



Resisting My Rugged Enemy

Author: *Sophie-Leigh Robbins*

Category: Romance

Description: He's the kind of trouble I've always avoided. Too bad trouble looks so good in hiking boots and flannel.

Reese

The best part about living in Maplewood Springs is my job at the local Visitor Center and Museum, where I get to nerd out about our small town's history, rave about local hiking trails, and make sure every tourist leaves with a hand-carved bear souvenir. Honestly, it's a dream gig—except when Sawyer strolls in with his muddy boots. Sure, he's got that rugged mountain man charm, but he also has this irritating habit of touching every exhibit, even though there's a big "Do Not Touch" sign practically screaming at him. It's like he's on a mission to drive me crazy.

But then, he asks me to tutor him in history. Apparently, he needs to pass an exam to get his ranger certification. And guess who the biggest history nerd in town is? Yeah, that would be me.

I'm stuck with him now, pretending I'm okay with helping him study while trying not to strangle him. But the more time I spend with Sawyer, the more I start to see there's more to him than his tough exterior.

Maybe, just maybe, tutoring him isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to me...

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

Chapter One

Reese

The early-morning air nips at my skin, reminding me that summer hasn't quite arrived yet in Montana. I hug my jacket tighter around my body as I make my way to work, cursing myself for forgetting to put on gloves today.

I've worked at the Maplewood Springs Visitor Center and Museum for five years and adore every second of it. I love helping tourists find the perfect souvenir or the right map for their planned hikes, but if I'm completely honest, I find running the museum even more exciting. As a self-proclaimed history nerd, I can't get enough of digging into local history and showcasing it so others can also enjoy it.

The charming visitor center sits at the edge of town, perched like a postcard against the backdrop of Mount Hartley's craggy peaks. The mountains look especially dramatic this morning. They cast long, moody shadows in the soft light of the rising sun, like they're showing off and reminding me who truly rules this part of the world.

"Look at us," they seem to say. "We're majestic and rugged, and you're just a woman who forgot her gloves."

I can't say they're wrong. Even though I live within walking distance from work, it's far enough to freeze my unprotected fingers off. The stupid thing is that I know how cold mornings can get in Maplewood Springs. I've lived here my entire life and realize how deceiving the weather can be. Some people think that sunshine automatically means warm temperatures, but it's more complicated than that.

I blow into my cold hands as Maplewood Spring's Visitor Center and Museum comes into view and make my way to the front door. The building has plenty of small mountain town charm, with its log cabin-style exterior, overflowing flower boxes, and a hand-painted sign that reads: "Welcome to Maplewood Springs! Gateway to Adventure."

I think the tagline sounds a bit cheesy, but hey, it works. Tourists flock here all year round to hike the trails, soak in the views, and enjoy everything our small town has to offer.

Behind me, Main Street is still waking up. Amelia from Summit Sweets, the town's bakery, hasn't flipped her sign to "Open" yet, but I can smell the cinnamon rolls from here. I briefly consider abandoning all responsibility to stuff my face. Two hikers stroll by the bakery, wearing matching neon rain jackets so bright they must be visible from the International Space Station.

I get my key out of my pocket and slide it into the lock, giving it a jiggle. Nothing. I jiggle harder. Still nothing. Ugh! This lock is a drama queen and insists on making every morning an ordeal.

"Come on," I mumble. "Work with me. Please."

Begging works because the lock finally clicks. The familiar creak of the wooden door echoes through the empty building as I push it open and flick on the lights. The interior of the visitor center-slash-museum comes to life with its polished wooden floors, shelves stocked with maps, guidebooks, and a truly staggering variety of bear-themed souvenirs. Behind a glass door, a glimpse of my favorite place, the museum, can be seen. Glass display cases full of local history fill the entire room.

I step inside and smile as I let my gaze wander the space before heading to the backroom to brew a fresh pot of coffee while I still have some time. In half an hour,

this place will be buzzing with tourists. They'll want maps, directions, and answers to burning questions like "Do you have gluten-free trail mix?" or "At what time do the bears usually come out?"

Seriously, someone asked me that exact question the other day. I thought they were joking, but they weren't. I almost felt bad that I had to break the news that bears don't have a strict schedule for making an appearance. This is the rugged wilderness, after all, not a timed Broadway Show.

With a fresh cup of coffee in hand, I walk around the space and tidy whatever needs tidying. Then, I take fifteen glorious minutes to catch up on the latest copy of *Historic Gems Quarterly*. Yes, it's as thrilling as it sounds, and no, I won't apologize for my love of obscure artifacts and questionable hairstyles from the 1800s. There's something about a well-placed bonnet that speaks to me, I guess.

I plop down behind the counter, flipping to an article titled "Buttoned Up: The Surprising Evolution of Victorian Shirt Buttons."

I let out a contented sigh. My coffee is still steaming, the museum smells faintly of pine and lemon cleaner, and for a moment, life is perfect.

That is until I hear the clunk of hiking boots on the wooden steps outside.

I glance at the clock. We're not open yet, but tourists always seem to think "Closed" is more of a suggestion than a rule.

Sure enough, the door handle jiggles, followed by a loud knock.

"Hello? Are you open? I need to grab a map of the area real quick!" a male voice calls out.

I take a deep, calming breath and remind myself that I love my job. Tourists bring money to the town. They're not here to ruin my peaceful me-time before a long day of work—they're just enthusiastic.

I put my magazine on the counter and walk toward the door, opening it with a smile.

"Good morning," I greet the elderly couple standing outside. "We open in fifteen minutes, but I can help you now if it's urgent."

"Oh, thanks. I didn't know if the 'closed' sign meant you were really closed. Sometimes, places open early. We thought we'd chance it," the man says.

The woman, whom I assume is his wife, nods enthusiastically. "That's right. All we need is a map of the area. We'll be in and out before you can blink."

I glance inside, my gaze lingering on my steaming mug of coffee and the article about Victorian shirt buttons. I'd love to get back to reading, but I realize I won't be able to relax with two customers waiting outside and possibly staring at me for half an hour, so I flip the sign to "Open."

"Well, I was about to open anyway," I lie. "Please, come in and let me grab that map for you."

"Actually," the man says, his grin widening, "while we're here, could you recommend a map for some hiking trails for my wife and me? I'm Dan, by the way, and this is Donna."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Sure.” I motion toward the map rack that takes up an entire wall. “The ones marked in green are the most popular. If you’re looking for something quieter, the blue trails are a little less traveled but just as scenic.”

“And the red and orange ones?”

“Reds are more strenuous. Suited best for seasoned hikers. The orange ones are multi-day hikes.”

Donna marches to the rack and starts pulling out map after map. “Ooh, let’s do this one! No, wait, this one has a waterfall. Oh, but this one loops back to town for lunch—perfect. What do you think, Dan?”

Dan gives her an overwhelmed shrug of the shoulder, then turns to me. “What do you think?”

“Me? I’m not sure. It’s such a personal choice.” I tap my chin and think. “Why don’t you go with the Whispering Pines Trail?” I suggest, carefully removing one of the maps from the rack.

“Whispering Pines, huh? What a magical name,” Donna says as she takes the map from me. She unfolds it and shoves it under Dan’s nose. “Looks fantastic, don’t you think, honey?”

“Absolutely. A real adventure if you ask me.”

I bite back a laugh as I gently take the map from Donna and turn it around. “There

you go. You had it upside down.”

“Oh, silly us.” Dan snorts.

“Anything else I can help you guys with?” I ask.

The man perks up. “Yeah, actually. What’s the deal with the museum? Is it worth checking out?”

“Absolutely,” I say. “We’ve got exhibits on local wildlife, early settler history, and even a few artifacts from the Gold Rush era. Admission is by donation.”

Donna gasps, but it’s got nothing to do with the subject of the museum. She’s already marching to another spot. “Oh my gosh, is that a stuffed grizzly bear?”

Before I can answer, she’s halfway across the room, her phone aimed at the bear statue like a weapon. Dan trails after her, peppering me with questions about trail permits, trekking poles, and bear spray. I answer them all to the best of my ability, but when he suddenly asks if I’d be willing to meet his accomplished single grandson, who happens to be in town later today, I’m seriously considering faking a fire drill. I’m here to help tourists, not date their grandkids.

“So, what do you say? Lunchtime work for you?” Dan asks.

He looks at me with an expression that suggests he thinks I’d seriously consider going out with his grandson.

I’m racking my brain for a polite yet firm excuse to remove myself from this awkward and inappropriate conversation when I hear the familiar creak of the front door. Good, another tourist. That’ll get me away from Dan’s inappropriate matchmaking.

But when I turn around, my heart sinks in my chest, and my smile falters. It's not a tourist. It's Sawyer—a walking mountain man cliché with his thick beard, piercing blue eyes, broad shoulders, flannel shirt, and denim pants. Not to mention the bane of my existence.

“Morning, sunshine,” he says, leaning casually against the counter like he owns the place.

I cross my arms over my chest. “What do you want, Sawyer?”

“Oh, don't mind me,” he drawls. “Just here with a question.” His eyes flick to Dan, who's still waiting for my answer. “Busy, or do you have a second?”

“If you'll excuse me,” I tell Dan, relieved that I have an out, even though it means having to talk to Sawyer.

I arch an eyebrow. “Can I help you with something, or are you just here to track dirt all over my polished floors again?”

He grins, and his annoyingly gorgeous eyes light up. “Come on, Reese. This is a mountain town frequented by hikers. Surely these floors have seen their fair share of dirt.”

“They do every time you walk in,” I bite back.

Dan clears his throat behind me, clearly not ready to let me off the hook yet. “So, about you going out with my grandson today. Did I mention he's an accomplished lawyer? He makes good money. You won't ever have to worry about finances again if you marry him.”

I give Dan a horrified look. “Marry him?”

“Well, not right away, of course, but maybe in a few months or—”

“Sorry,” Sawyer cuts in. “Don’t mean to interrupt, but Reese promised she’d help me out this morning.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I gape at him. “I did not—”

“Something about trail markers,” he says smoothly, ignoring my protest. “Really urgent.”

Dan frowns, his hopeful expression faltering. “Oh. Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you from your work. Will you be free later today?”

“I’m afraid not. Sorry, Dan, but I’m way too busy to go out with your grandson. He sounds nice, though. Good luck to him.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Silence fills the air until Dan shifts awkwardly. “We’ll, uh, be on our way then. Thanks for all your help.”

Before I can say another word, they’re heading for the door. Donna pauses to snap one last picture of the grizzly bear, and then they’re gone without buying a map or even a bear-shaped keychain.

I turn my attention back to Sawyer and shake my head. “Trail markers? Really?”

He shrugs, unbothered. “Seemed like you needed a rescue.”

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“No, but you looked like you were two seconds away from throwing a stapler at poor Dan.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t even have a stapler here. I keep them in the backroom.”

Gosh. Even I realize how ridiculous I sound.

Sawyer doesn’t move a muscle. Instead, he studies me with an infuriatingly amused look. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Saving you from a blind date with ‘accomplished lawyer grandson.’”

I roll my eyes. “Ugh. You’re the worst.”

His grin widens. “You’re welcome for that, too.”

“For what, annoying me?” I shake my head and stop him before he can utter another word. “Just cut to the chase. Why are you here, Sawyer?”

“Well, I need a favor. From you.”

“Me?”

He gives me a shrug of the shoulder. “Believe me, it pains me to admit it, but I need help, and you’re the only one who can offer it to me.”

“Me?” I repeat. “No way. I want nothing to do with whatever you’ve got planned.”

Sawyer sighs dramatically. “You’re going to make me beg, aren’t you?”

“You bet I am. It’s going to be the highlight of my day too. Of my week. So yeah, do

it. Beg,” I say, biting back a smirk.

But instead of looking surprised or shocked, his expression shifts into something else. Determination. A little bit of smugness even.

“Oh, I’ll beg, Reese,” he says, his voice low and teasing, “but I guarantee by the time I’m done, you’ll be the one saying yes to me.”

My heart involuntarily skips a beat, surprisingly so. I give my body the memo about how we don’t like Sawyer, but there seems to be a faulty connection between mind and body, because all I feel are stupid flutters in my chest.

Ugh. It angers me that he has this effect on me.

“Stop with the overly dramatic lines and say what you have to say, Sawyer,” I tell him, a teeny tiny bit curious about what favor he wants from me.

Chapter Two

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

Sawyer

Reese is the most adorable woman on the planet, slinging snarky comments my way and pretending she doesn't like me one bit, while I can see her cheeks flush pink right here in front of me.

I know she hates that I track mud all over her pristine floors every time I step inside, but what does she expect? I work as a hiking guide for Hartley Peak Adventures, and dirty boots come with the job. Besides, the visitor center gets cleaned every other day, so I don't get why she always gets so worked up about every single speck of dirt.

"Well, are you going to ask me that favor or what?"

Her words snap me out of my thoughts. "Here's the thing. I've been working hard to get my ranger certification. There's an exam, and when I pass that, I'm a ranger."

"Good for you, but what does that have to do with me?"

"A huge section of the exam focuses on the region's history, and I swear, none of it sticks in my brain. I really need to pass this thing, Reese. I was hoping you'd help me."

She blinks dumbfoundedly, then laughs. "Good one, Sawyer."

"I'm being serious here. Help a guy out. Please. I'm begging you," I say between gritted teeth. "How's that for begging?"

“It’s a start,” she says, unable to contain a smile. “Why do you even want to be a ranger? You love being a hiking guide. You get paid to stomp around in the woods all day and occasionally ruin my floors.”

I smirk. “Ruining your floors is the highlight of my career, sure, but being a ranger is the next step. It means I’d be certified for search-and-rescue or conservation efforts. You know, actually make a lasting impact instead of leading tourists to scenic overlooks. It also means I get benefits and a retirement plan.”

“Wait, Hartley Peak Adventures doesn’t offer you health insurance or paid time off?”

“No, so you can see why I want to become a ranger, right? And trust me, it’s not just for the benefits. The work itself speaks to me a lot.”

Reese exhales, her lips pressing together. She’s trying to find a way to say no. I see it in the way her fingers tap against the counter, the way she shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

Finally, she sighs. “I don’t have time to tutor you, Sawyer.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Why? Reading *Historic Gems Quarterly* takes up all your free time?”

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “For your information, *Historic Gems Quarterly* is a very important journal, thank you very much. But I suppose you wouldn’t understand the thrill of learning about Victorian buttons anyway.”

I grin, enjoying her irritation. “Victorian buttons, huh? Fascinating stuff. But I’m guessing those buttons won’t help me pass my ranger exam, will they? I need some hands-on tools and a good tutor.”

She gives me a pointed look. “Maybe you don’t need a history magazine, no, but I’m sure your hiking skills will come in handy when you’re lost in a sea of historical facts.”

“So does that mean that you’ll do it? You’ll tutor me?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, what do I get out of it besides seeing you succeed?”

I shrug, unsure of how to convince her. “For starters, I’ll make wiping my boots on the welcome mat of the Visitor Center my main priority when coming in here, and I’ll talk up the exhibits in the museum to my hiking clients. Heck, I’ll help you with whatever you want, Reese.”

Her shoulders soften. “I guess I could use your... help,” she says as if it’s a dirty word. “How are you with woodwork?”

“Woodwork?”

“Yeah, the shelves for the botanical pressings in the Natural History exhibit are starting to sag, and some of the samples have been damaged from a lack of proper storage. But there’s no budget for carpentry, so...” She shrugs as if she’s reluctant to admit she does need me after all.

I grin. “Well, I’m pretty good with my hands, Reese.” I lean against the counter, giving her my brightest smile. “Fixing a few shelves sounds like something I can manage. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

She bites her lip. “I guess I don’t have a choice. I need those shelves fixed.”

“Great, that’s settled then.” I extend my hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

She rolls her eyes, but a slight smile tugs at the corner of her mouth when he accepts my handshake. “You’re lucky I’m letting you do this at all.”

I laugh. “Guess I’ll make sure it’s worth your while then.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“You better. We start tomorrow morning at six thirty. I’ll meet you here. Oh, and bring snacks, preferably cinnamon rolls from Summit Sweets.”

“Are they even open that early?” I ask with a frown. I’m pretty sure Amelia’s shop is closed at that hour. I know since I often pass it on my way to a morning hike on Mount Hartley.

“I guess you’ll have to get inventive, Sawyer.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Wow, you’re going to make me suffer through this whole tutoring thing, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who wants to pass his ranger exam and said he’d do anything. Besides, consider the cinnamon rolls payback for when you broke that display, despite the big Do Not Touch sign staring you in the face.”

It finally dawns on me that she’s still angry over that. I came in here with a group of hikers looking to buy some bear-shaped souvenirs after we spotted one on the hike down from Mount Hartley. Reese told me how hard she’d worked on a new exhibit, and I ruined it thanks to my way-too-big hands. I was nervous because I like Reese, okay? So I was being extra clumsy that day, with her standing so close that I could smell her floral shampoo. Anyway, she sure loves to hold grudges if she’s still mad about that.

“That was two years ago, Reese. You still haven’t forgiven me?”

She shrugs. “You haven’t suffered enough, Sawyer. I worked really hard on that

exhibition, and you didn't do anything to try to fix it. Besides, that day was supposed to be amazing, and you ruined it."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind." She brushes it off, but I can tell there's more to it.

I raise my hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, Reese. I truly am."

"You should be. You ruined things for me that day."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," she repeats.

I'm not letting it go this time. "I want to know."

She lets out a heavy sigh. "It's too late to do anything about it, okay? Historic Gems Quarterly was going to drop by and write an article about mountain climbing history. They were going to feature pictures of my exhibit. But then you... Anyway, I don't want to talk about it."

A pang of hurt slices through me. I had no idea about the article. No wonder she's been treating me like the enemy. I ruined something important to her.

"I'll make things right. I promise," I tell her.

"Whatever. See you tomorrow, Sawyer." She walks away and starts tidying the map rack, making it clear the conversation is over for her.

I head to the door, taking the hint, but not before making one last promise. "I'll be

here at six thirty. With clean shoes and a bag full of cinnamon rolls.”

She doesn't reply, but I catch a soft smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as I walk out the door.

Chapter Three

Reese

I arrive at the visitor center twenty minutes early. I fumble with my keys in the dim morning light and wonder what exactly I've gotten myself into. Then I remind myself that Sawyer promised to help me fix the shelves for the botanical pressings in the Natural History exhibit. I might have to suffer through a few tutoring sessions with him, but it'll be worth it in the end.

The real challenge is getting through those tutoring sessions with my sanity intact. I pray Sawyer won't be his annoying self today. Maybe he'll finally sit back and listen to me for once. I snort at the idea because what are the chances of that happening?

The lock of the visitor center cooperates on the first try today. Apparently, even inanimate objects can sense my stress and decide to give me a break for once. I head inside and flip on the lights. Sawyer will be here soon, ready to learn all about local history, and I'll have to pretend like spending one-on-one time with him doesn't do weird things to my blood pressure. It's like my body and mind are on completely different wavelengths with the way my heart hammers whenever I think about Sawyer.

Sure, he looks amazing, but he's also annoying.

Right?

I set my bag down behind the counter and pull out the materials I spent way too much time organizing last night. Maps of the region from different time periods, photocopies of newspaper clippings about the Gold Rush, a timeline I made of significant events, and my personal favorite: a detailed breakdown of the Native American tribes that lived in this area before European settlement.

As I spread everything across an empty table, I can't help but feel a flutter of excitement about getting to teach this stuff, even if it's to Sawyer. History isn't just dates and names to me. It's stories about real people who lived, loved, and struggled in these same mountains we now live, love, and struggle in. If Sawyer pays attention, he might discover that local history is way more fascinating than he thought. Of course, that's assuming he can focus on something other than finding ways to irritate me.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I arrange the materials in logical order, then rearrange them again. Am I being too ambitious? Should I start with something simpler? What if he gets bored and gives up after ten minutes?

Ugh, why do I care so much? This is Sawyer we're talking about, the guy who broke my carefully crafted exhibit and cost me the chance to be featured in Historic Gems Quarterly. The guy who tracks mud everywhere and touches things he shouldn't and... and who has those ridiculously blue eyes that seem to see right through me.

I shake my head. Nope. Not going there.

I glance at the clock. Six twenty-five. He should be here any minute, assuming he shows up. Part of me wonders if this was all some elaborate joke. What if he stands me up and I'm left here with my perfectly organized study materials? Panic starts to set in, but then I hear the familiar sound of boots on the wooden steps outside, and my heart does that annoying flutter thing again. The footsteps are deliberate and confident. Sawyer has arrived.

I take a deep breath and smooth down my sweater, reminding myself that I'm the teacher here. I'm in control. This is my territory, and he needs my help. I have the upper hand.

At least, that's what I think until the door opens. Sawyer steps inside, looking surprisingly attractive for this ungodly hour. He wipes his boots on the doormat like he promised he would, and all I can do is stare at how his biceps flex under his flannel shirt. His hair is slightly damp, and he's carrying a white bakery bag that makes my stomach rumble. Yeah, I no longer have the upper hand. My treacherous

body does.

“Morning, Sunshine,” he greets.

I roll my eyes at the nickname even though something warm unfurls in my chest against my will.

“Don’t call me that,” I mutter, pointing to the bag in his hands. “Please tell me those are actual cinnamon rolls and not some dry supermarket pastries you picked up on the way over.”

He grins and sets the bag down, carefully avoiding my study materials. “I may have had to call in a favor with Amelia to get these at this hour, but I’m a man of my word, Reese. Fresh cinnamon rolls from Summit Sweets, still warm.”

I peek into the bag and find four perfectly glazed cinnamon rolls, each one bigger than my fist. The smell of cinnamon and butter and that perfect yeasty sweetness makes my mouth water.

“You convinced Amelia to open early for you? What did you promise her? Your firstborn child?”

“Something like that,” he says with a grin. “Though I think she was more interested in hearing about why I needed cinnamon rolls at dawn for a certain museum curator.”

“You told her about me?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

“Relax, Sunshine. I just said I had a very demanding teacher who, luckily for me, accepts bribes.”

Wow. He made a real effort. Kept his promises. Even wiped his boots on the way in.

Maybe there's more to Sawyer than I give him credit for.

"You made an effort," I say incredulously.

"I told you I would." He shrugs like it's no big deal. "Besides, I figure if I'm going to torture you with my complete ignorance of local history, the least I can do is bring quality bribes."

I take one of the cinnamon rolls and bite into it, closing my eyes briefly as the flavors hit my tongue. "Okay, this might make up for the early hour."

"Might?"

"Don't push it, Sawyer," I say, smiling despite myself.

His gaze lands on the materials I've laid out, his expression shifting to something more serious. "Wow. You went all out, didn't you?"

"I don't do anything halfway. If this is too much for you, we can start simple if you want," I say, suddenly self-conscious about my prep work.

What if he thinks my overachiever efforts mean I'm in love with him? What a nightmare that would be.

"No, this is perfect." He pulls up one of the visitor chairs and settles in across from me. "I appreciate you taking this seriously. I know you didn't have to help me after... well, after ruining that display and the chance at being featured in that magazine you love to read."

There's genuine gratitude in his voice. It's not the teasing tone I'm used to from him, and it throws me slightly off balance. Not to mention the fact that he remembers I

love reading Historic Gems Quarterly.

“Well,” I clear my throat and pull the papers toward us, “let’s see what we’re working with. Tell me what you already know about the region’s history and artifacts.”

I half expect him to define a historic artifact as anything older than his Spotify playlist or get extra cocky and claim he already knows everything about our town’s history. Instead, he runs a hand through his thick hair and throws me a sheepish look. “Honestly? Not much beyond the basics. I know there was a gold rush in the 1860s, and Native Americans lived here first, but beyond that...” He shrugs. “See? This is exactly why I need your help.”

“Okay, that’s a decent starting point.” I point to the timeline. “The Blackfeet and Crow tribes were the primary inhabitants of this area for thousands of years before European settlers arrived. They had established hunting grounds and seasonal camps throughout these mountains.”

“Thousands of years, huh? That’s older than you,” he says with a grin.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Ha, ha, you’re so funny, Sawyer.”

He leans forward, studying the timeline like an A-plus student. “What happened when the settlers showed up?”

“The usual tragic story, unfortunately. Conflicts over land, broken treaties, forced relocations.” I trace my finger along the dates. For your ranger exam, you’ll need to know specific events and dates. Like the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851, and how it affected tribal lands in Montana.”

He nods, pulls out a notebook, and starts writing. I arch an eyebrow. I half expected him to wing it, but he’s taking notes. The guy keeps throwing surprises at me.

“Are you writing down what I’m saying or doodling bears?” I ask.

“Why, are you shocked I own paper?”

“A little, yeah,” I say. “Anyway, let’s keep going.”

He flips a page and writes down gold rush in block letters, then underlines the title. “Okay, hit me with all the gold rush details.”

“That started around 1862 when prospectors found placer gold in Grasshopper Creek, about sixty miles from here. It brought thousands of miners and fortune-seekers into the territory practically overnight.” I pull out one of the photocopied newspaper articles. “Maplewood Springs was established as a supply town for the mining camps. That’s why our main street has that particular layout.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it was designed for pack mules and wagons.”

Sawyer studies the old photograph I’ve included, squinting at the sepia-toned image of muddy streets and canvas tents. “Hard to imagine this place looking like that.”

“I know, right? But if you look carefully at the mountain formations in the background, you can see it’s the same location.” I point out the distinctive peaks. “What’s fascinating is how quickly permanent settlements developed. Within five years, we had a general store, a blacksmith, two saloons, and even a small school.”

“Two saloons but only one school?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Priorities of the frontier, I guess.” I smile, and I realize I’m enjoying teaching Sawyer. What’s happening to me? “Though to be fair, the school served a much wider area. Children would ride in from homesteads twenty miles away.”

He takes another bite of his cinnamon roll and continues scribbling notes. “What about the environmental impact? I figure that’s something they’ll ask about on the ranger exam?”

I blink, genuinely impressed. “That’s an excellent question. Most people don’t think about that aspect.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m not all looks and no brains,” he teases.

“Jury’s still out on that one.”

“Ouch. But that does mean you agree about me having the looks, huh?” he says with a wink, barely able to contain himself from laughing.

“God help me,” I say with another eye roll.

“In all seriousness, I may not know much about history, but I know what mining does to the landscape.” He gestures toward the window, where Mount Hartley looms in the distance. “These mountains have been through a lot.”

“Exactly.” I pull out a map showing the locations of old mining claims. “Placer mining completely altered stream beds and water flow patterns. Some of the environmental damage is still visible today if you know where to look. There are areas where nothing grows because of mercury contamination from the extraction processes.”

Sawyer studies the map intently, asking questions about specific locations and taking detailed notes. This focused, engaged version of him is nothing like I’ve seen from him before. And maybe a little attractive, if I’m being honest.

Which I’m absolutely not, thank you very much.

“So what ended the boom?” he asks.

“Same thing that always ends gold rushes. The easy gold ran out. By 1875, most of the placer claims were exhausted, and the big mining operations moved on to other territories. A lot of the boomtowns became ghost towns almost overnight.”

“But not Maplewood Springs.”

“No, we were lucky. The location was good for other things like logging, ranching, mountaineering, hiking, and eventually tourism. Plus, we had the natural springs that the town is named after. As you know, people started coming here for the supposed healing properties of the mineral water.”

“Supposed?” He grins. “Are you telling me that you believe our famous springs are just fancy water? I’ve always believed the legends surrounding them.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I shrug. “I’m telling you that the mineral content is perfectly normal for mountain spring water, but people wanted to believe it was special. Sometimes, belief is more powerful than facts.”

“Spoken like a true historian with no tolerance for whimsical stuff.”

His voice is warm as he says it, and my cheeks heat. This is dangerous territory, with Sawyer being charming, attentive, and genuinely interested in the things I care about.

“No, spoken like someone who drinks tap water and survives,” I retort before my flushed cheeks give away that I’m not finding him as annoying as usual today.

I avert my eyes and clear my throat, reaching for another section of materials. “We should probably move on to the wildlife history. That’ll definitely be on your exam.”

I pause, suddenly realizing how much we still need to cover. “Actually, you know what? This historical stuff is just the beginning. We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover. Fire management, Leave No Trace principles, SAR protocols, forest regulations...” I trail off. “It’s a lot. Are you still up for it, Sawyer?” I try to keep my voice neutral, like I don’t care if he says yes or no, but a tiny part of me holds its breath while I wait for his answer. Spending more time with Sawyer wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

He leans back in his chair with a grin. “Absolutely. I’m in this. All the way to the fancy Latin plant names you’ll undoubtedly throw at me later.”

I smirk at him. “Botany might break you.”

He winks, and it's a good thing I'm sitting down because my legs start shaking. "Worth the risk, Reese."

Chapter Four

Sawyer

I never thought I'd say this—and I mean never, like not in a million cinnamon-roll-fueled years—but I'm enjoying learning about Montana's history.

Okay, enjoying might be a stretch, but I'm not actively trying to escape through the nearest window during our study sessions, which is more than I could say back in high school. Of course, it might have a little something to do with the woman teaching me.

Reese is smart. Sharp. Ridiculously passionate about the weirdest stuff. And don't even get me started on the way her eyes light up when she's mid-rant about treaty violations or the layout of 1800s pack mule routes. I didn't even know pack mule routes were a thing, but I've now heard the phrase 'logistical chokepoints of frontier commerce' more times than I've heard my own name this week.

And I'd kind of like to keep hearing it. At least, when it's coming from her. I doubt anyone else could make historical infrastructure sound this attractive and entertaining.

I've religiously been going over my study notes at night, trying to remember facts so I can impress her the next day. I even bought a highlighter. Yes, a highlighter. If my high school teachers could see me now, they'd be so surprised that their eyebrows would rocket into their hairlines and never come back.

Of course, it's kind of a shame we're always cooped up in here. I'm more of a hands-

on guy, and while I appreciate the crash course in gold rush trivia and treaty drama, I've got this itch to get outside. I'm a hiking guide after all. I flourish when I'm in the woods and summitting mountains. Maybe it's time for her to see that outdoorsy part of me. It could make her understand why my boots are always muddy. I don't do it to taunt her. It's nature's fault, really.

So I get this idea. It hits me while she's explaining the economic impact of gold prospectors

"Hey," I say, interrupting her mid-sentence. "You ever hiked up to Tramline Ridge?"

Reese blinks, clearly thrown off her groove. "Um, no. Should I have?"

I shrug. "Maybe. Depends if you like breathtaking views, secret wildflower meadows, and a stretch of rusted-out tram cables from the 1870s sitting up there like history forgot about them."

Her eyebrows rise. "Wait, really?"

"Yep. One of the old mining companies ran ore down from the summit. The cables are still strung through parts of the forest. Most people don't even know they're up there." I lean back in my chair. "Could be a good 'in the field' history lesson. You know, for a change of pace. Put that brain of yours to use in the wild. Enjoy the great outdoors while still exploring history. It's a win-win."

She narrows her eyes. "So, let me get this straight. You're suggesting I hike a literal mountain to see some rusty cables?"

"Well, when you say it like that, it sounds weird." I flash her a grin. "But yeah. That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

She stares at me for a beat longer than necessary. “I don’t know, Sawyer. I’m not an outdoorsy person.”

“Come on, this is Maplewood Springs. People come here from all over the country to enjoy all the gorgeous nature our town has to offer. Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me you don’t even own a pair of hiking boots,” I joke, but by the look on her face, I hit a little too close to the mark.

“I don’t have hiking boots,” she says, her cheeks turning pink in an adorable way that makes my heart skip a beat. “Hiking is not my thing.”

“Hiking is not your thing?” I ask in an incredulous voice.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Don’t sound so surprised, Sawyer. Not all of us were born with a compass embedded in our DNA and a topographical map burned into our retinas.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“No boots and not a hiking fan? Guess you leave me no choice but to file a formal complaint with the Maplewood Department of Outdoorsy Affairs.”

She snickers, and the sound hits me right in the chest. “Is that a real department, or are you making up official-sounding things to get me to go hiking with you?”

“Who’s to say?” I ask with a mischievous smile. “One thing’s for sure, though. We could both use a break from laminated timelines. Fresh air is good for your brain cells, you know.”

“I get fresh air. During my breaks.”

I arch an eyebrow at her.

She sighs and throws her hands up. “And what if you leave me alone, stranded on a ridgeline somewhere?”

“I promise I won’t do that, Reese. Besides, once you see the history out there firsthand, you’ll be able to tell tourists about it with way more confidence.”

She shoots me a playful glare. “I’m more than confident, thank you very much. And the Visitor Center has a solid four-point-seven rating. Can’t argue with that.”

The way she looks at me with pride in her eyes does things to me that shouldn’t be happening.

“Four-point-seven is impressive,” I admit. “But I bet you could bump it up to five

stars once you experience some of this history firsthand. Nothing beats authentic storytelling.”

She shakes her head and smiles at me. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Fine, I’ll go hiking with you, but only because I’m intrigued by the tram lines. They’d better be as interesting as you claim they are.”

“Great,” I say, barely able to contain my excitement. “How about tomorrow? The Visitor Center is closed on Sundays, right? It’s the perfect day for a field trip. I’ll show you those tram cables, you can see how the mining operation worked in the terrain, and maybe you’ll finally understand why I track mud in here every day.”

“So this is about your dirty boots?” She’s trying to look stern, but I can see the corner of her mouth twitching.

“Among other things.”

It’s also about wanting to spend more time with her, but I’m not going to admit that right now.

“I don’t even know where to start. I told you, I don’t have hiking boots.”

“We can swing by Maple’s Outfitters first thing in the morning. They rent gear. Eight good for you? I’ll pick you up right here. And I’ll bring cinnamon rolls.”

“This is crazy,” she says, but there’s something that looks like excitement flickering in her eyes.

“Sometimes crazy is exactly what you need.”

She fidgets with her pen. “Fine. But if I twist my ankle or get eaten by bears, I’m blaming you.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to file a complaint against someone while you’re digesting inside a bear.”

She throws her pen at me, and I dodge it with a laugh. “You’re terrible! I’m being serious here, Sawyer.”

“So am I. Bears are more afraid of you than—”

“Don’t.” She holds up a hand. “Don’t give me the nature lecture right now. I’m already having second thoughts. Besides, I’m the one who usually tells tourists about the bear facts.”

“Fine, I’ll stop teasing you. But fair warning. Once you see those views, you might never want to come back inside.”

“I doubt it. Spending a day hiking with you might be enough to lock myself in here permanently.”

“Fine by me. More fresh air for the rest of us. Though you’ll miss out on seeing me in my natural element, which, I’ll have you know, is pretty impressive.”

“As impressive as your ability to ruin my exhibits?” she retorts.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I can't help but laugh at that one. She got me there. I do have a pretty solid track record of messing up her perfectly organized world. But watching her get all fired up about it? That might be my favorite part of coming in here every day because when she's defending something she cares about, she lights up with that knee-buckling smile of hers.

Reese is already talking about historical facts again, but I can't concentrate on our study session anymore. All I can think about is tomorrow.

Chapter Five

Reese

I can't believe I let Sawyer talk me into going hiking with him. This is nothing but a terrible idea. First, it's, well, Sawyer. The guy who always pushes my buttons, although he's been making an effort to rein it in lately. And second, I'm afraid of heights. It's why I hardly ever go hiking. Sure, I enjoy the occasional walk around town or a leisurely stroll around Lake Hartley, but none of that involves elevation and narrow trails that snake up the mountain beside a cliff. One wrong step and you're plummeting to your death. I honestly can't fathom what's so fun about that.

Still, here I am, standing outside the Visitor Center at eight in the morning, wearing the most outdoorsy clothes I could find in my closet, which isn't saying much. My black leggings and cotton sweater hardly scream 'adventure ready,' but they'll have to do.

A family of tourists approaches the entrance of the Visitor Center, where I'm waiting

for Sawyer.

I give them an apologetic smile. “Sorry, we’re closed on Sundays. We’ll be open again tomorrow morning.”

The dad checks his watch. “Oh, that’s too bad. We were hoping to get some trail maps.”

“There’s a selection of basic maps on the covered porch around the side. It’s one dollar for a map. Just drop your money in the old vending machine and press the big green button. It’s not fancy, but it still spits out maps like clockwork. Most days, anyway,” I tell them, pointing toward the building. “And if you have any specific questions about the area, I’d be happy to—”

“Reese?”

I turn at the sound of Sawyer’s voice and nearly forget what I was saying. He’s walking toward us in well-worn hiking boots, dark pants that fit him perfectly, and a forest-green flannel shirt rolled up his strong forearms. His hair is slightly tousled from the morning breeze, and a backpack is slung over one shoulder like he was born carrying one.

“Hi,” I manage to say while trying not to gawk.

Oh, my goodness. This is not fair. I look like a total noob, sporting the same tattered backpack I used in high school, while he looks like he stepped straight out of a commercial for some impressive outdoor brand.

I tear my eyes away from him and focus my attention on the family in front of me. “Um,” I say, trying to remember how words work. “Sorry, what was your question again?”

The tourist dad is grinning now, clearly picking up on the reason for my sudden distraction. “I think we’ve got what we need. Thanks anyway.”

As they head toward the map dispenser, Sawyer stops in front of me with his signature confident smile. “Ready for an adventure?”

I’m not ready for how good he looks, but I manage to at least nod. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Of course, it would probably help if I told him about my fear of heights, but I don’t want him to think I’m lame. Or worse, look at me with pity. Last night, I looked up the tram cables he told me about and realized that two hiking trails lead up to them. I assumed one would be easy and the other more difficult, but unfortunately, both looked equally terrifying. So, unless I come clean and tell him I’m too scared to do this, I’ll be staring my fears dead in the eye in a couple of hours.

I swallow hard. Why did I agree to this again?

“Ready to try on some hiking boots?” Sawyer asks, interrupting my nightmare visions of me plummeting to my death before lunch.

“Sure,” I squeak.

We walk toward Maple’s Outfitters, which isn’t far from the Visitor Center.

“Do you have any historical facts to share about hiking boots?” Sawyer asks.

I’m not sure if he’s mocking me or if he’s genuinely interested in the history of hiking boots. The former seems more likely, so I roll my eyes at him. “Not everything I do has to involve history. It’s not like I walk around reciting facts about random stuff.”

Or do I? Internally, sure, but I always do my best to keep it inside. I had my fair share of snorts and laughs when I was younger, and being a history nerd wasn't exactly considered cool.

"Actually," Sawyer says, sounding genuine, "I was hoping you would. I like learning stuff from you."

Heat creeps up my neck. His genuine tone makes my stomach flip-flop. "Oh. Well..." I clear my throat, scrambling for something to say that won't make me sound like the complete nerd I am. "Hiking boots as we know them didn't exist until the 1930s. Before that, people wore regular work boots or even dress shoes on mountain trails."

"Seriously?" He holds the door to Maple's open for me, and I catch a whiff of his cologne as I pass by. Cedar and something earthy that makes me want to lean closer and take a deep, long breath in. I don't, of course. I'm not completely insane.

"Seriously. There are photographs of people climbing Mount Washington in New Hampshire wearing leather dress shoes and long skirts. The Vibram sole, the rubber tread that grips rock, wasn't invented until 1937."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“So basically, people were hiking mountains in what amounted to fancy loafers?”

I nod. “Pretty much. Which explains why so many early mountaineering expeditions ended badly.”

“Too bad social media wasn’t a thing back then. They’d all look super put-together in their pictures. Think of all the social clout and admiration they would’ve gotten.” He pauses and grins. “Instead of becoming internet famous, most of them died.”

I laugh, actually laugh, at his joke. Huh. This is new. My usual reaction to his jokes is a roll of my eyes.

“I never knew history could be this fun,” he says, looking at me with an expression that’s hard to read. Like he finds my weird little history-obsessed brain attractive somehow, which is impossible. Guys like Sawyer don’t usually go for girls who get excited about stuff that happened long ago. Those outdoorsy, confident, and absurdly good-looking types aren’t exactly known to crush on a geek like me.

I snort at my thoughts. Crush on? Get a grip, Reese. This has nothing to do with feelings.

Before I can get sucked into a vortex of confusion about where that idea of having a crush came from, a woman with purple-streaked hair approaches us.

“Hi, guys. Looking for something specific?”

“A pair of rental boots for her,” Sawyer says, gesturing to me. “Something sturdy but

comfortable for a moderate hike.”

The word “moderate” makes my stomach clench. I still haven’t told him about my height situation, and with every passing minute, it’s getting harder to bring it up. How do you casually mention to an experienced hiking guide slash mountainman that the thought of being more than ten feet off the ground makes you want to curl up in a ball and hide?

“What size?” the woman asks me.

“Seven and a half,” I manage.

As she disappears into the back room, Sawyer leans against the counter, scrutinizing me. “You seem nervous.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah. You keep fidgeting with your hair.” He reaches out and gently tugs a strand behind my ear, the one I was twisting around my finger. The brief contact sends electricity shooting down my arm. “What’s going on, Reese?”

This is it. My chance to come clean. To tell him that I’m probably going to embarrass myself and possibly cry in about two hours. Instead, I hear myself saying, “I’m not sure if this hike is a good idea. I don’t want to slow you down. You’re experienced, and I’m more of an indoor person.”

It’s not entirely a lie, but it’s not the whole truth either.

“Hey.” His voice is gentler now, and when I look up, his eyes are full of understanding. Gah. Who knew Sawyer had this soft side to him? “This isn’t a race. We’re going at whatever pace feels good for you, okay? And if you want to turn back

at any point, we'll turn back. No questions asked."

His kindness almost undoes me. Here I am, keeping this huge secret from him, and he's being nothing but patient and considerate. I should tell him. I should—

"Here we go!" The woman returns with three boxes of boots. "Let's start with these and see how they feel. They're all a size up from your usual one because your feet tend to sweat and expand while hiking."

I scrunch my nose. Does she really need to talk about my sweaty, expanding feet in front of Sawyer?

The woman seems oblivious to my mortification and keeps going. "You'll also want to wear merino wool socks to prevent blisters. Cotton holds moisture, which creates friction, and friction leads to hot spots that can become quite painful."

Great. Now we're discussing my potential foot blisters. I glance at Sawyer, who's trying very hard not to smile.

"And make sure you wiggle your toes when you try these on," the woman continues, still not noticing my growing embarrassment. "You want to ensure there's enough room for natural foot movement and circulation. Nothing worse than losing a toenail on the trail."

Seriously? Losing a toenail? I think I might die right here in Maple's Outfitters. Death by hiking boot consultation.

"Anyway, call me if you have any further questions or if you need any additional gear. We also sell handy female-centered products, like these plastic inventions that enable you to pee standing or a special antibacterial cloth to wipe your—"

“That’s okay,” I cut her short before she can recommend who knows what else.
“We’re good for now.”

“She’s very thorough,” Sawyer says quietly as we sit on a bench.

I can hear the barely contained laughter in his voice. “You don’t say,” I mutter, slipping on the first boot. “This is exactly how I imagined spending my morning. Discussing my expanding appendages with strangers.”

“Hey, at least she didn’t mention bunions,” he whispers.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I shoot him a look. “Don’t give her any ideas.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just smiles and stares at me while I fumble with my shoelaces. I try not to notice, but I hate it, because he looks at me like my embarrassment is endearing. It’s anything but. I hope the sales lady doesn’t try to talk to me about anything other than these boots because, at this rate, Sawyer will know everything about my bodily functions before we even hit the trail.

Chapter Six

Sawyer

Reese has been quiet since we started our hike, which is worrying. She usually has a clever comeback to my silly jokes, and her eyes work overtime when I’m near because of all the rolling they need to do. So far, nothing—no words, no eyerolls, no nothing.

“You doing okay, Reese? No signs of expanding feet yet?” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

Finally, she gives me an eyeroll so dramatic that I’m surprised she doesn’t get dizzy.

“There it is,” I say, grinning. “I was starting to worry you’d been replaced by a robot or something. A very quiet, non-sarcastic robot.”

“I’m fine,” she says, but her voice sounds tight. “Just focusing on not tripping over roots.”

I glance down at the relatively smooth trail we're on. There aren't many roots to speak of, but I don't call her out on it. Something's bothering her, and it's not the terrain.

"You know, if you need to take a break or slow down, just say the word," I offer. "This isn't a race. We can have a snack and rest for a few minutes."

She shoots me a look that's half grateful, half frustrated. "I said I'm fine, Sawyer."

Right. The classic I'm fine, meaning she's not fine. I've heard that tone from enough people to know that whatever's bugging her is bigger than being out of shape or inexperienced. Something's bothering her, but she doesn't want to tell me what. I've guided enough nervous hikers to recognize the signs. The way she keeps glancing up at the trail ahead instead of enjoying the scenery around us. The slight tension in her shoulders. The too-careful way she places each step, like she's bracing for something.

"Reese." I stop walking. "What are you afraid of?"

She purses her lips. For a second, I think she might tell me. But then she shakes her head and starts moving again. "I'm not afraid of anything. I just don't want to make a fool of myself in front of the guy who does this for a living."

Nice try, but that's not it. I've seen plenty of people worried about keeping up or looking inexperienced. This is different. This is the kind of fear that runs deeper than embarrassment. I need to know what fear we're dealing with. After all, it's my job to keep us safe, and I can't do that if I don't have all the details.

"How high up are we going today?" she asks after another half mile.

"Okay, I get it," I say. "You're afraid of heights."

Her face goes red, confirming my guess. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Actually, it kind of is a big deal if we’re hiking up to those tram cables you wanted to see.”

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘wanted.’ You kind of pushed me into it, remember?”

I hold up my hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, you got me. I may have been a little too enthusiastic about the whole ‘let’s go see some old cables’ thing. I honestly didn’t realize you were terrified and too nice to tell the pushy mountain man to shove his hiking suggestions where the sun don’t shine.”

That gets me the tiniest hint of a smile, which I’m counting as a victory.

“So here’s a crazy idea,” I say. “What if we don’t go up to the cables? I know, I know, revolutionary concept. But there are plenty of other things to see that don’t involve you clinging to rocks while hyperventilating.”

Her shoulders relax a fraction. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Reese, I’m a hiking guide. My job is to make sure people have a good time, not to traumatize them with their worst fears. Besides.” I grin. “I’ve seen those cables a million times. Next time I go up there, I’ll snap some pictures for you. Maybe I can even get them featured in Historical Gems Quarterly.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize I might’ve pushed my joke too far, because her expression goes from relieved to angry.

“Right,” she says, her voice flat. “Historical Gems Quarterly. Because that worked out so well the last time.”

The temperature between us drops about twenty degrees. She starts walking again, faster this time, and I can practically see her walls going back up in real time.

“Reese, I didn’t mean—”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“It’s fine,” she cuts me off, not looking back. “Just like everything else is fine.”

But it’s clearly not fine. I’ve managed to go from making her feel better about the height thing to reminding her of exactly why she probably shouldn’t trust me in the first place. The woman who was starting to relax around me is now marching up the trail like she’s trying to get as far away from me as possible.

Great job, Sawyer. Really smooth.

I up my pace and catch up with her. “Um, Reese, we shouldn’t keep going on this trail if you want to avoid steep drop-offs.”

She stops dead in her tracks and stares at the trail ahead that’s climbing toward some seriously intimidating terrain. A frown appears on her face, and then she huffs. She pulls on the shoulder straps of her backpack so hard I’m surprised they don’t snap, then spins on her heel with her head held high and marches right back past me like I’m invisible.

The silence stretches between us as we retrace our steps, and I can practically feel the anger radiating off her until she finally breaks and speaks.

“Why are you always so annoying?” she asks, not looking at me.

The question catches me off guard. “I... What?”

“You heard me. Why do you have to be so incredibly, persistently annoying, Sawyer?”

“Natural talent?” I offer weakly. “Some people are born artists, some are born athletes. I was apparently born to put my foot in my mouth at the worst possible moments.”

She doesn’t laugh, so I try again.

“Look, I’m not trying to be annoying. Okay, maybe sometimes I am, but not about the magazine thing. That was just me being an idiot.”

That gets the hint of a smile out of her. “Can’t argue with that. You’re amazingly good at being an idiot.”

Ouch. I deserved that.

“You know, there’s this other trail not far from here. It’s completely flat, follows an old railroad bed. Great views of the valley, no heights involved,” I suggest.

She glances at me, and I’m certain she’ll say yes.

“Maybe another time,” she says instead, adjusting her backpack straps again. “I think I’ve had enough adventure for one day.”

The disappointment hits me harder than it should. We’ve barely been hiking for an hour, and I was looking forward to spending the whole day with her.

“Right,” I say, trying to keep my voice neutral. “Sure. Another time.”

But as we walk back toward the Visitor Center in silence, I can’t shake the feeling that ‘another time’ might not come at all. Not after I managed to remind her of the one thing she probably wishes she could forget about me.

I sigh. Nice going, Sawyer. You really know how to show a girl a good time.

Ugh. Reese is absolutely right. I'm a first-class idiot. At least that's one thing we agree on. Always look at the bright side, right?

Chapter Seven

Reese

It's been three days since my failed hiking trip with Sawyer. Three days with no study sessions, which means three days of not seeing him at all.

Every time the door of the Visitor Center opens, I perk up, hoping it's him, but it never is. At this point, I almost wish he'd burst in here with his muddy boots and break something so I'd have an excuse to talk to him.

It's weird, but I think I miss him. That can't be right, though. I don't like him.

Do I?

The door chimes, and I practically leap out of my chair. But instead of Sawyer, it's a middle-aged man wearing a fanny pack and knee-high white socks pulled up to his shins.

"Excuse me, miss," he says, approaching my desk with the confidence of someone who's about to ask the world's most ridiculous question. "I'm looking for the Civil War battlefield."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I blink at him. “Sir, this is Montana. The Civil War didn’t make it out here.”

“Are you sure?” He pulls out a crumpled piece of paper. “My wife printed this from the internet. It says there’s a Civil War site near here.”

I lean forward to look at his “research.” It’s a Wikipedia page about the Battle of Gettysburg, which is in Pennsylvania. About two thousand miles east of here.

“That’s in Pennsylvania. You’re in Montana,” I explain.

“Pennsylvania, Montana—same thing, right?”

“Not exactly.”

He frowns. “Are you sure? It’s all up north.”

I stare at him. “Sir, they’re different states.”

“Well, how far is it to drive there?”

“About thirty hours, give or take.”

He considers this seriously. “And you’re absolutely certain there are no Civil War battles around here? Not even small ones?”

“I’m afraid not. Montana Territory was only established in 1864, near the very end of the Civil War. We had no military involvement in it.”

“Huh.” He looks genuinely disappointed. “Well, what do you have then?”

I perk up at his question. Local history, yay! Where do I even start?

“We have Native American history, frontier settlements, mining...” I pause, and before I can stop myself, I launch into it. “We have some fascinating gold rush history. There was a major discovery at Alder Gulch in 1863, and Virginia City became one of the richest mining camps in the territory. Thousands of prospectors flooded in from California and the East, and—”

My voice catches. Sawyer. I can practically hear his voice from our tutoring sessions, the way he leaned back in his chair and said, “Tell me about those Montana gold strikes, Teach,” with his infuriating grin. How he’d listen when I got excited about how different our boom was from California’s forty-niners—how ours happened later, was more brutal, more isolated.

The tourist is staring at me expectantly, but I suddenly can’t remember what I was saying.

“Um.” I clear my throat. “There are some good books over there about local mining history if you’re interested.”

The man brightens. “Perfect! My wife loves rocks.”

Minerals, I want to correct, but I nod weakly and point him toward the book section, trying to ignore the growing ache in my chest.

The man wanders off toward the shelves, and I slump back in my chair, watching him squint at book spines through his reading glasses. My phone sits on the desk beside me, and before I can second-guess myself, I pick it up to send Sawyer a message. Maybe I overreacted by cancelling our hiking day after his joke about featuring his

pictures in my favorite magazine. Sure, I was offended and hurt, but he looked genuinely sorry about the whole thing. And I do miss our study sessions. If we don't schedule another one soon, he might fail. I don't dislike him enough to wish that upon him.

You better get in here after hours to study. Your ranger exam is in two weeks, and we still haven't covered wildlife management protocols. Don't you dare fail after all the work I've put into teaching you about history!

I hit send, then immediately feel ridiculous. I sound like an old teacher with gray hair reprimanding one of her students.

I stare at the screen, waiting for the familiar double-check marks that mean the message has been delivered. One tick appears and stays there. Just one.

My stomach does a little flip. One tick means the message hasn't been delivered to his phone. He's probably out on the trails with a group of tourists, somewhere up in the mountains where cell service cuts out completely. It's his job after all.

Yes. He's out hiking. For sure. Either that, or he's blocked my number. My stomach turns at the thought.

I set the phone down and try to focus on my job, but my eyes keep drifting to that single, stubborn tick. What does it mean?

The fanny-pack tourist approaches my desk again, clutching a book about Montana ghost towns.

"This one looks perfect," he says cheerfully. "My wife's going to love reading about all these abandoned places."

I smile at him, knowing all too well how fun it is to be passionate about history.
“That’s a good choice. There’s a whole chapter on Virginia City.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

He pays, and then I'm alone again, wallowing in my... What exactly? Sadness?

I slump in my chair. Fine, I'll admit it. I'm sad, and I miss Sawyer. Even though he can be an idiot, he also has that special knack of making me laugh.

I glance at my phone again. The message still isn't delivered. What if he never texts back? What if he blocked me because I was unreasonable? Or what if a bear ate him, and I'm sitting here stewing over a dead man who just wanted to pass his ranger exam?

I groan and drop my forehead onto the counter. I don't have much time to wallow, though, because today seems to be a busy hiking day. Slews of tourists head in and out of the Visitor Center, buying maps, bear-shaped souvenirs, and desperately asking for directions to the nearest bathroom.

An hour before closing time, things finally slow down. I'm in the middle of restocking the map rack when the door chimes again.

"Hey, is this where I can find all those amazing historical exhibits, or am I in the wrong room?"

I jerk upright so fast I nearly bump my head on the map rack.

Sawyer is standing in the doorway. His hair is damp, probably from hiking, and his flannel shirt is tied around his waist. My gaze drops to the paper bag in his hands.

"I come bearing gifts and sincere groveling."

He sets the bag on the counter and opens it to reveal two cinnamon rolls from Summit Sweets.

“I’m impressed, Sawyer.”

“I like my limbs intact,” he says with a shrug. “And I figured you might throw the bear statue at me if I didn’t show up with food.”

I bite back a smile as I take one and sink my teeth into the sugary swirl of happiness. It’s still warm. “You’re lucky this is my weakness.”

“I know,” he says, leaning on the counter across from me, watching me with an annoyingly sincere look. “I’m sorry about the other day, Reese. I never should’ve joked about the whole magazine thing. I still feel bad for ruining your chance to feature in *Historic Gems Quarterly*. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

He stares at me with puppy eyes. Who can resist that? Not me, that’s for sure.

“Maybe. But first, explain why you’ve been avoiding my texts.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and shows me a flickering, waterlogged mess. “If you’ve been texting me, I haven’t received any of them. I was leading a group up Mount Hartley and dropped my phone in a beaver pond.”

I let out a small laugh. “A beaver pond?”

“What can I say? Never a dull moment when you’re a hiking guide.” He taps his fingers against the countertop. Then, he glances at me, like he’s about to ask me something he’s afraid to.

“So, uh.” He clears his throat. “Do you still want to... Would you still be up for

tutoring me? I mean, assuming I haven't totally burned that bridge. Please?"

"I guess. At least, that's what I thought. I texted you about it, but you ignored me. Then, I started planning your funeral."

He frowns. "My funeral?"

I nod. "Closed casket, obviously. I thought you got mauled by a bear. No one wants to see the result of something grueling as that."

He raises an eyebrow and gestures to himself. "You were going to deny people a final glimpse of all this?"

"Oh, please. Don't kid yourself," I huff.

He laughs, then locks eyes with me, causing my stomach to do that annoying fluttering thing it sometimes does when he looks at me. "So, what do you say about penciling in a tutoring session, Reese?"

"Tomorrow after work," I mutter.

"Thank you. I mean it. And I also want to ask you something else."

I frown. "Go on."

"I owe you a real hike. One without cliffs. Or emotional landmines. Just fresh air and something easy. A peace offering. Tomorrow morning. You in?"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I eye him for a long beat. Then sigh. “Fine, but if you forget the cinnamon rolls, I’m turning back at the trailhead.”

He grins. “Deal.”

“You’re in luck. The Visitor Center doesn’t open until ten on Thursdays. But I do need to be back by then. Can’t miss work for... well, you.”

“Done. I live to please, Reese.” He raps his knuckles on the counter. “Anyway, I’ve got to get going. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Prepare to get your mind blown.”

With those words, he heads to the door. As it swings shut behind him, I shake my head and try to hide my smile. Because somehow, against all odds and basic logic, I’m looking forward to spending the evening with him.

Which can only mean one thing: I’ve officially and completely lost my mind.

Chapter Eight

Reese

“This is more like it,” I say, adjusting my backpack straps as we approach the trailhead of The Lakeside Loop.

The trail stretches ahead of us with not a cliff in sight. There’s a reason I always suggest this hike to tourists asking about beginner trails. I’m not even wearing hiking boots this time. Maple Outfitters isn’t open at this time of day, and I don’t think I

need them for this flat trail. Besides, I didn't need another conversation involving blisters and expanding feet.

Sawyer grins, shouldering his pack with practiced ease. "No death-defying ledges this time. Scout's honor."

"Were you a Scout?"

He nods, pride shining in his eyes. "Eagle Scout, thank you very much. I can tie seventeen different knots and identify edible plants."

"Show-off."

The morning air is crisp but not cold, with that perfect late spring feel that makes you want to take deep breaths just because you can. I pull out my phone and snap a photo of the trailhead sign, surprising myself with the impulse to get this on camera.

"Getting into the spirit already?" Sawyer asks, something warm in his voice that makes my stomach flutter.

"Maybe," I admit, tucking the phone back into my pocket.

The trail is everything he promised. A gentle dirt path that winds through pine trees toward the lake. No steep inclines, no narrow ridges, just peaceful forest that gradually opens up to reveal glimpses of blue water through the branches.

For the first time ever, I'm not calculating escape routes or wondering how far the nearest hospital is. I'm enjoying this.

"Wow," I breathe when we emerge at the lake's edge.

It's nothing short of stunning. A perfect oval of dark blue water surrounded by trees, with the mountains reflected on the surface like something out of a postcard.

Sawyer stops beside me, close enough that I can smell his soap. "Worth the early wake-up time?"

"Definitely." I pull out my phone again and take pictures, trying to capture the way the light hits the water and the perfect reflection of the pine trees.

"You're getting into this photography thing," he observes.

"I'm documenting evidence that I went hiking. Voluntarily. Twice. With you."

He laughs, and the sound echoes across the water. We walk along the shoreline, and I find myself looking around instead of staring at my feet, watching for roots and rocks. There are wildflowers I never would have noticed, like tiny purple ones clustered near fallen logs and bright yellow ones that look like miniature sunflowers.

"Those are lupines," Sawyer says, noticing my attention. "And those yellow ones are arrow leaf balsamroot."

"You really do know your plants."

He shrugs. "You pick things up when you spend half your life outdoors."

"So I don't have to teach you about botany?"

“Maybe. I don’t mind.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He runs a hand through his hair and looks suddenly nervous. “I mean, you’re an excellent teacher. It can’t hurt to get a refresher, that’s all.”

“Oh, okay.”

We keep walking in silence, and about twenty minutes later, we come to a fallen log that stretches across a narrow inlet. The water isn’t deep, but it’s wider than I can comfortably step across.

“I can find another way around,” I say, but Sawyer’s already moving.

“Here,” he says, stepping onto the log first and turning back to offer me his hand. “It’s sturdy. I’ll help you across.”

I hesitate for a second, then take his hand. The contact sends electricity straight up my arm. His palm is warm, and his fingers are strong as they wrap around mine. I try to focus on stepping carefully onto the log, but all I can think about is how his thumb brushes across my knuckles, steadying me.

“Easy,” he says softly, and his voice does things to my insides that have nothing to do with balance.

I make it across without falling into the water, but he doesn’t let go of my hand right

away. We stand on the other side for a moment, his fingers still laced with mine, and I swear I can feel my pulse everywhere he's touching me.

"Thanks," I manage, my voice slightly breathless.

"Anytime," he says, and when he finally releases my hand, I immediately miss the warmth.

We continue around the lake, and I find myself walking a little closer to him than before, close enough that our arms brush occasionally when the trail narrows. Each accidental contact makes my skin tingle.

"Oh, my goodness," I say suddenly, stopping in my tracks. "Look at that."

Ahead of us, tucked back in the trees, are the ruins of an old log cabin. Most of the roof has caved in, and moss grows on the remaining walls, but I can still see the stone foundation and the remains of what must have been a chimney.

"Someone lived here," I breathe, already moving toward it. "This is incredible."

Sawyer follows me off the main trail, ducking under low branches. "Any idea how old it might be?"

I examine the construction, the way the logs are notched, and the style of the stonework. "Based on the building techniques, I'd guess 1890s, maybe early 1900s. Probably built by one of the homesteaders or someone who ran a fishing camp."

"A fishing camp?"

"This lake would have been perfect for it. Remote enough to feel like wilderness, but accessible. Someone could have guided fishing trips, maybe had a few cabins." I run

my hand along one of the remaining wall logs, imagining the lives that were lived here. “I bet they served fresh trout and told stories around a campfire.”

“You should write a book about this stuff,” Sawyer says. “The way you talk about history... You make it come alive.”

I glance at him, surprised by the sincerity in his voice. “Most people think it’s boring.”

“Most people are idiots.”

That makes me smile. “Present company excluded?”

“I’m occasionally an idiot, but not about this. You have a gift, Reese. You make me care about things I never thought about before.”

Something in his tone makes my chest tight in the best possible way. I turn back to the cabin ruins, mostly to hide the fact that I’m probably blushing.

“Should we eat breakfast here?” he asks. “Seems like the perfect spot for a picnic.”

“The ghost of the cabin owner might join us.”

He grins. “Let him. I brought enough food for three.”

We settle on a flat section of the old foundation, and Sawyer spreads out a blanket. He unpacks sandwiches, fruit, and—as promised—cinnamon rolls.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Did Amelia open up this early for you?” I ask in surprise.

“No, I bought them last night before she closed up shop. I had to wrestle a couple of tourists for them, though. They wanted the last cinnamon rolls. I wanted them too. Let’s say it was touch and go for a while, but I won.”

I laugh and realize how easy this feels. No studying, no pressure, no weird tension. Just us, talking and joking like we’ve been friends forever.

Which, honestly, is great, but also the weirdest thing ever. I never thought I’d see the day when we’d become friends.

A gentle breeze picks up, rustling the pine needles above us and sending ripples across the lake. Clouds drift across the sky, creating patterns of light and shadow on the water.

“This is beautiful,” I say without thinking.

“Yeah?” Sawyer sounds pleased. “No regrets about having to go out the door?”

“None at all. I’m even tolerating your company,” I say with a wink.

I take a bite of cinnamon roll and close my eyes, savoring it. When I open them, Sawyer is watching me with an expression I can’t quite read.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing. You just... You look happy. Relaxed.”

“I am. This is wonderful.”

“I’m glad.”

The clouds thicken slightly, casting the ruins in softer light. I pull out my phone again to capture the way the shadows fall across the old stone chimney.

“Can I get one of you by the cabin?” I ask impulsively.

Sawyer looks surprised but moves over to lean against the remaining wall. He looks completely natural there, like he belongs in this wild, historic place.

I snap a few photos, then hesitate. “Could you... Um, would you take one of me?”

“Of course.”

He takes my phone, and I suddenly feel extremely self-conscious as I move to where he was standing. But when he says, “Perfect,” and I hear the camera click, I realize I’m smiling. A real smile, not the polite one I use for work.

“Now both of us,” I say, surprising myself again.

Sawyer raises his eyebrows. “You want a selfie? With me?”

“Don’t let it go to your head. It’s just proof we were here together. You know, for when something happens to me and they need to find the culprit.”

He puts a hand on his heart, feigning shock. “You think I brought you here to kill you?”

“Well, you did bring me to an isolated location. It’s a classic set-up.”

“Wow, you figured out my master plan. Lure the cute historian to a remote lake with pastries, then get rid of her.”

Cute. The word hits me like a warm wave, and I resist the urge to touch my hair or check if I have cinnamon roll crumbs on my face. When was the last time someone called me cute? And meant it?

Sawyer comes over and stands beside me, holding the phone out at arm’s length. I can feel the warmth of his body along my side, and smell that combination of soap and pine that’s becoming familiar.

“Say ‘ghost cabin,’” he says.

“That’s terrible.”

“Say it anyway.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Ghost cabin,” I laugh, and the camera clicks.

He shows me the photo. We both look genuinely happy, and something about seeing us together like that —smiling and comfortable, as if we belong together —makes my heart skip a beat.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think I was falling for him. The thought should terrify me. Instead, looking at this photo of us together, it feels right.

“I think we should head back if you don’t want to miss work,” he says, sounding disappointed.

We pack up slowly, neither of us eager to leave this peaceful spot. As we head back to the main trail, the clouds have thickened enough to cast everything in a soft, golden light.

The walk back feels different than the hike out. We walk closer together, and when Sawyer occasionally touches my shoulder to point out a bird or an interesting tree, I don’t tense up. Instead, each gentle contact sends a warmth through my body, and I find myself hoping he’ll do it again.

“Thank you,” I say as we reach the trailhead again. “This was exactly what I needed.” I look back toward the lake, already missing the peace of it. “I might do this again.”

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. I can be outdoorsy too.”

“I never doubted it for a second,” he says. “Well, it was a pleasure. I’ll see you tonight for our study session.”

“I can’t wait.”

The words slip out before I can stop them, and heat floods my cheeks.

Sawyer gives me the sweetest, softest smile I’ve ever seen on him. “Me too, Reese. Me too.”

Chapter Nine

Sawyer

I’m relieved. Turns out I can be redeemed after all. Reese doesn’t hate me for acting like an idiot the other day. In fact, she’s still on board to tutor me. Which is great because my ranger exam is coming up soon, and I’m falling behind.

I swing by the Hartley Peak Adventures base to grab trail maps for the sunrise group hike I’m leading tomorrow. I also need to sneak in a quick shower. Going home would eat up too much time, and I’d rather not show up late to our tutoring session, especially not after how amazing our hike was this morning. That’s the kind of magic I don’t want to ruin.

The place is quiet except for the faint hum of a kettle and the smell of damp socks and overworked gear. I barely get three steps inside before I hear Knox’s voice, one of my colleagues slash hiking guides.

“Shower’s broken again,” Knox calls out from the breakroom without even looking up. “Unless you enjoy water pressure like a leaky faucet and temperatures ranging from glacial to molten lava.”

I glance down at the dried mud on my calves and the faint sheen of sweat clinging to my neck. Great. Exactly the vibe you want to bring to your tutoring session with the woman you've started to grow fond of.

"I'll risk it," I call back, already heading for the locker room.

Knox pokes his head out, brows raised. "You're voluntarily showering in that thing? You must smell really bad."

"I've got a tutoring session with Reese. Figured I shouldn't show up looking and smelling like this," I say over my shoulder.

"Oh, I get it. You want to look good for your date."

I turn around and laugh like it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. "It's not a date."

"Sure, Sawyer. Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better. All I know is that most guys wouldn't brave third-degree burns to smell good for a history lesson."

I don't answer, just grunt, mostly because he's right. I am braving third-degree burns for a history lesson. Or rather, for the person giving the lesson.

The shower is exactly as miserable as advertised. Part freezing drizzle, part volcanic splash zone, but I manage to get clean and change into a fresh T-shirt and jeans. I even put on socks that match. I catch my reflection in the fogged-up mirror and scrub a hand through my hair, trying to get it to cooperate.

"Not a date," I remind myself. "So stop messing with your hair, man."

Still, I'm out the door mere minutes later, smelling like sandalwood bodywash and

with hair that looks decent for once.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I arrive as the last tourist of the day heads out the front door. Perfect timing. Through the windows, I can see Reese starting her closing routine, switching off display lights and straightening brochure racks.

I step inside and wipe my boots on the welcome mat in a demonstrative way, causing Reese to give me another one of her signature eye rolls.

“Don’t lay it on so thick, Sawyer.”

I hold my hands up. “Hey, I’m just trying to save your floors from whatever I picked up on the trail today.”

“You’re insufferable,” she says with a laugh before flipping the sign on the door to “closed.”

I follow her to our usual study spot. “Thanks for staying late to help me cram.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’re covering wildlife management protocols tonight, and they’re not exactly riveting.” She pulls out a chair, then pauses. “Actually, you know what? Let me grab some of the visual aids from the storage room. Might help if you can see what we’re talking about instead of just reading about it.”

“Visual aids?”

She nods. “Taxidermy specimens, habitat dioramas, that sort of thing. We use them for the school groups,” she explains, already heading toward a door at the back of the Visitor Center that I’ve never paid attention to before. “Come on, you can help me

carry some of this stuff.”

The storage room is bigger than I expected, packed floor to ceiling with boxes, display cases, and what looks like half a forest worth of mounted animals. A black bear stands in one corner, forever frozen mid-growl. Elk antlers hang from hooks on the walls like some kind of hunting lodge fever dream. Even I’m a little intimidated by this eerie collection. I’ve come across my fair share of animals while hiking, but none of them were... dead.

“This is comprehensive,” I say, trying not to make eye contact with a particularly judgmental-looking mountain goat.

“Right? Most people don’t realize how much stuff we keep back here.” Reese is already digging through boxes labeled “Educational Materials.” She turns around. “Can you grab that case of bird specimens? The one on the shelf behind you?”

I turn to reach for it, and that’s when I hear the distinct click of the door shutting. We both freeze.

“Please tell me that door doesn’t automatically lock,” I say.

Reese’s face goes pale. “It shouldn’t.”

She rushes to the door, but no matter how many times she yanks the handle, it doesn’t budge.

“This is your fault!” Reese whirls around, hands on her hips, glaring at me like I personally engineered this disaster. “I told you to grab the bird specimens, not—” She stops mid-sentence, her face going from angry to horrified. “Oh. Oh, no.”

“Oh, no, what?”

“The security system.” She slaps her forehead. “The storage room automatically locks after closing hours. It’s to protect all the expensive equipment and specimens from theft.”

“You mean to tell me that people would want to steal these dead creatures?” I ask, horrified at the idea.

“That’s so not the point now, Sawyer!”

“You’re right. The point is, why you didn’t think to mention the security system trapping people in here before we headed into this room?”

“I forgot! I was focused on getting the visual aids for your studying, and I completely forgot we were past closing time.” She tries the handle again, more frantically this time. “This is a disaster. We’re trapped in here until morning when the cleaning lady comes in.”

“Morning?” My voice cracks a little. “As in, all night?”

“Unless someone comes looking for us, which they won’t because everyone thinks the visitor center is closed and empty. And you, well, sorry to say it so bluntly, but you don’t have anyone waiting for you at home either, do you?”

“No, but I have an early morning hike with a group tomorrow. If I don’t show, Knox will come and save us. Not that that will be necessary. We can call someone right now. Problem solved.”

I reach for my phone, then remember that it’s currently nothing but an expensive paperweight after falling into that beaver pond yesterday.

“Right,” I say slowly. “About that...”

Reese turns from where she's been examining the door. "About what?"

"My phone is still completely dead from its swim in a pond."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

The look she gives me could freeze molten lava. “You’re kidding me. And you don’t have a backup phone or one of those devices you always carry around?”

“You mean a PBL?”

“A what?”

“A personal beacon locator.”

She balls her hands into fists. “I don’t care what it’s called. PB&J. You know what I mean,” she shrieks, her voice two octaves higher than usual.

“I’m not in possession of either of those things.” I hold my hands in the air, afraid she might lunge at me. Or worse, chuck one of those scary-looking dead animals at my head.

“So you’re telling me that not only are we locked in here because I’m an idiot who forgot about the security system, but you also don’t have a functioning phone?” Her voice rises even higher with each word. “What kind of hiking guide doesn’t have a working phone?”

“The kind whose phone committed suicide by drowning,” I mutter, then immediately regret it when her glare intensifies. “What about your phone?”

She pats her pockets, then looks around the storage room with growing panic. “It’s on my desk. Out there.”

We stare at each other in the dim light filtering through a small window near the ceiling.

“Well,” I say finally. “This is awkward. One thing’s for sure, though. You can’t ever accuse me of not bringing adventure with me wherever I go.”

“I’m going to kill you, Sawyer.”

Chapter Ten

Reese

I’m going to murder him.

Not literally, obviously. Though the thought is becoming increasingly appealing as I stand in a storage room full of dead animals, staring at Sawyer like he’s personally responsible for ruining my entire evening. Which, I know, isn’t exactly fair to him. It’s not his fault that I forgot about the security system after closing hours. Although if he weren’t so clumsy, he wouldn’t have dropped his phone into a beaver pond, and we’d be rescued right now.

I sink onto a dusty crate labeled “Gold Rush Display” and drop my head in my hands. This was supposed to be a simple tutoring session. Cover wildlife management protocols, maybe quiz him on territorial mining laws, and go home. You know, to the place where I have a perfectly good bed waiting for me.

Instead, I’m trapped in what feels like a low-budget horror movie set, surrounded by glassy-eyed creatures that seem to be judging my life choices. The mountain goat in the corner looks particularly smug about the whole situation. And that’s not even mentioning the hard concrete floor I’ll be forced to sleep on tonight. Ugh.

“So,” Sawyer says after what feels like an eternity of silence. He’s leaning against a shelf of bird specimens, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. “This is happening.”

I don’t look up. “Congratulations, Sherlock. Your powers of observation are truly remarkable.”

“Hey, I didn’t ask to get locked in here either.”

“No, but you’re the one who—” I stop myself before I can finish that sentence. It wasn’t really his fault. The security system locking us in was my oversight, not his. But I’m too frustrated and embarrassed to admit that right now.

The silence stretches between us again. Somewhere outside, I can hear the faint hum of traffic on Main Street. Regular people, going about their regular evening routines, completely unaware that I’m sitting in a storage room having what might generously be called a mental breakdown.

“You know,” Sawyer says quietly, “I’ve been in worse situations.”

Despite myself, I look up. “Worse than being trapped overnight with a bunch of dead animals?”

“Well, there was that time I got stuck in a tree for six hours because a particularly aggressive moose decided to make camp underneath it.”

I blink at him. “That actually happened?”

“Scout’s honor.” He raises two fingers. “Though I was never actually a Boy Scout, so that probably doesn’t count for much.”

And despite everything, despite being locked in this creepy room, despite my phone

being unreachable, despite the fact that my evening has gone completely off the rails, the corners of my mouth twitch upward. Even in situations as crappy as these, Sawyer still knows how to make me feel better.

“Okay,” I say, standing and brushing dust off my jeans. “If we’re going to be stuck here until morning, we might as well make the best of it.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

Sawyer raises an eyebrow. “Does this mean you’re not going to kill me anymore?”

“Who knows? The night is still young,” I tell him with a shrug. “But first, we need to figure out how to survive the next ten to twelve hours without freezing to death or going insane.”

“How cold does it get in here at night?”

I look around the windowless room, trying to remember if there are any heating vents. “I honestly don’t know. I’ve never spent the night in here before, surprisingly enough.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.” He starts moving boxes around, creating a small clearing near the back wall. “At least we’ve got shelter.”

“Shelter surrounded by dead things staring at us.”

“It helps to think of them as very quiet roommates.”

I sigh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“But I’m growing on you, right?” he asks with a charming grin.

I ignore that question and start looking through the boxes, hoping to find something useful. “Are you hungry? I think I have some granola bars in my desk, but obviously that’s not happening.”

“I’m fine for now. What about you?”

“I could eat.” My stomach chooses that moment to growl loudly, as if to emphasize the point. “I was planning to heat up leftover Pad Thai when I got home.”

“Pad Thai sounds amazing right now.”

“Ha!” I say triumphantly, pulling out what looks like a large rolled-up hide. It’s some kind of animal skin rug, a display piece for one of the historical exhibits. It’s thick and surprisingly soft.

Sawyer lights up at the sight of the hide. “Great find, Reese!”

I shake it out. It’s large enough for both of us, but only barely.

“We are going to share that, right?” Sawyer asks, narrowing his eyes at me when he sees me hesitate.

“I don’t know. That seems awfully intimate.”

“Would you rather I freeze?” He shakes his head. “You know what, don’t answer that.”

“I’ll give you a spot on this rug only when the situation gets dire, okay?”

I don’t want to be rude, but come on. Sharing the thing with Sawyer could lead to... I don’t know. A brush of our fingers or something. I’m not ready for that. I think.

I spread out the soft rug and settle onto it, pulling the edges around myself like a fortress.

“So,” I say, trying to lead the attention away from the fact that I’m hogging the only warm thing in here, “tell me about this moose situation.”

He grins. “You really want to know?”

“We’ve got time.”

“Fair point.” He leans back against the wall. “It was last spring, during a solo hike up near Mount Hartley. I was taking pictures of this waterfall when I heard this crashing sound through the trees. Figured it was just a deer or something, so I kept going. Then, this bull moose comes charging out of the underbrush, scaring me to death. I barely had time to scramble up the nearest tree before he started pacing around underneath it like he was planning to wait me out.”

“How long did he stay?”

“Six hours. I timed it.” Sawyer shakes his head. “I kept thinking he’d get bored and wander off, but this moose had nothing better to do with his day than keep me prisoner. First, I got bored out of my mind. Then, I ate my entire day’s worth of trail mix, took approximately two hundred photos of tree bark, and had a very one-sided conversation with my new moose friend about the weather. I called him Maurice the moose.”

I can’t help but laugh at the mental image. Something about the way he tells the story, with genuine humor instead of trying to make himself sound heroic, makes me see him differently. Most guys would have embellished it, made themselves the hero who outsmarted the dangerous wildlife. But Sawyer makes it funny.

“What about you?” he asks. “Any wildlife encounters that didn’t end with you safely behind a desk?”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Not really. I’m more of an indoor person, like you already know after the hike I cut short the other day.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what I meant.” He shifts, leaning forward slightly. “I mean, what brought you here? To a small town’s visitor center. You know everything there is to know about local history. You could probably teach at a university somewhere if you wanted.”

The question catches me off guard. It’s not that I haven’t thought about it. I think about it constantly. But nobody’s ever asked me directly why I’m here instead of somewhere else, doing something that probably makes more sense for someone with my background.

“It’s complicated,” I say with a shrug, like it doesn’t matter.

“We’ve got time,” he echoes my earlier words back to me.

I look at him standing in the dim light, surrounded by taxidermy animals and cardboard boxes, waiting for me to answer. And for some reason, maybe because we’re stuck here together or because I’m tired of keeping everything to myself, I find myself wanting to open up and be honest with him.

Chapter Eleven

Sawyer

I watch her face change, like she’s deciding whether to trust me with something

important.

“I was supposed to be teaching,” she says. “That was the plan, anyway. Get my master’s in history, find a position at a good school, spend my days talking about the things I care about.”

“So, what happened?”

She laughs. “Reality, mostly. I did my student teaching semester and realized that half the kids couldn’t care less about history, and the other half were only there because it was required. Trying to get eighth-graders excited about territorial mining laws when they’re more interested in their phones and finding a boyfriend or girlfriend...” She shakes her head. “It was exhausting.”

“So you gave up on teaching?”

“I gave up on fighting kids who didn’t want to learn. At least here, when someone asks me about the Gold Rush, they want to know the answer. Sure, some of them are a little eccentric and weird, but they’re also genuinely curious. That makes all the difference.”

“So you chose tourists over teenagers?”

“At least tourists tip,” she says with a smile.

I laugh. “Yeah, that’s a bonus. And they’re the kind of audience that wants to be here and learn, right?”

“Exactly. Imagine heading up a mountain with a group of disgruntled people who hate hiking. I’m sure you wouldn’t find it enjoyable.”

I pull a face. “Yeah, that sounds horrible.”

“Right? Plus, in here, I get to do research for the exhibits, write educational materials, work with local historical societies. It’s not university-level research, but it’s still meaningful work.” She pauses. “Most days, anyway.”

“What about the other days?”

“The other days, I wonder if I took the easy way out. If I should have stuck it out, found a different school, tried harder. My parents certainly think so.”

“What do they think you should be doing?”

“Teach at some prestigious prep school, publish papers, make a name for myself in academic circles. They don’t exactly understand why I prefer to explain local history to tourists.”

“Do you regret your choice?”

She bites her bottom lip. “Some days. But then someone like you comes in, actually interested in what I have to say, and I remember why I love what I do.” She looks up at me. “Even if you’re a terrible student and you’re only doing your best because you need to pass your ranger exam.”

“Hey, I’m getting better at taking notes every day.”

“Marginally,” she jokes.

“At least you got a guy like me interested in history. That’s saying something. Your work matters, Reese. What you do matters, no matter what your parents or anyone else thinks about it.”

“You think flattery will get you an A-plus on my test exams, huh?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

I raise an eyebrow. “Test exams? That’s the first thing I’ve heard about that.”

She laughs, and the sound does something to my chest that I’ve never felt before.

“Anyway, enough about me,” she says, oblivious to what she just did to me. “What about you? Why aren’t you a ranger already? You know more about these mountains than most people who’ve lived here their whole lives.”

I lean back against the metal shelving, feeling the cold seep through my shirt. “Being a guide is good work. Honest work. But...” I trail off, unsure how to explain it without sounding ungrateful for what I have.

“But?”

“When I first started guiding, I thought it would be temporary. Something to pay the bills while I figured out my next move.” I run a hand through my hair. “That was eight years ago. Don’t get me wrong, I love taking people up the mountain and showing them places they’ve never seen before. But lately, I’ve been wanting more.”

“More?”

“When I take groups hiking, I see the damage. Illegal campsites, trash left behind, people feeding wildlife even after I tell them not to. I watch developers eyeing parcels near the park boundaries, and I know what that means for migration patterns. A few weeks ago, I found a bear cub with a plastic container stuck on its head. It got me thinking. As a guide, I can educate maybe a dozen people at a time about Leave No Trace principles. As a ranger, I couldn’t force them. I could also work on habitat

restoration and wildlife management.”

She taps her finger to her chin. “So you want to go from telling people not to litter to arresting them for it.”

“Don’t tempt me. I can’t arrest them, but I’ve been fantasizing about the look on certain people’s faces when I can write them citations.”

“So what’s the problem? You’re already studying for your ranger exam. If you pass, you get to hand out fines left and right.”

I shrug. “My dad thinks I’m crazy. He says I have a good thing going and doesn’t understand why I would mess with that. Truth is, I’ve been playing it safe for far too long.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to stop waiting for the perfect moment to chase what you want. Just go for it, Sawyer. You’re already halfway there. You’ve taken the first step by deciding to take the ranger exam. You’re the kind of guy who knows what he wants and goes for it. That’s something your dad should be proud about.”

I grin. “What I desperately want right now is to be warm. Are you sure you can’t share that rug with me?”

“You know, technically, you’re still my student. Isn’t there some kind of rule against sharing buffalo hide rugs with students?”

I frown at her. “I think that only applies in classrooms. Storage rooms are a gray area.”

She hesitates, but I think I’ve finally convinced her to share the rug with me, because her shoulders slump.

“Okay, but I have conditions. No hogging the fur, no complaining about my cold feet, and if you snore, you’re back on the floor,” she says.

“Deal,” I eagerly answer, elated about my victory. “Wait, do you have cold feet?”

“Freezing. I think I’ve lost feeling in three toes.”

“I could warm them up for you.”

She holds her hand up. “Absolutely not. That’s where I draw the line. No touching my feet, Sawyer. No way.”

“Come on, it’s just practical. Body heat is the most efficient—”

“Nope.” She shakes her head firmly. “My feet stay on my side of the buffalo hide.”

“I didn’t know there were sides to this thing.”

“There are now. Your side, my side, and a very clear boundary between them. Got it?”

“Got it,” I tell her.

She scoots over reluctantly, dragging part of the hide with her and wrapping it around her shoulders like a cape.

“This is cozy,” I say, settling in beside her with probably too much satisfaction.

“Don’t get used to it.” She tucks her legs up under her, careful to keep them away from my side. “This is a one-time emergency situation.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Right. A professional emergency buffalo hide sharing.”

“Exactly.” She pulls the hide tighter around herself, and I can’t help but notice how close we are now.

“Should we try to get some sleep? With the early morning hike and the stress from being stuck in here after a busy workday, I’m beat.”

“Yeah, sleep is a good idea,” I say.

“Well, good night, Sawyer.”

“Good night, Reese.”

I close my eyes, but I’m anything but sleepy, especially now that I’m inches away from Reese. The woman I used to tease but have grown more and more fond of in the days we’ve been spending together.

I can hear her breathing in the quiet room, feel the warmth radiating from her body under the shared hide. When did she stop being the uptight historian who corrected my every question? Now all I can think about is how her eyes light up when she talks about something she’s passionate about, or the way she gets this little crease between her eyebrows when she’s concentrating on explaining territorial mining laws. The way she laughs at my terrible jokes, even when she’s trying not to.

She’s brilliant and stubborn and completely dedicated to things most people would find boring. She cares about getting the details right, about making sure people

understand not just what happened, but why it mattered. And somehow, over these past few weeks, watching her get excited about old maps and mining claims has become the best part of my day.

“Reese, are you asleep?” I whisper.

There’s a pause, then: “No. Are you?”

“Obviously not, since I’m talking to you.”

I hear her soft laugh in the darkness. “Good point.”

We both stay silent for a moment, and the tension builds between us like a live wire.

“Sawyer?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For earlier. What you said about my work mattering.” Her voice is quiet, vulnerable. “I needed to hear that.”

I turn toward her, and even in the dim light, I can see her face. “I meant every word.”

“I know you did. That’s what makes it...” She trails off.

“Makes it what?”

“Dangerous.”

My heart starts beating faster. “Dangerous how?”

She turns to face me fully now, and we're so close I can feel her breath on my face.
"Because it makes me want things I shouldn't want."

"Like what?"

"Like this." Her voice is barely a whisper.

The air between us feels electric. Every rational thought tells me to keep my distance, maintain the professional boundary, but then she reaches up and touches my cheek with her fingertips, and all of that goes out the window.

"Reese..." I start, but she's already moving closer.

"Tell me this is a bad idea," she whispers against my lips.

"This is a terrible idea," I murmur back.

"Good," she breathes, and leans in closer.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

When her lips meet mine, it's like every light in the building suddenly comes back on. She tastes like mint and something uniquely her, and when I kiss her back, she makes this soft sound that nearly undoes me completely.

I thread my fingers through her hair, and she presses closer, her hand fisting in my shirt like she's afraid I might disappear. The buffalo hide falls away from our shoulders, but neither of us cares about the cold anymore.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she whispers against my mouth, but she doesn't pull away.

"Probably not," I agree, trailing kisses along her jaw. "But I've been thinking about doing this for weeks."

"Weeks?"

I nod. "Yeah, even before you started tutoring me."

She pulls back slightly, surprise flickering across her face. "Before? But you used to come in and—"

"Annoy you on purpose? Yeah." I brush a strand of hair from her face. "Because it was the only way I could get you to look at me. When you'd get all indignant about my lame jokes and terrible questions, your whole face would light up. It was worth enduring your lectures to see that fire in your eyes."

"You're telling me you've been flirting with me this entire time by pretending to be

an idiot?”

“Hey, I wasn’t pretending to be an idiot. I genuinely didn’t know half the stuff I asked you about.” I grin. “I was... strategically curious.”

She stares at me for a moment, then starts laughing. “Strategically curious? That’s the worst pickup strategy I’ve ever heard.”

“But it worked, didn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she admits. “It worked.”

When she kisses me again, it’s different. This time, her kiss is slower and deeper, like she’s pouring everything she can’t say into it. I lose myself in the taste of her, the way she sighs against my lips, how perfectly she fits in my arms.

I furiously hope that the cleaning lady calls in sick tomorrow because I never want this night to end. All I want is to kiss Reese until I forget my own name.

I love feeling her soft laugh against my neck, the way her fingers trace patterns on my chest, and how she shivers when I whisper her name...

“What are you thinking about?” she asks.

“How I’m going to explain to my hiking groups why I keep smiling like an idiot.”

She props herself up on her elbow, grinning down at me. “You could tell them you finally passed your history lessons.”

“With flying colors, apparently.”

She snorts. “Don’t get cocky. You still have a lot to learn.”

“Lucky me,” I say, pulling her closer again. “I have an excellent teacher.”

“The best,” she agrees, and when she kisses me again, soft and sweet, I’m certain I could stay trapped in this storage room forever. I don’t need food. Don’t need air. Only her.

Outside, I can hear the wind picking up, but wrapped in this soft buffalo hide with Reese in my arms, I’ve never felt warmer.

Epilogue

Sawyer

One year later

Historic Gems Quarterly sits on our kitchen counter, open to page twelve. Even now, three months after it arrived, I can’t help but grin every time I see it. There’s Reese, standing by those old cabin ruins, her face lit up with genuine joy as she explains something to an invisible audience. The photographer they sent did an incredible job, but honestly, the magic was already there in the pictures I took that day by the lake.

I still can’t believe my plan worked.

After our lakeside hike last year, the one we did the day of our first kiss, I stared at those photos on my phone for hours. Reese looked so natural, so passionate, talking about the history of that old fishing camp. It hit me that this was exactly what Historic Gems Quarterly needed to see. Not some stuffy posed shot, but her in her element, bringing the past to life and connecting to their readers.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

So I did something that could have backfired spectacularly. I submitted those photos along with a pitch about the “hidden historian of Montana’s backcountry,” complete with Reese’s impromptu lecture about the cabin’s origins. I didn’t tell her. I couldn’t risk her talking me out of it or getting her hopes up in case they said no.

Three weeks later, an editor called her directly.

The look on her face when she hung up that phone... I’ll never forget it. Pure shock, then disbelief, then this slow-spreading smile that made my chest feel too small for my heart.

“They want to do a feature story,” she whispered. “About me. About the work I do here.”

I played dumb, of course. “That’s incredible, Reese. How did they even know about you?”

She shook her head in bewilderment. “They said someone sent them photos and a story pitch. They won’t tell me who.”

I came clean two months later, after the interview went well and the photographer captured her in her element. She cried and kissed me so hard I saw stars.

“You believed in me,” she said against my lips. “I love you, Sawyer. So much.”

“I love you too,” I said.

That was the moment I knew I was going to marry her.

The ranger exam was a piece of cake after all her tutoring. I passed with flying colors, like she'd predicted, and landed a job as a ranger, right here in Maplewood Springs. I also kept my promise about fixing her sagging shelves for the botanical pressings in the Natural History exhibit.

We spent every waking hour together. Talking, laughing, hiking. Kissing. When her lease came up for renewal, it made sense for her to move in with me. Her history books and my outdoor gear somehow all fit together perfectly in my little cabin outside town.

Now, another six months later, I'm standing in our bedroom, staring at the small velvet box in my hands and trying not to throw up from nerves.

I've been carrying this ring around for the past month, since I found it in an antique shop. The moment I saw it, I knew the vintage piece from the 1890s was perfect.

I've been waiting for the right moment. I thought about proposing at the lake where we had our first real hike together, or maybe at the Visitor Center where we spent all those hours studying. But those places didn't feel quite right.

This morning, though, I figured it out.

I hear Reese's car in the driveway and quickly stuff the ring box into my pocket. She's been at the historical society all morning, working on research for her next article. Historic Gems Quarterly has already commissioned two more pieces from her, and there's talk of a book deal. I'm so proud of her. And soon, hopefully, I'll get to call her my wife.

"Yeah, this is Reese, my wife," I'll tell people. "She's the best historian around. She

even has a book deal and everything.”

Man, I often pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming. That’s how lucky I am to have found her.

“Sawyer?” she calls as she comes through the front door. “You’ll never guess what I found in the archives today!”

“Tell me,” I say, walking out to meet her.

She’s practically vibrating with excitement. “Letters!” she says, removing her jacket. “A whole box of letters from the 1890s, written by the woman who ran that fishing camp at the lake. The one where we had our picnic? Her name was Margaret Hartwell, and she wrote to her sister back east about everything. The weather, the guests, the fish they caught, even complaints about her husband tracking his muddy boots all through the house. What a coincidence, right?”

She laughs, and I can’t help but smile at how animated she gets when she talks about her discoveries.

“That’s incredible, Reese. You’re going to write about her?”

“I’m going to try. Her story deserves to be told.” She pauses, looking at me with that soft expression that still makes my knees weak, even after a whole year together. “I keep thinking about how we sat right there where she lived, where she built her life. It’s like... I don’t know, like the past and present were connected for a moment.”

This is it. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. My nerves disappear entirely as I look at her. This brilliant, passionate woman who sees magic in forgotten stories and makes the past come alive. She’s my present and my future, and suddenly, I know exactly what I want to say.

“Actually,” I say, reaching into my pocket, “I have something that might connect our present to our future.”

Her eyes widen as I drop to one knee right there in our entryway, her jacket still dangling from one hand.

“Reese,” I say, opening the box to reveal the ring I spent months picking out. It’s exactly the kind of ring that has its own history. “I love how you see the world. I love how you make the past come alive, how you find magic in old stories and forgotten places. I love how you took a chance on hiking with me, even though you were terrified. I love how you inspire me to be better, smarter, and more curious about everything. I love you.”

Her hand flies to her mouth, and I can see tears gathering in her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:48 pm

“I want to spend the rest of my life exploring with you,” I continue. “Not just trails and lakes, but everything. I want to be there when you discover more letters, when you write your books, when you finally convince the historical society to fund that expedition to the old mining camps. I want to fix your shelves and listen to your stories and make sure you never run out of cinnamon rolls.”

She laughs through her tears, and I take that as encouragement.

“My greatest adventures don’t wait for me in the wilderness. They wait for me in building a life with someone who understands my dreams. Reese, you’re my greatest adventure. Will you marry me?”

For a moment, she just stares at me, tears streaming down her face. Then she nods frantically and drops to her knees in front of me.

“Yes,” she whispers. “Yes, of course, yes.”

I slide the ring onto her finger with shaking hands, and then she’s kissing me and we’re both crying and laughing at the same time.

“I love you so much,” she says, pulling back to look at the ring. “It’s beautiful. So much history in something so small.”

“I love you too and plan to do so for the next sixty years or so,” I say, standing and pulling her with me.

“Just sixty?”

“Fine. Seventy. Or eighty. But I’m not promising to leave my muddy boots by the door.”

She laughs, the sound echoing through our house—our home—and I know that whatever adventures are waiting for us, we’ll face them together.

Just like all the happy couples who lived here hundreds of years ago.