



Mountain Man Defender

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: Will the gruff, former Ranger finally accept I'm not letting our differences, or his equally grumpy guard dog, turn me away?

Lars Olsen

I'm the last single man standing on Pineville Mountain, or at least that's what it feels like, and that's just fine by me.

Then she shows up.

Smart, and smart-mouthed.

Way out of my league.

And stunning to the point I can barely function when I'm around her.

Well, parts of me function, and that's the problem.

At least she'll be gone soon.

Dylan's sister married one of my best friend's and she was only supposed to be here for a week. But then she's hires her for the job I'd should have filled months ago.

Now she's my employee, always in my space and she's driving me up the wall. The beautiful and tempting woman occupies my every waking thought, and some nighttime ones as well—like “What do her lips taste like?” or “Is she really flirting with me?” and “When can I get her in my...” um yeah, thoughts someone ten years older should keep to themselves-myself.

She's off-limits. End of story.

I'm good with my life, just me and my dog. So, yeah....

Dylan Davis

After a year of “finding myself,” I'm back home for my twin sister's wedding. But before the ceremony, she asks me for a favor: step into the role of guest services manager for The Triple R Lodge. It's just for a couple months, she says. Then I can be onto my next adventure. Yet, what I didn't count on was the bearded, burly and sexy mountain of a man who frustrates and tempts me beyond measure.

Lars fights our connection with irritated grunts and silent moody stares until he runs out of reasons to avoid me when we share a fiery kiss that turns into a passion-fueled night spent in his cabin.

He may not believe me, but I'm no longer running. Not when I've finally found love in the exact place I thought I had to leave to find my purpose in life, and love.

Can I prove to him that although we're opposites in most things doesn't mean we can't have forever.

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ONE

DYLAN

Time to poke the bear.

Our back and forth had gone on long enough.

Four months, three days too long.

I wasn't staying at the Triple R Lodge simply to help my sister and her new husband out of a tight spot. Or his partners. But the third partner, the only one currently unattached, had made me want to stay beyond the four weeks I'd agreed to.

Lars Olsen was grumpy, burly and kindhearted when he thought no one was looking. But most frustrating of all, the bear of a man and retired Ranger was a man of few words.

Wasn't there a saying about still waters running deep? Yeah, I really wanted to find out if that was true. He was a first-generation Norwegian and a man I'd never thought I'd be attracted to. Stoic alphas had never been my catnip, but he had "it" and I wanted it.

Maybe it's because he's pushing me away? Or the temptation of having something forbidden. No, I think it's simple chemistry and the thrill of someone so opposite to me that has my panties in a twist near constantly. It's driven me to purchase a battery-operated boyfriend. I'd never needed a "BOB" before him. I was never for or against

owning one but considered myself more of a middle of the road person sexually. Sure, I enjoyed sex, just never been wowed by it.

But with him? I knew it would be out of this world historic. Because all I had to do was picture his near constant scowl on his handsome face, his muscle bound six-foot-three frame and when the electricity between us became unbearable, a date with my BOB ensured a good night's sleep.

But enough was enough.

The bickering was fun. Exciting even, and I loved winding him up. Hoping he would reach that point of no return. Maybe even bend me over the closest surface. Or better yet, giving me a good spanking for all the mouthy things I've said to him. Argh!

Hell, I'd take a good round of wall sex at this point. Anything to cut the damn, and unnecessary tension between us.

Our back and forth had given everyone else at the lodge plenty of entertainment value. That is when the other couples weren't locked away in their cabins enjoying their newly minted marital euphoria.

Lauren and West, my sister and her new husband, the original owner of the hunting lodge he inherited from his uncle, now christened the Triple R Lodge and Ridge and Addison were all in the full bloom of love and orgasmic bliss.

Dammit, I wanted that too.

"You keep staring at Lars like that, and he's going to hole up in his place again with that equally grumpy dog. Remember the last time you two went at it? We didn't see him for a day and a half. West and Ridge had to drag him out to finish the flooring in your new apartment. I'm still hearing about my husband's groin pull." Lauren, my

beloved twin, often exaggerated. Her husband may have tweaked a muscle here and there, but that hadn't kept him from performing his nightly duties as a husband.

We were currently standing in the doorway as her husband West, and his best friends and business partners, Ridge and Lars, were in the mudding and taping phase of the project. Since we had no skills to offer, we'd brought them lunch. Ridge's wife, Addison, was in a counseling session with one of the lodge's client-guests. Otherwise, she'd be here with us.

"Oh, please. It barely put a dent in your sex life." As twins, we shared everything, so I knew the truth. "Besides, it's not really my apartment. It's for the lodge's permanent manager. I'll only be its temporary occupant." I'd stepped into the role as a favor to Lauren since I had no job at the time and because Lars hadn't filled the position.

But I wasn't about to let her know how much I was enjoying it. Not yet anyway. Not until I figured out how to convince Lars he's the one for me. So, I had no plans to go anywhere. I was winging it. For now.

Working alongside my sister and all three soldiers turned mountain men as they created a space for others who'd served their country and communities had become the purpose I'd hoped to find in my yearlong overseas sabbatical.

If Lauren hadn't fallen instantly for West all those months ago, I wouldn't be here now, drooling over the Norse giant I now lived to poke. Just needed to get him to want to poke me back.

My gaze returned to him as it did more times than I could count. What was he thinking about now? His permanent, narrow-eyed stare had been leveled at me often. I'm not ashamed to admit it did something to me. He thought it'd keep me at arm's length, but all it did was trigger full-body goose bumps and creative thoughts of how I could show him what he did to me.

Where most people would cave under the glare from the short-tempered, often silent, burly grump of...okay, yes, man candy. I never thought someone like him would do it for me, but bless me, he had become my catnip. He'd become a challenge I was determined to conquer.

Something about Lars Olsen lit me up hotter than a north Idaho summer night in August, which surprisingly gets way hotter than people living beyond the northwest section of the country probably believed.

Sighing, I continued to watch as the three owners continued to mud and tape the apartment walls. There was just something about a man who was good with his hands. And to think Lars had spent years in the Army, then learned carpentry after retiring and using that skill to help his two best friends to turn the hunting lodge into what it's become was damn impressive.

And it made me want to learn all his whys. Why he chose the Army? Why carpentry? Why he's never married? Why he mainly communicates with nods and grunts? Why doesn't he pick up on all my signals and silly attempts to tease him into smiling?

Sure, on paper Lars and I seemed like an unlikely pair, but there was something going on between us and I was determined to play it out until he either confessed to feeling the same or told me to get lost.

Lauren and West's whirlwind romance had been the best thing to happen in our family since our mom found love again with Beck, our step-dad, a few years ago. He was also a retired Ranger and had slipped into our family seamlessly.

So if the six-foot-four mountain of a man would pull his head out of his butt and get over whatever hang ups were keeping him from taking what his dark brown, brooding eyes telegraphed to me every time we argued, or when we locked eyes when hanging out with the other two happy couples then, my life may just get very interesting real

soon. And if not, we'd soon find out if spontaneous combustion was an actual thing.

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Because when he wasn't looking at me as if he wanted to pick me up and tuck me into his side and carry me off to his cabin, I was conspiring on new ways to get him to do just that.

Or when he was warning any man who came within ten feet of me away with a look, I imagined he'd honed while in the service. If I was a smart woman, I'd fear that look. Especially since it was now directed at me.

But today, being smart was at the bottom of a very long list. Today, I was determined to get him to kiss me or spank me. Either would serve me well.

I'd often jumped before I looked in life and now would be no different. Here goes nothing.

"So, how much longer before you finish slinging mud? I mean, it looks great and all, but it's not like you're painting a masterpiece. It's just walls. Maybe I can—" I left Lauren to moon over her husband and walked over to Lars.

"No! Touch nothing. It'll be done today." Lars wore protective eye wear, low slung work pants, and waffle stompers, and a camo tank top that outlined every dip and rise in his powerful chest. My gaze ate him up as it dawned on me he actually spoke over five words in a row. Sure, they were underlined in frustration. What else was new? But I think I was finally getting to him.

My gaze strayed to his beefy arms, which were splattered with dried "mud" and suddenly all I could envision was his burly, hard body, naked in a hot shower, covered in suds, surrounded by steam. And he'd need a good scrub brush to get clean.

I wanted to be the one wielding that brush all over those mammoth shoulders and heavily muscled, sun-kissed arms. And my daydream didn't end there. But his throat clearing did. Knocked me right back into the moment and his frowny face that I somehow had fallen in love with in a matter of weeks.

There must be something about the mountain air. Crisp and woodsy. Then there were the sunsets overlooking the valley below toward the city of Pineville, which stretched all the way to the Kokanee River, had become my second favorite view. This place was set up for romance, almost as if it'd been scripted for a Hallmark movie complete with the town grump who only needed the love of a good woman to turn his frown upside down. And I'd fallen for all of it.

"Dylan!" Lars barked out my name and it set off his dog, Pepper Jack, aka PJ, into a fit of howls. Shortly after Lars rescued the ten-year-old Newfoundland, the dog had gotten ahold of a block of pepper jack cheese. The poor thing had been sick all that night. Anything with spice was not a canine's friend, and Lars, in a rare bout of humor, renamed the Newfie after the cheese.

And now, both of their loud and unexpected reactions had me rethinking my decision to push him into revealing his feelings for me. Had I built this whole back-and-forth thing between us into something it wasn't? Dammit, I hated second guessing myself.

Yet, since I took this job and witnessed what my sister had discovered up here on the mountain, experiencing the same connection she'd found with West, and this had become my new priority.

Because, dammit, she was right. Love rarely made sense, and it didn't happen on a preconceived timeline.

But how much deeper was I willing to go to find out if Lars wanted me as much as I wanted him?

TWO

LARS

“What?” Dylan shot back. “I’m really at a loss here. You blow hot then cold more often than my great-granny Davis when I was a kid. Lauren and I had to visit her when we spent time with our dad and she was full on menopausal for a good ten years. Well, I don’t have ten years to figure you out, mister.” Dylan slammed her fists on her tempting and perfectly flared hips and all the spit dried up in my mouth.

Dylan was a handful. Enough to drive a sane man to drink. If I thought making an offering to the Norse gods of my ancestral homeland to spare me from my near constant state of sexual arousal and frustration whenever she was in the same room as me, I would. But like Loki, she was wily. And too damn tempting. And so out of my league I can’t let myself think she was attracted to me.

Locked in a stare down, everyone else in the room faded away. And for once, she kept silent as I tried to win the battle raging within me to grab her and kiss her senseless. And what in the hell did she mean by not having ten years? Why did her words always seem to have another meaning?

I’d been debating why she paid me so much attention. Because Dylan teased everyone. She was kind. And friendly. But she seemed to go out of her way to make me...irritated. Which turned into a case of major sexual frustration and kept me awake half the damn night. Morning showers had become increasingly colder since she arrived at the lodge.

Why couldn’t she have been someone just looking for a temporary gig? She’d settled into our little family-slash-tribe as if she were made for me. Er, it, us...shit. And now her sister was married to one of my closest friends. So, even if she didn’t stay in the job much longer, she’d always have a connection here. And I’m not sure I could

handle seeing her with another man. Why some guy hadn't locked her down already was a mystery.

Dylan and Lauren were twins, fraternal. Something I was thankful for everyday, since that meant I wasn't lusting after a carbon copy of West's wife Lauren. And I'd been lusting. Internally. I did my best to not let her see how she affected me. Dylan was so far out of my league. Under normal circumstances, our paths would never have crossed, even in a town the size of Pineville.

But she was here, and I had to deal. I'll be the first to admit, I hadn't been doing a very good job of it. I'd become more closed off than usual. Damn, why'd she have to be so, so perfect? Dylan was taller than her sister. The top of her head came to my shoulders where with most of the women I'd been with had been much shorter. And I really liked that she was just the right height to pull her flush against me, all her curves lining up just so.

She was leaner than her petite and curvy sister, but all her curves were just right for me. I'd spent hours imagining what her full breasts looked like. Would they be rosy tipped or a deeper red? Either way, I'd gladly spend hours worshiping those often-pebbled peaks.

Then there was her outfits. She wore clothes that flattered her form yet did nothing to hide her very sensitive nipples that, no matter the situation, were always tempting me as they pressed seductively against the silks and linen blouses she preferred. Yeah, I may be a bit obsessed with those firm globes no matter what she wore.

And now here I was trying my best to keep my eyes from straying below her lovely neck and figure out how to handle the feisty guest services manager who may or may not be open to what I had in mind for her, if I were to make a move. Which I wasn't, unless she made it crystal clear that's what she wanted. Dylan had been riding my ass all morning over finishing the texturing in the apartment. West, Ridge and I had built

it as an addition over my wood shop. It was for whomever filled the manager position so they could live on-site. I'd been in charge of hiring, but after months of wavering, the decision was taken out of my hands when Lauren had offered it to Dylan.

She hadn't been an applicant, but she'd stepped in and become the perfect fit. For the position, not my sanity.

"Well? Nothing to say. Not even a grunt?" Dylan's eyes were still blazing, and all I could focus on was would she have the response when I was diving between her thighs making her scream?

Did she realize how glorious she looked standing there, daring me with her chin lifted in the air?

"I'm thinking." And I was. I'd given Dylan more thought than when I'd joined the Army. More brain power than when West asked me to move to Idaho and help him create his vision. Now our vision. And certainly more thought than I'd given another woman. Ever.

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Having her around all the damn time had become torture. And now she was going to live just feet away from my cabin. What had begun as temporarily helping us out, had turned into a more permanent choice. She'd recently returned from a year overseas where Lauren had said she'd been trying to find herself, her purpose. What if she one day decided that wasn't here, and she took off again?

My gut ached just thinking about her leaving. The thought of not having her around was...well, I had a hard time picturing this place without her now, and that was a whole other level of torture.

Dylan had been staying with her mom and stepdad, who also lived on Pineville mountain about a mile away. So, I got her urgency in wanting her own space.

Especially since her stepdad was Beckett Rivera. Beck had also been in our Ranger unit and had retired a couple years before I did. And it made the fact that I wanted Dylan all the more complicated since West, Rigde and I had looked up to Beck when we served. Still do.

Sure, she didn't grow up with him as her stepdad. Her mom, Taya, had only met and married Beck a few years back. Rumor had it they were still in the honeymoon phase and that made for a very awkward home life for any twenty-six-year-old.

Dealing with Beck and his possible disapproval was just one more thing to consider and keep me from making a move with her. Let alone how completely opposite we were.

Dylan was chardonnay and fancy hors d'oeuvres; I'm beer and corn dogs.

Dylan was candlelit three-star restaurant dinners; I'm takeout on the floor in front of a fireplace.

Dylan's adventurous and fluent in French, and I'm rooted deep into this mountain like a Ponderosa pine.

The only thing I was fluent in was disassembling and re-assembling my sniper rifle in less than a minute. And sawdust. Lots of sawdust.

So, yeah. Dylan and I are opposites with a capital "O."

Didn't keep me from wanting her. But it should have. But it made me realistic. So, her and I? Not gonna happen. She'd eventually get bored. Someone as smart and talented as she was would eventually get bored here.

So, like every day since she'd arrived, I'd grin and bear the near daily torture of having her so close yet just out of my reach. It had been four months of head scratching, erection camouflaging and beard stroking. Although that wasn't the only thing I'd been stroking more of lately.

Looking around to see why the room had gone quiet, West, Ridge and Lauren had left. And taken the food with them.

"You can continue to ignore me, Mr. Olsen. But there's something you may not know about me. Even though we've interacted quite a bit in the last few months—for work—I still don't feel we really know each other. I've been wanting to change that. But since you're a man of few words, I'm going to employ my secret weapon. Want to know what that is?"

Her words, like her very presence, spurred me into action. I set down the spray gun, crossed my arms, and gave her my full attention. Secret weapon? This I had to hear. I

do my damndest to maintain a bored look on my face as I waited for the big reveal. Where was she headed with all this? Hell, if I've ever been around a woman who talked as much as Dylan Davis did.

“Nothing? Huh, guess I shouldn't be surprised since you're a lover, not a fighter. Which makes teasing you no fun at all, by the way.” Dylan shifted her body as her brown eyes shifted from blazing to teasing along with her sexy, sassy smile.

She'd blown the wind right out of me. I lost it when she said, “you're a lover, not a fighter,” releasing a low groan I couldn't hold back. Her eyes flared hot again at my whatever the hell sound that was, and...dammit.

There were a few enemy soldiers that would beg to differ with her. She had no idea what type of fighter I'd been. Pushing all those memories way, way back down, they were less painful now but not forgotten. I'd dealt with them soon after returning stateside with an amazing therapist and a shit ton of heavy lifting as we remodeled the ancient hunting lodge the last few years. But I had no plans on sharing any of it with her. Some things were better left unsaid.

Don't take the bait, Olsen.

“Fine, don't guess. I can tell by your curious nature that you're dying to find out. I, my favorite mountain man, can read minds and I know exactly what you're thinking. What you're thinking when you don't think I notice you looking at me.” Her lips pursed in a perfect cupid's bow and all I wanted to do was lick them apart and devour that sassy mouth of hers.

She kept speaking, but I was lost to desire once again. I imagined stripping her form fitting slacks from her heart-shaped ass, yanking down her panties then right before I backed her into the nearest wall, free my aching cock and with her urging me on, I'd guide myself deep into her wet pussy and finally put myself out of the fucking misery

I'd been living in and?—

“Lars?”

Her soft questioning tone pulled me back to reality only to witness a deep bloom of red on her cheeks. Her unique feminine scent reached me, confirming she really could read my mind. “Tell me?” I asked as I stepped over the equipment scattered between us. “What was I thinking just now? What’s put that sweet blush on your face, Dylan?” I stopped short of touching her, but close enough to hear her ragged breathing.

“Um...yeah.” Her tongue flicked out, wetting her lips and dammit, I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I wanted Dylan this very second.

“Cat got your tongue, pretty lady?” My voice, rusty from so little use, or maybe it was her? She made me sound like a starving man who was presented with the tastiest of desserts, just out of reach. Because if I made another move, I’d do all those things I’d just pictured in my bloodless skull. All that blood once feeding my brain now pulsed in my dick.

A sharp bark filled the air, causing us both to jump. Mood. Killer. PJ, my Newfie, had a knack for sensing my emotions and although he was crotchety to almost everyone but me, he also had an inner compass when it came to Dylan.

He was the ultimate cock blocker covered in fur.

As the dog cozied up to Dylan, we remained frozen. I couldn’t even blink. That’s how badly I didn’t want this moment to end. Because I knew this was the closest I was going to letting myself get to having her.

Dylan absently ruffled PJ behind his ears and, if a dog could smile, mine did. He also

had a gleam in his eye. I took it as “she likes me better than you, blockhead.” Yeah, even my own dog knew how special this woman was and had no trouble asking for her attention.

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As my mind switched from hormone overload to near-normal operation, a digital tone filled the room. Dylan fumbled in her pocket and pulled out her pink cell phone. “Oh. Paxton is almost here. I’ve, uh, gotta go. Let’s pick this up, um, later. Okay?” With one last hard if wistful look, she was gone.

Her light musk scent, I’d yet to identify, washed over me as she left. I stared at the spot she’d just occupied for so long, PJ let out a whine, reminding me it was his dinner time. Shaking off the last dregs of sexual tension, I made sure my equipment was all turned off before I led the over-indulged senior dog who’d helped me through some pretty low times after I arrived in Pineville, out of the apartment and to my cabin.

The Newfoundland was lucky the only soft spot I possessed was for him. Otherwise, I’d make him wait for his dinner until I finished texturing so I could get this job finished. I needed to ensure there’d be fewer reasons to be in Dylan’s crosshairs. Although she was quickly becoming my second soft spot.

A dangerous and sexy soft spot that tempted me constantly into forgetting every promise made not to cross that line with her totally and permanently useless.

But first, I was going to find out who in the hell Paxton was, and why my girl’s face lit up when she’d read his text? Just as I had the thought, I swore. My girl?

When the hell had I begun thinking of Dylan as mine?

THREE

DYLAN

“Why the frown, sis? Someone switch your coffee to decaf?” Lauren chuckled. A fluffy, dark gray kitten crawled out of her arms, then up her shoulder and snuggled into my twin’s neck.

It was Sunday. Apartment painting day. And the first time I’d be alone with Lars after the interruption of our newest client-guest’s arrival the other day. The frustrating man had been avoiding me since. I needed advice.

So, before I headed over to the apartment, I stopped at Lauren and West’s cabin for a cup, okay my third cup of coffee. I was looking forward to being so close to my sister again. Poor West. He was going to get a hopefully not too rude wake-up call on what it was really like being married to a twin once I was around day and night.

Growing up, Lauren and I had few boundaries. Might be worth hinting to him that if he didn’t want me walking in when they were “busy,” he might want to invest in a deadbolt or, better yet, a front door camera.

With a very unladylike snort, I replied, “Believe me, if that had happened, I’d be doing more than frowning. Anyway, what’s with the fur ball? Did you finally breakdown West’s ban on cats? And more importantly, what did you have to do to change his mind?” Yes, I changed the subject. I was still deciding how much to share with Lauren about my feelings for Lars. She knew I thought he was hot, but that was it. So far. I gave myself five more minutes, if that, before I spilled my guts.

“I didn’t have to do anything. I happily complied with his demands.” More laughter. Then a wink.

My sister and her new husband were having so much sex, I doubted there was much more Lauren would have to do to sway her husband into anything. And since I knew

they were holding off on having kids, so the kitten might be a good compromise.

Just as I had the thought, Lauren recovered from cracking herself up and said, “It was a compromise. He’s still not sure about fatherhood, so this little guy is our new fur baby.” Lauren nuzzled the kitten, then transferred it back to the pen she’d set up off the kitchen. Sitting back down, she narrowed her eyes and said, “Okay, spill. What’s really going on? I know you, Dyl. You’re the most sunshiny sunshine there is. Annoying, yes, but I’ve lived it. Give me the tea. It’s Lars, right?”

My head spun, and my guts churned. I’d missed this when I was off cavorting in Europe. She would always have my back, even as she kicked me in the butt when I needed it. “Get out of my head. And yes, it’s all about the Nordic bear. He seems to be cracking under my targeted campaign?—”

“But—”

“But just when I think he’s going to grab me and kiss me, he calls on some otherworldly strength and the flare of desire I’ve drawn from him poofs and he’s back to being his typical stoic self.” As I voiced out loud what I’d been feeling for months, I questioned if I was fighting an unwinnable battle.

Maybe Lars wasn’t that into me, and I was just seeing what I wanted to see. Or maybe his reactions were merely because he hadn’t been with a woman in a long time. That tidbit of info had been, according to Ridge, who’d sworn me to secrecy. Oh, well. Telling Lauren was the same as telling me. It was a twin thing. Two for one and all that.

“First. Wipe that doubt right out of your head. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. The way his posture changes whenever you’re near him. Heck, if you two are in the same room, even if you’re standing on opposites sides, there’s an invisible current between you two. So, forget that.”

I knew that. Had felt that pulse of energy the very first day when he'd hesitantly offered his hand when we met. His hand swallowed mine, and I'd instantly felt wrapped up in his warmth, connected on an unexpected level. I'd felt dainty for the first time, which at five foot ten was difficult for a woman. But he made me feel feminine, safe, and when I'd met his gaze, I suspected he was a fierce defender. A testament to his Nordic ancestry. And I wanted more of that feeling.

I'd been doing my best to show him how into him I was. And yet, for whatever reason, it hadn't been enough. He had seemed indifferent at times, and I was feeling more defeated each day.

"Get naked." Lauren made the statement so matter of factually it caught me off guard.

I spit out my last sip of coffee all over myself. "Akh!" That was unexpected and was the truthiest truth bomb ever. But as I grabbed the kitchen towel Lauren handed me and cleaned myself up, I realized it wasn't a bad idea. I'd been waiting for him to make a move because I'd wanted to be sure he wanted me too. I'd totally overlooked the obvious.

Yes, it may be just a tad, okay, a lot calculated, but desperate measures and all that. Showing some skin had worked pretty much since Adam and Eve's day, so I'd make it work for me.

I gave Lauren a hug and promised an update later tonight. She was off to help mom with a big event and West, Ridge and Addy would be working with various client-guests. That left Lars and me to tackle my apartment together.

Less than an hour later, I'd changed into clothes I wouldn't mind getting paint on, and tucked my hair under an old baseball cap our dad had bought me at an Idaho Outlaws game we attended a few years back. I'd even added my favorite scent in some strategic places. I was as ready as I ever would be. And I hope Lars was ready

to be swept off his size fourteen, waffle-stomper wearing feet.

He'd already begun painting by the time I arrived. He didn't so much as flinch when I entered the apartment. The front door and the windows were wide open, letting in the late Spring fresh air. PJ was sprawled out on his side on the kitchen floor, all four legs pointing straight out as he snored. The kitchen area looked as if he'd already finished it.

How long had he been up here?" "Hi. Um, where do you want me?" Hands in my back pockets, I rocked in my beat-up old running shoes waiting for him to finish the far wall. His impatient "hold on" was the only sound in the room, except for the squeak of the paint roller.

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When he turned around, the roller dropped to the floor. The sound bounce checking off the plastic covered floor echoing off the walls. I'd never seen Lars look startled before. His jaw had also dropped, and he was staring at me as if I'd sprouted an extra head.

The shorts I'd chosen to wear had seen better days, but by his reaction, I knew the cutoffs were the perfect. And my confidence grew when his gaze settled on my bare legs.

Wait until he saw my backside. I gave him a flirty smile, stepped forward, picked up the paint roller, and handed it to him. "Something wrong?"

Slow blinks were followed by a slow, upward scan of my legs, before his gaze settled on my face. Lars cleared his throat, then with the speed of a wildfire, he blanked his face and froze me out once again. "Thanks. You're late." He took the roller, dipped it into the paint tray and turned back to the wall.

Oh no, he didn't. "According to your schedule, maybe. I seem to remember agreeing to nine a.m. Besides, it's Sunday. Don't you sleep in, like you know, the rest of humanity?" I made sure to put a lightness into my tone, less snark. I didn't want to poke the bear too much today. Just enough to get us both naked.

I didn't expect an answer, so I looked around for the rest of the supplies and spied them in the corner and headed that way. "I can help you in here or in the bedroom. Which one?" I hadn't even meant to make my question provocative, and yet I did.

I bent to grab the other roller and...oh, yes. Quicker than I'd hoped.

“Jesus Christ, what are you....” The rest of his sentence faded, and all I heard was heavy breathing. I turned around to face the man who, hopefully, was going to take the huge hint and take me in his arms and kiss me until next Sunday.

I thought I was brave, but I found myself suddenly unsure, shy even. No longer was he hiding his reaction from me. I’d noticed he had an, um, bigger package than most because yeah, I’m a red-blooded woman with needs and I can appreciate the male form. Lars was a big man, so that meant he’d be big—everywhere. But now he’d become noticeably bigger. His erection tenting the front of his work pants to the point of imminent exposure.

But it was his eyes that struck me the most. They were narrowed like always, but the heat was near nuclear level, and I may have sighed. Okay, definitely. Sighed. Loudly.

One sigh turned into a gasp as he tossed down the roller. In two long strides, he stopped short, inches from me. At a loss for words, I simply soaked in his attention. However, I couldn’t miss the way he was opening and closing his hands. The muscles in his forearms flexed. The veins pulsing. And the strain on his face as he fought, then losing an inner fight, finally reached for me. Oh, my.

“Hey, guys. Great news. I’m free to help knock this project out. Addy had an emergency call in town, so, uh, yeah. I’m interrupting, I’ll just go—” Ridge backpedaled toward the open front door.

Shoot, I should have locked it.

“Stop. You’re not.” Lars growled. He didn’t need to finish the sentence for the deeper meaning to be crystal clear. His arms fell back to his sides, and he turned away from his friend, sucking in great gulps of air before he turned back around.

“I’ve got another roller in the shop. I’ll be right back. You two can start in the

bedroom. I'm almost finished in here, then I'll start on the bathroom." Lars nodded at me. The heat now banked to a low simmer, but I knew better. Now I knew for sure just how I affected him.

And wow. That was more words strung together than he's said to me in the last week. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but dammit. He couldn't have made it clearer. His reaction said he wanted me. My elation vanished by his words because he would do nothing about it.

We watched as Lars moved like his heels were on fire out of the apartment. The sound of his pounding boots thundered as he descended the stairs.

Ridge at least had the decency to look apologetic.

On the flip side, with the warm weather, the paint should be dry by tomorrow and I can finally move in. And then I was going to have a heart-to-heart with my mountain man.

No more teasing.

No more tempting outfits.

No more hoping he'd make the first move.

I'd simply tell him how I felt. And accept whatever decision he made. I was going to need to stock up on some pistachio ice cream, just in case.

FOUR

LARS

I hadn't been proud of much in my life. Pride had not been allowed in my crowded childhood home. The oldest of six, four boys and two girls. My mother had been pregnant with me when they'd had moved to the states from the Netherlands. And in our house, service was prized above everything else.

Yet today, as we moved Dylan into the apartment, all I could think about was how close she'd be to my cabin. To my empty bed inside my cabin.

Feet instead of miles, Dylan would become even more of an obsession.

I'd survived last Sunday, barely, as she painted in those damn cutoff shorts that rode, barely, just under her ass cheeks. Her flesh had me excusing myself more times than I could count and had been the hardest, literally, since the day she'd swept into my life.

"Bro, you need to stop staring and tell Dylan how you feel about her before one of our guests discovers how great she is and makes a move on her." Kane said under his breath. He'd recently moved to Pineville after attending Ridge and Addison's wedding, reuniting our tight-knit group and joined our new venture.

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Within our Ranger unit, he'd been the master at developing out-of-the box solutions for complicated entries into enemy strongholds. A born adrenaline junkie, his crazy physical strength and acrobatic skills had saved each of us at least once. Kane hadn't stayed on through retirement like us. He decided to take his skills to Hollywood and became a highly sought after stuntman.

That was until he'd shattered his knee last year. Now, after finishing intensive rehab, he was finding his way once again, determined to assist those that came to the Triple R to discover a new skill and purpose. He just hadn't figured out yet how to turn his stuntman skills into real-world applications. But he would. And now that I knew he wasn't after Dylan for anything more than friendship, he was off my shitlist.

Somehow, he'd picked up on my interest in her. He'd always been good at reading people, but more likely Ridge had said something to him. The one time I open up about my feelings and it's used it against me. Lesson learned. Just because they'd found women here on the mountain didn't mean I had to.

I told him that as much as I wanted her, Dylan and I were too different to make anything between us work. The sex part would be simple, and probably beyond great. And yeah, I could admit she might be attracted to me and might not turn me down for some fun between the sheets. But someone like Dylan wasn't looking for simple. Deep down, I knew she was the type of woman who'd want more. Deserved more than just a hook-up.

But then what? We had nothing to talk about. No similar interests that I'd discovered. And she was young enough to want kids, and I wasn't sure I did. Having five younger siblings had just about cured me of that.

Kane was still waiting for a reaction out of me, but all I gave him was a grunt and a not too gentle shove as I placed another one of Dylan's boxes full of her personal items on the kitchen table. Spinning on my heel, Kane's laughter followed me out onto the staircase landing. So distracted by his comment, I collided with Dylan, her arms full of clothing.

Grasping her arms, I pulled her into me so she wouldn't go flying backward. Damn. This is what I'd been avoiding for months. Having my hands on her. And although there were layers of clothing between us, with her tits pressed into my chest, I swore I felt her body heat as if neither one of us wore a stitch of clothing.

Wide-eyed, and out of breath, I guided her inside as gently as I could. My hands looked like oven mitts against her bare arms. Clenching my teeth together, furious at myself that I'd made marks on her delicate skin.

"Whoa. Easy there, handsome. If you wanted me in your arms, all you had to do was ask." Dylan's breathy words sent a bolt of electricity straight to my cock. Her eyes were no longer rounded but heavy lidded, a hopeful look replacing surprise. I was losing ground here, and if I didn't move now, I was going to kiss her.

Hard. And in front of everyone. My body's reaction couldn't be explained away as anything other than what it truly was. What I had truly become. Gone. Truly. Forever. Under Dylan's spell. Her special brand of witchcraft zeroed in on me and I was ninety-nine-point-five percent ready for it.

For her.

In that moment, all my reasons for avoiding Dylan, my body's desperate need for hers, and the desire to be in her world every waking moment, soaking in her positivity and joy at just being, became hard to ignore.

But not here. Later. When I could be alone with her.

But later that evening, as much as I wanted to track Dylan down, I had something equally important to do. Most of my contribution to the lodge had been through physical labor. I wasn't great at the touchy-feely stuff, but I had attended every fire pit get-together since we'd officially opened.

Our primary goal had been to make these gatherings less like a therapy session. That was Addy's specialty, and more like a bro night. And we kept the conversations as casual or as in depth as our client-guests wanted.

Tonight was no different. Okay, one thing was different. Paxton Hart was here for a week. A local firefighter/EMT whose text to Dylan the other day had done the impossible. Made me jealous. Woke me up and made me re-evaluate and question every interaction I'd had with Dylan since her arrival.

I'd been ready to stake my claim if he so much as uttered her name. Instead, he'd shared what had brought him to the Triple R. Torn up over the death of a fellow firefighter, something he'd witnessed, had haunted him for months. He'd questioned his ability to continue doing his job. And in his position, he needed to be all in.

His was the exact situation we wanted to be here for, to provide comfort, to listen without judgement, and offer brotherhood when hope and purpose had become a distant memory.

West, Ridge and the other four men in attendance contributed to the conversation without taking away from Pax' situation. I offered nods of encouragement, and what I hoped was empathy. I knew what it was like to lose a friend, a fellow soldier. Too many. And sometimes just being present to listen to someone's story was enough.

In times like these, just being there mattered.

Guidance and solutions were only offered when asked. We weren't professionals or doctors, but we'd lived our own versions of horror, and sometimes, heck, most of the time, that's what mattered to men like Pax.

I went to bed that night, no longer wanting to smash his pretty face in. Like anyone who came to our mountain for help, I saw him as a friend. I spent the rest of my night tossing and turning, working out why I'd thought of Dylan as mine when I'd done nothing to tell her how I felt.

Because after having her soft curves smashed against me today, that was going to change.

FIVE

DYLAN

Mondays weren't typically considered prime date nights, but tonight would, hopefully, be my first and last one. Lauren cautioned me after my failed attempt, okay attempts, at seducing Lars. "Don't poke the bear, okay? I don't want to see you disappointed." Oh, no, I was done with that. I was going on full offense, no more hit and run, no more passive, all aggressive, leaving no doubt what I wanted.

Lars wouldn't see me coming. Okay, wait. Yes, he'll see me coming, have me coming, have me screaming his name, but he won't know what hit him and darn it all. My brain was fried from too much thinking, planning, wanting. I'm so over metaphors, analogies and motivational quotes.

Tonight, I'm channeling my inner temptress and bagging myself a burly mountain man.

The possibility he'd turn me down only nagged at me a little. After our painting

party, and the clinch on move-in day, I felt my odds were high. According to his friends, he'd never discussed any of the women he'd dated. Not in any meaningful way. They may have been telling tales out of school, but it was encouraging to know that at least at the mention of my name, he did more than grunt and glare when they teased him about me.

And according to Addy, he even blushed once when they'd been discussing me. That little tidbit had kept me going for days.

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The best part of tonight's plan was he didn't have a clue about it. I'd worked with my mom and Lauren on some dishes to bring over to him as a thank you for all the work he'd done in my apartment and helping me move in. So, what if technically he would have done it for whomever they hired? Besides, he was going to love my version of gratitude.

Tonight I'd chosen a linen dress with cap sleeves with a flowy skirt that flattered my shape. I kept my hair down and loosely curled. My one concession to the area we lived was my footwear. As short a distance as the walk from my place over the shop to his cabin was, anything with a heel wouldn't work. So comfy slip-on tennis shoes had won out.

The sound of PJ's barks greeted me even before I stepped onto the stairs leading up to Lar's porch. He was the lodge's unofficial guard dog. His barks sounding more old-man grumpy than threatening. And we'd become fast friends after I'd snuck him a few treats.

Taking a moment before I knocked, I stopped to admire the railing and posts which were hand carved and wrapped around at least three quarters of the cabin. The man had talented hands and just thinking about what else they could do sent a shiver along my spine.

How I'd dreamed about those hands running along my body, his fingers delving underneath my panties, seeking my folds and....Oh, my. Okay, focus, Dyl. Now or never. I moved to go up the short staircase and looked up at the front door. And he was right there. Standing in the doorway, a questioning look slashed across his handsome face. At least he wasn't scowling.

I'm not sure if I could hide the naughty thoughts that had been rolling through my brain.

And then miracle of miracles, instead of asking me why I was there, he took PJ's collar in hand and led him back inside, leaving the front door wide open. Okay, guess that was his way of inviting me in. My heart pounded so fast I feared it would break a rib, but with a fresh influx of confidence, I threw back my shoulders and crossed the threshold into his home.

With dinner still in my hands, outstretched like an offering, he was nowhere to be seen. Muffled words and the clink of metal flowed from a room off his kitchen. Maybe a pantry or his mud room? Hard to tell since each cabin the men had built was similar on the outside, but each with a unique floor plan.

Lars walked back into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him. "His kennel's in there." No explanation why he put the dog away. And I wasn't going to ask.

His face had softened, and a new look had replaced the questioning one. A hungry look. For the food, or for me?

"Smells good. You want to set it on the table? I'll get us some plates and forks." He moved gracefully for a man his size. Not a move wasted as he collected the dinnerware and brought it to the gorgeous table. Another hand-crafted item by him.

"Uh, okay. This table is amazing. How long did it take you to make?" He took the containers out of my hands as I just stood there, smiling like a lovesick fool. "Oh. Thanks. Sorry. Meant to set those down, but I was dazzled by your work." He put the food down, then looked at me. Really looked as if he was looking into my very soul.

My heart stopped and now I knew how it felt when your breath "hitches," a description used by some of my favorite romance authors in their stories. And mine

definitely hitched. And then it did it again when his hands brushed mine.

Every nerve ending I had hummed. My nipples pushing against the material of my dress, the friction reminding me of my last-minute decision to go braless. And commando. Temptress level achieved.

Lars continued to scan my face. What was he looking for? Then his gaze dropped lower, and lower, and raised my temperature higher and higher.

Watching his gaze on its return journey, I became dizzy and unbearably aroused. I didn't have to ask if he liked what he saw. I felt it. Everywhere.

"You dazzle me, Dylan. I like your dress." His voice always sounded gravelly, unused. But now? Uttering those words? The tone had dropped and washed over my hypersensitive skin like a lover's caress. Where had this version of Lars been?

"I...thank you." Less is more, Dyl. You're not here for a long conversation over dinner. You're here to get your man, stake your claim, experience what all those hot gazes had promised. Unfulfilled for so long, was this a dream or was this moment, finally, actually happening?

Tension built. The good kind—the best kind. The longer we remained silent, the clearer it became that he knew exactly why I was there. Trouble was, the longer it went on, the more nervous I was. Whatever I'd planned to say vanished from my memory, and it didn't matter anymore that he wasn't saying anything. Because I wasn't about to fill the awkward silence with my typical snark just to get a reaction from him.

I was getting a reaction.

The kind I liked best.

His erection stretching the material behind his zipper, on the verge of escaping his waistband. This reaction I liked the best. And it steadied my resolve. The food could wait. Words could wait. Knowing what he felt, tasted, and sounded like as he touched, licked and made me scream his name was all I could focus on. I wanted. I needed all of it now. My feet moved without conscious thought as I stepped around the table, kicked off my shoes and on tiptoes offered myself to him.

His lips morphed into the barest of grins. He knew what he was doing. And he was waiting for me to make the first move. So be it.

My hands landed on his hard, rumbling chest. I felt his growl before the sound reached my ears. Lars grasped me around the waist, pulled me in tight, and slammed his mouth on mine. Heaven wasn't a place. It was a person. He worshipped my lips while I ground myself against his cock, desperate to get closer, which was crazy, but at this point the need was beyond my control.

Without breaking our kiss, he swept me up in his arms. My moan signaling my approval as I clutched one hand onto his bulging arm and wound the other around his neck, determined not to ever let go.

The only thing I noticed before he dropped me on his bed was the spectacular sunset streaming through the largest window I'd ever seen in a bedroom. A double paned, floor to ceiling monstrosity that nearly took up an entire wall. I knew about him to know he'd found solace and meaning living up here amongst the trees, and he'd made sure it was front and center in his personal space as well.

Any woman would be crazy not to want a man like Lars. Full of so much passion and determination to enjoy what this mountain offered. What it had given him, his friends, and the others who came here to experience the same. And the only crazy I was...was crazy over him.

Now I just had to show him I didn't just want one night. I wanted the full meal deal.

SIX

LARS

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I can't remember the last time I was this desperate to be inside a woman. Which meant never. Not until Dylan. The want and the need to be inside her damn near stole my breath. But before I could take a step backward, strip down then order her to do the same, she was eagerly reaching for my waist. Undoing the belt then dragging the zipper down, my cock sprung free.

I let out a hiss as she wrapped her fingers around my shaft. She slid her palm up and down, then back up again. Jaaaaaysus.

Surely my eyes crossed. My hips bucked forward. And my heart stopped. I was right, witchcraft. And I wanted to be under her spell for as long as she wanted me.

Dylan's gaze flicked up to mine, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. It was all the warning I got before she took the head of my penis into her mouth and flicked her tongue.

My body jerked, but she kept her grasp firm. Her eyes closed as she annihilated all my defenses. Why the hell had I ever resisted this woman?

As she worked my cock, she made the sexiest sounds I've ever heard. Near the edge, there would be no pleasure for her if I let her continue. I reached down and gently cupped her shoulders. "That feels amazing. But next time, otherwise, I'm going to come too soon. And for our first time, I need to be buried so deep inside your velvet heat, neither one of us will recover anytime soon."

Her sweet mouth released me with a pop, the sound echoed and I groaned. Dylan softly laughed. Her breath fanned my cock and damn, she was going to be a handful.

Already was. And I was here for it.

I lifted her, then tunneled my hands under her pretty skirt and found she wore nothing underneath. Fuck me. Another soft laugh. “Oh, you think you’re clever, do you?” At her nod, she raised her arms, and I lifted the dress over her head and received yet another shock. No bra. I couldn’t get my clothes off fast enough as she arranged herself on my bed and watched as I finished undressing.

“I was pretty confident this was happening tonight, so I decided to make things easier for you. I’m nice that way.”

“If that’s nice, what are you not?” My words tumbled out in a rush.

“Naughty?” With a flick of her finger, she sent a long piece of hair over her shoulder and off her breast. Rosy-tipped nipples pearled under my stare as I took my cock in hand and climbed into my bed over her.

“I’ll take naughty. Show me?”

Dylan’s smile vanished, but only because her tongue traced her wet lips as she leaned back, her knees bent, then let her legs fall open wide. The origin of the scent I couldn’t quite place. A mixture of her essence, even now glistening on her deep pink pussy lips, drifted to me along with some kind of essential oil perfume. Sweet and spicy.

Before I could lean down and take my first taste, Dylan dipped a hand between her thighs and stroked herself as her other hand squeezed one of her perfect tits. “Where do you want to taste first?”

Dammit, I wasn’t going to last if she kept being naughty. Decisions were hard, and no matter where I began, I knew where I’d finish.

But first there was one more thing I needed to know. “Why me?”

Dylan’s movements stopped, and she frowned. I didn’t enjoy putting that look on her face. “I mean. Even you have to admit, a soldier turned surly mountain man isn’t your usual type, right?”

Crawling up onto her knees, Dylan placed both hands on my chest, leaning in close. Her stomach brushed my cock, and it jumped, but hearing her response was more important than burying myself deep inside her.

“What if my type is kind, thoughtful, creative, hardworking, a good friend, and hot? What if the sense of knowing you belong with a person, no matter how many days you’ve known each other, how many? deep conversations you’ve had, or not, is my type?”

Those bright brown eyes shone with so much emotion I didn’t dare put a name to it. Later. Right now, she was giving me a gift. And I knew exactly what she was talking about because I felt the same way about her.

“Then I say we’re on the same page.”

Dylan’s face bloomed and the desire she’d banked when I questioned her returned. “Good. Now where were we?”

I gently gave her a push against her shoulders, and she fell back with a laugh. Best damn sound ever. “Open back up for me. Now.”

“Yes,” her whispered response was the last coherent word either of us said for quite some time.

Diving between her folds, I licked her clit until she grabbed a handful of my hair and

held on. She dug her heels into the mattress, lifting her hips higher as I drove my tongue deep into her slick channel. I teased her tight bud, rubbing it, pinching it as her moans built. When she broke, she rode out her orgasm against my tongue; lost in her pleasure. I watched her fall over the edge. Damn, she was glorious.

I lost track of how many times she said my name as I flicked the tip of her clit with my tongue, wanting to give her another orgasm before I filled her up. Slick and sensitive, I felt her spasms as she rocked her hips. Dylan came quickly the second time and pride from a job well done filled me.

If I was lucky, she'd allow me to provide her with as many orgasms as she wanted for the rest of our lives.

“Now.” Dylan panted. “Inside me.”

I was not a man afraid of being bossed around by his woman. Grabbing a condom from the side table, how I rolled it on without fumbling it as she laid beneath me, her hair fanned out. glowing satisfaction upon her gorgeous face struck me dumb. But I did.

I guide myself to her entrance and paused until she locked eyes with me. The first thrust was slow, shallow, and she mewled her displeasure when I withdrew. “Greedy, much?” I teased.

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The second was just as slow, but I didn't stop until I was seated deep, her inner walls wrapping around me. The heat of our joining flipped a switch within me and going slow wasn't going to be enough.

I paced my strokes, wanting this to last, but when she wrapped her legs around my waist, my composure broke and I slammed fast and hard. Her moans and shouts fueled me as I took everything she gave me.

“Yes, yes, oh, yes.” Dylan lifted herself up off the bed, pressing her core against me as she came. So damn tight around me. Her orgasm triggered mine, and I thrust wildly, roaring her name. Dylan was mine.

She had been from that very first day.

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

DYLAN

As it turned out, I didn't need the apartment after all. I'd spent one night in it before I seduced Lars. Although he claims he was on his way over to tell me, and show me, how he really felt about me. Either way, we were now couple number three thanks to the lodge and Kane had moved into the apartment. He'd been staying in town while they'd begun building his cabin further back on the property.

In doing so, it gave Lars the opportunity to add another skills-based training for their

client-guests to take part in. Including Kane, who was getting on Lars' last nerve. Mr. Adrenaline Junkie was having a hard time settling into life on the mountain.

“Dylan, can you find something for Kane to do?”

“I thought he was improving. You said he went an entire day without smacking his head or a finger with the hammer?” We all knew Kane’s heart wasn’t in construction or building a house. He was gamely trying since it was his house, but once it was done, he’d need something else to focus his pent-up energy on.

“Not enough. He needs a hobby. Or a girlfriend. Anything. Otherwise, he and I are gonna throw down and the only person I want to throw down is you. On any surface. I’m not picky.” Lars wiggled his eyebrows at me and I giggled. Oh, how two months changed a man.

We needed to get out of bed and start our day. We both had a lot on our schedules. “I know that look. We don’t have time.” I tossed my side of the covers off me and shifted to get up. That’s as far as I got.

Lars tugged me back against his very warm and very aroused body.

“Wait, I have a question. It’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Remember when you were brow-beating me when I was texturing the apartment and you said, ‘I don’t have ten years.’ What did you mean by that?”

“Brow-beating? Hey, I never brow-beat. I may tease, with love, but never with any meanness.” Realizing he was doing his own teasing, I still wanted to set the record straight. Although I should be ecstatic that he was having real conversations with me since we became an official couple.

“Hmm, not sure I remember that.” I scooted away and settled myself against the headboard. “Let me think.”

His hand snaked under the covers and settled at the top of my right thigh. “Until you do, I’ll just keep this right here.” He feathered his fingers over my still tingling skin. It hadn’t been that many minutes ago I was happily screaming his name. But dang. I was ready. “I don’t think we’ll have time. I have an appointment in an hour and I need to wash my...Lars!” He flicked his thumb between my folds, hitting my still sensitive clit.

“Stop stalling.” Lars growled against my ear.

Wait. What did he ask me?

“I’m waiting. And we have time.” Lars withdrew his thumb and yes, I whimpered.

“Ten years. Right, I remember now. Well, it wasn’t particularly about ten years. It could have been ten days. Because when you know you want someone, that your life isn’t complete without knowing what that person’s kiss is like, how their hands will feel against your body?—”

“Like this?” Lars pushed two fingers inside my once again throbbing pussy and once again forgot what we were talking about.

I let my legs fall open and rode his fingers as he teased another orgasm from me. My cries filled the room moments later.

“Told you we had time.” Lars moved behind me as I got my breathing under control.

“Um, so what about you?” I watched as he reached into the nightstand on his side of the king sized bed and took something out that he kept hidden in his hand.

“Tonight. Right now, I have another question for you.”

Still basking in my afterglow, I flipped over and, probably with a dreamy look on my

face, I stared at my sexy mountain man. “Okay, especially if I get another reward.” My tone hopeful. Now we had just fifty minutes to both get ready.

Lars dipped down and took my lips in a slow kiss, unlike any we’d shared. It felt almost reverent, like he was cherishing each stroke as he feathered his lips against mine. With each swipe of his tongue, he claimed what he already owned: my heart. With a final tug on my bottom lip, he pulled back, and I swear his eyes shone with tears.

“Marry me. Have my babies. Sit on the porch with me in matching rocking chairs when we’re seventy and beyond.”

It took a moment for my brain to catch up. My eyes focused on an object he held up between us, and any thoughts of teasing him about matching anything vanished.

“I love you Dylan. I’m so damn sorry I held back from you all those months. And I’m so damn happy you never gave up on me.”

For the first time, maybe ever, in my life, I was speechless and the one who ended up nodding my answer. The irony was not lost on me or my burly mountain of a man as a smile as big as he is split his face.

PJ, ever attuned to his master, and to me, howled his approval from the other room. Of course, it was breakfast time.