



Kissing My Mountain Man

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Category: Romance

Description: I thought I knew everything. But he's about to show me so much more.

I've always felt a connection with my four-times great aunt, Clara Bishop. For years I've researched every aspect of her life as a fiercely independent frontier woman through her notable journals.

As I plan to visit her old homestead, I'm paired up with a grumpy park ranger who'd rather be fishing on his day off than leading me up the mountain.

But when we stumble upon a secret that Clara never planned to share with the world, together we dig deeper into the mystery. It's hard not to see the parallels between Clara's life and mine as I fall for the handsome mountain man by my side.

Can a century-old love be shared once again on this mountain? Or is history doomed to repeat itself?

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ChapterOne

LANDRY

With each mile we drive out of the city, the scenic view around us is ever-changing. The vibrant colors of the leaves are beginning to fade, and I'm ready for the new season—crisp, clean air, warm cozy sweaters, and hearty soups to feed my body and soul.

“Seriously, Landry,” Bellamy, my friend, and a fellow graduate student, says from the driver's seat. “I can't tell if you're just excited to get there or you really have to pee.”

“Sorry.” I slip my hands under my thighs to try and still the excitement mounting inside me. “I've waited a long time for this—practically a lifetime.”

Since I was a little girl and found the name Clara Bishop in my social studies book in second grade, I've been consumed with wanting to learn everything I could about my four-times great aunt.

Clara lived out on the frontier in the late 1800s and defied all societal norms that were placed on women during this time. She was fiercely independent, one of the best sharpshooters in the territory, and she famously documented her life in her journals.

I've felt a connection with her that has crossed over a century I could never truly explain, but I feel like I know her. So much so that she's the catalyst in my thesis for graduate school. And this weekend is the first time I'm getting to visit the historic site

of her homestead on Bishop's Ridge in Woodland National Park.

I glance out the passenger window and watch as the lush mountain range grows with each passing minute. If it weren't for the road we're driving on right now, it would look like we've stepped back in time over a hundred years ago to the pristine, untouched land of the American Frontier. The dense foliage of the trees makes it hard to see the rugged terrain that I'll have to trek to see the place where Clara spent most of her life.

The pull to visit this place has always been strong, and it's taken me years to get the permission I need to visit it. But with the help of my roommate Devrie, I now have a ranger who will be guiding me up the mountain and the backing of my university to be there.

"How many cups of coffee did you drink this morning?" Bellamy asks.

Pointing to the empty cup in the cup holder between our seats, I say, "Just the one."

"Are you sure about that?" She eyes my knees as they bounce with anticipation.

"I can't help it. This is such an amazing opportunity."

"You've only been talking about coming up here since the day I met you." Bellamy chuckles beside me, not taking her eyes off the winding road ahead of us. "I'm just glad it's finally happening for you. Now maybe you'll shut up about it."

"The jokes on you in this scenario." I laugh, knowing she's only kidding. "I'm going to have so much more to tell you when I get back."

"In that case." Bellamy pushes on the brakes. "I think we should turn back."

“Too late.” I point at the sign ahead that reads—Welcome to Woodlands National Park.

We drive in silence as we enter the park. I think Bellamy is giving me this time to take in everything I can of this place I’ve dreamed of visiting since I was a little girl. Every tree and rock formation we pass, I wonder if Clara saw the same ones when she traveled west and settled in this area.

“Who’s the ranger that’s going to take you up the mountain?” Bellamy asks.

“He’s my roommate’s brother.” I pull out the slip of paper from my pocket with his information that Devrie scribbled out for me. “His name is Denny Martin.”

“I bet he’s some bearded wild man who hunts his own food and claims he can talk to animals,” she smirks.

“He’s a national parks ranger.” I flash her a skeptical look. “I doubt he looks anything like the recluse you’re describing.”

“I don’t know. My dad loves watching those reality shows about people living in the wild and looking a lot like Bigfoot.”

“Are you really bringing up Bigfoot when I’m about to go hiking in the woods?”

“Just remember, he’s probably more afraid of you than you are of it.”

“I swear if you weren’t my ride right now,” I grumble as she chuckles next to me.

“All jokes aside, I’m happy you finally get to check out this place.”

“Thanks again for driving me out here,” I say. “After my car broke down last year, I

didn't bother replacing it because it costs a fortune to park in the city."

"No worries." Bellamy turns down a dirt road that leads to the ranger station. "I can't wait to hear all about it."

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“It’s going to be life changing. I’m determined to find something that no other researcher has found before—some insight into her incredible life that will set my thesis apart. If I’m lucky, I might be able to get some interest in her biography that I’ve been working on. A more accurate biography.” I hold my hand up to stop her from reminding me once again it wouldn’t be the first book written about Clara.

Bellamy takes her eyes off the road for a second to glare at me. It’s the same look my mom would give me when I’d say something crazy when I was a little kid, like I want to grow up to be a princess or if you make me eat Brussel sprouts again, I’m running away from home.

“Landry—”

“Think about what this could mean, Bell? A fiercely self-sufficient frontier woman who was never beholden a man. Clara Bishop was ahead of her time. I want the world to know everything about her and love her the way I do.”

“I get it.” Bellamy sighs. “I really do. But please, don’t get your hopes up too much, okay? Historians have already researched her, and her story has been told a few times. I don’t want this to crush you if you don’t find something.”

I exhale a big gust of air as if her words have let the wind out of my sails. She’s probably right. I need to get my head out of the clouds. But something deep inside me knows there’s more to my ancestor’s story. I have a driving need to find it. And it’s only fitting that her four-times great-niece finds those answers.

Her words settle between us, making the last leg of the drive a bit tense. But as we

pull into a small clearing, the trees open up and I realize it's the parking area for the ranger station. It's a small wood structure that looks like it could've once been the home of a settler in another lifetime.

My gaze settles on a tall, rugged-looking man as he leans against the porch railing. Suddenly the rapid increase in my heart isn't only because I'm excited for what this day will bring. This has to be Denny. He looks like a lot like Devrie with his dirty blond hair and angular features. But there's something rough around the edges in the way his square jaw has a week's worth of stubble growing on it, and his intense eyes appear as if they've seen some things that can't be unseen.

"Um, Landry, are you okay with going into the mountains alone with him?" Bellamy asks.

The scowl on his face deepens, and I wonder if he's heard her. He pushes off the railing and jams his fists into the pockets of his jeans. The flannel shirt he's wearing strains against the thick muscles in his shoulders, and my mind wanders to what he might look like without a shirt.

"You look flushed. Are you okay?" Bellamy asks, pulling my attention back to her.

"I'm fine," I assure her. "It's all fine. Devrie assured me that there was nothing to worry about. He's the best one to get me up and down the mountain safely."

Bellamy doesn't take her eyes off him. "He looks angry."

"Devrie says he's all bark and no bite. Besides he's probably just wondering why I'm not getting out of the car," I say, pulling on the door handle. "Thanks for everything, Bell."

Bellamy glares at me in the way she does when she thinks I'm not taking things

seriously enough. “I can still go with you. He’s not even in uniform.”

If it wasn’t for the fact that he was Devrie’s older brother, that last bit might have given me pause too. But I know that if anything happens to me, then she will make his life miserable.

“You already booked the motel and didn’t pack anything for a hike,” I say, pulling my hiking pack from the backseat. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Before she can say anything else, I get out of the car and close the door behind me. It’s clear that Bellamy isn’t completely sold on me going but I’ve never been so close to the world I’ve read so much about in Clara’s journals. I can’t go back now.

“I’ll see you soon,” I tell Bellamy with a wave.

She nods but doesn’t take her eyes off Denny, silently warning him that she will hold her responsible if I’m not returned in the same condition she’s left me in.

I swing my arm through one arm loop of the pack and pull it on as I walk over to Denny. “Are you ready for an adventure?”

ChapterTwo

DENNY

When I woke up this morning before the sun, the day was already filled with such promise, and it hadn’t even started yet. Today’s the first day I’ve had off in weeks and I plan on utilizing every minute of it out on the river. Just me, the wonders of nature that will surround me, and all the trout I can reel in.

The sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon as I pull to a stop in front of the

ranger station. I grab my thermos off the passenger seat and jump out of my truck. According to the forecast this morning, the weather should cooperate and give me a beautiful day.

I take the steps two at a time up the porch and yank open the screen door. Kit Williams is sitting with his feet up on his desk near the phone with a book in hand.

“Morning, Kit,” I say as I head over to the coffee station and empty most of the pot into my thermos.

Kit glances up from the book and raises one tentative eyebrow at me. “You’re early.”

“Nah, man.” I shake my head and take a sip of the rich caffeinated goodness. “It’s never too early to get out and spend the day on the river.”

He drops his feet to the floor and sits up straight. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

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I shake my head and shrug my shoulders at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about that promise you made to your sister.” He points to the phone on my desk. “Going out to Bishop’s Ridge to the old homestead with her roommate. Any of this ringing any bells?”

“No.” I lower the thermos from my lips. “That’s next week.”

Kit only shakes his head and points at the Fish and Wildlife calendar hanging on the wall before returning his attention back to his book.

No. No, no, no!

I run over to the calendar. The plan was that I wasn’t supposed to take her up until next week. But there it is in bold red lettering—Dev’s friend Bishop’s Ridge Homestead.

This couldn’t be coming at a worse time. I need this break and I don’t want to spend it leading around some city girl princess that thinks she can handle trekking through the park. The journey up to Bishop’s Ridge isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s such rugged terrain that it’s the reason that the old homestead has hardly been touched since the old woman who lived there died a hundred years ago.

Fuckin’ hell.

“Hey, Kit?”

“No.”

“Come on, buddy. You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

Kit lifts his gaze from his book to meet mine. “Don’t even ask what you’re thinking. I’m the only one here today at the station. Trust me. I’d much rather be out on the mountain than staying indoors, but alas, those are the cards we’ve been dealt.”

I roll my eyes after his little speech when I notice the steaming mug of coffee next to him on the desk with a powdered jelly donut and a well-worn copy of a biography of Jedidiah Smith in his hands.

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re really brokenhearted about it,” I say, pushing open the screen door and walking out to the porch with Kit’s laughter ringing out behind me.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and scroll through my recent contacts list, looking for my little sister’s number. Her phone rings three times before she picks up.

“No, big brother, you aren’t canceling on Landry,” she says by way of greeting. “She’s already on her way up there, and she’s really excited.”

I drop my head and let out a frustrated sigh. “Devrie, this is my only day off in weeks. I’ve been counting down the days to take some time for myself finally.”

There’s a shuffling sound, and I hear the muffled sound of my best friend Alec’s voice. My already shitty morning goes from bad to worse as I’m reminded of the fact that he is now dating my sister. I’m not happy with this turn of events in either of their dating lives, but as Devrie has reminded me in so many colorful words that it’s none of my business who she dates, and I should just be happy that she’s happy. And I am—I guess. There are way worse guys in the world than Alec, but it’s still hard to wrap my head around it.

“I’m sorry that this isn’t a good time for you, but you promised. We talked about this and had this all planned for two months. Landry needs this for her thesis project. She has been working so hard and is so close to graduating. You don’t want to be the one to screw this up for her, do you?”

I throw my head back and gaze up at the cobwebs in the corner of the porch ceiling. My sister has a gift for laying on just the right amount of guilt to get anyone to do precisely as she wants, and I’m just the idiot who can’t say no to her.

“Fine.” I run my hand over the back of my neck. “But I’m not happy about doing it.”

“You don’t have to be, but I love you all the more for doing it.”

“You’ll owe me,” I tell her.

“How about we call it even for punching my boyfriend in the face?”

“Wait a minute,” I hear Alec say in the background, sounding much more alert.

I laugh, not needing to see his expression to know the look he’s giving my sister right now.

“Come on, Denny. You’ll love it. Landry’s cool, and she understands what she’s asking of you.”

“I hope so,” I say seriously. “It’s not going to be easy getting up there.”

“She knows that. I promise. Besides, it’s not like you weren’t going to be doing something similar on your day off anyway. I know how you like to play on the mountain.”

“I wasn’t going to be playing on the mountain,” I growl with annoyance. “I was going to go fishing.”

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“Nature is nature,” she says, and I can almost hear her eyes rolling. “You’ll be outdoors. There’s nothing you like more.”

“I like being alone more.”

Devrie is quiet for a moment. “Well, maybe this once you will open your eyes to the beauty that surrounds you, and you won’t be so quick to want to be alone.”

Doubtful.

When I don’t say anything, she continues, “I know that you think you’ve closed yourself off to love, and I’m not entirely sure why, but there is someone out there for you. You can’t keep hiding away on that mountain.”

The faint echo of pain in my chest hits when I think back to my time on the force years ago. I won’t allow the memory of her face to come to the forefront of my mind, but I know it’s there. It will always be there.

“I just wanted to fish,” I finally say.

“Tomorrow, you can. But today, I need you to help out my friend.”

I sigh. “Yeah, alright.”

“Thank you. You’re the best.”

“I know.”

Devrie chuckles, and we say our goodbyes before hanging up the phone. I cross my arms and lean on the porch railing, staring out at the beauty that surrounds me.

“You don’t get views like this in the city,” I say to myself.

In the distance, I hear the sound of a car heading up the dirt road toward the station. Must be Landry. I can’t hold back the scowl that settles on my face. I may be following through with my promise to my sister, but I don’t have to like it—or her.

I squint my eyes to get a better view as the car pulls to a stop in front of me. I can’t get a clear look in the car, but there are two females when I was only expecting one.

What the hell?

Annoyance surges in me as I think about how Devrie didn’t say anything about needing to take two women up the mountain today.

The driver has shorter cropped hair that she tucks behind her ear as she stares up at me with a frown that might intimidate another guy but not me. She can’t be Landry. Devrie said she was excited to be up here. Whoever this woman is, maybe she can talk Landry into not following through with the plan, and I can get out to the river.

The glare of the rising sun blocks any view of the woman in the passenger seat. I can see her hands moving, so she must be saying something. She moves to pull something from the back before getting out of the passenger side door.

When she turns to me and swings her hiking pack onto her shoulders, I’m gut-punched at how gorgeous she is. A heart-shaped face with big brown eyes and a dark brown bouncy ponytail swinging with each step.

My dick reacts instantly as my gaze moves down the hourglass figure of the woman

walking towards me. Devrie is right about my heart being closed off, but I can't shut off the way my body reacts to a beautiful woman walking toward me.

She smiles up at me with a look of excitement I haven't been able to muster in years and asks, "Are you ready for an adventure?"

Yes, I fucking am.

ChapterThree

LANDRY

Denny nods his head once without saying a word and pushes off the railing. Well, he's certainly got the whole brooding mountain man vibe down, but he looks nothing like Devrie tried to paint him.

"Thank you so much for doing this," I say, unable to keep the grin from spreading on my face. "I can't tell you how excited I am to get this opportunity."

His penetrating gaze shifts from me to over my shoulder. "Is she coming along too?"

I turn to see Bellamy as she narrows her eyes on Denny, and I sigh. "No, she's my ride."

"Is she okay? She doesn't look happy."

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“Bellamy is just concerned about me.”

His eyebrow ticks up curiously, but he doesn’t ask the question that’s evident in his eyes.

“The terrain,” I lie, not wanting to offend him. “She thinks it might be too dangerous.”

“She isn’t wrong.” His eyes move slowly down my body, and it feels almost as intimate as an embrace.

Heat pools in my lower belly, but I push away the attraction growing inside me. That’s not why I’m here. I need to focus on the task at hand.

“I’m glad to see that you’ve dressed appropriately for the trek.” He points at my boots. “Brand new?”

Tightening my grip on the straps of my backpack, I glance down at my feet. “I’ve been wearing them around for a few weeks to break them in.”

I can’t deny I’m a little disappointed he’s trying to poke some holes in my attempts to prove that I’m capable of hiking up the mountain with him. What I wouldn’t give to know what he’s thinking right now.

Denny nods once. “We better get going. I’m going to let Kit know we’ll be heading out.”

I wait on the porch as he steps into the office. The hum of Bellamy's engine reminds me that she hasn't left yet. I turn around and give her a thumbs up and then a shooing motion for her to go.

"Be careful," she mouths to me before backing up and heading down the dirt road we came in on.

Denny returns with a backpack on his shoulders. He remains quiet as he walks down the steps, and I follow him toward a path behind the station that leads into the woods.

The first few miles aren't so bad since the trail is worn down. This makes it pretty easy to keep up with Denny's steady pace. But as the incline starts to increase sharply, I'm suddenly finding my ability to keep up with him isn't as good as I'd hoped.

My breathing gets heavier, and my thighs begin to chafe thanks to my nonexistent thigh gap. I'm almost certain that every pore is sweating, and I'm using muscles in my body I don't think I've ever used before.

That's it, as soon as I get home, I'm joining a gym. I was a fool to think that walking to and from and around campus every day would somehow be enough to prepare me for this journey.

"You okay back there?" Denny asks.

The hiking Adonis peers back over his shoulder at this mere mortal, and I can only muster a thumbs up as confirmation that I'm still good to keep going. I can't afford the air needed in my lungs to vocalize even a grunt.

"Right." He stops, allowing me to catch up to him. "How about we slow down?"

“Nope.” I rest my hands on my hips and take in a few deep breaths of air. “No need. I got this.”

He doesn’t look convinced. He even has the audacity to stand there, barely winded, as I try to ensure enough oxygen is reaching my brain, so I don’t faint.

“Don’t try to be a hero,” he says, as he unscrews the cap from his canteen and hands it over to me. “This isn’t a race. It’s a marathon.”

“Please, Denny, I want to get there.”

“I know you do. And you’ve already made it past the point where most people give up and turn back.”

I look around as if there is some mile marker to confirm what he’s saying, but there are only trees and nature surrounding us.

“Are you just saying that?” I ask between sips. “Because if you are, I will take it. I won’t lie. This sucks.”

The corner of his mouth ticks up in amusement. “I’m impressed by your honesty. And even more so by your determination.”

His words are like a shot of adrenaline to my heart, and I find that I’m suddenly ready to get moving again.

“Well, come on, slowpoke,” I tease, handing him back his canteen.

He chuckles. “Okay, then.”

Denny allows me to lead the way for a bit up the remainder of the path that has been

worn into the ground. If it wasn't there and I had to create a way through the trees, I'd be in serious trouble.

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Denny starts to point out some spots and tracks where wildlife has left its marks all around us. The brush near the path begins to thicken as we move along, and I really have to concentrate on where to step.

My breathing begins to steady out a bit as my body adjusts to this new pace of physical exertion. But I'm still very much an untrained hiker, and my body is quick to remind me of this with each step. A little stitch in my side begins to pinch, and I have to remind myself that oxygen is my friend more now than ever. My calves scream at me, and my mind slips to the hot bubble bath I'm going to take when I get home.

Almost as soon as I think about the luxuries, I get to enjoy in the twenty-first century, Clara's face pops into my mind. It's entirely possible that she walked this same path at some point in her sixty-two years and did it all without a premade trail. I have no reason to complain about any of this.

Clara ran a homestead alone on this mountain in the late 19th century.

I take a few steps.

She was a sharpshooter who never missed her mark.

I take a few more.

She was a woman ahead of her time.

My foot catches on a thick root poking out of the ground. With my brain lost in my own thoughts of comparing myself to Clara, I have zero time to react. My vision

spins as my body falls forward, and my knee slams into the hard-packed earth. Right before my head is on a trajectory to connect with a rock the size of a football, a strong arm wraps around my waist and catches me.

Denny lifts me with ease and steadies me on my feet. My brain is still trying to process what just happened when he leans close. The puffs of his breath against my neck and hair sends tingles through me.

My own breath quickens, and this time it's not from exertion.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I turn my head slightly and meet his concerned gaze. "Yes."

The deep crease between his brows makes me think that he doesn't believe me. He studies my face for a moment, probably checking for any sign that maybe I did hit my head.

"Really, I'm fine," I whisper. "Thanks to you."

His grip on me tightens, and I swear I can feel the hard press of his cock against my hip. My core clenches with excitement. The pull between us is undeniable. I start to lean in to press my lips to his, but just before they touch, he pulls back.

"We should really keep moving." He releases me and steps away.

The sudden loss of his body against mine makes me wobble, and I take a step to steady myself. But when I press my weight down on the foot that caught the root, I feel a sharp pain shoot through my foot, and I wince.

"What's wrong?" he asks but reacts before I can even answer. "Sit down."

“It’s nothing.”

“I’ll let you know if it’s nothing,” he says, reaching down and lifting me up into his arms.

This gruff manner would generally put me off, but this take control alpha strong man routine is more of a turn-on than I could’ve imagined, even if he did reject my kiss.

He walks us over to a nearby boulder and sets me down. I watch with rapt attention as he squats down in front of me. Carefully, he lifts my left leg and undoes the laces of my boot, and gingerly slips it off my foot.

“Does this hurt?” he asks as he holds my ankle steady and moves my foot in a slow circle.

It does ache a bit but not enough for me to be concerned that it’s broken. He looks up and studies my face when I don’t answer right away.

“Landry?”

It’s the first time I’ve heard him say my name, and it makes my heart rate double. I’ve been so consumed with school and researching everything I could about Clara Bishop that I’ve put dating on the back burner one too many times. Now here I am, face to face with a gorgeous guy, practically living out a Cinderella scenario I’ve dreamt about since I was a little girl, and I can’t find the words to speak.

“Landry.” He sets down my foot and leans forward to cup my face in his large hands. His eyes dart between mine with panic.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I rasp out. My mouth is so dry, and I’d love another sip from his canteen.

His shoulders relax. “You scared the shit out of me.”

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I open my mouth to speak, but a bird in the tree above us squawks loudly, cutting me off. Denny's hands drop from my face.

"Nothing appears to be broken," he says. "Might just be a sprain. Either way, we should head back. I don't—"

"No!" I say louder than I mean to. "I have to go up there. And we've already come this far.

Denny sighs and looks around. I can see the wheels turning in his mind as he weighs out all the different scenarios in which this could end badly. I hold my breath and wait, knowing that if he makes the call to go back, there's nothing I can do. I don't know how to get to the homestead on my own, and I don't think he'd let me even if I could.

"Why do you want to go to Bishop's Ridge so bad?" he asks, sitting down on the boulder next to me.

We look out at the range of mountains rolling out before us. I'm not sure I realized just how high we were already until this moment. We've climbed pretty far, and the sight before me is incredible.

"Clara Bishop is my four-time great aunt," I say, glancing over at him to see if he recognizes the name.

Denny's eyebrows shoot up with surprise. I'm not sure whether I should be surprised that he knows the name or if he's surprised that I'm related to such a remarkable

woman. Then again, I haven't really shown I'm worthy of association with my clumsy behavior and inability to speak.

"She was quite a woman," he says.

"A woman ahead of her time." I nod. "She's the subject of my graduate thesis. I've spent years researching every aspect of her life, but the one thing I haven't done is visit where she lived."

"I see."

"I have plans to write a book about her life."

"Aren't there a few already out there?" he asks, surprising me.

"Yes, but none of them go nearly as in-depth as they could. I want to show that women in the frontier are more than just a footnote in history."

Denny nods and pushes up from the boulder. "Well, we won't get there any quicker if we keep sitting here. If you think you can still make it up the mountain, then it's my job to get you up there."

I grab my boot off the ground and push my foot into it. The ache that remains isn't enough to stop me from finishing this trip.

After I've got it all laced up, I stand and take a tentative step to make sure I'm okay. My ankle doesn't buckle, so I take a few more steps before turning back to Denny.

"I'm all good."

"Then let's go."

ChapterFour

DENNY

I decide that it's probably best to keep Landry in front of me as we walk. That way, I can keep my eyes on her for the remainder way up the mountain.

When she tripped, the fear that tore through my chest surprised even me. I don't want anyone to get hurt on my watch, but there's something about Landry that takes my fear to another level. I thought I wasn't going to get to her in time before she hit her head on the rock, but I got lucky.

So, for the last two hours, I've watched over her as she carefully hikes with her head down, watching every step. I think it helps that she sets a pace she's comfortable with rather than trying to keep up with mine.

I'd never forgive myself if she hurt herself again. Not to mention Devrie would kill me.

It's probably ridiculous that I'm feeling this way about a woman I've only just met, but it's not only the fact that she's fucking gorgeous that has me thinking this way. It's the passion in her voice when she spoke about giving more life to Clara Bishop's story.

When I became a park ranger, I'd heard the stories about her and even picked up a biography to find out more about her. But Landry is right. The guy who wrote about her seemed to try and downplay who Clara was during her time. It's not hard to see strong, independent women every day now, but back in the late 1800s, they may have been strong, but they didn't have their independence. So, for Clara Bishop to live as she did in the time that she lived made her one hell of a woman. It's clear that determination runs strong in Landry's family.

“How much farther do you think?” she asks over her shoulder.

I glance up ahead, looking for the lover’s knot tree. It’s what I always look for when I come up to Bishop’s Ridge. But I don’t see it yet.

“We’re getting close,” I say.

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I study Landry closely as we continue on. Her head comes up from time to time and then drops back down to her feet. She's still worried about tripping, but I won't let that happen.

My gaze moves down her body, taking in every dip and curve. That ass of hers sways in front of me with each step, and it takes everything in me to keep my body from reacting the way it wants to respond. I need to get myself under control, and it's starting to get uncomfortable.

Just as we turn a bend in the hike, I see the lover's knot tree.

"There it is," I say.

"What?" Landry stops and looks around. "Where?"

I come up behind her and point over her shoulder to the two trees whose trunks are bent and wrapped around one another in a knot. It's not something you see every day in nature, and it was likely done by someone when the two trees were saplings many years ago.

"The lover's knot," I whisper. She follows my finger to where I'm pointing. "The homestead is just beyond the trees."

Her eyes light up as she moves her head, and a piece of the structure can be seen between the trees.

Forgetting her concern about falling again, Landry takes off running. But I don't miss

how she favors her right foot a bit more as she moves. I should've known that she wasn't being completely honest about her injury. The need to see Clara's homestead in person supersedes any pain Landry might be feeling from her fall.

I still can't get over how a woman like Clara Bishop survived up here on her own, and that's not a reflection of her gender. Living up here on the mountain in this century would be hard enough but take away all the modern luxuries we take for granted, like running water, electricity, or indoor plumbing, and I wouldn't be able to do it.

"Are you coming?" Landry yells back to me.

I follow her up the remainder of the path to the clearing that opens up just beyond the trees. The old log cabin still stands, the same as it did over a century ago—a reflection of the strong woman who built it.

I've kept most of what I've been feeling behind a serious expression this whole time, but witnessing Landry's genuine excitement to be here has a smile spreading across my face that I can't stop.

Landry runs around the old cabin, never staying in one spot for long before moving on to the next. Her hands move lightly over the structure like there might be some hidden portal to send her back in time to when the house was occupied.

After making a complete circle, she finally stops by the front window and leans close to look in. I watch as she lifts her hand to shield her eyes so that she can see into the cloudy glass.

"This is incredible," she says, smiling over at me. "I mean, I've seen pictures, but just being here is something completely different."

“Are you going to go inside?”

“Can I?” she asks, her eyes growing even wider.

I laugh. “I didn’t bring you up all this way to just stand outside.”

Landry tries to open the door, but the old thing doesn’t move. She tries again—no such luck.

This door hasn’t been open in decades. And the elements probably expanded the wood, making it tighten inside the door frame.

The other rangers and I work hard to try and make sure tourists don’t make it up this way to disturb the history of this place. This homestead was on this land before it became a national park. But thanks to someone at the university, Landry has been given special permission to go inside.

She huffs and uses her shoulder to shove with all her might, but the door still won’t budge.

I run over to her. The rocks and twigs crunched under my boots with every step. “Mind if I give it a try?”

“Yes, please.” She steps back to give me some room.

Using my shoulder, I lean and put my weight into the door, but it only creaks a bit. I try again, this time putting more force into it, but it only shakes and doesn’t open.

“Step back,” I grumble, hating that this damn door is making me look like a jackass in front of Landry.

I take a few steps back, ignoring the amusement on her face as I run forward and slam my body hard into the door. It bursts open, and I stumble to catch myself to keep from falling on my face. But as I do this, my foot goes straight through one of the rotted floorboards.

“Are you hurt?” Landry asks, rushing in behind me.

I wiggle my foot a bit to ensure nothing’s hurt. Thankfully I don’t feel any of the telltale signs that I’ve broken something.

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So much for working to keep this place preserved as we found it.

“Nope.” I pull it out of the hole I’ve made. “Just my pride.”

Landry chuckles and rests her hand on my arm. The simple touch sends a jolt of electricity through my body. But if she felt it too, she’s hiding it better than me as she bends down to look into the hole.

“I think there’s something in there.” She points.

We both lean down for a closer look. I reach in and pull at the remainder of the broken floorboard. It creaks from the force before the rusty old nail gives way, and I set the broken floorboard piece to the side. Landry reaches into the hole.

“There’s definitely something in here,” she confirms, but whatever it is, it’s too big to come out.

I grab the next floorboard and yank hard. This one comes up much easier. I set it down with the other piece as Landry pulls out the metal tin. She pushes to her feet and rushes over to the door for better light. I follow her out.

Landry tries to open the tin box, but the metal has oxidized a bit, sealing it shut.

“It won’t open.” She looks up at me, her eyes searching for me to give her some sort of answer.

I pull my arms out of my hiking pack and pull out the knife I keep inside. Landry

hands me the box, and I use the tip to pry it open. It takes a few minutes but eventually, the lid gives way, but I don't open it.

"Here," I say, handing the box back to her.

This is Landry's discovery and history, not mine.

"You do the honors." I nod to the box.

She bites down on her lower lip, and my cock twitches with excitement, but this isn't the time or place for any thoughts about what it would be like to bite on that lip myself.

Tentatively Landry lifts the lid, and we both see a yellowing piece of fabric folded inside.

Landry's hand holding the box begins to shake, maybe from adrenaline or perhaps something else. But I reach up and steady it with mine.

"Clara was probably the last person to have seen what's inside," Landry whispers.

"Then I guess it's good that someone from her family is the one to open it."

Tears brim in Landry's eyes, but they don't fall until she blinks. I reach up and use my thumb to wipe them away. The corners of her mouth lift, but there is still sadness in her eyes.

I take the box from Landry's hand and hold it for her. She lifts out the cloth and peels back one corner. It appears to be a handkerchief with the letters "JM" embroidered into the corner. As she pulls back the other side, we find a tintype photo of a man and woman inside.

Landry gasps. “That’s Clara Bishop.”

We both lean closer to get a better look. The familiar heart-shaped face and dark eyes in the tintype match the woman standing next to me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that this was Landry.

“She’s beautiful,” Landry says.

I look over at her, watching her as she studies the image of her ancestor. “Yes, she is.”

Pride beams in the smile she flashes up at me, but I want to say that it’s really her that I’m talking about, not Clara.

“I wonder who the man is?” she asks. “Clara was never married.”

She hands me the tintype to look closer. The two are standing back-to-back with their faces turned toward the camera. It’s an unusual pose for the time it was taken, but then again, Clara Bishop was often one to buck traditions.

“Maybe this will give you some answers,” I say, holding up the box to show Landry the leather-bound journal inside. She strokes her fingers over the worn, cracking cover and lifts it out of the tin.

Ever the careful historian, she slowly unbinds the journal strap with the leather strap wrapped around it several times. She takes a deep breath before opening the cover.

I watch as elation rushes out of her when she flips open the journal. The pure excitement she’s experiencing is infectious, as her lips move as she reads to herself.

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“Oh my gosh,” she whispers.

Her hand grasps my forearm again, and her heat sears my skin in the best way. I can’t stop physically reacting to her.

“Denny,” she looks up at me. “This is Clara’s journal.”

“I gathered as much.”

“No, you don’t understand. This is a lost journal.”

“Now you lost me.”

“Clara famously wrote about her life in her journals, but the dates never matched up with the set my grandfather donated to the university. It was believed that it was just lost over time. But according to the dates written in here. This is the missing journal.”

Landry breathes heavily as she stares at the priceless piece of history. Well, priceless to Landry.

“Listen to this,” Landry says, and I keep my eyes off her lips as she begins to read.

ChapterFive

LANDRY

Denny’s accidental discovery of this journal is the find of the century for me. It won’t

make headlines on the nightly news or even send people flocking to this mountain, but it does open that one last door to the past I've craved to peer into since the first time I poured over these journals.

I could never understand how one journal of nearly thirty was lost over time. My thoughts even crossed into righteous anger at my family for being so careless with them. But now I realize as I hold this leather-bound treasure in my hand that my anger was utterly unjustified.

July 21, 1883

A man appeared at my door last night. Like a wraith stepping out of the shadows, he thumped his fist against the frame and hollered for me to open up. When I refused him entry into my home, he pounded again. Only this time with half the strength as before. His voice was deep, but I could still hear the pain in the cadence of each word he spoke. I knew better than to let this man in, but there was something that called to me. Maybe a voice from my better angels urging me to help this man when no one else could.

With my rifle in hand, I opened the door. The dark figure leaned one arm against the wall holding himself up, while his other hand held his taut belly. But there was no mistaking the crimson blood that dripped out from beneath his jacket. With a staggering step forward, he fell into my arms, nearly taking us both to the ground. I struggled to help him over to the bed, knowing even then that he wouldn't likely survive the night.

"Do you think that was J.M.?" Denny asks.

I look up from the familiar cursive handwriting of Clara to Denny's curious expression.

“Maybe,” I say, walking over to the edge of the porch. I sit down on the step and pat the spot on my left.

“Let’s find out,” he says, taking the seat next to me.

So I continue reading.

July 24, 1883

He is still alive, but there is no certainty that our Lord will not call him back at any moment. I stitched his wound as best I could, but only time would tell if it would be enough.

I managed to get a name as he slipped in and out of consciousness. John Milford. There are no Milfords I know in the territory, but somehow this man found his way to my doorstep. I suspect he might be running from the law. He made me swear on Momma’s grave that I wouldn’t let them find him. I am not looking for trouble, but trouble sure found me.

With each entry we read, it becomes clearer that John Milford has become much more to Clara than just some strange man who appeared at her door in need of some help.

I listen as Denny reads another entry from the journal where Clara begins to admit that her attraction to John has turned into feelings of love. The way she describes him, and their interactions, doesn’t sound too far off from a couple in this century in the early stages of a relationship. The way she catches him watching her when he thinks she doesn’t see or how her heart races when he’s close to her and their bodies brush against one another. It’s easy to forget that they may have lived in simpler times, but what they felt for one another wasn’t simple at all.

August 8, 1883

John and I took a walk this morning. His strength is returning quickly, and I fear once he has fully recovered that he will continue on without looking back. His past inches closer with every day that comes and goes, but all I can see is the future I wish to share with him.

We came across two young saplings near the bend in the path. John joined the two in a lover's knot, twisting the branches as if they were holding onto one another. He says if they grow together, then what we feel for one another is true. But I don't need a sign to know that I love him. With every breath I breathe, John will be the only man for which my heart beats.

Denny stops but doesn't look up from the pages.

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“What?” I ask, leaning closer to see if he is quietly reading ahead without me.

“It’s hard to read this knowing what happens.” He sighs and closes the journal in his hands. “It’s clear that they were falling in love, but why didn’t they end up together?”

The realization that Clara died alone and unmarried hits me like a ton of bricks. I think my head and my heart were trying to protect me from remembering this critical fact. I was so wrapped up in the love story that I wanted to forget.

“I don’t know,” I whisper and rest my head on his shoulder. The movement feels so natural, and Denny doesn’t try and pull away from me this time. “Maybe John left her? She said he was running from the law.”

“But why didn’t she go with him then?”

“She had a home here. Her land. To a woman like Clara, in this time, fighting for every scrap of independence in her life, she wasn’t going to throw it all away.”

“Love isn’t something you throw away.” Denny pushes to his feet and begins to pace in front of me. “Sometimes it’s taken from you.”

I’m starting to think that we aren’t talking about Clara and John anymore. There’s no mistaking that I’m starting to feel things for Denny. And I’m pretty sure he might feel the same way. In the same way that Clara and John danced around their feelings for one another, Denny and I hear the same music. But something is holding him back.

“When was it taken from you?” I ask.

Denny stops and turns to me. His eyes wide in surprise that I've worked out the truth with only a few hints.

"It was back when I was on the force. I was working on a case in organized crime that involved a shooting at a restaurant. We had a witness, the owner, that came forward to testify when she had no reason other than it was the right thing to do. We convinced her that we could keep her safe."

Oh no.

"The night before the trial, I was at the safe house with her and a few other detectives. I'd drawn the short straw to go out and pick up dinner. But when I got back, a car peeled off from the house, and I knew something was wrong." He shakes his head like he doesn't want to believe the memory replaying in his mind. "If only I'd gotten back sooner."

"Then it could have been you too. You can't play the what-if game in your mind. It won't change the outcome."

He twists the toe of his boot into the ground. "She was gone before it began, but I've—"

"Never forgotten," I finish for him

"Yes," he says but keeps his eyes trained down. "And I can't believe that John would leave Clara without a reason."

I stand up and walk over to him. Looping my arms around his waist, I pull him close. He tenses for a moment before his muscles loosen, and he relaxes against me.

* * *

Denny

I've never told anyone about what happened and why I quit being a cop. But there was something about hearing John and Clara's story and the way everything seems so much easier with Landry that had me opening up.

A part of me hoped that hearing the story would drive her away. For so long, I've punished myself for that night and still feel like I don't deserve to be happy. But when I see Landry smile or hear her laugh, I see someone I want but can't have. It took every ounce of willpower in my body not to kiss her earlier. She deserves someone better than a broken mountain man like me.

We spent the rest of the afternoon reading more entries in the journal, ignoring the sun as it moved slowly across the sky. It wasn't until it began to dip that I realized we had to leave if we wanted to get back before dark.

"Landry, we have to leave right now."

"But she's talking about how the sheriff and his men have been seen coming up the mountain." She points at the open journal in her lap.

"If we don't leave now, we won't make it to the station before it's dark. We don't want to get stuck hiking down at night. It's far too dangerous."

She's quiet, and I can see the wheels turning in her mind, weighing out the pros and cons of what to do.

"I'm not leaving you here," I warn. "And if I have to pick you up and carry you over my shoulder down this mountain, I will do it."

"As uncomfortable as that sounds for the both of us, maybe there's another option."

“You want to camp out here tonight.”

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“Ding. Ding. Ding.” She points at me. “Give the handsome man a prize.”

“Don’t try to butter me up with your sweet pillow talk,” I tease.

Landry smiles and shrugs like she doesn’t know what I’m talking about. “I just think if we’re really going to finish reading this and find out what happened, then what better place than where it all happened.”

My pack that I keep ready to go at the station is always filled up with a few days’ worth of rations and a couple blankets in case I get stuck on the mountain. We could stay the night if I allowed us to.

“I guess I could radio down to Kit and let him know that we won’t be back until tomorrow.”

The smile flashes me would shame the sun with how bright it is. And I can’t be the one to crush her dream. She’s wanted to come up here for so long. I’d be an asshole if I didn’t do my best to give her more time if I could.

“I’ll gather some wood, and you can get a fire going,” she says, setting down the journal and pushing to her feet.

I’ve never met a woman like Landry before. It seems like the simplest things make her happy, like spending the night on a mountain sleeping under the stars. There was no one in my old life that would’ve even considered embracing this adventure the way Landry has.

I watch her walk off into the tree line to grab some wood. And I can't stop myself when my gaze slips down to the round globes of her ass. I need to stop thinking about her this way. Nothing can happen between us. For one thing, she lives several hours away, in the city, for crying out loud, and she's my sister's friend and roommate. That could make things awkward, especially after the stink I made about Devrie and Alec getting together. They'd both rake me over the coals for taking this further.

Landry returns shortly, carrying a handful of sticks and branches as I finish up making a pit for the fire. Soon a warm fire is burning, and I lay out the rationed food I have in my pack—a bag of trail mix, a few protein bars, some freeze-dried fruit, and jerky.

The sun starts to dip closer to the horizon as we pick through the food for our makeshift dinner on the mountain.

“Do you like working as a park ranger?” she asks as she pops a piece of dried pineapple in her mouth.

“Sure,” I shrug. “When I'm not hauling around graduate students on the mountain.”

Landry tosses a piece of pineapple at my head, but I dodge the flying fruit. “Very funny.”

I chuckle and sit back, stretching out my legs in front of me as I chew on the bite of jerky.

“When I was a kid, my dad used to take Devrie and me out exploring in the woods behind our house. No matter the season, we'd go at least once or twice a month, for a day or a whole weekend, and camp out under the stars.” I smile at the memories. “He'd teach us about wildlife and how we need to respect nature and the animals. We'd study the plants, what were poisonous, and what were safe to eat or use

medicinally.”

“My roommate Devrie did all this? The girl who can’t go anywhere without a coffee shop every few blocks?”

“She went, but I didn’t say she enjoyed it.” I laugh. “Especially the time she got poison ivy all over her because she didn’t listen and laid down in some. It took a whole bottle of calamine lotion to cover it all. I had to wait on her hand and foot after she told my dad that I tricked her into laying in it.”

“Did you?”

I shrug. “Who can even remember?”

“I’m sure Devrie can.” Landry laughs.

I scan the woods around us and draw in a deep breath of fresh air.

“After I quit the force. I needed to get away. Find a place that was going to make me feel happy again. Being out here in nature has always been a familiar and safe place to me and becoming a park ranger was the perfect job that went along with it.”

“I think it suits you. I mean, your life here on the mountain. But you are lacking the long scruffy beard and coat made of pelts.”

“What century do you think we are in?” I scoff. “Besides, you don’t think I look the part?”

“Well, sure, you are ruggedly handsome in that ‘I need to go chop some wood and build a modern log cabin’ sort of way.”

I shake my head at her. “I’m not sure if I should be insulted or just take the compliment that you think I’m hot.”

“Whoa, I said handsome.”

“But I think you meant hot.”

Landry’s cheeks flush pink as she laughs and looks away. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

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“Just the stars and a beautiful woman sitting next to me.”

Landry continues to smile but doesn't meet my gaze. Instead, she focuses on the surrounding trees. I'm not sure Landry knows just how gorgeous she is. And if she were mine, I'd make sure she knew every day.

“Why Clara Bishop? I understand she's an ancestor, but most people don't dedicate most of their adult life to someone they've never even met.”

Landry sits back and stretches her legs out in front of her like I am. Her fingers brush over mine as she situates herself. The temptation to take her hand in mine is almost too much to bear.

“When I was in the fourth grade, I found a book in the school library about Clara. I didn't think much of it other than I liked that we shared the same last name. I didn't know we were related.”

“When I got home that afternoon, I showed my grandfather, and he told me who she was to me in our family. I couldn't believe it. We read the book from cover to cover that night, but I was still full of questions. I wanted to know how a woman in that time could live on her own when so many others couldn't.”

“I can see how finding this last journal is such a discovery for you.”

“It's bittersweet.”

“How so?”

“I’ve spent so long wishing I could find this last journal, the final piece in the puzzle that is the story of Clara Bishop’s life. I thought I knew everything about her. But thanks to your clumsy attempts at opening the door and stomping your foot into the floorboard—”

“You’re welcome.” I nod, but she continues on without missing a beat.

“I’ve come to find out there’s still so much I don’t know.”

“Sometimes a person needs a few secrets that they keep close to their hearts. Can you ever truly know someone completely?”

“I suppose not. But it makes me wonder what else I don’t know.”

“Don’t think about it with questions of what you don’t know,” I say. “Think of it as sharing a secret with someone you care so much about.”

“I like that.” She smiles at me, and I wonder if there’s a secret we’re sharing right now.

Chapter Six

LANDRY

The sun’s light descends into darkness, and the warmth goes with it. Even though I’m sitting next to the fire Denny built, I’m still not completely warm. A shiver rakes through my body.

Denny stands and pulls a couple of blankets from his pack. He wraps one around me before laying the other on the ground for us to sit on.

“What about you?” I ask, tugging the blanket tighter around me, so the chill isn’t so invasive now.

He shrugs. “I’m fine.”

But I don’t miss the way he holds out his hands to the fire for heat. I’m grateful he came prepared, but the guilt that we are still on this mountain is because of me. I scoot closer to him, so our sides touch and hope that some of my body heat will help him. I wish he’d put his arm over my shoulder and pull me in, strictly for warmth, at least that’s what I tell myself, but instead, he rests his elbows on his knees at stares into the fire.

“Why don’t you read more from the journal? The fire should give off enough light.”

I’ve been itching to read more, so I light up at the suggestion. He hands me the journal, and our fingers brush over one another’s. I swear we both feel the spark that passes between us when his dark gaze meets mine before dipping down to my lips.

Why won’t he just kiss me?

My stomach twists with hope, but he doesn’t make a move. It took him some time to warm up to me, but even when he was grumpy at the beginning of the day, I was still comfortable with him. And safe. I instantly knew I was safe. I want so much more.

“Ready?” I ask, clearing my throat.

He doesn’t say a word but nods once to give me the go-ahead.

August 10, 1883

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:00 pm

My hand is shaking so hard I can barely write. The sheriff turned up this morning with a few of his men. They claimed hunters in the area had seen a man on my land, but they couldn't be sure it was John. We've been careless, thinking that we are in our own little world on this mountain, but the outside world feels like it is closing in.

August 13, 1883

John is gone. When I woke up this morning, I found the loft in the barn empty. I knew this day would come, but I could not have prepared myself for the shattering of my heart into a million pieces. There are no more tears left in me to cry. I have only the handkerchief he left behind and the promise he made to come back for me. I know I will never love again.

I stop reading and close the journal.

"Is that all there is?" Denny asks quietly.

"No." I shake my head. "But I don't think I can read anymore."

"Landry." Denny cups my face with his hand and turns my head to look at him. "Please don't cry."

He brushes his thumb across the apple of my cheek to brush it away. I didn't even realize I'm crying. I'm heartbroken for Clara. She was so close to finding love, but he left her behind.

"He left her."

Denny shakes his head. “I know it seems that way, but I want to think that he was trying to protect her. He promised he’d come back for her.”

“But he didn’t.”

“We don’t know that.” His finger taps the journal in my lap. “You remind me of her. And if I know John the way I think I do, there’s no way he could leave a woman like her forever.” His gaze dips quickly down to my lips and back up again. “I know I couldn’t.”

Before I can say anything, he leans close but stops just short of his lips touching mine. He’s asking for permission, so I lean forward and give it, pressing my lips to his. It’s a kiss that scorches through my body.

Denny’s arms encircle me. His one hand cradles my neck, and his other slips around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I lift my arms and wrap them around his neck as his tongue licks my lips, beckoning me to open for him. Our kiss deepens as we explore one another.

I’ve been dying for him to touch me like this all day—to taste his lips, to feel his hands on my body, to hear the sounds he makes as I swing my leg over his lap and straddle myself against the hard press of his cock.

There’s no holding back the moan that slips out of me as Denny’s strong hands move to my ass and squeeze me closer. Apparently, I wasn’t close enough to him either. We both groan as my hips move up and down, slowly riding him his tongue brushes against mine. His rough hands roam under my shirt and stroke my bare skin.

“God, you’re so soft,” he breathes against my lips.

I grind my body down harder against him as his fingers make easy work of

unclasping my bra. My breasts fall out of the bra, and instantly Denny's hands are cupping them under my shirt. His thumbs graze back and forth over my sensitive nipples.

He lifts the hem of my shirt, and I raise my arms to allow him to pull it free. The straps of my bra fall from my shoulders, and I toss it to the side. The night air felt cold a moment ago, but the heat coursing through my body is enough to keep me warm. Denny's mouth finds one pebbled nipple and then the other, using his tongue and teeth, nipping softly to make me cry out. My head falls back in ecstasy.

A warmth builds between my thighs, and I can already feel myself getting closer to release. But Denny has different plans for me. In one quick move, he flips me over and lays me down on the blanket. His firm body pressed over mine.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispers.

I look up at him. His eyes are as dark as the night sky above us. The flames of the fire cause shadows to dance on his face. I reach between us and start unbuttoning his flannel, wanting to feel his hot skin pressed against mine. My fingers glide over the muscled contours of this chest down to his six-pack abs.

Fuck me. He's built.

My hands tug at the buttons of his pants and slip beneath the fabric. His eyes grow hungry as I wrap my hand around his stiff length, rubbing up and down. Denny's hand locks around my wrist and halts the movement. For a second, I wonder if I've gone too far, but then Denny's lips crush against mine in a bruising kiss.

We both work to remove the rest of the clothes between us. Denny situates himself between my thighs. The tip of his cock strokes up and down my wet folds before he pushes inside me.

“Denny.” I shut my eyes.

Inch by inch, my body stretches around this thick length. Slowly he starts to move out and back in, the rhythm increasing with each thrust of his hips. I run my hands down the hard planes of his back to his ass.

“Harder,” I breathe.

He wastes no time, and he plunges himself deep inside me. His balls smack my ass, and a scream rips out of me, and he drives again and again, never letting up. I needed this so badly, needed him. My core tightens around him, and he grunts in animalistic pleasure. He keeps thrusting, never slowing down.

Only the sounds of our heavy breathing and the slapping of our skin can be heard in the silence of the night. A cool breeze blows around us, and my nipples pucker hard. The friction of our bodies moving as one pushes us closer to release. His cock hits that golden spot once, twice, and I can’t hold back any longer. My inner muscles flex as I come undone beneath him.

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Denny thrusts a few more times, and he joins me in this shared release. We cling to one another, riding that wave of complete and utter bliss.

When it's done, Denny lays next to me as we try to settle our breathing. His palm resting against my chest, over my heart.

“Oh. Wow.” I sigh.

He nods. “Fuck me.”

I turn my head to look at him. “I think I just did.”

We both burst out laughing. Denny pulls me against him and wraps the blanket over each of us. Sleep comes quickly, and the last thing I see before I close my eyes is the soft glow of the campfire still burning next to us.

ChapterSeven

DENNY

The sound of birds chirping wakes me. I peek one eye open and then the other, trying to remember why I'm outside, and the image of Landry pops into my mind. Everything around me feels damp from the dew that fell last night. The fire that was built is now just a pile of smoking orange embers.

I move my hand around next to me on the blanket, but Landry isn't there. Sitting up, I look for her along the tree line, but she's nowhere in sight. Her clothes are gone, but

her pack is still sitting next to mine. She couldn't have gotten far. My clothes are still scattered on the ground next to where we tossed them last night. Quickly I get dressed and pull on my boots, hoping Landry hasn't wandered off too far.

I walk around the homestead and find her sitting on a large boulder with her back toward me. As I get closer, I see that her shoulders are shaking. My heart drops as I realize she's crying. I run over to her and cup her face in my hands.

"What's wrong?"

She looks up at me through tear-filled eyes, both red and puffy. "I couldn't sleep."

This still doesn't explain the tears, so I wait for her to continue.

"So, I got up to read more from this." She holds up the journal in her hands.

I frown, looking down at the leather-bound cover and then back up at her. "Okay, but why are you crying?"

My mind leaps to the worst-case scenario.

"He came back for her, just like he promised."

The breath I was holding whooshes out of me. "I don't understand?"

Landry smiles through the tears still falling down her cheeks. "John had heard the sheriff and the men coming in the middle of the night. He knew he had to lead them away from Clara to protect her from harboring a fugitive. There was a shootout that ended with two of the sheriff's men getting killed. He knew he'd have to wait for the dust to settle before he could come back."

“How long was he gone?”

“Two years.” She sighs. “It took two years before he could come back. And a part of him wondered if she’d moved on and found someone else.”

“I still don’t understand. Did they end up together?”

“Yeah.”

“How is it that no one knew about him?”

“He was a fugitive from the law. But thanks to the seclusion of the mountain, they were able to live out the rest of their days in peace.” Landry rests her fingertips over her lips and shakes her head. “Do you know what this means?”

I shrug and shake my head.

“The Clara Bishop we know of history isn’t the same as the legacy she left behind. This changes everything. John likely had a huge influence on Clara and the reputation that she built in the community. I need to talk with my thesis advisor. This new information could be just the thing the biography I’m writing about her needs to get attention from a publisher.”

I watch her as her excitement grows, but something in my gut nags at me. I mean, this is a huge find, but something about this feels wrong.

“Denny? What is it?”

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“This secret was important to Clara and John.” I blurt out. “They hid it for a reason. And to go out and blast it for everybody to read it seems wrong.”

Landry frowns at me. “What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying, is it such a great idea to invade your ancestor’s privacy to write a book? Love is something they shared with each other, and it was a deep love. Why does it need to be exploited?”

“You think I’m trying to exploit her?” Landry shouts. “I’m trying to tell her story in an authentic way. I’ve spent years dedicating myself to researching her. People need to know how incredible she was and everything she went through. It’s not exploiting her. It’s celebrating her.”

She’s fuming, and her eyes narrow at me.

“By sharing her innermost thoughts, fears, and feelings with the world about the man she loved. That’s celebrating her?”

“You don’t understand. I’m preserving history.”

“No,” I say in frustration. “You aren’t preserving anything. You are putting a spotlight on the part of Clara’s life that she didn’t want to share with the world.”

I’m not sure how this conversation went so wildly off the rails, but from the expression on her face, I don’t think there is any way to save this. Everything we shared together is gone, and the ghosts of Clara and John seem to be standing

between us.

“Landry, please. I don’t want—”

“I want to go back now,” she says, crossing her arms. “Can we please go?”

Her voice is monotone, and her whole body is tense and screaming for me to back the hell off. I don’t think there is anything I can say that will salvage this.

“Fine.” I turn around and start walking back to the site. She’s not the only one who is angry now.

I check to make sure the fire is out and no more embers still burn. We pack up our things. Each looking back one more time to the historic homestead where Clara and John spent their life together. A life I could’ve seen myself having with Landry, but not anymore.

I lead us down the mountain, neither one of us saying a word the whole way down.

When we get to the ranger station, Landry calls her friend Bellamy to pick her up. She’s waiting on the steps of the ranger station when her friend finally shows up. I watch from the window as Landry stomps over to the car and jumps in. She doesn’t look back at me, even though I want more than anything for her to show me some sign that what we shared isn’t over.

But when the car pulls away, anger and sadness twist in my gut. And there’s no denying the ache in my chest. I thought I knew love before Landry, but even in this short time we spent together, I now know that I never experienced a connection like this with anyone before. We shared something incredible on that mountain—a rare find that often only comes once in a lifetime.

I don't want it to end, especially not like this.

ChapterEight

LANDRY

"What are you going to do?" Bellamy asks as we sit outside my professor's office.

I gave Bellamy the full rundown of what happened when she picked me up a few days ago. As a fellow academic, I knew she'd understand the discovery that had been made and how I should share it with the world. But her reaction surprised me. She just sat there quietly, looking out at the road. It wasn't until I finished telling her everything that she said that she could see why I wanted to share what I'd found. But on the other hand, she could also see Denny's side too.

Since then, I've been fluttering back and forth with my emotions since I got home. One minute I'm mad because of the argument with Denny, then the next, I'm excited at the discovery we made, then I'm sad and want to cry because I miss Denny. I don't know what to do. Devrie was no help because she's on a work trip until next week. I couldn't even use her as my spy to see how Denny was doing.

"I think this is a huge discovery," I answer Bellamy. "An essential one that could lead to a lot of interest from publishers in my biography of Clara. How many graduate students can claim this type of discovery?"

"Not many."

"Exactly."

She nods while biting on her bottom lip. When she catches me looking at her, she sits up. "You're right, Landry. This is big."

My body deflates a little bit. Her words are saying one thing, but the expression on her face is saying another. She thinks this is a bad idea. This is everything I've worked for. To have this kind of discovery could change the trajectory of my career. So why does it feel like I'm about to sell out an old friend? Clara deserves better than someone like me to be her descendant.

“Ms. Bishop?”

I glance up and see Professor Emerson standing in the doorway before me, gesturing for me to come in.

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“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he says.

I glance over at Bellamy. She gives me an attempt at a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“I’ve been so eager to hear about your adventure,” Professor Emerson says, drawing my attention back to him.

I follow him into his office. “It was quite an experience.”

“Did you find out anything new?” He waves his hand to the chair in front of his desk for me to take a seat.

I place my bag on the floor and look down at it. The box with the lost journal and tintype photo is tucked inside, ready to be revealed, but I can’t do it. Glancing up at Professor Emerson, I find him staring at me expectantly.

“Only some trinkets, but nothing worth mentioning. Clara Bishop is still the open book that history knows her to be.”

He frowns and leans back in his chair. “Ah, well, that’s disappointing. I must admit that I thought if anyone could unearth any hidden secrets lurking up on that mountain, it would be you.”

I force a smile at him.

If he only knew.

We talk for a few more minutes, and I let him know I'll have my notes typed and sent to him by the end of the week. Then he gets a call and has to cut the meeting short. I leave his office, waiting for the dread of disappointment that I didn't tell him the truth to hit me, but it never comes.

It seems that when I was finally able to set aside my ambitions, I could see what Denny and Bellamy saw all along. It'll be enough that I know the truth. Clara and John's love will continue on, even after they've been long gone over a century.

Bellamy had to get to class, so the hallway was empty when I walked out. She'll want to talk later, but the only person I want to talk to right now is Denny. I need to apologize to him for the way I left. He was right about everything. He taught me more than I could've hoped. I've been so driven that the tunnel vision blinded me to what was right in front of me—love.

One day with him wasn't enough. It'll never be enough. I want to have everything with him. Love doesn't have set rules for how long it takes to fall for someone. And our short time on the mountain was all it took for him to win my heart.

I run down the stairs and out the front doors. The sun is bright, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sudden blast of light. But a moment is all it takes for me to miss the bottom step, I roll my ankle in my attempt to right myself, but I still fall towards the concrete sidewalk. Just before I even hit the ground, two strong arms wrap around me before impact.

I'm about to thank my savior when I turn and see Denny holding me in his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asks, concern creasing his brow.

I nod. "I was coming to you."

“You were?” He smiles. “I wasn’t sure if I showed up here that you’d want to see me.”

“I was wrong. Nobody needs to know about John and Clara, especially my professor. You’re right. Some things need to be left as they are. I’ve just been on this path for so long that I forgot what’s really important.”

Denny helps me back up to my feet, but he doesn’t let me go. “Clara would be proud of you.”

“I’m not so sure she’d be proud about the way I spoke to you and walked away like that. Please forgive me.”

“I’m sorry too. I could’ve found a better way to express how I thought the secret should be handled and not given you judgment. But the one good thing that came out of our fight is that now that it’s over, we can make up.”

He leans down and kisses me with everything inside of him. I feel it in the way he holds me close like he’s never going to let me go.

“I finally know how Clara felt when she found her mountain man.”

“How’s that?” Denny smiles.

“Filled with love.”

“That makes two of us.”

Epilogue

LANDRY

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Denny holds my hand as we walk around the homestead. We've come up here several times over the last couple of years, and we never get tired of exploring. Denny's even joked about wanting a summer cabin up here.

"Where are we going?" I ask as he leads me to a trail so hidden I wouldn't have known it was there if he hadn't pointed it out.

"You'll see, be patient." He smirks over his shoulder at me.

I sigh but decide to be good. After all, he's my ranger guide on this little journey.

We walk nearly a mile in the dense brush. Whatever he was trying to show me was hidden very well. No one in their right mind would come out here. Finally, there's a break in the trees and a small clearing. In the center, there stands a massive old oak tree with rocks framed around it in a rectangle and a stone with a large crack down the middle.

I gasp and squeeze Denny's hand as we approach the stone. "Denny, that's John Milford's grave. You found John's grave."

He smiles down at me and pulls out the old tin box we found from his pack. "I thought maybe we could bury these here. Join them together in some way and bring them some peace. What do you think?"

Tears spill down my cheeks and I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck. He turns to me and leans down to press a kiss to my lips.

“It’s perfect,” I say.

Denny buries the treasures right next to the headstone as I say a few words for Clara and John. I tell them about how their love led me to mine and that I’m forever grateful.

The sun begins to set as we head back to the homestead, to the camp we set up earlier today. Denny’s built a fire in the same spot where we spent our first night together.

It’s a sad day to see the journal gone, but I know that it’s where it needs to be.

I stare into the fire, thinking about what’s in store for Denny and me, when he interrupts my thoughts with another surprise.

Denny lowers himself down on one knee next to me and holds out a small velvet box.

“Landry, I’ve been enamored by you from the moment I met you. Your passion and your drive are traits that I admire and want to nurture. I promise to help you with every dream you have if you become my dream come true. Will you marry me?”

For the second time today, this man has made me cry happy tears.

I launch myself into his arms. Denny laughs as we fall to the ground, and I pepper his face with kisses.

“Is that a yes?” He laughs.

“Yes!”