



Seduced By the Mountain Man

Author: *Annee Jones*

Category: Romance, Adult

Description: He was my brother's best friend—the one man I was never supposed to touch. One night changed everything... and now he's standing shirtless in front of me. Again.

DELANEY:

I had one rule: never hook up with my brother's best friend. But Jace Redmond made it very hard to follow rules—especially the night of that destination wedding when tequila and temptation got the best of us.

We agreed it was a one-time thing. No regrets. No repeats.

So imagine my horror when I show up for a relaxing girls' week at Hope Peak Lake Resort... and he's the first person I see. Shirtless. Smirking. And apparently in charge of our entire outdoor adventure itinerary.

Now he's leading my group on hikes, paddling trips, and trust falls—and every time he touches me, I remember exactly what I'm trying to forget.

This was supposed to be a getaway. But how do I escape the one man who already got under my skin?

JACE:

Sleeping with Delaney Shaw was the best mistake I've ever made. She's my best friend's little sister—gorgeous, mouthy, completely off-limits—and I knew it the second we fell into bed that night, we were crossing a line we couldn't uncross.

So I let her walk away.

But when I found out she was headed to Hope Peak Lake for a girls' trip, I made sure I was the one running the resort's adventure program that week.

Now she's back in my world for five steamy summer days—and I'm done pretending I don't want more.

The question is... will she let me break the rules again?

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Chapter One

“Welcome to Trouble”

Delaney

Montana in July took my breath away.

I navigated the final winding stretch of mountain road in the cherry-red convertible I'd splurged on renting. The top was down despite Whitney's complaints about what the wind was doing to her perfectly styled blonde hair. Early summer sunshine bathed the mountainsides in gold, making the pines shimmer with that vibrant green you only find where the air is so clean it almost hurts to breathe it.

"Can you please slow down before you kill us all?" Kayla shouted from the back seat, her hands braced against the front seats as I took another curve with perhaps a little more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary.

"Oh, let her drive," Amber shouted back, her auburn hair whipping around her face as she raised her arms like she was on a roller coaster. "This is the first time I've seen Delaney Shaw have actual fun in six months."

Whitney turned down Beyoncé just enough to be heard without screaming. "Mountain therapy officially begins now, ladies. One week of no emails, no Slack notifications, and—" she pointed at me with a perfectly manicured finger, "—absolutely no brooding about Colin the Cowardly Banker."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't suppress my smile. "I wasn't planning on brooding about him."

"Good," Whitney nodded. "Because what you need is someone new to help you forget the old, and I have a feeling this place will deliver."

"I just need a break," I insisted, though the idea of a vacation fling didn't sound terrible. It had been six months since I'd caught Colin with his assistant. Six months of burying myself in a massive marketing campaign launch that had earned me a promotion but left me with dark circles under my eyes and a permanent knot between my shoulder blades. "Peace, quiet, nature, and maybe some alcohol."

"And hot mountain men," Amber added, wiggling her eyebrows. "Don't forget those."

I laughed as the GPS announced our arrival. "We're here, you savages. Try to act civilized for at least five minutes."

Hope Peak Lake Resort appeared around the final bend, and all four of us fell silent. The resort perched on a bluff overlooking a vast, pristine lake that shimmered like a sapphire nestled among the Montana mountains. Luxury log cabins dotted the hillside, each with its own deck positioned to maximize the views. The main lodge, an impressive timber and stone structure, stood at the center, with stone pathways winding between buildings and down to the shore where I could make out a dock and what looked like a water sports center.

"Holy shit," Kayla breathed. "This place is gorgeous."

"Worth every penny," Whitney agreed as I pulled into the circular drive in front of the main lodge.

American flags and red, white, and blue bunting decorated the lodge entrance, a

reminder that Independence Day was just a few days away. I killed the engine and took a deep breath of pine-scented air. Already I could feel some of the tension leaving my body—though that knot between my shoulders persisted, a souvenir from countless hours hunched over my laptop.

"Ladies, welcome to Hope Peak!" A smiling valet approached, opening my door with a flourish. "I'll take care of your bags."

We handed over the car keys and followed the stone path into the lobby, a cavernous space with exposed beams, a large fireplace stacked with logs, and floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the magnificent lake view. The resort filled my senses with wood smoke and hints of something delicious from what I presumed was the restaurant.

"Shaw party, checking in," I announced to the woman behind the reception desk, a silver-haired woman with an elegant bearing despite her practical clothing.

"Ms. Shaw, welcome." She smiled warmly, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm Ruth Anderson, the owner. We're delighted to have you with us." She handed us each a welcome packet in a leather folio embossed with the resort logo. "You've arrived just in time for our Fourth of July celebrations. We have a full week of activities planned, culminating in our famous fireworks over the lake."

"Sounds perfect," I replied, already leafing through the materials.

Ruth leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice. "I see you've booked our luxury lakeside cabin. It's one of our finest—complete privacy, with incredible sunset views." Her eyes twinkled as she continued, "And do take advantage of everything the resort has to offer. We've just launched an adventure program that's been quite popular with our guests."

The way she emphasized "everything" made me wonder if she somehow knew we were all single and ready to mingle. I glanced at Whitney, who was already scanning the lobby like she was hunting for prey.

"We definitely will," Whitney assured her, accepting her key card with a smile that spelled trouble.

A staff member led us to our cabin, nestled on a small rise with unobstructed views of the lake. The interior combined rustic charm with luxury touches—knotty pine walls, plush furniture, a stone fireplace, and a kitchen stocked with high-end appliances. A spacious deck wrapped around the back, complete with Adirondack chairs, a hot tub, and the promised sunset view.

"I call the master bedroom!" Amber shouted, dropping her bags and making a beeline for the largest bedroom.

"We agreed to draw straws," Kayla protested, following her.

Whitney sidled up next to me as I stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the view. "So," she said, wagging her eyebrows, "Ready to get under someone?"

I snorted. "I'm ready for a nap."

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"You've been napping on life for six months," she countered, pulling the activities brochure from her welcome packet. "Look at all this! Hiking, paddleboarding, zip lining... ooh, cliff jumping!"

"Are you trying to kill me?" I groaned.

"I'm trying to wake you up," she replied, her tone softer. "You've been working yourself to death, Dee. When was the last time you did something just because it was fun?"

I couldn't answer that, which was answer enough.

Amber emerged from the bedroom dispute, brochure in hand. "They have a spa! Massages, facials, the works."

My shoulders practically cried out at the word "massage." I hadn't realized how much tension I was carrying until the prospect of relief appeared.

"That," I said, pointing at the brochure, "is exactly what I need before you lunatics drag me off any cliffs. I'm booking a massage. Right now."

"That's the spirit," Whitney approved. "Get some professional relief, then maybe we can find someone to provide a more recreational version later."

I ignored her, using the resort app to book the first available massage slot that afternoon. My shoulders thanked me in advance.

We spent the next hour unpacking and exploring the cabin. I claimed the smallest bedroom, a cozy space with a queen bed and its own bathroom, grateful to have a private retreat. By three o'clock, I was changed into yoga pants and a loose t-shirt, ready for my appointment at the resort spa.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Whitney called as I headed out the door.

"That leaves a terrifying amount of possibilities," I shot back, hearing her laugh as I closed the door behind me.

The journey to the spa building was peaceful, the afternoon sun warm on my skin. I followed a meandering path through gardens bursting with wildflowers, past other cabins and toward the lake shore. The spa occupied a small, elegant building near the water, with large windows and a tranquil fountain outside the entrance.

Inside, the spa welcomed me with muted colors and soft music, the air scented with lavender and eucalyptus. A receptionist greeted me and directed me to a changing room, where I found a plush robe and slippers waiting. I changed quickly, stowing my clothes in a locker, and was led to a dimly lit treatment room.

"Your therapist will be with you shortly," the attendant said. "Just lie face down and make yourself comfortable."

I did as instructed, settling onto the massage table and arranging the sheet over my body. The music playing was some ethereal flute melody that would typically annoy me, but in this setting, it fit perfectly. I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, beginning to unwind.

The door opened softly. "I'll be with you in just a moment," said a deep, masculine voice that sent an immediate shock through my system.

I knew that voice.

My eyes snapped open, and I twisted my head to see a broad back turned to me as he arranged bottles on a side table. Even from behind, there was no mistaking those shoulders, the set of that neck, the dark hair cut short but always slightly messy.

No. No way. Not here. Not now.

My mind flashed back six months, to another resort, another state. Jackson Hole. My cousin's wedding. Too much whiskey at the reception. Finding him alone at the hotel bar—Jace Redmond, my brother's best friend since childhood, the man who'd featured in my fantasies since I was sixteen.

I remembered with painful clarity how he'd looked at me that night, really looked at me, maybe for the first time. How one dance had turned into two, how his hand had felt at the small of my back, how we'd ended up in his room with our hands and mouths all over each other. How I'd woken up the next morning to an empty bed and a single text message:

This never happened.

I must have made some sound, because he turned around, those ocean-blue eyes widening briefly before his expression settled into that infuriating half-smirk I knew all too well.

"Hello, Dee," he said, his voice deeper than I remembered. "Wasn't expecting to see you on my table."

My throat went dry. Jace looked exactly the same and somehow better. His white polo with the resort logo stretched across his chest, defining every muscle. His forearms, exposed by rolled-up sleeves, were tanned and corded from years of

outdoor work. His stubble was perhaps a day or two heavier than the last time I'd seen him.

The last time I'd seen him naked.

"What are you—" I managed, sitting up awkwardly while clutching the sheet to my chest. "Why are you—"

"The regular therapist called in sick," he explained, looking far too amused at my discomfort. "I'm filling in. I run the adventure program here, but I'm certified in sports massage."

Of course he was. Of course Jace Redmond, who excelled at literally everything outdoorsy, would also have healing hands. I'd experienced those hands firsthand, but that was not a memory I needed right now.

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"I can reschedule you with Bethany tomorrow if you'd prefer," he offered, though his tone suggested he knew exactly what my pride would make me say.

I straightened my spine. "No, that's fine. This is... fine."

One dark eyebrow quirked upward. "You sure about that?"

"Absolutely," I lied. "Just a massage. Very professional."

"Always am," he replied, though the heat in his eyes said otherwise.

I forced myself to lie back down, face through the donut cushion, trying to regulate my breathing. This was fine. Just a massage. From the man who'd given me the best night of my life and then pretended it never happened. No big deal.

"I'll step out while you get settled," he said, and I heard the door close behind him.

I briefly considered bolting—grabbing my clothes and running back to the cabin. But that would mean admitting he'd rattled me, and I'd rather die. So I adjusted the sheet, making sure I was adequately covered, and tried to summon the Zen I'd felt moments before.

When Jace returned, I was lying perfectly still, the picture of relaxation except for every muscle in my body being tensed to the breaking point.

"I'm going to start with your shoulders," he said, his voice shifting into a professional register that somehow made this worse. "You're carrying a lot of tension there."

The first touch of his hands on my bare skin sent electricity crackling down my spine. His fingers were strong, callused from outdoor work, and so warm they burned through me. He began at my shoulders, applying firm pressure that balanced between pleasure and pain as he worked the knots I'd been carrying for months.

And oh, it felt good. Embarrassingly good. So good I had to bite my lip to stifle sounds that would absolutely not be appropriate in this context.

"Breathe, Dee," he murmured, his thumbs working a particularly stubborn knot. "You're as tight as a bowstring."

And whose fault is that? I wanted to snap but couldn't form words because his hands had moved to the base of my neck, and my brain was short-circuiting.

As he worked his way down my spine, memories flooded back—his hands on other parts of my body, his mouth following, the way he'd whispered my name in the dark of that hotel room. The way he'd looked at me like I was everything he'd ever wanted.

Until morning came, and I wasn't.

"You're still holding tension," he observed, hands moving lower. "Try to relax."

Relax? With his hands on me? After what had happened? After what hadn't happened since?

It was too much. The heat of his touch, the scent of him—an elixir of sunscreen and manhood—the flood of memories, the hurt and want tangled together in my chest.

I bolted upright, clutching the sheet to my chest, nearly colliding with him in the process.

"I just remembered—" I stammered, desperately avoiding his eyes. "I have to... there's a thing. At the cabin. I forgot."

Jace stepped back, confusion and something else—amusement?—playing across his features. "A thing?"

"Yes. Very important. Can't miss it." I was babbling but couldn't seem to stop. "I'll, uh, reschedule. Sorry for the trouble."

Before he could respond, I'd gathered my clothes in a bundle and fled to the changing room, heart hammering against my ribs. I changed in record time, not bothering with proper clothing arrangement, just needing to escape.

As I hurried back along the garden path toward our cabin, my cheeks burning with embarrassment, one thought repeated in my mind:

One week. I just needed to survive one week at Hope Peak without doing anything foolish. One week without falling back into the arms of the man who'd broken my heart six months ago. One week without letting Jace Redmond anywhere near me.

Given my luck, it was going to be the longest week of my life.

Chapter Two

“Let the Games Begin”

Jace

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I watched Delaney Shaw flee my massage room like her ass was on fire and couldn't help grinning. She'd always been skittish around me—at least until Jackson Hole, when she'd sauntered up to the hotel bar in that midnight blue dress and said, "I'm not eighteen anymore, Jace. And you're not my brother's shadow tonight."

Christ, she'd nearly knocked me sideways.

The memory slammed into me as I tidied bottles that didn't need tidying. Delaney's skin had tasted like vanilla and whiskey. Her laugh when I'd lifted her against the wall—half surprise, half hunger—had driven me crazy. The way she'd curled against me afterward, breathing slowing as sleep took her, like she belonged there.

Then morning came, and panic with it. I'd stared at her sleeping form—chestnut hair spread across my pillow, freckles visible in early light—and all I could think was: Tyler would kill me.

My oldest friend. The guy who'd given me work when Mom couldn't make ends meet. Who'd trusted me around his little sister for over a decade.

So I'd run. Left her sleeping and sent that goddamn text.

Six months later, those three words burned like acid: This never happened.

I locked the massage room and headed across the grounds to my cabin. Late afternoon sun turned Hope Peak Lake into molten gold. Guests dotted the shore, soaking up perfect Montana summer. A few kayakers glided across the water, tiny against pine-covered mountains.

My place sat at the property's edge where manicured grounds gave way to wilderness. Nothing fancy—one bedroom, small porch facing the lake—but it was mine for the season. Ruth had offered it as part of the deal when she hired me to launch the adventure program.

Inside, I stripped off the massage polo and grabbed my official gear from the closet. Quick-dry shorts and another logo shirt that showcased the build I'd earned from years outdoors. Ruth insisted on uniforms, claiming they made staff easier to spot. I'd rolled my eyes but complied.

As I changed, I admitted what I'd been avoiding since seeing Delaney's name on the booking system: I'd rearranged everything to lead her group's activities. Even volunteered for Bethany's massage shift when I learned about Delaney's appointment.

I should have stayed away. Tyler was still my best friend. If he knew what happened in Jackson Hole—what I was contemplating now—it could destroy everything.

But something about Delaney had always pulled me like gravity. From the first time I noticed her as more than Tyler's annoying little sister—the summer she turned twenty-one and came home with confidence and curves her sundresses couldn't hide—I'd been fighting that pull.

For six years, I'd kept my distance. Been the dutiful friend, the polite acquaintance. Then came Jackson Hole, when careful boundaries crumbled after one dance, one touch, one whispered invitation.

I grabbed a water bottle and stepped onto my porch. The sun was starting its descent toward the mountains, painting everything gold. Six months of torture, wondering if I'd made the biggest mistake of my life. Torn between loyalty to Tyler and the fact that I couldn't get his sister out of my head.

Last month, Tyler had called. We'd talked about work, his latest development project, summer plans. Then he'd said, almost casually, "If you ever got serious about someone, I'd want to hear about it. You're family, man."

"Where's that coming from?" I'd asked, startled.

"Just thinking. Life's short, and we're getting older. Don't let the good stuff pass you by."

I couldn't make sense of it then. Now, with Delaney here, those words kept echoing. Had he suspected something? Was it permission?

Five days. I had five days to figure out if what I felt was worth the risk. To see if she felt anything beyond anger. To decide if I was brave enough to face the consequences.

Five days to find out if she could forgive me.

The next morning dawned clear and hot. I arrived at the activities center early, checking equipment with Matt, my assistant guide. Good kid—twenty-five, eager, with encyclopedic wildlife knowledge that impressed even jaded guests.

"Full group for paddleboarding today," Matt said, loading life vests onto the cart. "Including those women from the lakeside cabin."

"Yeah," I kept my voice neutral.

"The redhead was at the bar last night. Amber? Said they're celebrating their friend's promotion."

I nodded, not sharing my connection with Delaney. Better to keep that to myself, at least until I could figure things out.

By nine, the meeting area filled with guests in swimwear and sunglasses, chattering about the day ahead. I scanned the crowd, immediately finding Delaney in back. She was trying to disappear behind oversized shades, wearing a modest black one-piece under what looked like Tyler's old button-down. Her hair was pulled back simply, and she studiously avoided my direction.

Her friends were another story. The blonde surveyed the crowd like a general. The tall woman with intricate braids applied sunscreen methodically. The redhead openly assessed every male guide—including me.

I cleared my throat. Chatter died.

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"Morning, everyone. I'm Jace Redmond, adventure program director." I launched into the standard welcome, explaining safety and the week's schedule. "We'll start with paddleboarding, then hiking tomorrow, zip-lining and cliff-jumping midweek, finishing with our Fourth of July S'mores and Stars finale Thursday night."

As I spoke, I kept my eyes on Delaney. She fidgeted under my attention—crossing her arms, uncrossing them, pushing her sunglasses higher, tugging at her cover-up.

God, she was adorable when rattled.

"Questions before we head to the lake?" I asked, finally releasing her from my stare.

Several hands shot up. I fielded the usual queries about depth and difficulty before pointing to the redhead—Amber—whose hand had been waving persistently.

"Do you offer private lessons?" she asked with a wink. "Some of us might want extra attention."

Beside her, Delaney shifted like she wanted to be anywhere else.

"All guides are available during group activities," I replied evenly. "The activities desk can arrange additional instruction."

The tall woman raised her hand, one eyebrow raised skeptically. "Are there different difficulty levels? Some people might prefer easing into things."

"Each activity has modifications. We want everyone to stay safe while still having

fun." I checked my watch. "No more questions? Meet at the boat dock in fifteen. Sunscreen and water bottles. Life vests provided."

As the crowd dispersed, I noticed Delaney hanging back, adjusting her sandal. I approached slowly, giving her time to walk away.

She didn't.

"Should have warned you I work here," I said quietly. "Saw your name on the booking system but thought it better to talk in person."

Her eyes narrowed behind dark lenses. "I've scheduled another massage. With Bethany."

"Fair enough." I resisted smiling at her defensive tone. "I was just filling in."

"Lucky me," she replied, voice low and sharp. "Of all the resorts in Montana..."

Despite her cool tone, I could see her pulse jumping. She wasn't as indifferent as she wanted me to believe.

"About Jackson Hole," I started, but she shook her head.

"I'm here with my friends for vacation. That's it."

As she turned to leave, I couldn't help myself. I leaned closer.

"We should talk, Dee. When you're ready."

The slight hesitation in her step told me my words had landed. She remembered that night as clearly as I did.

I shouldn't be pushing when I'd been the one to walk away. But I'd spent six months wondering if I'd thrown away something important out of fear.

Now I had days to decide if whatever was still between us was worth risking my oldest friendship. To see if Delaney could understand why I'd panicked. If she'd consider giving me another chance.

The sun climbed higher as I walked to the dock, watching her retreating figure. Her shoulders were tense, stride purposeful. She was running again.

This time, I was considering following—even though I still wasn't sure it was right.

Let the games begin.

The paddleboarding session went smoothly. Twenty novices trying to balance on boards while I circled in a kayak with Matt, offering guidance and occasional rescues for those who tumbled in.

Delaney surprised me. Despite earlier reluctance, she was a natural—standing confidently, maintaining balance with fluid movements. Her expression was peaceful beneath her baseball cap.

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Until I stripped off my shirt.

Montana summers are hot. Paddleboarding is physical work. Removing my shirt while demonstrating technique was perfectly reasonable. If I flexed a little more than necessary, well, that was between me and the sun.

I didn't miss how Delaney's eyes followed me. Or how she suddenly lost perfect balance and wobbled when I helped the redhead back onto her board after a suspiciously convenient fall.

Kayla—the woman with braids—paddled over to Delaney and said something that made her laugh. The sound carried across water, hitting me unexpectedly hard. When was the last time I'd heard Delaney laugh like that? Open, uninhibited, head back, sunlight catching highlights in her hair?

Too long. My heart did a small flip-flop in my chest.

"Jace!" Matt called, breaking my reverie. "Mrs. O'Henry's stuck by the rocks again."

I reluctantly turned attention to guiding the nervous older woman away from shore. When I looked for Delaney again, she'd drifted toward deeper water, attention fixed on something in the distance—probably the bald eagle slowly circling the far shore.

She didn't notice how far she'd strayed until a motorboat passed, its wake creating waves that threatened her stability. I watched her wobble, arms out, fighting to stay upright.

Without thinking, I was in the water, strong strokes carrying me to her side. I reached her as the second wave hit, hands catching her hips to steady her.

"You're a walking hazard, Dee," I said, voice low as my hands lingered. "Or maybe a floating one."

She stiffened but didn't pull away. "I was fine until you decided to turn this into Magic Mike: Lake Edition."

I laughed, surprised and pleased by her sass. "If I'd known you were such a fan, I'd have brought tearaway pants."

"You're impossible," she muttered, but I caught the slight curve of her lips.

"And you're too far from the group," I countered, nodding toward the main gathering. "Come on, I'll escort you back."

"I can manage," she insisted.

"I know you can," I said, treading water beside her board. "But humor me. It's my job to keep everyone safe, even stubborn marketing directors who think they know everything."

Her head snapped toward me. "How did you—"

"Tyler mentioned it," I admitted. "We still talk, you know. Even if you and I don't."

Something complicated passed across her face—hurt, maybe regret—before she masked it. "Fine. Lead the way, Mountain Man."

I guided her back, swimming alongside her board, hyperaware of her presence. When

we rejoined the group, the blonde—whose name I'd learned was Whitney—shot me a speculative look, making me wonder if the electricity I felt between Delaney and me wasn't merely my imagination.

The session finished without incident, though Delaney stayed firmly in the group's center, far from me. As they headed to shore, her friends surrounded her, heads bent in obvious gossip. I caught fragments—"seriously hot" and "what was that about?"—before they moved out of earshot.

Matt helped secure boards and vests in the equipment shed. "Amber asked me to show her the trails later," he said, trying to sound casual. "Think it's okay?"

I clapped his shoulder. "Just remember you're on duty at seven tomorrow, regardless of how late your 'trail tour' runs."

He grinned, face flushing. "Yes, sir."

Alone, I found myself staring across the grounds where Delaney and her friends had disappeared toward the dining area. Tomorrow would be hiking—more time in close proximity. More opportunities to decide if what I felt was worth potential consequences.

Tyler had been my friend since we were teenagers. When Mom struggled financially, the Shaws gave me summer work. Tyler stood by me through everything. Would he understand if he knew I had feelings for his sister? Or would he see it as betrayal?

Six months ago, I'd convinced myself the answer was clear. Made the mistake of running when things got complicated, choosing the safe path of friendship over the uncertain one of pursuing Delaney.

But seeing her again, feeling that same pull, I wasn't sure anymore. Maybe some

things were worth the risk.

This time, I was considering standing my ground.

This time, I might play to win—if I could find the courage to face what came after.

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Chapter Three

“Lake Rules and Fireworks”

Delaney

"Spill. Everything. Now."

Whitney's demand came the moment our cabin door closed behind us. My arms ached pleasantly from paddleboarding, my skin tingled from the sun, and my nerves were still jangled from Jace's hands on my hips during that not-so-accidental rescue.

"There's nothing to spill," I insisted, reaching for a bottle of water. My throat was suddenly parched.

"Oh please," Amber flopped dramatically onto the sofa. "That man looked at you like you were dessert, and you practically melted when he touched you."

I nearly choked on my water. "I did not melt."

"You definitely melted," Kayla confirmed, giving me an apologetic smile as she settled into an armchair. "Your whole body went soft for a second before you remembered to be angry."

"And that comment about Magic Mike?" Whitney raised her eyebrows. "You two obviously have history."

I sighed, knowing resistance was futile. These women had seen me through breakups, promotions, family drama, and my disastrous attempt at bangs in 2021. They could read me like a book.

"Fine," I said, dropping onto the couch beside Amber. "Remember when I told you about Jackson Hole? The hookup at my cousin's wedding?"

Three pairs of eyes widened simultaneously.

"No. Way." Amber sat up straight. "That's your brother's friend? The one who disappeared the next morning?"

"The very same," I confirmed, picking at a loose thread on the sofa cushion.

"Well, that explains your reaction yesterday," Whitney said. "You looked like you'd seen a ghost in the massage room."

"I felt like I had." I pulled my legs up beneath me. "One minute I'm expecting a nice, relaxing massage, the next I'm face-to-face with the guy who left me sleeping and texted 'This never happened.'"

"But why did he do that?" Kayla asked, ever the analyst of the group. "It obviously wasn't a chemistry issue. The electricity between you two could power the entire resort."

I shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "He's my brother's best friend. Tyler would have a meltdown if he knew."

"Tyler needs to grow up," Whitney muttered. She'd witnessed my brother's overprotective streak firsthand during college.

"So what's the plan?" Amber asked, a dangerous glint in her eye.

"The plan is to enjoy our vacation and pretend Jace doesn't exist," I said firmly.

"Boring," Amber sing-songed. "I vote for hot revenge sex followed by you walking out on him."

"I vote for finding out what actually happened," Kayla countered. "Maybe there's more to the story."

Whitney examined her perfectly manicured nails. "Twenty dollars says they hook up before Thursday."

"Fifty says it happens tonight," Amber countered.

"No one is betting on my love life!" I protested.

"So you admit it's a love life situation," Whitney pounced.

I groaned, covering my face with a throw pillow. "I hate all of you."

"No, you don't," Kayla said, patting my knee. "You love us because we want you to be happy. And potentially well-satisfied by a mountain man with shoulders like a Greek god."

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Even I couldn't help laughing at that.

"I'm going to shower," I announced, standing up. "And then we're going to dinner, where we will discuss literally anything else. Deal?"

"Deal," they chorused, with matching innocent expressions that didn't fool me for a second.

Dinner at the resort's main restaurant was a farm-to-table affair featuring local trout, huckleberry cocktails, and thankfully, no sign of Jace. By the time we finished our meal, complete with decadent chocolate desserts, the sun was beginning its descent behind the mountains.

Back at the cabin, Amber announced she was meeting Matt, the assistant guide, for a tour of the "night hiking trails" that somehow required her tightest jeans and an extra spritz of perfume.

"Don't wait up," she called, sashaying out the door.

Whitney and Kayla decided to check out the resort's evening cocktail hour, but I begged off, claiming fatigue from our paddleboarding adventure.

"You sure?" Whitney asked, eyeing me suspiciously. "It could be fun."

"I'm sure," I said, already changing into leggings and a soft hoodie. "I just want some

quiet time."

After they left, the cabin's silence was blissful. I poured a glass of wine, grabbed my book, and stepped onto our porch. The evening was perfect—warm enough to be comfortable but with that hint of mountain coolness in the air that promised a good night's sleep.

I tried to read, but the words blurred on the page, my mind drifting back to Jace. To his hands steadying me on the paddleboard. To his voice, low and intimate in my ear.

We should talk, Dee. When you're ready.

After fifteen minutes of reading the same paragraph repeatedly, I set the book down with a sigh. Clearly, sitting still wasn't working. Maybe a walk would clear my head.

The resort grounds were beautiful at twilight, with soft lighting along the paths and the occasional laughter drifting from the main lodge. I found myself drawn toward the lake, following a trail that wound through a stand of pines before emerging at a small, secluded cove.

A wooden dock extended into the calm water, empty except for a few Adirondack chairs at the far end. Perfect.

I settled into one of the chairs, pulling my knees up to my chest and watching the last golden rays of sunlight playing across the lake's surface. In the distance, the mountains were taking on that distinctive pink-purple glow that only happens at sunset. *Alpenglow*, my father had called it during family vacations.

The peaceful moment was exactly what I needed—a chance to breathe, to think, to center myself. For the first time since arriving at Hope Peak, the stubborn knot of tension between my shoulders began to ease.

Until I heard the splash.

I turned toward the sound just in time to see a figure cutting through the water with powerful strokes, heading directly for the dock. Even in the fading light, there was no mistaking those shoulders and that confident rhythm.

Jace.

I briefly considered fleeing, but something held me in place. Pride, maybe. Or curiosity. Or the simple fact that running away never solved anything.

He noticed me just as he reached the dock ladder, pausing with his hands on the lowest rung, water streaming from his hair and running down his lean torso.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said, a slow smile spreading across his face.

"Are you following me?" I asked, aiming for irritation but landing somewhere closer to breathless.

"I was here first," he pointed out, hoisting himself out of the water in one fluid motion. "Been swimming across the cove and back. Best way to clear my head after a day of playing tour guide."

Water sluiced down his body, his swim shorts clinging to muscled thighs. He grabbed a towel from the dock railing and ran it over his hair, leaving it sticking up in all directions. It should have looked ridiculous. Instead, it was endearing in a way that made my chest tight.

"This is the staff swimming area," he added, gesturing to a small sign I'd missed in the dimming light. "Technically, you're trespassing."

"I didn't see the sign," I said, standing up. "I'll go."

"Don't," he said quickly, then softened his tone. "I mean, you don't have to. It's a big dock."

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I hesitated, then settled back into the chair. "Fine. But only because the sunset's pretty."

"Just the sunset?" His tone was teasing as he draped the towel around his neck and took the chair beside mine.

"Just the sunset," I confirmed, fighting a smile. "The company is decidedly average."

He clutched his chest in mock pain. "You wound me, Dee."

"You'll survive," I said dryly, but the old nickname sent a flutter through me. Tyler had been the one to originally coin the moniker, a habit that began one summer when he decided 'Delaney' was too many syllables for shouting across the lake at our family's cabin. Jace had quickly adopted the custom himself after hearing it from my brother.

We sat in silence for a moment, watching the sky deepen from gold to orange to crimson.

"About yesterday—" he started.

"Let's not," I interrupted. "I get it. You were filling in for the regular masseuse. Awkward coincidence."

"That's not what I meant," he said quietly. "I meant what happened after. When I brought up Jackson Hole."

My heart kicked against my ribs. "Ancient history."

"Six months isn't ancient."

"It is when you get a text making it crystal clear it meant nothing," I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

He winced. "I deserved that."

"Yes, you did."

Jace turned in his chair to face me fully, water still dripping from his hair onto those unfairly sculpted shoulders. In the fading light, his blue eyes were darker, more intense.

"It didn't mean nothing," he said softly. "That's the problem."

Something in my chest cracked open at the honesty in his voice. I'd spent six months convincing myself that night was a mistake, that Jace regretted it, that the connection I'd felt was one-sided.

"Then why the text?" I asked, hating how vulnerable the question made me feel.

"Because I woke up next to my best friend's sister," he said simply. "And I panicked. All I could think about was how Tyler would react, what it would do to our friendship."

"And now?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

He stood up, moving closer until he was standing directly in front of my chair. Water droplets clung to his eyelashes, and the familiar scent of him filled my senses.

"Now I'm wondering if some things are worth the risk," he said, his voice dropping lower. "If you're worth the risk."

My heart thundered in my ears. "That's a convenient realization to have now that I'm here."

"Or maybe seeing you again just made it impossible to ignore," he countered, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

I stood up abruptly, needing to level the playing field. We were too close now, my back against the dock railing, Jace barely a breath away. The dying sunlight caught on his damp skin, turning him golden.

"I think you're confusing attraction with something more meaningful," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. "What happened at the wedding was a mistake. A one-time thing."

"Was it?" he challenged, stepping closer. "Because I remember every second of that night, Dee. Every touch. Every sound you made. Every whispered word."

Heat bloomed low in my belly. "That's not fair. I'd had too much to drink and clearly wasn't thinking straight."

"That's not true, and you know it. But you are right about something not being fair," he agreed, his hands coming to rest on the railing on either side of me, caging me in without actually touching me. "It's not fair the way I can't stop thinking about you. Not the way I've spent six months regretting that text. Not the way you're looking at me right now."

"And how am I looking at you?" I whispered.

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"Like you want me to kiss you," he said, his gaze dropping to my lips. "Even though you're still mad at me."

"I am mad at you," I confirmed, tilting my face up to his.

"I know," he murmured, leaning in until our breaths mingled. "I'm hoping you'll kiss me anyway."

I don't know who moved first. Maybe we both did. All I know is that one moment we were staring at each other, and the next his mouth was on mine, hot and demanding.

My hands slid up his arms to the nape of his neck, his skin still cool and damp from the lake. His hands circled my waist, pulling me flush against him, the soft material of my hoodie soaking through immediately from his wet body. I didn't care. All I cared about was the taste of him—like the wild huckleberries that grew along the lakeshore—and the firm pressure of his lips moving against mine.

The kiss deepened, his tongue sliding against mine in a way that made me moan softly. One of his hands tangled in my hair, angling my head to give him better access. The other splayed across my lower back, pressing me even closer.

Every rational thought fled my mind. There was only sensation—the solid warmth of him against me, the gentle scrape of stubble against my skin, the familiar yet thrilling way our bodies fit together.

When he groaned my name against my lips, something snapped inside me. This was exactly what I'd promised myself wouldn't happen. History repeating itself.

With supreme effort, I tore my mouth from his, both of us breathing hard.

"This isn't happening again," I said, my voice husky with desire that undermined my words.

His eyes, heavy-lidded and dark with want, searched mine. "Feels like it already is."

"No," I said, more firmly. "We had our chance. You walked away."

"I made a mistake," he said, his thumb tracing my lower lip. "I'm trying to fix it."

"Some things can't be fixed," I replied, ducking under his arm. "Goodnight, Jace."

I walked away quickly, not daring to look back, my lips still tingling from his kiss. Behind me, I heard him call my name, but I kept going, my stride purposeful.

Let him be the one left wanting more this time. Let him be the one to lie awake remembering the taste and feel of a kiss that shouldn't have happened.

Let him be the one to wonder what might have been.

By the time I reached the cabin, my heart had slowed, but the memory of his lips on mine remained. I touched my fingers to my mouth, feeling the slight swelling there. My clothes were damp from his body, my hair mussed from his hands.

Evidence of a moment of weakness I wouldn't repeat. Couldn't repeat.

No matter how good it had felt. No matter how right.

Because at the end of the day, nothing had changed. He was still my brother's best friend. That was still a line we shouldn't—no, couldn't—cross.

Even if, for one burning moment on a lakeside dock at sunset, crossing that line had felt like coming home.

Chapter Four

“Crossed Lines”

Jace

I hadn't slept worth a damn.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Delaney—her lips reddened from my kisses, amber eyes dark with want, that soft gasp when I'd pulled her against me on the dock. The taste of her lingered like a ghost, making my senses crave more.

The pale light of dawn found me already up, staring at my phone, Tyler's contact pulled up. My thumb hovered over the call button. What would I even say? Hey man, I know she's your little sister, but I can't stop thinking about her. And last night we kissed like the world was ending, and I'm pretty sure if she hadn't walked away, I would've taken her right there on the dock.

Yeah, that would go over great.

I tossed the phone aside and headed for the shower, cranking the water as cold as it would go. The icy spray shocked my system but did little to cool the heat that had been building since I'd watched Delaney walk away last night, her hips swaying slightly, hair tumbling down her back, the memory of her pressed against me still burning through my veins.

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By six-thirty, I was at the activities center, methodically checking equipment for the day's hike like my life depended on it. Water bottles. First aid kit. Trail maps. Anything to keep my hands busy and my mind off her.

Matt strolled in whistling, looking annoyingly well-rested despite having "shown Amber the night trails" until the early hours.

"Morning, boss." His cheerful greeting grated on my sleep-deprived nerves. "Perfect day for Mount Lookout, huh?"

I grunted something noncommittal as I checked the straps on a backpack for the third time.

"You okay?" Matt's brows furrowed. "You look like you got hit by a truck."

"I'm fine." I straightened, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension. "Just didn't sleep well. How was your... trail tour?"

His face lit up. "Amber's amazing. We're meeting up again tonight after the resort activities."

"Just be on time for the kayak prep tomorrow," I said, more sharply than intended.

"Yes, sir." Matt's grin didn't falter as he started organizing trail snacks. "By the way, Ruth was asking about the Fourth of July events. Wants to make sure we're prepared for the stargazing session and night hike."

"We'll be ready," I said, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand. "I need you to check the headlamps today. Half of them were flickering during the last night hike."

"On it." He paused, watching me too carefully. "Everything really okay? You seem... off."

I exhaled slowly. "Just got some things on my mind."

Matt seemed about to press further but thankfully dropped it when Ruth appeared at the door.

"Morning, gentlemen." The resort owner's silver hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, her weathered face creased in a smile. "Weather report looks clear for your hike, but there might be a brief shower rolling through mid-afternoon. Pack extra rain ponchos."

"Already on it," I assured her, grateful for the distraction.

"Good." She lingered in the doorway. "Jace, a word?"

I followed her outside, the mountain air crisp in my lungs.

"I noticed some tension with one of our guests yesterday," Ruth said without preamble. "The brunette from the lakeside cabin. Previous acquaintance?"

I should have known Ruth would notice. The woman missed nothing.

"Old friend," I said carefully. "From back home."

Ruth's knowing eyes saw right through me. "Just make sure whatever's happening doesn't interfere with the guest experience. That said..." A hint of a smile curved her

lips. "Sometimes the best things in life require taking a chance."

Before I could respond, she was already walking away, leaving me to wonder how transparent my feelings for Delaney really were.

By nine o'clock, the hiking group had assembled by the trailhead. Fifteen guests in various states of outdoor readiness, from seasoned hikers in proper boots to city slickers in brand-new everything.

Delaney and her friends arrived last, Whitney complaining loudly about the "ungodly hour" while Kayla quietly adjusted her backpack straps with practiced efficiency. Amber immediately broke off to flirt with Matt.

And then there was Delaney.

She wore hiking shorts that showcased those long legs, a moisture-wicking tank top under an open plaid shirt, and her chestnut hair pleated into a thick braid. No makeup, just a light sweep of sunscreen across her nose and cheeks, highlighting those freckles I'd always found so damn appealing.

Our eyes locked for a brief moment before she deliberately turned away, focusing intently on adjusting her hat. The message was clear: that kiss didn't happen.

A bitter echo of my own text from six months ago.

I cleared my throat, silencing the chatter. "Welcome to the Mount Lookout trail. It's a moderate hike, about four miles round trip, with some elevation gain. The views are worth it—on a clear day like today, you can see three mountain ranges and the entire lake."

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I went through the standard safety briefing, explaining the buddy system we used on all hikes. "This trail has some narrow sections and a few stream crossings. Everyone needs a buddy—no exceptions."

Matt began pairing people off, mostly couples who were already together. Whitney immediately claimed a middle-aged doctor from Chicago who'd been not-so-subtly flirting with her at breakfast. Kayla paired with an older woman who was surprisingly fit for her age. Amber, of course, snagged Matt.

Which left Delaney standing alone, looking everywhere but at me.

Perfect.

"Looks like you're with me," I said, moving to her side. "Ready, partner?"

Her eyes narrowed. "This feels suspiciously convenient."

"Trail guide's privilege," I murmured. "Let's go."

We set off, leading the group along the pine-needle-covered path that wound its way up the mountainside. The morning air was crisp and sweet with the scent of wildflowers and sun-warmed earth. Under different circumstances, it would have been idyllic.

Instead, it was torture—walking so close to Delaney that our arms occasionally brushed, feeling the heat radiating from her body, catching whiffs of her coconut shampoo with every breeze.

She maintained a pointed silence for the first mile, responding to my trail commentary with nothing more than noncommittal hums. The rest of the group spread out behind us, Matt bringing up the rear to ensure no stragglers got left behind.

Finally, as we approached the first stream crossing—strategically placed stepping stones that required some balance—I seized my opportunity.

"Take my hand," I said, reaching out to her. "The rocks can be slippery."

"I'm fine," she replied coolly, but the path was narrow enough that she couldn't simply walk around me.

"It's protocol," I insisted. "I'm responsible for everyone's safety."

Her eyes flashed with irritation, but she placed her hand in mine. The contact was electric, her palm smooth against my callused one. I led her across, deliberately taking my time, savoring the connection.

Once across, she immediately tried to pull away, but I held firm.

"We need to talk about last night," I said, keeping my voice low so the approaching hikers wouldn't hear.

"There's nothing to talk about." She tugged her hand free. "It was a mistake."

"It didn't feel like a mistake," I countered, stepping closer. "It felt inevitable."

"Don't." Her voice was tight. "I'm not doing this, Jace. Not again."

"Doing what, exactly? Being honest about what's between us?"

"There is nothing between us." Her jaw was set, stubborn as always. "One drunken night and one impulsive kiss don't make a relationship."

"Then why can't you look me in the eye?" I challenged.

Her gaze snapped to mine, defiant. "Happy now?"

God, she was beautiful when she was angry—eyes flashing, cheeks flushed, lips pressed into a thin line that I desperately wanted to kiss into softness again.

"No," I said honestly. "I'm not happy. I haven't been happy since I walked away from you in Jackson Hole."

Something flickered in her expression—surprise, maybe doubt—before she shuttered it away. "You made your choice. You don't get to change your mind just because I happen to be here."

"What if I've been regretting that choice every day since?"

She shook her head, but before she could respond, Whitney called from behind us, breaking the moment.

"Are we stopping for photos at this bridge? The light is amazing!"

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I stepped back, slipping into guide mode. "Yes, this is a great spot. We'll take ten minutes here before continuing."

Delaney immediately moved away to join Kayla, leaving me to help other hikers navigate the crossing. But I caught her glancing my way more than once, her expression troubled.

The seeds of doubt were planted. Now I just had to see if they'd grow.

The trail steepened as we continued, the forest occasionally opening to reveal breathtaking views of the valley below. I kept the group moving at a steady pace, aware that dark clouds were beginning to gather over the distant peaks despite the current sunshine.

Summer storms in the mountains could move in quickly. I'd been monitoring the weather app all morning, calculating our timing. If we pushed a little faster, we could reach the summit lookout, enjoy the view, and start back down before the rain hit.

But nature had other plans.

We were about three-quarters of the way up when I felt the first drop. Then another. Within minutes, a light drizzle became a steady rain, sending unprepared hikers scrambling for cover.

"There's a rock outcropping ahead," I called out, pointing up the trail. "Large enough

for everyone to shelter. Stay together!"

I urged the group forward, Matt helping a couple who'd been unprepared for the sudden shower. The outcropping appeared around the bend—a natural overhang that created a shallow cave-like space, big enough to fit everyone if we squeezed.

As hikers huddled together, shaking water from jackets and hats, I did a quick headcount. Everyone was accounted for—except Delaney.

A spike of alarm shot through me until I spotted her further along the rock wall, sheltering under a smaller overhang separate from the main group. Either by accident or design, she'd found the one spot that would put us alone together again.

I didn't question the gift. "Stay put, everyone," I instructed. "Matt's in charge. I need to check on our other shelter."

I made my way to Delaney, rain plastering my shirt to my skin. She'd managed to stay relatively dry, though droplets clung to her eyelashes and dampened the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail.

"Looks like we'll be stuck here a while," I said, ducking under the overhang. The space was small enough that we stood only inches apart. "Summer storms usually pass quickly, but we should wait it out."

"Perfect," she muttered, pressing back against the rock wall. "Just perfect."

"If you hate my company that much, you're welcome to join the crowd over there," I nodded toward the main group, where people were laughing and taking selfies with the dramatic backdrop.

"It's not that." She sighed, running a hand through her damp hair. "This is just..."

complicated."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Really?" Her eyebrows rose. "My brother's best friend since childhood, who I slept with once, then got the brush-off from, now wants what, exactly? A vacation fling? Round two of 'this never happened'?"

The anger in her voice was justified, but there was hurt there too—hurt I'd caused.

"I want a chance," I said simply. "A real one this time."

"Why should I believe you?" She crossed her arms. "You had six months to call, to text something other than 'this never happened.' Six months, Jace. Not a word."

"I know." I stepped closer, unable to help myself. "I fucked up. I was a coward."

"Yes, you were."

"But I'm here now, saying I made a mistake. That night wasn't just some hookup for me, Dee. It was..." I searched for the words. "It was everything I'd wanted for years, and it terrified me."

She stared at me, raindrops pattering on the rocks around us, the sound filling the charged silence between us.

"Years?" she finally asked, her voice smaller.

"Since the summer you turned twenty-one and came home from college." The admission felt like a weight lifting. "You walked into the boathouse wearing that blue bikini, laughing about something with your friends, and it hit me all at once that you

weren't Tyler's little sister anymore. You were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen."

Her lips parted in surprise. "That was six years ago."

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"Yeah, well." I ran a hand through my wet hair. "I've been pretty good at denial."

"So what changed in Jackson Hole?"

"Whiskey. That dress. The way you looked at me across the dance floor like you wanted me as badly as I wanted you." I leaned one arm against the rock wall beside her head. "But mostly, it was just time. Six years of wanting something and denying myself... there's only so long you can hold out."

Her breathing had quickened, her chest rising and falling more rapidly, and I knew she wasn't as immune to me as she pretended.

"I've thought about you every day since," I continued, my voice dropping lower. "Not just the sex—though God knows I've replayed that night in my head more times than I can count—but the way you laughed against my neck when I carried you to bed. The way you looked in the morning light, peaceful and perfect on my pillow. The way it felt to hold you, like something clicking into place after being misaligned for years."

"Jace..." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Tell me you haven't thought about it too," I challenged softly. "Tell me last night's kiss didn't bring it all back."

She swallowed hard. "It doesn't matter what I've thought about. This—us—it would hurt Tyler."

"You don't know that."

"Don't I? His best friend sleeping with his sister behind his back? How could that not hurt him?"

"Maybe it's time we stopped making decisions based on what we think Tyler would want," I said. "Maybe it's time we asked him."

Her eyes widened. "You want to tell Tyler about us?"

"I'm saying I'm willing to. That's how serious I am about this, Dee. About you. Will you give us a chance?"

For a moment, she looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time, uncertainty replacing the anger in her eyes. Then, almost imperceptibly, she leaned toward me.

That was all the invitation I needed.

I closed the distance between us, my lips finding hers with the desperate hunger that had been building since I'd watched her walk away last night. She made a small, surprised sound that quickly melted into a moan as she kissed me back, her hands clutching the wet fabric of my shirt.

This kiss was different from last night's—less tentative, more raw. My tongue swept into her mouth, claiming her, and she responded with equal fervor, her body arching against mine. I pressed her back against the rock wall, one hand tangling in her hair, the other gripping her hip to pull her closer.

We might have stayed that way for minutes or hours, lost in each other, if not for Matt's voice calling from the main shelter.

"Jace! The rain's letting up!"

Delaney broke away first, breathing hard, her lips red and swollen. I rested my forehead against hers, unwilling to let her go completely.

"This isn't over," I murmured.

"It has to be," she whispered, but the conviction in her voice was wavering.

"Think about what I said. About telling Tyler."

She didn't answer, just slipped out from between me and the wall, straightening her clothes with trembling hands before walking toward the main group.

I took a deep breath, trying to regain my composure, before following her back to reality.

The remainder of the hike passed in a blur. The storm had cost us time, so we turned back without reaching the summit, much to the disappointment of some hikers. The trail was slick with rain, requiring more attention, which at least gave me a legitimate reason to stay close to Delaney on the descent.

She kept her distance emotionally, though, speaking only when necessary and always with others nearby. Still, I caught her watching me when she thought I wasn't looking, her expression conflicted.

By the time we returned to the resort, the sun had reappeared, turning the wet landscape into a glistening paradise. The group dispersed, heading to their cabins to change out of damp clothes.

"You looked pretty cozy with Delaney under that rock overhang," Matt commented as we stored equipment. "Something going on there?"

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"Just doing my job," I replied, not meeting his eyes.

"Right." Matt's tone made it clear he didn't believe me. "Well, she's signed up for cliff jumping tomorrow."

I nodded, already thinking ahead to the evening. I needed to finish inventory in the boathouse anyway. With the next day's activities requiring water equipment, it was a legitimate reason to be there late—and a perfect place for privacy if Delaney sought me out.

Sunset found me alone in the boathouse, methodically counting paddles and life vests by the light of old overhead fixtures. I was so lost in thought, replying the moments under the rock overhang, that I didn't hear the door open, only registering another presence when it closed with a decisive click.

Delaney stood there, hair still damp from what must have been a recent shower, dressed in clean shorts and a loose tank top that revealed the graceful curve of her collarbone. She looked determined, though about what, I couldn't tell.

"Dee," I straightened, setting aside the clipboard. "What are you doing here?"

"I told the girls I needed to check what equipment we'd need for cliff jumping tomorrow." She walked further into the room, her steps deliberate. "But really, I needed to talk to you."

"About what happened on the trail."

"About all of it." She stopped a few feet away, her arms crossed protectively over her chest. "Jackson Hole. The text. Last night. Today."

I waited, giving her space to continue.

"I've been thinking about what you said." She took a deep breath. "About telling Tyler. About taking a chance."

Hope surged in my chest, but I kept my expression neutral. "And?"

"And I think you're being selfish." The words came out in a rush. "You're willing to risk a friendship that spans decades for what—a fling? Some vacation sex? How is that fair to Tyler?"

The accusation stung, but I recognized the fear behind it. "Is that what you think this is? Just sex?"

"What else could it be?" She threw up her hands. "We live in different states, Jace. I have a career in Denver. You're here, living your mountain man fantasy. And between us is my brother, who trusts you. Who would be devastated."

"You don't know that," I repeated, moving closer to her. "And you're wrong about what this is. Yes, I want you—God knows I've never wanted anyone the way I want you—but this isn't just about sex for me."

"Then what is it about?" Her voice cracked slightly. "Because from where I'm standing, you're asking me to risk hurting my brother for... what exactly?"

"For us," I said simply. "For a chance to see if what I've felt for years—what I felt

that night at the wedding, what I've felt every time I've seen you since—is real. For the possibility that maybe, just maybe, you're worth risking everything for."

"Don't put this all on me!" she shot back, anger flaring. "You're the one who walked away. You're the one who sent that text. You're the one who didn't call for six months. And now you expect me to believe you're all in? That this is somehow more than just wanting to finish what we started?"

I closed the distance between us in two strides, backing her against the wall of equipment racks.

"You want to know if this is real?" I growled, frustration boiling over. "Every morning for six months I've woken up reaching for you. Every time Tyler mentioned your name, my heart stopped, wondering if he somehow knew if you'd told him. Every relationship I've tried to start has ended because they weren't you."

Her eyes widened, but I wasn't done.

"I didn't call because I was a coward, yes. Because I was afraid of losing Tyler, afraid of my own feelings, afraid that what I felt was one-sided. But I'm done being afraid, Delaney. I'm done pretending I don't want every part of you—your body, your mind, your heart. All of it."

"Jace..." she whispered, but I cut her off, my hands braced on either side of her head.

"Tell me you don't feel it too," I challenged. "Tell me I'm imagining this thing between us, and I'll walk away right now. I'll respect the line you're drawing. But don't tell me what I feel isn't real."

For a long moment, she stared at me, her chest heaving with emotion, her eyes searching mine. I could see the battle waging within her—desire versus duty, want

versus fear.

Then her hands were in my hair, pulling my mouth down to hers with a ferocity that answered every question.

Our bodies collided with the force of desire that had been building for years. My hands slid down to grip her ass, lifting her against me as her legs wrapped around my waist. Her back hit the wall with a thud, paddles and life vests rattling on their hooks, but neither of us cared.

"This doesn't mean—" she gasped as my mouth moved to her neck, sucking at the sensitive spot below her ear.

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"Shut up," I growled against her skin. "Just feel."

And she did. Her head fell back against the wall, giving me better access as I trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her throat to the swell of her breasts. My hands slipped under her tank top, finding bare skin, hot and smooth beneath my palms.

"Take it off," she demanded, and I obeyed, yanking the fabric up and over her head to reveal a simple black bra that still somehow managed to be the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"Fuck, Dee," I groaned, cupping one breast through the thin material. "You're perfect."

"Less talking," she ordered, her hands already tugging at my shirt. "More touching. Please."

I stepped back just long enough to strip off my shirt before crushing her to me again, the feel of her bare skin against mine sending electricity crackling down my spine. Her hands roamed my chest, nails scraping lightly over my nipples, making me hiss with pleasure.

I reached behind her to unhook her bra, revealing those perfect breasts I'd dreamed about for months. My mouth found one peaked nipple, tongue circling before sucking hard enough to make her cry out.

"Jace, please," she moaned, her hands fumbling with my belt. "I need you now."

I caught her hands, pinning them against the wall above her head. "Not yet. I've waited too long for this to rush."

Keeping her wrists trapped in one hand, I traced the other down her body, over the swell of her breast, across the flat plane of her stomach, to the waistband of her shorts. I popped the button one-handed, sliding the zipper down with deliberate slowness that made her squirm.

"You're teasing," she accused, breathless.

"I'm savoring," I corrected, slipping my hand into her shorts, past the barrier of her panties, to find her already wet and wanting. "Christ, you're soaked."

Her hips bucked against my hand as I slid one finger through her folds, circling her clit with just enough pressure to drive her crazy without giving her release.

"More," she demanded, straining against my grip on her wrists.

I added a second finger, pushing slowly into her heat, feeling her clench around me as I found that perfect spot inside her. Her eyes fluttered closed, mouth falling open in a silent gasp.

"Look at me," I commanded, crooking my fingers in a way that made her whole body shudder. "I want to see you when you come."

Her eyes snapped open, dark with desire, meeting mine as I worked her with my fingers, my thumb circling her clit in rhythm with my thrusts. Her breathing became more ragged, hips moving desperately against my hand.

"That's it," I encouraged, pressing harder. "Let go for me, Dee."

She came with a shattered cry, her inner walls pulsing around my fingers, her entire body trembling. I released her wrists to wrap my arm around her waist, supporting her through the aftershocks.

Before she could fully recover, I was yanking her shorts and panties down her legs, my own following quickly after. I lifted her again, her back against the wall, positioning myself at her entrance.

"You're so fucking wet for me," I groaned, rubbing the head of my cock against her slick folds.

She responded by wrapping her legs tighter around my waist, drawing me closer. "Stop teasing," she demanded, reaching between us to guide me to her entrance.

With one powerful thrust, I was inside her.

"Fuck," I growled, the tight heat of her nearly undoing me on the spot. "You feel so good."

She answered by clenching around me, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. "Move," she commanded.

I did, pulling almost all the way out before slamming back in, setting a punishing rhythm that had her gasping with each thrust. The boathouse filled with the sounds of skin against skin, our ragged breathing, and the occasional clatter of equipment as the force of our movements shook the racks.

"Harder," she demanded, and I complied, bracing one hand against the wall for leverage, the other gripping her ass, angling her just right to hit that perfect spot with each thrust.

I could feel her beginning to tighten around me again, her second orgasm building. "That's it, baby," I encouraged, my own release coiling tight at the base of my spine. "Come for me again."

She did, her head thrown back in abandon, my name a broken cry on her lips as she shattered around me. The sight of her coming undone was enough to send me over the edge, my hips stuttering as I followed her into bliss, burying my face in the crook of her neck to muffle my shout.

For long moments afterward, we stayed locked together, panting, bodies slick with sweat, neither willing to break the connection. Finally, reluctantly, I lowered her to her feet, steadying her when her legs threatened to give out.

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Reality began to creep back in as we gathered our scattered clothes, the silence between us growing heavier with each passing second.

"Dee," I started, reaching for her, but she shook her head.

"I can't do this right now," she said, voice still rough from our activities. "I need to think."

"About what?"

"About everything." She pulled her tank top back on, not meeting my eyes. "This doesn't solve anything, Jace. It just makes it more complicated."

I caught her hand before she could retreat completely. "It only makes it complicated if you run away again."

Her eyes finally met mine, conflicted but no longer cold. "I'm not running. I'm just... processing. This is a lot."

"Take all the time you need," I said, meaning it. "But know that I meant everything I said. This isn't just sex for me, Dee. It never was. And I think you feel the same."

She nodded slowly, then stretched up to press a brief, soft kiss to my lips. "Goodnight, Jace."

I watched her walk away, the boathouse door closing quietly behind her. But unlike six months ago, this time she left me with hope instead of regret.

This time, I wouldn't let her go so easily.

Chapter Five

“Just a Fling”

Delaney

I didn't breathe properly until I was halfway back to the cabin.

My legs wobbled with each step, my body still humming with aftershocks that made every movement a vivid reminder of what had just happened in the boathouse. Jace's calloused hands on my bare skin. His mouth claiming my breasts. The way he'd filled me so completely I'd forgotten where I ended and he began.

The night air cooled my flushed skin, moonlight silvering the path just enough to guide me back. I raked my fingers through my tangled hair, wincing when they caught in the knots his eager hands had created. My lips throbbed, tender from his kisses, and my neck stung where he'd sucked hard enough to leave marks.

I was a wreck. A thoroughly satisfied, completely conflicted wreck.

By the time I reached the cabin door, I'd pulled myself together as best I could—hair smoothed, clothes straightened, face composed into what I hoped passed for casual normalcy. I drew in a steadying breath, exhaled slowly, and stepped inside.

Three pairs of eyes instantly locked on me.

Whitney froze mid-sentence, wineglass suspended halfway to her lips. Kayla's eyebrows lifted slightly as she scanned my appearance. Amber, sprawled across the sofa with her legs dangling over the armrest, bolted upright with the predatory

interest of a cat spotting a wounded bird.

"Well, well, well," Amber drawled. "Someone's been busy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, heading for the kitchen to pour myself a much-needed glass of wine. "I just went to check on equipment for tomorrow."

"Uh-huh." Whitney followed me, leaning against the counter. "Is that why your shirt is inside out?"

I glanced down. Sure enough, the seams of my tank top were clearly visible. Heat blazed across my face.

"And your hair looks like you stuck your finger in an electrical socket," Amber added helpfully.

"And you've got what appears to be the beginnings of a hickey right... there." Kayla pointed to a spot just below my left ear.

I slapped a hand over the spot, mortification completing the trifecta of emotions swirling through me—satisfaction, confusion, and now embarrassment.

"Fine," I muttered, gulping half my wine in one go. "I ran into Jace at the boathouse."

"And then you ran into him again. And again. And again," Whitney said with a wicked grin. "Horizontally, I'm assuming? Or was it vertically? Against a wall perhaps?"

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The wine nearly went down the wrong pipe. "How did you—"

"Oh honey," Amber laughed. "Your face tells the whole story. Plus, I've had boathouse sex. There aren't a lot of horizontal options unless you want splinters in unfortunate places."

"Jesus," I groaned, refilling my glass. "Can we please not discuss this?"

"Absolutely not," Whitney declared. "You've been wound so tight for months. If mountain man finally helped you release some tension, we want details. For science."

"There are no details," I insisted. "It was just... a thing that happened. No big deal."

"If it's no big deal, why are you blushing so hard your face matches your wine?" Kayla asked gently.

I sighed, knowing I wouldn't escape this inquisition. "Look, it's just a fling, okay? Just a vacation hookup to get him out of my system."

"Out of your system?" Whitney's voice dripped skepticism. "Honey, that implies he was in your system to begin with. Like, deeply embedded."

"It's complicated," I hedged.

"We've got all night and another bottle of wine," Amber said, grabbing said bottle from the fridge. "Uncomplicate it for us."

I let them herd me to the couch, where I sank down between Kayla and Whitney while Amber perched on the coffee table facing me.

"I already told you what happened at the wedding," I sighed. "And now we've... I don't know what we're doing."

"Fucking out your frustrations, by the looks of it," Amber supplied.

"Amber!" Kayla scolded, though her lips twitched.

"What? Am I wrong?"

I couldn't help the small smile that escaped. "You're not entirely wrong."

"So this is just physical?" Whitney pressed. "A nice vacation fling to scratch that itch?"

"Exactly," I said, seizing the convenient explanation. "People do that all the time, right? Friends with benefits. No strings attached. That's all this is."

"Friends with benefits generally aren't your brother's best friend since childhood," Kayla pointed out.

I winced. "Yeah, well, that part's not ideal."

"What would Tyler say if he knew?" Whitney asked.

"He'd probably murder Jace and then lock me in a tower," I muttered. "Which is why he's not going to know. This is just a temporary thing. It'll be over when we leave."

Even as I said the words, something in my chest constricted painfully.

"If you say so," Whitney said, clearly unconvinced. "But I never saw you look at Colin—or any man for that matter—the way you look at Jace."

"That's just lust," I insisted. "Intense physical attraction. It happens."

"Sure it does," Amber agreed, a little too readily. "And it's about time you had some fun. You're always so serious about everything."

"I am not," I protested.

Three identical looks of disbelief answered me.

"Okay, fine. Maybe I am. But that's why this is good for me. I'm being spontaneous. Carefree. Living in the moment."

"If you say so," Kayla said, echoing Whitney's earlier skepticism. "Just be careful with your heart, okay? Friends-with-benefits are great until they're not."

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I nodded, grateful when the conversation finally shifted to Amber's adventures with Matt. As they chattered, I sipped my wine and tried to ignore the lingering sensation of Jace's hands on my skin, the echo of his words in my ear.

This isn't just sex for me, Dee. It never was.

But it had to be. Anything more would be too complicated, too messy, too fraught with potential for heartbreak—mine and others'.

No, this was just a fling. And I was going to enjoy every minute of it without letting my heart get involved.

At least, that was the plan.

I escaped to my room as soon as I could, locking the bathroom door behind me before stripping off my inside-out tank top and shorts. In the mirror, my reflection told the story my friends had read so easily—hair tousled beyond simple explanation, lips slightly swollen, and yes, a darkening mark just below my ear that would require strategic hairstyling tomorrow.

The woman in the mirror looked different somehow. Eyes brighter, skin flushed with a glow that went beyond embarrassment. She looked alive in a way I hadn't seen in months—maybe years.

I stepped into the shower, letting hot water cascade over me. As steam filled the small

space, I closed my eyes and instantly regretted it—because there was Jace, his eyes dark with desire as he'd looked down at me in the boathouse, his voice rough as he'd groaned my name.

My hand drifted lower, tracing the path his fingers had taken earlier. I leaned against the cool tile wall, letting the fantasy build—Jace stepping into the shower behind me, his strong arms wrapping around my waist, his lips finding that sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder.

It would be so easy to give in to this, to let myself fall into whatever this was between us. But the reality wasn't that simple.

As I lathered shampoo into my hair, my mind drifted back over our complicated history. Jace had been a fixture in my childhood summers at the family cabin at Flathead Lake, only about an hour's drive from where we were now in Hope Peak. I remembered the first time he'd appeared—I must have been nine or ten, which would have made him thirteen or fourteen. My mother had hired a local maid service, and one of the cleaners had mentioned having a son Tyler's age who was bored at home.

Next thing I knew, this quiet, watchful boy with too-long dark hair was trailing after Tyler like a shadow. They'd spent that entire summer fishing, hiking, getting into the kind of mischief that seemed to follow boys of that age. When summer ended, I remembered my mother packing up bags of Tyler's outgrown clothes to send home with Jace, along with school supplies she'd purchased for both boys.

The next summer, Jace was back, no longer connected to the maid service but invited as Tyler's friend. And the summer after that. And after that. Until he was as much a part of our summers as sunburns and s'mores.

I never got to know him well back then. He and Tyler were four years older, firmly in the realm of "annoying big brother and his friend," always heading off on adventures

I wasn't allowed to join. Not that I'd wanted to—I was busy with my own friends, my books, my secret experiments with my mother's makeup.

Until the summer I turned thirteen. Suddenly, I noticed how Jace's shoulders had broadened, how his voice had deepened, how his quiet focus seemed so different from Tyler's boisterous energy. I'd developed my first, pathetic crush, following them around until Tyler threatened to lock me in the boathouse if I didn't leave them alone.

Jace had always been kind, though. When Tyler rolled his eyes at my attempts to join their conversations, Jace would sometimes linger behind, answering my questions about whatever they were planning that day. Once, he'd even brought me back a peculiar rock he'd found on a hike, just because I'd mentioned collecting them.

My crush had persisted through high school, flaring each summer when he'd reappear, more handsome each time. But it had been innocent, the kind of safe infatuation you could indulge when you knew nothing would ever come of it.

Until Jackson Hole changed everything.

I rinsed the shampoo from my hair, my thoughts a tangled mess. What was happening between us now—was it just the forbidden thrill of crossing a line we'd observed for so long? The satisfaction of finally acting on an attraction that had simmered in the background for years?

Or was it something more?

No, I told myself firmly. It couldn't be more. We were too different, our lives too separate. I was a marketing director with an MBA, living in Denver, following the path my parents had always expected. Jace was... well, I didn't actually know what Jace did when he wasn't working at Hope Peak. Tyler rarely mentioned him in specific terms, just occasional references to adventures they'd had or plans they were

making.

I didn't even know if he'd gone to college. Where he lived when he wasn't at the resort. What his dreams were beyond the next mountain to climb or lake to swim.

We were fundamentally mismatched—the ambitious city professional and the free-spirited outdoorsman. What we had was intense physical chemistry, nothing more. The kind of passion that burned hot and fast, then faded just as quickly.

Right?

Intense passion doesn't last. That's what everyone says. Especially not between people as different as we were.

I stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around myself as my mind continued its circular argument. This thing with Jace could only be temporary—a summer vacation fling, friends with benefits, a way to get him out of my system once and for all.

I could do casual. I could be carefree, spontaneous. I didn't have to be serious, responsible Delaney Shaw all the time.

But as I crawled into bed, setting my alarm for the next day's zip-lining activity, a small voice whispered that I was lying to myself. That I'd never been good at casual. That I'd never been the girl who could separate sex from emotion.

And worst of all, that what I felt for Jace had never been simple lust, not when I was thirteen, and certainly not now.

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I pushed the thought away, burying my face in the pillow. This was just physical. It had to be. Because the alternative was too terrifying to contemplate.

The zip-lining course stretched across the forested ridge above the resort, offering panoramic views of the lake and mountains beyond. Under different circumstances, I might have been excited about the adventure—I'd never been zip-lining before, and despite my city lifestyle, I did enjoy the occasional adrenaline rush.

Today, however, my stomach twisted in knots for reasons that had nothing to do with the prospect of flying through the air attached to a metal cable.

I'd carefully styled my hair to hide the mark on my neck, chosen an athletic tank top and shorts that were practical but still flattering, and spent more time on my minimal makeup than I was willing to admit. All for a man I was insisting meant nothing beyond physical release.

The self-deception was exhausting.

We gathered at the base of the course, where Matt was explaining the safety features of the harnesses while distributing helmets. Jace stood off to the side, helping adjust equipment and answering questions, but I noticed he hadn't looked in my direction once since our group arrived.

He was giving me space. The realization should have been a relief—wasn't that what I wanted? Time to process without his intense presence complicating things further?

Instead, it stung. Which was ridiculous, given that I'd practically fled from him last night.

"Delaney," Whitney nudged me. "You're up for harness fitting."

I startled, realizing Jace was now directly in front of me, holding out a contraption of straps and buckles, his expression professionally neutral.

"Good morning," he said, his voice revealing nothing of last night's passion. "Arms up, please."

I complied wordlessly, lifting my arms as he slipped the harness over my shoulders. His hands were brisk and impersonal as he adjusted straps, tightened buckles, checked connections. Nothing in his manner suggested we'd been intimately entwined against a wall less than twelve hours ago.

"How did you sleep?" he asked, his voice low enough that only I could hear as he knelt to secure the leg straps.

"Fine," I lied, hyperaware of his hands near my thighs, even through the professional barrier he'd erected. "You?"

"Liar," he murmured, the ghost of a smile touching his lips as he stood. "You've got circles under your eyes."

"Are you saying I look tired? Because that's never a compliment."

This time the smile reached his eyes. "I'm saying you look like someone who was up half the night thinking about me."

Before I could formulate a suitably cutting response, he'd moved on to help the next

guest, leaving me flustered and irritated—both at his accuracy and at how much I wanted him to keep talking to me.

So much for giving me space.

The group began the short hike up to the first platform, Matt leading the way with his enthusiastic explanation of the forest ecosystem. I lagged toward the back, distracted by my own thoughts and the occasional glimpse of Jace ahead, his movements confident on the uneven trail.

"You're staring," Whitney murmured beside me.

"I am not," I protested automatically.

"The back of his head hasn't changed in the last five minutes," she pointed out. "And yet you haven't taken your eyes off it."

I sighed. "I'm just... processing."

"Processing what a mountain man looks like from behind? Because I have to say, the view is exceptional."

I couldn't help laughing. "You're terrible."

"I'm observant," she corrected. "And what I observe is that this is definitely more than a casual hook-up for you."

"It's not," I insisted. "It can't be."

"Can't be or shouldn't be?" she asked shrewdly. "Because those are two very different things."

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I had no answer for that.

The first zip-line was relatively short, designed to help beginners get comfortable with the sensation before tackling the longer, faster lines higher up the mountain. I watched as guest after guest stepped off the platform with varying degrees of enthusiasm, from Whitney's exuberant "Woo-hoo!" to Kayla's quiet determination.

When my turn came, I approached the edge with what I hoped was casual confidence. Matt had clipped me to the line and stepped back, leaving me facing a drop that suddenly seemed much steeper than it had from solid ground.

"Whenever you're ready," he encouraged. "Just step off and let gravity do the work."

I nodded, took a deep breath, and looked down.

Big mistake.

My stomach lurched, vision tunneling slightly as vertigo hit. I'd never considered myself afraid of heights, but something about the combination of elevation, the seeming insubstantiality of the cable, and the distance to the next platform paralyzed me.

"I—" I swallowed hard. "Give me a second."

"Take your time," Matt said cheerfully, though I could sense the line of waiting

guests behind me growing restless.

I closed my eyes, trying to gather my courage, but that only made the sensation of height more disorienting. My hands gripped the harness straps so tightly my knuckles whitened.

"Switch out," I heard Jace's voice behind me, followed by Matt's murmured acknowledgment.

Then Jace was beside me, his presence solid and reassuring. "Look at me, Dee," he said quietly. "Not down."

I opened my eyes, focusing on his face rather than the drop beneath my feet. His blue eyes were calm, steady.

"I've got you," he said, one hand coming to rest lightly at the small of my back. "You're secure. The line can hold over a thousand pounds. The harness is double-checked. You're safe."

"I know that logically," I managed. "My body hasn't gotten the memo."

His lips quirked. "First time?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me." The simple statement held a weight beyond the current situation, a reminder of how well he knew me despite the years of distance.

His thumb traced small circles against my back, the touch hidden from the waiting guests but electrifying to my already heightened senses.

"You don't have to do this," he said softly. "We can get you down the traditional way if you want."

"No," I shook my head. "I want to. I'm just..."

"Scared," he finished. "It's okay to be scared, Dee. Being brave isn't about not feeling fear. It's about feeling it and moving forward anyway."

"When did you get so philosophical?" I asked, my grip on the harness loosening slightly.

"I've had a lot of time to think about fear lately," he said, his gaze intensifying. "About what happens when you let it make your decisions for you. About what you miss out on when you run away from the things that scare you."

We weren't talking about zip-lining anymore, and we both knew it.

"What if I fall?" I whispered.

"Then I'll catch you," he said simply. "I always will."

Something shifted in my chest, a quiet realignment that frightened me more than the drop beneath my feet. Because in that moment, looking into his eyes, I believed him completely.

"Okay," I nodded. "I'm ready."

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"That's my girl," he murmured, the pride in his voice sending warmth flooding through me. "Just step off and enjoy the ride."

I took a deep breath and stepped into empty air.

The initial drop made my stomach lurch but then came the exhilaration—the rush of wind in my face, the breathtaking view of forest and lake, the sense of flying free. I heard myself laughing as I glided toward the next platform, where Kayla waited with a thumbs up.

As the guide there unclipped me, I turned back to see Jace watching from the departure platform, a smile on his face that made my heart skip.

Just a fling, I reminded myself sternly. Just physical attraction.

But as the day progressed through increasingly challenging zip-lines, I found myself seeking him out at each platform, our eyes meeting in brief moments of connection that seemed to transcend the physical space between us.

By the time we completed the final, exhilarating ride back to the base, I was flushed with adrenaline and confusion in equal measure. Because if this was just physical, why did his simple words of encouragement mean so much? Why did his belief in me matter more than anyone else's?

And why, when he helped me out of my harness with the same professional detachment he'd shown earlier, did I feel its absence like a physical loss?

"You have to come to the sunset cruise," Amber insisted as we lounged on the cabin deck that afternoon. "It's supposed to be the highlight of the pre-Fourth festivities. Live music, dancing, cocktails—"

"And a certain outdoor guide who might be there," Whitney added with a wink.

"That's not a selling point," I lied, flipping through a magazine I wasn't actually reading. "I'm tired from zip-lining. I might just stay in."

"Absolutely not," Kayla said firmly. "You're coming. Even if it's just to enjoy the scenery and music."

I relented, partly because I knew they wouldn't give up, and partly because—despite my protests—the thought of seeing Jace again sent a thrill of anticipation through me.

Just physical, I reminded myself as I changed into a simple sundress that brought out the amber flecks in my eyes. Just temporary.

The cruise departed at seven, just as the sun began its descent toward the mountain peaks. The resort had transformed one of their larger pontoon boats into a floating cocktail lounge, with twinkling lights strung along the railings, a small bar set up at the stern, and a three-piece band playing soft jazz near the bow.

About thirty guests mingled on the deck as we pulled away from the dock, the golden light of late afternoon gilding the lake's surface. I accepted a glass of white wine from a passing server and found a spot at the railing, watching the shoreline recede.

I spotted Jace almost immediately, not because I was looking for him (I absolutely was), but because he was impossible to miss—tall and commanding even in the

simple uniform shirt and shorts he wore. He was speaking with Ruth, the resort owner, their heads bent together in what appeared to be a serious conversation.

As if sensing my gaze, he looked up, his eyes finding mine across the deck with unerring precision. For a breathless moment, we simply looked at each other. Then Ruth said something that recaptured his attention, and the connection broke.

I turned back to the water, sipping my wine and trying to calm the ridiculous flutter in my stomach. This was getting out of hand. One passionate encounter (okay, two if you counted Jackson Hole) and I was acting like a lovesick teenager.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ruth's voice came over the small sound system. "Welcome to our sunset cruise. We'll be touring the lake for the next two hours, with a special stop at Echo Cove to watch the sunset. Please enjoy the music, the drinks, and the company."

The band shifted from background jazz to more upbeat numbers, and several couples moved to the small dance floor near the bow. Whitney immediately dragged her doctor from Chicago to join them, while Amber and Matt were already swaying together, oblivious to anything but each other.

I remained at the railing, nursing my wine and watching the forested shoreline slip by. The mountains reflected perfectly in the still water, creating a mirror world that seemed more peaceful than the real one.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I didn't need to turn to know Jace had joined me. His presence at my side was as familiar now as my own heartbeat.

"It is," I agreed, not looking at him for fear of what my face might reveal.

"One of my favorite parts of working here," he continued. "The way the light turns the mountains to copper and gold at this time of day. Like they're holding the sunset inside them."

I nodded, taking another sip of wine to avoid speaking. If I opened my mouth, I might say something dangerous, like how I'd thought about him all day, or how his words on the zip-line platform had touched something deep inside me.

"Are we going to talk about last night?" he continued softly.

"I thought we agreed to give me time to think," I replied, finally turning to face him.

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The fading sunlight caught in his dark hair, bringing out hints of auburn, and deepened his tan against the white of his shirt. His eyes, when they met mine, were serious.

"You're right," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

The simple concern in his voice threatened to undo me. "I'm fine," I said, more sharply than intended. "It was just sex, Jace. People have casual sex all the time."

Something flickered in his expression. "If that's what you need it to be."

"It is," I insisted. "It's simpler that way."

"Simpler isn't always better," he said quietly. "But I'll respect whatever boundaries you want to set, Dee. Just let me know what they are."

Before I could respond, Ruth approached, placing a hand on Jace's arm. "Sorry to interrupt, but we need your expertise at the helm. Captain's noticed something with the steering."

Jace nodded. "Excuse me," he said to me, then followed Ruth toward the pilot's cabin.

I watched him go, frustration and confusion tangling in my chest. Why couldn't he just accept the simple explanation? Why did he have to push for more, make me question everything I thought I knew about what was happening between us?

As the evening progressed, I found myself tracking his movements around the

boat—helping with whatever mechanical issue had arisen, then circulating among the guests, answering questions about the lake and mountains, occasionally stopping to chat with Ruth or assist the servers.

Every time a female guest approached him—and several did, with transparent interest—a hot spike of jealousy shot through me. The tall blonde who touched his arm while laughing at something he said. The curvy Latina who cornered him near the bar, standing too close as she asked about hiking trails.

I told myself the jealousy was natural, purely territorial instinct after what we'd shared. Nothing more.

But when the band shifted to slower songs as the sun began to set, and I watched him politely decline a dance from the persistent blonde, the relief I felt was too profound to explain away as simply possessive lust.

"You should just go talk to him," Whitney said, appearing at my side with a fresh glass of wine for each of us.

"I don't know what you mean," I replied automatically.

"Please." She rolled her eyes. "You've been watching him all night like he's the last slice of chocolate cake and you're on a diet."

I sighed, accepting the wine. "It's complicated."

"So you keep saying." She turned to face me fully. "Tell me the truth—are you falling for him?"

The question hit too close to the fear that had been growing all day. "Of course not," I said quickly.

"Uh-huh." Her tone dripped skepticism. "That's why you can't take your eyes off him. That's why you lit up like a Christmas tree when he helped you on the zip-line. That's why you're currently plotting the painful death of Tiffany from Tulsa over there who's making another attempt to get his attention."

I glanced over to see the blonde had indeed returned to Jace's side. "I am not," I protested weakly.

"You know what I think?" Whitney continued, ignoring my denial. "I think you're more worried about what your family would think than about what you actually feel."

The accuracy of my best friend's assessment was uncomfortably close to the thoughts that had kept me awake last night. "That's not true," I said, but there was no conviction in my voice.

"Isn't it? Your whole life has been about meeting expectations—your parents', your brother's, society's. Go to a good school, join the right sorority, get the right job, date the right kind of men." She gestured with her wine glass. "When was the last time you did something just because it made you happy, without calculating how it would look to everyone else?"

I had no answer.

"That's what I thought," she said, softer now. "Look, I'm not saying throw caution to the wind and elope with the guy. I'm just saying... maybe stop overthinking for once and see where this goes. Get to know each other as adults. You might be surprised."

The boat was slowing as we entered a small, sheltered cove, the mountains rising steeply on three sides to create a natural amphitheater. The sun hung low on the horizon, painting everything in shades of gold and crimson.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ruth announced, "welcome to Echo Cove, the perfect spot to watch the sunset. If you listen carefully as the light fades, you might hear the loons calling to each other across the water—a sound that's been the signature of this lake for generations."

As guests moved to the railings for better views, Whitney squeezed my arm. "Just think about what I said, okay? Life's too short to let other people's opinions dictate your happiness."

She drifted away, leaving me with her words echoing in my mind like the loon calls Ruth had described. I stared out at the fiery sky, the mountains darkening to purple silhouettes, and for the first time, allowed myself to consider a terrifying possibility:

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What if this wasn't just a fling? What if what I felt for Jace was something deeper, something that had been building for years, something that couldn't be explained away as simple physical attraction?

What if I was falling for him?

And if I was, what was I going to do about it?

The questions followed me like shadows as the boat completed its journey and returned to the dock. They lingered as we walked back to the cabin, as I got ready for bed, as I lay staring at the ceiling in the darkness.

Sleep eluded me, my thoughts a carousel of confusion—Jace's voice on the zip-line platform, his eyes finding mine across the boat deck, his hands on my body in the boathouse, his words before I'd walked away.

This isn't just sex for me, Dee. It never was.

The truth I'd been avoiding crept closer, impossible to deny in the honest darkness of night: maybe it wasn't just sex for me either. Maybe it never had been.

And that terrified me more than any zip-line ever could.

Chapter Six

“Worth the Risk”

Jace

Dawn broke over Hope Peak Lake in bands of rose and gold, the water still and clear, mountains doubled in perfect reflection. I wasn't much for poetry, but something about watching the world wake up from the middle of the lake always hit me hard.

I'd been up since four-thirty, hauling kayaks to the beach for the sunrise tour—one of our most popular activities despite the ungodly hour. Most guests who signed up arrived bleary-eyed and coffee-clutching, but they always left rejuvenated, babbling about the magical experience.

I checked my watch. Five-forty-five. Fifteen minutes until push-off.

Matt appeared, stifling a yawn, followed by six early risers in various states of wakefulness. I scanned the small group for a familiar chestnut braid, but Delaney was nowhere to be seen.

"Everyone here?" I asked Matt, keeping my tone casual despite the hollow feeling in my chest.

He consulted his clipboard. "Should be. Seven signed up, six showed. We had one cancellation last night."

"Anyone I know?"

Matt flipped through his paperwork. "Shaw, Delaney. Called the desk around nine, asked to be removed from the list."

The hollow feeling in my gut expanded. I'd expected this, but it still hurt.

"Right," I nodded, pushing the feeling aside. "Let's get these folks on the water."

The tour proceeded smoothly—the soft dip of paddles breaking the lake's surface, hushed exclamations as the sun crested the mountains, a bald eagle swooping low enough to cause a ripple of excitement. I went through the motions of guiding, pointing out landmarks, sharing historical tidbits, but my mind kept drifting back to Delaney.

To the boathouse. Her fingernails digging into my shoulders. The way she'd whispered my name.

Had I pushed too hard? Moved too fast? After all, I'd been the one to send that text six months ago. One steamy night in a boathouse didn't erase that kind of rejection.

When we returned to shore, I busied myself securing equipment while the guests drifted off to breakfast, still buzzing from the experience. Matt lingered, helping me haul kayaks back to the boathouse.

"You're quiet this morning," he observed, loading paddles onto the rack. "More than usual, I mean."

I shrugged. "Just tired."

"Uh-huh." His skeptical tone made it clear he wasn't buying it. "Nothing to do with our cancellation?"

I shot him a warning look, but he just grinned.

"Look, I'm not blind. Something's going on with you and the Shaw woman. Even Ruth's noticed."

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"It's complicated," I muttered, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Usually is." He hesitated, then added, "She stopped by yesterday, you know. Asked which activities you wouldn't be leading."

My hands froze on the kayak I was securing. "She what?"

"Yeah, came to the activities desk when you were doing equipment checks. Wanted to know which events had different guides." He scratched his neck. "I thought it was weird, but I figured... maybe you'd had a falling out or something."

The cold feeling in my stomach spread. So she was actively avoiding me. Message received.

"Thanks for letting me know," I said, my voice tight.

Matt studied me, concern evident in his young face. "You okay, boss?"

"Fine," I lied. "Just tired."

"If you say so." He didn't push further, but as he headed out, he paused at the door. "For what it's worth, she seemed more confused than angry. And she signed up for the stargazing tonight."

I frowned. "I'm leading that."

"Yeah," Matt nodded, a small smile playing at his lips. "She knows."

He left me standing there, trying to make sense of the contradictory signals. Avoiding my morning activities but deliberately signing up for the evening one? What game was she playing?

Or maybe it wasn't a game at all. Maybe she was just as confused as I was about what was happening between us.

I walked through the rest of the day on autopilot. The afternoon fishing expedition I led consisted of middle-aged men more interested in drinking beer than catching anything, which suited me fine given where my thoughts were.

By the time evening approached, I'd cycled through a dozen scenarios for the "Stars Over Hope Peak" event I was leading tonight. This peaceful stargazing session was entirely separate from tomorrow's grand Fourth of July celebration that would feature fireworks over the lake and our famous s'mores buffet. Would she actually show up? If she did, would she acknowledge me? Should I give her space or try to talk to her?

The question nagged at me all day. I've stared down grizzlies and navigated class IV rapids, but Delaney Shaw had me second-guessing every move.

At eight-thirty, I began setting up on the beach for our "Stars Over Hope Peak" session. The night was perfect for stargazing—clear skies, new moon, just enough chill in the air to keep mosquitoes at bay. I arranged comfortable lounge chairs in a semicircle, set up the telescope, and placed lanterns along the path from the main lodge.

Guests began arriving just before nine, excitement in their voices as they claimed chairs. Ruth brought out thermoses of hot chocolate and coffee, along with blankets for those who hadn't anticipated the evening chill.

I was calibrating the telescope when I sensed her. I didn't need to turn around to know

Delaney had arrived—something in the air changed, charged like before a lightning strike. When I did look up, I spotted her at the edge of the beach.

She wasn't with her usual group. Whitney was cozied up to her doctor, while Amber and Matt were elsewhere, probably continuing their very obvious romance. Kayla sat with an older couple, already deep in conversation. Delaney stood alone, slightly apart from the main gathering, arms wrapped around herself as she gazed out at the lake.

My heart drummed against my ribs. This was my chance—maybe my last one.

"Everyone find a comfortable spot," I called to the group. "We'll be starting in about ten minutes. Feel free to help yourself to hot drinks in the meantime."

As the guests settled in, I made my way over to where Delaney stood. She must have sensed my approach, but she didn't turn.

"Didn't expect to see you here," I said quietly, stopping a respectful distance away.

She glanced at me, then back at the lake. "It's a clear night. Seemed like a waste to miss it."

"I hear you've been asking about which activities I'm not leading," I said, getting straight to the point.

A faint blush colored her cheeks. "Matt has a big mouth."

"He's concerned," I said. "Apparently, I've been acting weird."

"Have you?" Her tone was carefully neutral.

"Can we talk? Five minutes, that's all I'm asking."

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She hesitated, then nodded. "Five minutes."

I gestured toward a more secluded section of beach, away from the growing crowd. She followed, keeping a careful distance between us.

When we were out of earshot, I turned to face her. The fading twilight softened her features, her eyes catching the light of the first stars appearing overhead. I nearly lost my train of thought looking at her.

"I'm sorry," I said simply.

She blinked, clearly not expecting this opening. "For what, exactly?"

"For hurting you. Six months ago. Yesterday. Any time in between." I ran a hand through my hair, searching for the right words. "That was never my intention, Dee. And I don't want to make things worse for you now."

Her arms remained crossed, a barrier between us. "So what do you want?"

"If space is what you need, I'll give it to you. I'll back off completely." The words felt like rocks in my throat, but I forced them out anyway. "I just want you to be happy. That's the truth. I care about you too much to keep pushing if it's making you miserable."

Something flickered in her expression—surprise, maybe uncertainty. "You'd do that? Just... walk away again?"

"If that's what you want." I held her gaze. "Is it?"

Before she could answer, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, glancing at the screen. "It's Tyler," she said, her voice tight.

The tension between us ratcheted up another notch. She looked at me, conflict written across her face.

"Go ahead," I said. "Take it."

She hesitated, then swiped to answer. "Hey, Ty."

I turned slightly, giving her the illusion of privacy while remaining close enough to hear her side of the conversation.

"Yeah, I'm good... Just enjoying the vacation... No, not working too much, I promise... The resort? It's beautiful, you'd love it..." She paused, and I could feel her eyes on me. "No, no problems at all."

Another pause, longer this time. "Actually, there is someone here you know..." She took a deep breath. "Jace is running the adventure program."

I couldn't hear Tyler's response, but Delaney's nervous laugh told me enough. "Yeah, small world, right?... No, it's fine. We're all adults... Yes, I'll tell him you said hi."

She hung up, sliding the phone back into her pocket. "Tyler says hi."

"I gathered." I studied her face. "You didn't tell him about us."

"There is no us," she said automatically, but without conviction.

"Isn't there?" I challenged gently.

She looked away. "My five minutes are up. Don't you have a stargazing event to run?"

I checked my watch. She was right—our little talk had eaten into the scheduled start time. "This conversation isn't over, Dee."

"It never seems to be," she muttered, but followed me back to the group.

I slipped into guide mode, welcoming everyone and explaining the evening's plan. As I pointed out the first emerging stars, I was acutely aware of Delaney settling into a lounge chair at the edge of the group, separate from her friends.

For the next hour, I led the group through a tour of the night sky—pointing out constellations, sharing mythology, letting people take turns at the telescope to view Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons. The guests were enthusiastic, asking questions and exclaiming over the celestial sights.

Throughout it all, Delaney remained quiet, but I could feel her watching—not just the stars, but me. When the official program ended and people began drifting back toward the lodge, she stayed, gaze fixed on the heavens.

I busied myself packing up equipment, giving other guests time to clear out. Ruth caught my eye as she collected empty mugs, giving me a knowing look before tactfully ushering the last lingerers toward the path.

Finally, only Delaney remained, still reclined in her lounge chair. I approached cautiously, carrying two steaming mugs.

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"Hot chocolate?" I offered. "There's a splash of something stronger in it. Ruth's secret recipe."

She accepted the mug, wrapping her hands around its warmth. "Thanks."

I settled into the chair beside hers, leaving space between us. Above us, the Milky Way cut across the sky, billions of stars pressed so close together they formed a glowing river against the blackness.

"Remember when your dad taught us the constellations?" I asked, breaking the silence. "That summer at the cabin when I was fifteen?"

A small smile touched her lips. "You learned them faster than Tyler did. Dad was impressed."

"I'd never seen stars like that before," I admitted. "Growing up in town, with all the lights... the night sky was just darkness with a few bright dots. That first summer at your family's cabin in Montana, seeing the full glory of it... it changed something in me."

"Is that why you ended up here?" she asked, gesturing at the resort, the mountains, the lake. "Living in the wilderness?"

I nodded. "Partly. Your family showed me there was a different way to live. That you could have peace, beauty, stability. All the things I never had growing up."

She turned to look at me fully. "What was it like? Your childhood. You never really

talked about it, even when you spent all those summers with us."

I took a sip of my spiked hot chocolate, the warmth and alcohol spreading through me, loosening something in my chest.

"It wasn't great," I said quietly. "My dad beat the crap out of my mom until she finally up and left when I was nine. He never tried to get in contact with either of us after that. Not once."

Delaney's breath caught audibly. "Jace, I didn't know."

"Not many people do." I stared up at the stars, finding it easier to talk when I wasn't looking at her. "Mom worked multiple jobs, but we never had enough to make ends meet. And her taste in men didn't get any better. Different guys, same problems. That's why those summers with your family meant so much to me."

I paused, remembering those years—the tiny apartments, the unpaid bills, the shouting matches that would send me fleeing to friends' houses or, when I got older, to the woods at the edge of town.

"Being with the Shaws during those summers," I continued, "it was the closest thing I ever had to a real family. Your parents treating me like I mattered. Tyler treating me like a brother."

I finally looked at her. "That's why I panicked in Jackson Hole. Tyler's friendship, your family's acceptance—it's been my anchor for half my life. The thought of losing that..." I shook my head. "I couldn't risk it. But then I couldn't stop thinking about you either. Not since that summer you turned twenty-one and came home from college. Something changed then. I started seeing you differently."

She was silent for a long moment, her face unreadable in the starlight.

"We come from two different worlds," I said softly. "It's true. I know I'll never be good enough for you. Your parents are successful attorneys. You and Tyler both have impressive careers—him in real estate development and you in digital marketing. Meanwhile, I'm just a guy who's good at climbing mountains and paddling canoes."

"That's not true," she said suddenly, fierce in a way that startled me. "I'm not a baby anymore, Jace. I'm all grown up, and I don't care what my family thinks."

A low laugh escaped me. "Yes, you do. And that's okay. Your parents and brother love you, they just want the best for you."

She opened her mouth to protest, but I continued.

"Tyler told me how you were born premature and were in the NICU. How he remembers how worried he and your parents were that you wouldn't make it. I can't blame them for being overprotective. They're good people."

Her expression softened. "He told you about that?"

I nodded. "Years ago. He said it was the scariest time of his life, seeing you in that little incubator with tubes everywhere. Said he promised himself that if you pulled through, he'd always look out for you."

"Great," she muttered. "So he's never going to stop being overprotective."

"Probably not," I agreed. "But maybe he doesn't have to. Maybe it's time for all of us to recognize that you're not that fragile baby anymore."

I risked reaching out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She didn't pull away.

"I meant what I said before," I told her. "If you want me to back off, I will. But I need

to know that's what you actually want, not what you think you should want because of Tyler or your parents or any other obligation."

She was quiet for so long I thought she might not answer. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I don't know what I want. That's the problem."

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It wasn't the answer I'd hoped for, but it wasn't a rejection either. I'd take it.

"Fair enough," I said. "Figure it out on your own time. No pressure." I paused, then added, "I hope you come to the Fourth of July celebration tomorrow. The fireworks are always spectacular."

I stood, offering her my hand. After a moment's hesitation, she took it, letting me help her up from the lounge chair. I released her immediately, not wanting to push my luck.

"For what it's worth," I said as we walked back toward the path to the cabins, "I think you're the strongest person I know. You always have been. Even when you were little, tagging after Tyler and me, determined to keep up despite being four years younger."

Delaney smiled—just barely. "I was a pest."

"You were determined," I corrected. "And Tyler needed the challenge."

We reached the fork in the path where we would separate—her to the lakeside cabin, me to my staff quarters.

"Goodnight, Dee," I said, keeping my voice casual despite the pounding in my chest.

She hesitated, then surprised me by rising on tiptoe to press a light kiss to my cheek. "Goodnight, Jace."

I watched her disappear down the path, her silhouette fading into darkness. The spot where her lips touched my skin burned like a brand.

Tomorrow was Independence Day. Maybe it was time we both claimed ours.

Chapter Seven

“Independence Day”

Delaney

I woke to the sound of gentle drumming drifting across the lake, rhythmic and hypnotic in the pre-dawn stillness. For a moment, I lay listening, feeling the ancient cadence settle into my bones like a meditation. Today was the Fourth of July—Independence Day—and somehow that drumming felt like a call to something deeper than patriotic celebration.

My phone showed 6:47 AM. The girls were still asleep, but I was wide awake, my mind immediately jumping to last night's conversation with Jace under the stars. The way he'd opened up about his childhood, his fears, his feelings. The gentle kiss I'd pressed to his cheek before walking away, my pulse racing with emotions I wasn't ready to name.

I don't know what I want.

The words echoed as I slipped quietly from bed and padded to the kitchen for coffee. But maybe that wasn't entirely true anymore. Maybe I was just afraid to admit what I wanted because it meant risking everything.

I carried my mug out to the deck, wrapping a soft throw around my shoulders against the morning chill. The lake stretched before me like glass, the mountains reflected so

perfectly it was hard to tell where earth ended and sky began. The drumming continued, and I spotted a small fire burning on a distant point of land, tiny figures moving around it.

"You're up early."

Whitney emerged from the cabin, her own coffee in hand, blonde hair mussed with sleep.

"Couldn't sleep," I admitted. "What's with the drumming?"

"Resort newsletter under the door said there's a special Fourth of July sunrise ceremony this morning. Optional, but it sounded interesting." She settled into the chair beside me. "Native American guide leading some kind of release ritual. Perfect for someone who needs to let go of a few things."

Her pointed look wasn't lost on me. "Subtle as always."

"I prefer 'observant.'" She sipped her coffee. "So, how did stargazing go last night?"

Heat bloomed in my cheeks. "It was... educational."

"I'll bet." Whitney's grin was knowing. "You came back looking like someone had rearranged your entire worldview."

Before I could respond, Kayla and Amber emerged, drawn by our voices and the promise of coffee. Soon we were all on the deck, watching the sun climb higher over the mountains while the distant drumming called to something primal in our souls.

"We should go," Amber said suddenly. "To the ceremony. When's the last time any of us did something truly meaningful on vacation instead of just... existing?"

"I'm in," Kayla agreed. "There's something about this place that makes you want to dig deeper, you know?"

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I looked at my friends—these women who'd known me through every heartbreak and triumph, who'd watched me play it safe for so long they'd probably given up hope I'd ever take a real risk.

"Okay," I heard myself say. "Let's go."

The ceremony took place on a bluff overlooking the lake, where a circle of stones surrounded a small fire pit. About twenty guests had gathered, sitting cross-legged on provided blankets while a weathered man with kind eyes and silver-streaked braids spoke in low, reverent tones.

"I am Joseph Crow Feather," he said, his voice carrying easily in the still morning air. "My grandmother was Blackfeet, my grandfather Salish. Both tribes have called these mountains home for thousands of years, long before resorts and roads and the boundaries we draw on maps."

He gestured to the fire, where sweet-smelling smoke spiraled upward. "Fire has always been sacred—it transforms, it purifies, it carries our prayers to the Creator. This morning, we offer you an old ceremony for a new day. A chance to release what no longer serves you and make space for what wants to be born."

Joseph held up a small piece of bark paper and a charcoal stick. "Write down what you wish to be free from. Not with your mind, but with your heart. What weighs you down? What holds you back from the life you're meant to live?"

The papers and charcoal were passed around the circle. I stared at the blank surface, charcoal stick poised, while my friends scribbled around me. What did I want freedom from?

The obvious answer came immediately: expectations. I wrote the word in careful letters, then sat back to wait my turn.

But as Joseph continued speaking about release and new beginnings, my thoughts wandered. Freedom from expectations was only half the equation, wasn't it? What did I want freedom to do? Freedom to choose my own happiness. Freedom to take risks. Freedom to love without calculating the cost.

Freedom to be brave enough to reach for what I wanted, even if it scared me.

"Now," Joseph said, "one by one, we offer these burdens to the fire. As the smoke carries them away, know that you are making space for something better to take their place."

I watched as people approached the fire, some speaking their intentions aloud, others silently dropping their papers into the flames. Whitney went before me, her paper disappearing in a bright flare that sent sparks dancing toward the sky.

When my turn came, I walked to the fire on unsteady legs. The heat warmed my face as I held the paper over the flames.

"I release the need to meet everyone else's expectations," I said quietly, my voice stronger than I'd expected. "And I claim the courage to choose my own path."

The paper caught fire, the word "expectations" disappearing in a curl of smoke and ash. I watched it rise, feeling something tight in my chest loosen and fly away with it.

As I returned to my place in the circle, I caught sight of a familiar figure standing at the edge of the gathering. Jace leaned against a pine tree, arms crossed, watching the ceremony with respectful attention. When our eyes met, he gave me the slightest nod—approval, understanding, encouragement all wrapped in that simple gesture.

My pulse quickened, but this time it felt like an awakening.

After the ceremony, the day unfolded with the kind of peaceful rhythm that made you forget about clocks and schedules. We returned to the cabin for showers and a leisurely breakfast, then made our way to the resort's art pavilion, where a local watercolor artist named Margaret was setting up for a painting workshop.

"Today we're going to explore perspective," Margaret announced to the dozen guests who'd gathered around easels set up on the pavilion's wide deck. The view stretched across the lake to the mountains beyond, the morning light painting everything in soft pastels. "How the same scene can look completely different depending on where you stand, what time of day it is, how the light falls."

She held up a triangular piece of glass that caught the sunlight. "Anyone know what this is?"

"A kaleidoscope piece," Kayla said.

"Exactly. And what makes a kaleidoscope magical?"

"The way it changes," I said. "Every time you turn it, you see something completely new, even though it's the same pieces inside."

Margaret smiled. "Precisely. Life is like that too. The same situation can look entirely different depending on our perspective, our willingness to see with fresh eyes. Today, I want you to paint not just what you see, but how you feel about what you see."

I'd never been much of an artist, but something about the gentle instruction and the peaceful setting drew me in. I mixed colors on my palette—the deep blue of the lake, the soft green of the pines, the warm gold of the sunlight on the water.

As I painted, Margaret moved among us, offering quiet guidance. When she paused behind my easel, I tensed, expecting criticism.

"You're painting with your heart," she observed instead. "Look how you've captured the way the light seems to dance on the water. Very nice."

I stepped back to look at my work. The painting wasn't technically perfect, but it was... alive somehow. Full of movement and warmth and hope.

"So many people paint what they think they should see," Margaret continued. "But what happens when you open your eyes to inner landscapes as well as outer? What connections do you find? There lies the vision of the spirit."

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As the workshop wound down, I thought about kaleidoscopes again. How you had to turn them to see the new pattern. How staying in one position meant missing all the other beautiful possibilities.

Maybe it was time to turn the kaleidoscope of my own life.

The afternoon passed in a haze of relaxation. We lounged by the lake, read books in the shade, dozed in hammocks strung between trees. The kind of perfect summer day that lived in memory long after it was over.

As evening approached, the resort came alive with preparations for the Fourth of July celebration. Red, white, and blue decorations appeared on every surface. The smell of barbecue drifted from the beach, where staff were setting up long buffet tables for the evening feast.

I changed into denim shorts and a red tank top with tiny white stars—casual but still patriotic. My friends were getting ready with the kind of enthusiasm that suggested they expected this to be a memorable night.

"You look cute," Whitney said, adjusting her own outfit—navy blue shorts and a white off-shoulder top. "Very all-American girl. Perfect for catching a certain mountain man's attention."

"I'm dressing for a lakeside barbecue," I protested, though my cheeks warmed.

"Uh-huh. And I suppose it's a coincidence that you spent twenty minutes on your makeup?"

"Fifteen," I corrected, then realized that didn't help my case.

Amber laughed. "Just admit it, Dee. You're hoping to catch a certain someone's eye tonight."

I was saved from answering by Kayla's appearance in the doorway. She'd chosen khaki shorts and a red baseball tee, her braids swept up in a casual ponytail.

"Ready, ladies?" she asked. "I heard they're setting up the buffet tables down by the lake."

We made our way down to the lakefront as the sun began its descent toward the mountains. The scene was perfectly festive—long buffet tables set up on the beach with red, white, and blue tablecloths fluttering in the breeze, families spread out on blankets with coolers and lawn chairs, kids splashing in the shallow water while parents watched from the shore. The bluegrass band had set up on a small wooden platform near the dock, their music drifting across the water.

I spotted Jace almost immediately, not because I was looking for him (okay, I absolutely was), but because he commanded attention even in the casual crowd. He'd traded his usual resort uniform for khaki shorts and a navy polo that made his eyes look even more intense. He was helping staff set up the buffet line, his sleeves rolled up, looking completely at ease in the relaxed atmosphere.

"Go talk to him," Whitney murmured in my ear.

"He's working," I said, accepting a cold beer from a server circulating with drinks.

"He managed to find time for a private conversation last night," she pointed out. "I'm sure he can spare a few minutes now."

She had a point, but before I could work up the courage to approach him, Ruth called everyone's attention with a small bell.

"Folks, the buffet is ready! We've got all your Fourth of July favorites—burgers, hot dogs, all the fixings, plus Ruth's famous potato salad and coleslaw. Kids, don't forget to save room for s'mores later!"

The crowd began moving toward the buffet tables, families with children getting in line first while others continued lounging on their blankets or wading in the lake. We joined the line, the conversation flowing as easily as the cold drinks while we loaded our plates with perfectly grilled burgers and hot dogs, corn on the cob, potato salad, and coleslaw.

As the meal wound down and the sky deepened to purple, Ruth stood on the platform with the band's microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, in just a few minutes we'll be launching our Fourth of July fireworks display over the lake. This year's show is extra special—choreographed to music and designed to celebrate not just our nation's independence, but the personal freedom we all seek in our own lives. Find your spots on the beach or grab a blanket, and get ready for a spectacular show!"

Families began claiming prime spots along the shoreline, parents setting up lawn chairs while kids ran around with sparklers. Whitney headed off with her doctor toward a quieter section of beach, while Amber and Matt found a spot closer to the water. Kayla spread out a blanket with the older couple from our painting class, already deep in conversation about the day's art workshop, leaving me to find my own place to watch.

The first firework exploded just as I found a spot on the sand—a golden starburst that reflected perfectly in the lake's still surface. Families around me "ooohed" and "aaahed" as more followed, children pointing excitedly while parents tried to capture the perfect photo.

I was so mesmerized by the display that I didn't notice him approaching until he spoke.

"Mind if I join you?"

I turned to find Jace beside me, having changed from his work polo into a gray t-shirt and the same khaki shorts. The casual look suited him perfectly, making him seem more approachable somehow.

"Beautiful night for fireworks," he added, settling onto the sand beside me.

"It is," I agreed, my voice steady despite my racing pulse. "The whole day has been... illuminating."

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His eyebrows rose slightly. "The ceremony this morning?"

I nodded. "And the painting class. Lots of talk about perspective, about seeing things differently." I paused as a particularly spectacular firework lit up the sky. "About having the courage to change your view when the old one isn't serving you anymore."

"And what did you see when you changed your perspective?" he asked quietly, his voice barely audible over the crowd's cheers.

I turned to face him fully, my pulse hammering against my ribs. The moment stretched between us, electric with possibility.

"I saw that I've been an idiot," I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. "I saw that I've been so afraid of what everyone else might think, so focused on meeting expectations, that I've forgotten to ask myself what I actually want."

Another firework exploded overhead, casting us in golden light. Jace's eyes searched mine. "And what do you want, Dee?"

The question hung between us like a bridge I could either cross or burn. I thought about the ceremony this morning, about releasing expectations and claiming courage. About the kaleidoscope Margaret had shown us, how you had to turn it to see new patterns.

Time to turn.

"You," I said simply. "I want you. Not just for tonight, not just for this vacation. I

want to see where this goes between us, consequences be damned. I want to stop being afraid of my own feelings."

His expression shifted, hope blooming across his features. "Delaney..."

"I love you," I continued, the words pouring out like water through a broken dam. "I think I always have, maybe since I was thirteen years old and you brought me that stupid rock from one of your hikes with Tyler. Definitely since Jackson Hole, when I finally got to see what it would be like to be with you and then had to pretend it never happened."

The fireworks continued exploding overhead, but I barely noticed. All my attention was focused on Jace's face, on the way his expression transformed from surprise to wonder to something so tender it made my chest ache.

"I love you too," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "God, Dee, I've been in love with you for so long I forgot what it felt like not to want you."

Before I could respond, he was cupping my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing away tears I didn't realize I'd shed.

"Come with me," he said, taking my hand. "I want to show you something."

He led me away from the crowd, along a path that wound behind the staff cabins to a small overlook I hadn't known existed. The view was breathtaking—the entire lake spread out below us, the fireworks reflecting in the water like fallen stars, the mountains silhouetted against the night sky.

"This is my favorite spot on the property," he said, settling onto the grass. "I come here when I need to think, to clear my head. I've been coming here every night since you arrived, trying to figure out how to tell you how I feel."

I sat beside him, close enough that our shoulders touched. "You didn't need to figure it out. You just needed to say it."

"Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest," he admitted, turning to face me. "Especially when you're afraid of losing something precious."

"Tyler?"

"Tyler. Your family's acceptance. Your friendship. You." His hand found mine, fingers intertwining. "But I realized something this week. I was so busy trying not to lose you that I never actually tried to have you."

Another round of fireworks burst overhead, the colors painting his face in shades of gold and crimson. I reached up to trace the line of his jaw, marveling at the way he leaned into my touch.

"What about Tyler?" I asked. "What about the complications?"

"We'll figure it out," he said simply. "Together. Maybe Tyler will surprise us. Maybe your parents will come around. Or maybe they won't, and we'll handle that too. But I'm done making decisions based on fear, Dee. I'm done walking away from what might be the best thing that's ever happened to me."

The sincerity in his voice, the certainty, made my chest feel full to bursting. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying let's stop analyzing and start living. Let's see where this takes us without trying to map out every step in advance." He smiled, that devastating half-smile that had been undoing me for years. "I'm saying let's be brave enough to fall, knowing we'll catch each other."

I was already leaning toward him when the sky exploded in the finale—a rapid-fire succession of fireworks that lit up the night like daylight. But I barely noticed, because Jace's lips were on mine, soft and sure and full of promise.

This kiss was different from our previous encounters—less desperate, more purposeful. A claiming and a surrender all at once. His hands tangled in my hair, and I pressed closer, pouring years of suppressed longing into the connection between us.

When we finally broke apart, glowing and breathless, the last echoes of the fireworks were fading over the lake.

"Stay with me tonight," he whispered against my lips. "Not just for sex, though God knows I want that too. Stay because you want to wake up in my arms. Stay because you're ready to stop running."

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I looked into his eyes, seeing my own hopes and fears reflected there, and knew I was done running from this, from him, from the possibility of something beautiful and complicated and real.

"Yes," I said, the word carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken promises. "Yes to all of it."

He stood and offered me his hand, and I took it without hesitation. As he led me toward his cabin, toward a future I couldn't predict but was finally brave enough to embrace, I felt something I hadn't experienced in years:

The exhilarating freedom of choosing my own path, consequences and all.

His cabin was smaller than ours but infinitely cozier, with a stone fireplace, rustic furniture, and windows that framed the lake like living paintings. Jace lit a few candles while I stood by the window, watching the last guests making their way back from the beach.

"Second thoughts?" he asked, coming to stand behind me, his hands settling on my shoulders.

"No," I said, leaning back against his chest. "Just... absorbing. This feels like a beginning, doesn't it?"

"The best kind," he agreed, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Want some wine?"

Coffee? I can make s'mores if you're feeling festive."

I turned in his arms, smiling at the nervous energy beneath his casual offer. "Are you trying to delay the inevitable, Mountain Man?"

"Maybe a little," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "This feels important. I want to get it right."

"You already are," I assured him, rising on my toes to brush my lips against his. "Stop overthinking and kiss me properly."

He needed no further encouragement. His mouth claimed mine with a hunger that had been building for days, weeks, maybe years. My tank top came off easily, his hands gentle but urgent as they reacquainted themselves with my skin. I pushed his shirt off his shoulders, desperate to feel skin against skin.

When he lifted me and carried me to his bed, I felt weightless with possibility and desire and love finally acknowledged. The windows were open, letting in the cool mountain air and the distant sound of laughter from the resort grounds, but the world beyond these walls might as well have been a thousand miles away.

He laid me down gently, his eyes drinking in the sight of me in the candlelight. "You're so beautiful, Dee. I've imagined this so many times, but the reality..."

"Is better," I finished, pulling him down to me. "It's always better when it's real."

This time, we took our time. His hands mapped every inch of my body like he was memorizing a sacred text, his mouth following with kisses and whispered endearments that made my pulse race as much as my body respond. When I returned the favor, exploring the planes and angles of his chest, the ridged muscles of his abdomen, the way he shuddered when I kissed the sensitive spot below his ear, it felt

like coming home to something I'd been searching for my entire life.

"I love you," I whispered as he settled between my thighs, his weight perfect and right and everything I'd been craving without knowing it.

"I love you too," he replied, his forehead resting against mine. "So damn much, Dee. You have no idea."

When he finally moved inside me, slow and sure and infinitely tender, I understood the difference between having sex and making love. This wasn't just physical joining—it was emotional, spiritual, the melding of two souls that had beencircling each other for years, finally brave enough to close the distance.

We moved together in perfect rhythm, building toward something beautiful and inevitable. When I shattered in his arms, crying out his name into the candlelit darkness, he followed me over the edge, his own release wrung from him like a prayer.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow to normal. Through the open window, I could hear the peaceful sounds of the lake—the gentle lap of water against the shore, the distant call of a loon, the whisper of wind through the pines.

"So what happens now?" I asked, tracing patterns on his chest with my fingertip.

"Now we figure it out as we go," he said, his hand stroking my hair. "One day at a time. One conversation at a time. Starting with Tyler."

I tensed slightly at the mention of my brother, but Jace's arms tightened around me reassuringly.

"We'll call him together," he continued. "Soon. Before we lose our nerve or he hears it from someone else. We'll be honest about our feelings and hope he understands that we're adults capable of making our own choices."

"And if he can't?"

"Then we'll handle that too. But I have a feeling Tyler might surprise us. He's wanted both of us to find happiness for a long time. Maybe he'll realize this could be the perfect outcome."

I smiled against his chest, allowing myself to hope. "You make it sound so simple."

"Maybe it is. Maybe we've been overcomplicating things because we were afraid." He tilted my chin up so I could see his eyes. "But I'm not afraid anymore, Dee. Not when I'm holding you like this."

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"Neither am I," I realized, and it was true. For the first time in years—maybe ever—I felt completely, perfectly at peace. "I love you, Jace Redmond."

"I love you too, Delaney Shaw," he replied, sealing the words with a kiss that tasted like promises and forever. "Happy Independence Day."

As sleep finally claimed us, wrapped in each other's arms with the sounds of the Montana night drifting through the windows, I thought about independence—not just the kind celebrated with fireworks and flags, but the personal kind that came from choosing love over fear, courage over comfort, the unknown future over the familiar past.

Today hadn't just been about celebrating America's freedom. It had been about claiming my own.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow we'd begin the rest of our lives.

Epilogue

Delaney

One week back in Denver, and I couldn't concentrate on anything longer than five minutes.

I stared at my computer screen, where a half-finished marketing analysis for our fall

campaign glowed accusingly at me. The quarterly reports that used to capture my complete attention now felt as substantial as tissue paper. Through my office window, the city stretched out in concrete and glass, and all I could think about was mountain lakes and pine trees and a certain blue-eyed adventure guide who'd turned my carefully ordered world upside down.

My phone buzzed with a text from Jace: Miss you. How's the corporate world treating you?

I typed back: Like a square peg in a round hole. Miss you too.

The response came immediately: Free to talk? I have an idea.

Instead of texting back, I called him. His voice, warm and familiar, made my chest tighten with longing.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "How's your first week back in civilization?"

"Terrible," I admitted, leaning back in my desk chair. "I keep looking at spreadsheets and thinking about kaleidoscopes. My assistant thinks I've had some kind of breakdown."

"Have you?"

"Maybe the good kind." I glanced at my office door, then lowered my voice. "I can't stop thinking about you. About us. About what we said we'd do."

"About calling Tyler?"

My stomach flipped. We'd talked about it every night this week, but somehow there

was always a reason to postpone. Time differences, his work schedule, my fear of ruining everything.

"I think," Jace continued, "we need to stop overthinking this and just do it. Rip off the band-aid."

"Now?" My voice squeaked slightly.

"Why not? He's probably home from work by now. And if we don't do it soon, I'm going to lose my nerve."

I took a deep breath, thinking about the release ceremony at Hope Peak, about claiming courage over fear. "Okay. Let's do it."

"Really?"

"Before I change my mind. But we do it together, on video call. I need to see his face."

"Deal. Give me five minutes to set up my laptop, then call me back."

Ten minutes later, I was staring at my laptop screen, looking at Jace's face in one window while Tyler's contact information loomed in another. Jace had changed into a clean flannel shirt, and I'd quickly touched up my makeup and brushed my hair.

"Ready?" Jace asked.

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"No. But let's do it anyway."

I clicked the call button. Tyler answered on the second ring, my brother's familiar face filling the screen. He was in his Denver apartment, still wearing his work clothes, looking tired but pleased.

"Hey, Dee! This is a nice surprise. How was your girls' trip? I want to hear all about—" He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widening as he registered Jace in the shared screen. "Jace? What are you... are you guys calling me together?"

"Hi, Tyler," Jace said, his voice steady despite the tension I could see in his shoulders. "We need to talk to you about something."

Tyler's expression shifted from confusion to understanding to something that might have been amusement. He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "This should be interesting. Go ahead."

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. All those speeches I'd rehearsed disappeared into thin air.

"We're together," Jace said simply when my silence stretched too long. "Delaney and I. We're in love, and we wanted you to hear it from us."

Tyler was quiet for a long moment, his gaze moving between our faces. "How long?"

"It's complicated," I managed to find my voice. "But really, since Jackson Hole. At Shannon's wedding."

"Ah." Tyler nodded slowly. "I wondered about that."

"You wondered?" I squeaked.

"Dee, you disappeared from the reception for three hours, and Jace left the next morning looking like he'd been hit by a truck. Plus, you both got really weird whenever I mentioned the other one's name." Tyler's lips twitched. "I'm not blind."

Jace and I exchanged glances. "You knew?" Jace asked.

"I suspected. I wasn't sure until right now, seeing you both so terrified to tell me." Tyler shook his head, grinning. "Did you really think I'd be angry?"

"Yes," I said at the same time Jace said, "Maybe."

Tyler laughed. "Look, you're both adults. You're also two of my favorite people in the world. If you can make each other happy, then I'm happy. It's not like I get a vote in who either of you date."

"Really?" I felt tears pricking my eyes. "You're not upset? You don't think it's weird?"

"Weird? Maybe a little. But good weird." Tyler's expression softened. "Dee, I know you've been miserable for months. And Jace, you've been carrying a torch for my sister for years."

"Years?" I turned to stare at Jace, who had the grace to look embarrassed.

"You weren't exactly subtle," Tyler told him. "The way you'd light up whenever she came home from college, how you always found excuses to be around when she was visiting. I just figured you'd never act on it because of our friendship."

"I almost didn't," Jace admitted. "I was terrified of losing you."

"You're not going to lose me," Tyler said firmly. "You're my brother, man. That doesn't change. Although," he paused, grinning wickedly, "if you hurt my sister, I will bury you somewhere in the mountains where they'll never find the body."

"Tyler!" I protested, but I was laughing.

"I'm kidding. Mostly." Tyler's expression grew serious. "But I mean it about wanting you both to be happy. You're good for each other. I can see it in your faces right now."

I wiped at my eyes, overwhelmed with relief. "I love you, big brother."

"Love you too, pest. Both of you." Tyler paused. "So what happens now? Long distance relationship?"

"Actually," I said, glancing at Jace, "that's the other thing. My boss confirmed that I have the option to work remotely—even out of state." I took a deep breath. "I'm thinking of spending the rest of the summer at Hope Peak. Working from Montana for a while."

Tyler's eyebrows rose. "That's a big change for you."

"Maybe it's time for a big change," I said, surprising myself with how certain I sounded. "I've been playing it safe for so long, I forgot what it felt like to take a real risk."

"Well," Tyler grinned, "if you're going to take a risk, might as well make it a good one. When do you leave?"

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"Tomorrow," Jace and I said simultaneously, then looked at each other in surprise.

"Tomorrow?" I laughed. "I haven't even packed."

"Ruth has a cabin opening up for the rest of the season," Jace said. "I may have already put a hold on it. You know, just in case."

"Presumptuous much?"

"Hopeful," he corrected, his eyes warm. "Very, very hopeful."

Twenty-four hours later, I stood on the familiar dock at Hope Peak Lake, watching the sun begin its descent toward the mountains. My laptop and work materials were set up in Jace's cabin, my clothes hung in his closet, and for the first time in years, I felt like I was exactly where I belonged.

Jace emerged from the boathouse, having just finished securing the evening's kayak tour equipment. He'd changed into jeans and the blue flannel shirt I'd grown to love, his hair still damp from washing off the day's work.

"How did the client call go?" he asked, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

"They loved the campaign concept. Apparently, working from 'a place of natural inspiration' is giving my creative work a new edge." I leaned back against his chest, feeling his laugh rumble through me. "Who knew that staring at mountains would

make me better at marketing outdoor gear?"

"Shocking," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the spot below my ear that still made me shiver. "What gave them that idea?"

I turned in his arms, looping my hands around his neck. The evening light caught in his dark hair, bringing out those auburn highlights I'd grown to love. "I came here to forget about you," I said softly. "Instead, I got seduced by the mountain man all over again."

"This time let's make it for keeps," he promised, his voice rough with emotion as he tightened his arms around me.

"For keeps," I agreed, just before his lips found mine.

As he kissed me, soft and sweet and full of promise, the sun painted the lake in shades of gold and crimson. In the distance, a loon called across the water, its haunting song carrying on the evening breeze. The mountains stood sentinel around us, ancient and enduring, witnesses to a love that had finally found its courage.

I'd spent my whole life following other people's expectations, choosing the safe path, the predictable outcome. But standing here in Jace's arms, with the Montana wilderness spread out before us and a future full of beautiful uncertainty ahead, I finally understood what Whitney had tried to tell me:

Sometimes the best things in life required taking a leap of faith.

It was time to fly.