into town? I'm disappointed."

That earns me another almost-smile. "Next time."

Next time. The casual implication that there will be one settles warm in my chest.

The truck is well-maintained but clearly built for function, not comfort. Ruby jumps into the back without being told, settling in like this is routine.

"She comes to town with you?" I ask as Caleb helps me up into the passenger seat, his hand strong and steady under my elbow.

"Sometimes." He closes my door and circles to the driver's side. "She likes to visit her brother."

"Ruby has a brother?"

"Same litter. My cousin Cade has him. Bear."

I smile at this small revelation. "So it runs in the family, the whole mountain man and loyal dog combo?"

"Something like that." He starts the engine, the truck rumbling to life beneath us.

As we pull away from the cabin, I look back, committing it to memory. The solid log walls. The smoke curling from the chimney. The porch where I watched sunrise with coffee in borrowed flannel.

I already miss it.

The drive down the mountain is quiet but not uncomfortable. Caleb navigates the rough roads with easy confidence, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the center console. I resist the urge to cover it with mine.

"Tell me about your cousins," I say instead. "What should I expect?"

He sighs, but it's not annoyed. "Sawyer's the oldest. The sheriff. Responsible one. Cade's the loner."

"Like you?"

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Worse than me." There's a hint of affection in his voice. "Elias runs the family ranch. Quiet type. Boone's the fire chief."

"Also a smoke jumper?"

"Was. Now he stays closer to home. Then there's Finn, does security work. Travels a lot. Luke's the youngest. Has a daughter, Lily."

"Six McKenna men running Grizzly Ridge? The town doesn't stand a chance." I'm only half joking.

"Seven, counting me. Though I don't run anything."

"Except your mountain."

He nods, conceding the point. "Town's just past this ridge."

The trees thin out, revealing Grizzly Ridge below us. It's exactly what a small Montana town should look like—a main street with western facades, mountains rising behind it, smoke curling from chimneys. Charming in a way that can't be manufactured.

"It's like a postcard," I say, genuinely impressed.

"Tourist bait," he replies, but there's no real cynicism in his tone. "Town plays it up for the summer visitors."



As we drive down the main street, I notice people turning to look at our truck. A few wave. Caleb nods in acknowledgment but doesn't slow down.

"You're quite the local celebrity," I observe.

"Not me. Just don't come to town much. People notice."

"And now you've got a woman with you. I bet that really has them talking."

His hands tighten slightly on the wheel. "Town runs on gossip."

"Does that bother you? People talking?"

He considers this, turning onto a side street. "Used to. Not so much anymore. Learned to tune it out."

We pull up to a small motel at the edge of town—the Grizzly Inn, according to the vintage neon sign out front. Not exactly the Ritz, but it looks clean and well-kept.

"Figured you'd want a shower, real bed," Caleb says, parking but not turning off the engine. "Barbecue's not until six."

The consideration behind this gesture catches me off guard. He's thought about what I might need, planned ahead for my comfort. It's a small thing, but it speaks volumes.

"Thank you," I say, meaning it. "A shower sounds heavenly."

He nods, finally shutting off the engine. "I'll help you check in, then head to Sawyer's. Pick you up at five-thirty?"

"Perfect."

Inside, the motel is exactly what I expected—dated but clean, with a friendly older woman at the front desk who barely conceals her curiosity when Caleb walks in with me.

"Caleb McKenna," she says, genuine warmth in her voice. "Twice in one year. The apocalypse must be upon us."

"Marge," he acknowledges with a nod. "Need a room for Ms. Monroe."

Marge's eyes widen almost imperceptibly as they shift to me. "Of course. How long will you be staying, honey?"

I hesitate, realizing I haven't thought this far ahead. "Just tonight for now."

She nods, typing something into an ancient computer. "Room 4 has the best view of the mountains. And the hot water lasts longer than the others."

"That sounds perfect, thank you."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

As she processes my credit card, I catch her giving Caleb a look loaded with unspoken questions. He ignores it with practiced ease.

"There's a diner across the street if you get hungry," she tells me, handing over an actual metal key. "And my number's on the phone if you need anything."

"I appreciate it."

Caleb insists on carrying my small bag to the room, checking the locks on the windows and door with an attention to security that would seem paranoid from anyone else. From him, it's just who he is, leaving nothing to chance.

"All set?" he asks, lingering awkwardly by the door.

"All set. Thank you, Caleb. For everything."

He nods once, eyes meeting mine briefly before dropping away. "Five-thirty," he reminds me, and then he's gone, the door closing softly behind him.

Alone for the first time in days, I sink onto the bed, suddenly exhausted. The room feels too large, too empty without his solid presence filling the space.

Get it together, Lila. You've known the man less than a week.

I shake off the melancholy and head for the shower, turning it as hot as it will go. The water pressure is better than I expected, and I stand under the spray until my skin is pink, washing away days of mountain grime with the complimentary shampoo.

Wrapped in a scratchy motel towel, I survey my limited wardrobe options. My hiking clothes are functional but hardly appropriate for meeting the entire McKenna clan. The only alternative is the outfit I traveled to Montana in—jeans, a soft green sweater, and ankle boots that are thankfully comfortable enough for my healing ankle.

It'll have to do.

After blowing my hair dry with the ancient wall unit, I finally check my phone. It comes to life with a cascade of missed calls, texts, emails. Most from my mother, a few from friends, nothing from Peter.

I send Mom a quick text assuring her I'm fine, just had limited service, and promise to call tomorrow. The rest can wait.

By five-fifteen, I'm ready, nerves fluttering in my stomach for reasons I don't want to examine too closely. This isn't a date. It's a ride to town and a family barbecue. Nothing more.

So why am I checking my reflection for the tenth time?

Caleb arrives at exactly five-thirty, knocking quietly on my door. When I open it, I'm momentarily speechless.

He's changed clothes. The flannel and worn jeans have been replaced with a clean button-down shirt in deep blue and darker jeans that actually fit properly. His beard is neatly trimmed, hair still damp from a shower.

He looks... incredible.

"Hi," I manage, suddenly self-conscious in my travel-worn outfit.

His eyes move over me once, quickly but thoroughly. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." I grab my jacket and small purse. "Lead the way, mountain man."

Ruby is waiting in the truck, tail thumping against the seat when she sees me. I scratch behind her ears, oddly touched by her greeting.

"She missed you," Caleb says, starting the engine.

"I missed her too." I glance at him. "Both of you, actually."

He doesn't respond, but his hands flex on the steering wheel.

Sawyer's house is on the outskirts of town—a large, rambling structure with a sprawling yard and several outbuildings. A half-dozen vehicles are already parked in the gravel driveway, and the sound of laughter and music drifts from the backyard.

"Last chance to back out," Caleb says as he parks.

"Not a chance. I want to meet the infamous McKennas."

His mouth quirks. "Your funeral."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

As we round the house to the backyard, Ruby trotting ahead, I get my first glimpse of the McKenna clan in full force. They're gathered around picnic tables and a massive grill, all tall, dark-haired, and ridiculously good-looking in that rugged mountain man way.

And they all stop talking the moment they spot us.

"Well, I'll be damned," says one, rising from his seat with a wide grin. "The hermit emerges, and with company."

"Shut up, Boone," Caleb mutters, but there's no real heat in it.

A man who can only be Sawyer—slightly older, with an air of authority—approaches, hand extended to me. "Sawyer McKenna. Welcome to Grizzly Ridge."

"Lila Monroe," I reply, shaking his hand. "Thanks for having me."

"Any friend of Caleb's is welcome here." His eyes flick between us, assessing. "Though you're the first friend he's brought around in... well, ever."

"I found her lost in the woods," Caleb interjects, clearly uncomfortable with the attention. "Sprained ankle. Been staying at my cabin until the roads cleared."

This statement causes a ripple of interest through the gathered family. A younger man with a little girl perched on his shoulders—Luke, I assume—grins widely.

"So you're the reason he finally answered his radio," he says. "We were about to send a search party."

"I answer when it's important," Caleb grumbles.

"Apparently you needed someone stranded on your doorstep to qualify as important," says another—Elias, if I'm keeping them straight.

I feel Caleb tense beside me, ready to retreat from the good-natured ribbing. Without thinking, I place my hand on his arm, a silent show of support.

"I'm lucky he found me," I say, looking directly at his cousins. "Not everyone would take in a stranger, especially one as directionally challenged as I was."

Something shifts in their expressions—a subtle reassessment, a new respect.

"Come get a drink," Sawyer says, gesturing toward a cooler. "Food's almost ready."

As Caleb gets pulled into conversation with one cousin, another man approaches me—tall like the others but with a sharper edge. Cade, I'm guessing, the loner.

"So you survived my cousin's cabin," he says, handing me a beer. "No small feat."

"It was actually nice," I reply honestly. "Peaceful."

He studies me with eyes so similar to Caleb's it's unsettling. "Heard you're from New York."

"Born and raised. Though it feels different going back this time."

"Because of the ankle?"

"Because of other things." I look across the yard where Caleb is now crouched beside Luke's daughter, listening seriously to whatever she's telling him. "Sometimes you don't know what you're looking for until you find it."

Cade follows my gaze, something knowing in his expression. "He's a good man. Better than he thinks he is."

"I'm starting to see that."

The evening unfolds with surprising ease after that. The McKennas are loud and teasing with each other, but they welcome me without question. I learn that Sawyer has been sheriff for eight years, that Cade builds custom furniture in addition to his guiding business, that Luke's daughter Lily is obsessed with horses and wants to be a veterinarian.

I'm sitting next to Caleb at the picnic table, our shoulders occasionally brushing, his presence a steady anchor amid the boisterous gathering. He's quieter than his cousins, but I notice how they listen when he does speak, the respect evident beneath the teasing.

"So, Lila," Boone says as we finish eating, "what's the plan now that you're free from the mountain hermit's lair? Back to New York?"

The question I've been avoiding presses in, demanding an answer. All eyes turn to me, including Caleb's, though he pretends to focus on his plate.

"I'm not sure yet," I say carefully. "I was supposed to be at a wilderness retreat for the next week, but I'm thinking of skipping it."



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"Plenty of wilderness around here if that's what you're after," Sawyer offers. "Without the trust falls and kumbaya sessions."

I laugh. "That's kind of what I was thinking. Maybe stay a few more days, see what Grizzly Ridge has to offer."

I don't look at Caleb as I say this, but I feel him go still beside me.

"Town's small, but there's decent hiking once that ankle's better," Luke says. "Caleb knows all the best trails, don't you, cuz?"

Caleb grunts noncommittally, but doesn't contradict him.

As night falls, someone starts a fire in a pit at the center of the yard. The conversation flows easily, stories of McKenna childhood adventures, local gossip, gentle ribbing. I laugh more than I have in months, tucked beside Caleb on a log bench, his warmth a constant presence at my side.

Lily eventually falls asleep against her father's chest, and people begin to drift homeward. Caleb stands, extending a hand to help me up.

"Should get you back," he says softly. "Been a long day."

I take his hand, noticing how he doesn't immediately let go once I'm standing. "It's been a wonderful day. Thank you for bringing me."

We say our goodbyes, each McKenna giving me a genuine invitation to return.

Sawyer pulls Caleb aside for a brief, low conversation while I chat with Luke about good physical therapy exercises for my ankle.

In the truck, driving back to the motel, a comfortable silence falls between us. The town is quiet now, storefronts dark, only the occasional porch light illuminating the street.

"Your family is great," I say finally. "I see why you avoid them."

He glances at me, surprised, then actually chuckles—a low, rusty sound like he's out of practice. "They're a lot."

"They love you."

"They're nosy as hell."

"That too." I smile, looking out at the darkened town. "But nice. Welcoming."

He pulls up in front of the motel, idling the engine. Neither of us moves to get out.

"Thanks for coming," he says after a moment. "They liked you."

"I liked them too." I turn to face him. "What happens now, Caleb?"

He stares straight ahead, hands tight on the wheel. "What do you want to happen?"

It's the same question he asked this morning, but weighted differently now. What do I want? I've been letting other people—my ex, my mother, societal expectations—dictate that for too long.

"I meant what I said at dinner," I tell him. "I'm thinking of staying a few more days."

He nods slowly. "Motel's comfortable enough."

"It is." I pause, gathering courage. "But I was wondering if maybe... your offer of the cabin is still open."

His head turns sharply, eyes finding mine in the dim light. "My cabin?"

"If that's too much, I understand. I just..." I take a deep breath. "I wasn't ready to leave this morning. I'm still not sure I am."

The thick silence stretches between us.

"It's just a cabin in the woods," he says finally, voice rough. "Nothing special."

"I think we both know that's not true."

His eyes hold mine, searching for something. Sincerity, maybe. Or the catch he's expecting to find.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

"My ankle's better," I continue. "I can help more. Pull my weight. I just... I'd like a little more time. To figure things out."

"Figure what out?"

"What I want." I swallow hard. "Who I want to be. Where I belong."

The last word hangs in the air between us, loaded with meaning. He's still watching me, expression unreadable in the shadows.

"The cabin's there," he says finally. "If you want it."

It's not a declaration of feeling. Not an invitation to something more. Just a simple statement of fact. But coming from Caleb McKenna, it feels like the most honest offer I've ever received.

"I'd like that." My voice is barely above a whisper.

He nods once, decision made. "Rest tonight. I'll pick you up in the morning. Nine work?"

"Nine works perfectly."

We sit in silence for another moment, neither wanting to break the fragile understanding we've reached. Then, with reluctance that seems mutual, we get out of the truck.

He walks me to my door, Ruby following at his heels. At the threshold, I turn to face him, suddenly nervous in a way I haven't been since high school.

"Goodnight, Caleb. Thank you for today."

He nods, hands shoved in his pockets. "Nine," he reminds me.

"I'll be ready."

I watch as he walks back to his truck, Ruby jumping in the back without being told. As they pull away, I realize my heart is pounding, cheeks flushed with something that feels dangerously like hope.

My ankle's better. The roads are clear. I have every reason to leave, to return to my life in New York, to the path I was on before I got lost in these mountains.

But as I close the motel room door behind me, I know with absolute certainty that I'm not ready to go. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

6

LILA

Two weeks later, the fire crackles in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the cabin walls. Outside, snow has been falling steadily for hours, adding another layer to the blanket already covering the mountain. I stand at the window, a mug of tea warming my hands, watching the flakes drift down in the glow of the porch light.

"It's beautiful," I say softly. "Like we're inside a snow globe."

I hear Caleb shift in his chair where he's been reading, and feel his eyes on me.

Something has been building between us since I returned to the cabin—a tension, a pull that grows stronger every day.

"Storm's not letting up tonight," he says, his deep voice sending a shiver through me that has nothing to do with the cold. "Might be snowed in tomorrow."

I turn to face him, unable to suppress my smile. "Snowed in with you and Ruby? Sounds perfect to me."

I hear the warmth in my own voice, the invitation I haven't quite had the courage to voice directly. Whatever is growing between us remains unspoken, hovering in every shared glance, every accidental touch.

He stands, moving toward me with that fluid grace that still catches me off guard. This powerful man, so at home in his body, in this wilderness. When he reaches my side, I tilt my face up, tea forgotten in my hands.

"What are we doing, Caleb?" I whisper, searching his eyes in the firelight.

His hand moves to my face, brushing a strand of hair from my cheek. The simple contact sends warmth flooding through me.

"I don't know," he admits, voice rough like gravel. "This wasn't the plan."

"Plans change." I set my mug on the windowsill, never breaking his gaze. "Sometimes for the better."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

His thumb traces the curve of my jaw, and I know he can feel my pulse racing beneath his touch.

"Lila," he breathes my name like it's something precious. "I don't want to be the reason you stay if it's not what you really want."

"You're not the reason I'm staying," I tell him, covering his hand with mine. "You're the reason I found myself. There's a difference."

Something shifts in his expression, a wall crumbling behind those intense eyes that have haunted my dreams for weeks.

"I've wanted to kiss you since that first night," he confesses, his forehead touching mine. "When you fell asleep on the couch, looking like you belonged here."

My lips curve into a smile. "What's stopping you now, mountain man?"

Nothing, apparently. His mouth finds mine in the half-light, tentative at first, then hungry with a need that matches my own. I wind my arms around his neck, pressing myself against him, learning the feel of his body against mine. He tastes like coffee and wilderness, and his hands—those capable, calloused hands—are impossibly gentle as they span my waist.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, I feel dizzy with want.

"Take me to bed, Caleb," I whisper against his lips. "Not the couch tonight. Not separate rooms. Just us."

He searches my face, and I let him see everything—my certainty, my desire, my heart. "You sure about this? About me?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." I trace the line of his beard, marveling at how this man has come to mean so much to me in such a short time.

Without another word, he lifts me into his arms like I weigh nothing, cradling me against his chest as he carries me toward the bedroom. I tuck my face against his neck, breathing in his scent—pine and smoke and something uniquely him.

In the bedroom, he sets me on my feet beside the bed. Moonlight reflects off the snow outside, filtering through the window to cast us in silver and shadow.

My fingers find the buttons of his flannel shirt, slowly undoing each one. "I've imagined this," I admit, pushing the fabric from his broad shoulders. "How you'd look. How you'd feel."

His hands catch my wrists, bringing them to his lips. "Show me," he murmurs against my skin. "Show me what you imagined."

So I do. With trembling fingers and whispered directions, I guide his hands where I want them. He follows my lead, learning my body with exquisite attention—the curve of my waist, the sensitive skin beneath my breasts, the heat building between my thighs.

"You're beautiful," he breathes against my neck as I arch beneath him. "So damn beautiful it hurts to look at you."

When he finally positions himself above me, I'm trembling with anticipation. Our eyes lock as he slowly begins to push inside. The initial stretch takes my breath away—a delicious burn that has me gasping his name.



"Caleb." It comes out like a prayer, reverent and raw.

"You okay?" he whispers, holding perfectly still despite the tension vibrating through his powerful body.

I nod, unable to form words as I adjust to the feeling of him. He's big—filling me completely, stretching me to my limits. When he begins to move, slow and careful at first, my nails dig into the hard muscle of his shoulders. I'm marking him, claiming this extraordinary man as mine.

"More," I beg, lifting my hips to meet his next thrust. "Please, more."

He obliges, increasing the pace, driving deeper with each powerful stroke. The headboard knocks rhythmically against the wall, keeping time with our ragged breathing and desperate moans. There's an intense look of concentration on his face—he's holding back, afraid of hurting me.

"I won't break," I pant, wrapping my legs tighter around his waist. "Let go, Caleb. Let me feel all of you."

Something primal flashes in his eyes, and he hooks one of my legs over his shoulder, changing the angle. His next thrust hits somewhere so deep inside me that white-hot pleasure explodes behind my eyelids.

"God, yes," I cry out, arching beneath him. "Right there."

He drives into me with powerful, measured strokes, each one hitting that perfect spot. I'm climbing higher, tension coiling tighter in my core. When his thumb finds my clit, circling in time with his thrusts, the dual stimulation pushes me toward the edge.

"Come for me, baby," he growls, voice rough with exertion and desire. "Want to feel

you come apart around me."

The combination of his deep voice, skilled touch, and relentless rhythm sends me flying. The orgasm crashes through me in waves, my inner walls pulsing around him as I cry out his name. The sound echoes off the cabin walls, mingling with the howl of the mountain wind outside.

He follows moments later, his rhythm faltering as he drives deep one final time. His entire body goes rigid, a guttural groan tearing from his throat as he empties himself inside me. I can feel every pulse, every throb, as if our bodies have truly become one.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

In that perfect moment of release, I'm more present, more alive than I've ever been. He collapses beside me rather than on top of me, immediately pulling me against him like he can't bear to break our connection. Both of us are slick with sweat, chests heaving as we try to catch our breath. For long minutes, we lie tangled together, unable to speak, unwilling to move.

As our heartbeats gradually slow, I curl against his chest, tracing idle patterns through the light dusting of dark hair there. His skin is hot against mine, little tremors still running through his powerful frame. His heartbeat is strong and steady beneath my ear, his arm a solid weight around my waist—protective, possessive, perfect.

"That was..." I begin, struggling to find words adequate for what just happened between us.

"Yeah," he agrees, understanding without explanation. His fingers comb gently through my tangled hair, occasionally massaging my scalp in a way that makes me almost purr with contentment.

The intimacy of this moment—the quiet aftermath—feels even more profound than the passion that preceded it. I've had sex before, but never this. Never something that felt like laying my soul bare alongside my body.

"I can hear you thinking," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

I smile against his chest. "Just realizing that getting lost might be the best thing that ever happened to me."

His arm tightens around me. "Definitely the best thing that ever happened to me."

Outside, the storm rages on, but in here, wrapped in Caleb's arms, I've found a shelter more secure than any mountain cabin. I've found home.

"I never expected you," I whisper into the darkness. "When I came to Montana, I was looking for myself, not..."

"Not a grumpy hermit?" There's a smile in his voice.

"Not the love of my life," I correct him softly.

His arm tightens around me, and I feel his lips press against the top of my head. "I love you," he says, the words rough with emotion. "Have for a while now."

The simple confession fills my chest with warmth. "I know," I murmur, pressing a kiss to his chest, right over his heart. "I love you too."

As sleep claims me, I marvel at how the universe works. I came to these mountains lost, and in losing my way completely, I found exactly where I was meant to be. In this cabin, on this mountain, in the arms of a man who sees me more clearly than anyone ever has.

Sometimes, getting lost is the only way to find your way home.

## EPILOGUE

### CALEB

#### One Year Later

A little over a year ago, I found a city girl lost in my woods. Today, I'm watching her through the cabin window, barefoot in the garden despite the morning chill, her dark hair catching the sunlight as she harvests the last of summer's tomatoes.

My wife.

The word still feels new in my mind. Foreign but right, like it was waiting there all along.

Ruby lies at Lila's feet, ever the faithful shadow since the day I brought my woman home. The dog made her choice long before I admitted mine. Smart animal.

I pour two mugs of coffee—hers with cream, a luxury I never kept before her—and step onto the porch. The mountain air carries the first hint of fall, the promise of snow not far behind. I don't dread the coming winter like I used to. Not anymore.

"Morning," I call, and Lila turns, her smile hitting me square in the chest like it does every damn time.

"I was wondering when you'd drag yourself out of bed." She sets her basket down and walks toward me, those hips swaying in a rhythm I've memorized with my hands. "Thought mountain men were supposed to rise with the sun."

"Had a late night." I hand her the coffee, letting my fingers linger against hers. "Someone kept me up."

Her cheeks flush, and I still can't believe I get to see that—her pink skin and bright eyes in the morning light, the way she bites her lip remembering what we did to each other in the dark.

"Worth it though, right?" She winks, and something in my chest expands.

A year ago, my cabin was silent. Empty. Just the way I thought I wanted it. Now there are Lila's books mixed with mine on the shelves, her fancy coffee mugs hanging beside my chipped ones, her hiking boots next to mine by the door. Little pieces of her life tangled up with mine until I can't remember what it was like before.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm*

Don't want to remember.

"Sawyer called," I say, watching her sip her coffee. "Family dinner at the ranch tonight. Elias is announcing something."

"Engagement, maybe?" She raises an eyebrow. "He and Riley have been getting serious."

I shrug, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her against me. "Could be. McKennas move fast when we know what we want."

Lila laughs, the sound still the brightest thing on this mountain. "Three months from meeting to marriage? Yeah, I'd say that qualifies as fast."

"Would've married you the day after I found you if you'd let me." The words come out gruff, honest.

"Liar." She sets her mug down to wrap both arms around my neck. "You would've run for the hills if I'd suggested marriage back then."

"Probably." I concede, my hands finding their home on her hips. "But I would've come back."

"I know." She says it with complete certainty, this trust between us built one day at a time since she limped into my life. "You always come back to what's yours."

Mine. The word sends heat rushing through my veins. I drop my head, capturing her

mouth in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly burns hotter. Her body melts against mine, familiar now but never taken for granted.

When we break apart, she's breathless, eyes dark. "We have hours before we need to leave for dinner."

"That right?" I'm already backing her toward the cabin door.

"Hours and hours." Her hands slide under my shirt, those city-soft fingers finding skin. "Think we could find something to do with that time?"

Instead of answering, I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her inside. Ruby stays in the garden, used to being abandoned when we get like this.

Later, as Lila sleeps beside me, her bare skin warm against mine, I think about the year behind us. How she went back to New York only long enough to pack what mattered and settle her affairs. How she built a life here, working remotely for some fancy city company three days a week and helping Cade with his guide business the other two. How she charmed my family and this town and somehow didn't run screaming from the isolation that drove everyone else away.

I run my fingers down the curve of her spine, memorizing her for the thousandth time. She stirs but doesn't wake, just presses closer.

Sometimes, in the darkest part of night, I still expect to wake and find her gone. Find all this was just some dream my lonely mind created. But then morning comes, and she's still here, making this cabin a home.

Making me whole in a way I never knew I needed.

I press my lips to her shoulder, tasting salt and sleep-warm skin. In her sleep, she murmurs my name, and something fierce and protective surges in my chest.



I came to this mountain to escape. To forget. To hide from a world that took too much.

Instead, I found everything.

My eyes drift to the small white stick hidden in my drawer, the one I found this morning while Lila was in the garden. The one with two pink lines that explain why she's been tired lately, why her body feels different under my hands. She doesn't know I know yet. Probably planning some special way to tell me.

I'll act surprised when she does.

McKenna men have always been good at keeping secrets when it matters.

And nothing has ever mattered more than the woman in my arms and the life growing inside her.

My last thought before sleep claims me is that sometimes, getting lost is the only way to be found.

And I'll spend the rest of my life making sure Lila knows she'll always have a home to return to.

Always have me.