



The One With The Secret Crushes

Author: *Alexis Anne*

Category: Romance

Description: A new small town romance series from USA Today Bestselling Author, Alexis Anne...

How do you get two crazy, stubborn, (wildly in love and in denial) kids (adults) together?

Have the meddling small town book club set them up on a surprise blind date!

When Mackenzie Howard moved home after a decade away, she hoped her former high school best friend (and secret crush), Scott Shaw, would finally see her as much more than friends. Instead, he didn't recognize her at all and she's spent the last six months avoiding another mortifying run-in, which is hard to do in a small town like Lost Creek.

Grouchy bar owner Scott Shaw is tired of waiting for the right time and place to confess he's head over heels in love with Mackenzie. But ever since returning to Lost Creek, she's avoided him at all costs and he doesn't know why.

The book club is ready to meddle. While Mackenzie mistakenly believes no one knows about her feelings for Scott, and Scott thinks he's kept his crush mostly under wraps, the entire town of Lost Creek is well aware that they are destined to be together and helps the book club trap them on a surprise blind date.

Now with Mackenzie's full attention (finally), Scott sets out to romance the pants off her (literally, hopefully) and prove that not only does he remember everything about their friendship, about her, but the only relationship he wants going forward, is forever.

The One With The Secret Crushes is a 30k word novella based on the 10k word short story Still Standing that appeared in the Loving Carolina Anthology. It has been heavily edited, updated, and expanded into this new first book of the Lost Creek series.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

One

Mackenzie

You let reality smack her in the face

The town of Lost Creek was many things but quiet wasn't one of them. Aside from the roar of the river that served as our permanent background noise, there were the whispers of the town busybodies, of which my Aunt Sharon was their fearless leader. Gossip spread across town like wildfire. Everyone knew everything about everybody.

Which was why I'd kept mostly to myself since moving home six months ago. Winter helped keep most of the town from noticing my hermit status but now it was spring and there was nowhere to hide.

I felt several pairs of eyes on me as I dropped into the empty chair at the Green Door Café. My best friend, and new employee, Joanne, had selected one of the sidewalk tables to enjoy the spring air drifting through the mountain gorge. I was exposed and I could already hear the barely hushed words as information spread.

Mackenzie Howard is out in public!

She's wearing a sundress. It's a bit too chilly for sundresses.

How is the poor dear doing? Is she smiling?

"We really don't have to do this." I took a sip of the coffee she had waiting for me.

"Yes. We. Do." Joanne flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder like I exhausted her.

Which, to be fair, I probably did.

I shrugged. "I worked hard, and it paid off." This little celebration breakfast was nice in theory, but Maeve Applebottom was staring at me from her usual perch at the window of the cafe. Without a doubt she was providing a detailed account to her best friend, my aforementioned Aunt Sharon, on the bags under my eyes, the cleanliness of my hair and skin, and my decision to wear a dress and Chucks, when Joanne and I should be at the office.

"You moved home, took over the family business, lost your dad, and turned the company around. We're booked solid for the rest of this month, all of May, and at eighty percent capacity for June and July. Your hard work didn't just pay off, Mack, it fucking exploded." She shoved a stack of pancakes my way. "Now celebrate."

"I think celebrations are supposed to be joyful."

She waved her syrupy fork at me. "And you're joyful...underneath your thick exterior of isolation and sadness. Crack that crust, and I donotmean the toast." She tugged the white plate of slightly browned and buttered bread away.

I owned the fact that I was letting my grief be the excuse I gave everyone for declining their kind invitations. But it wasn'tactuallythe reason I had skipped every girls' night out, every birthday party, every dinner invitation.

Nope, the reality was much more embarrassing.

Lucy, Joanne's younger sister, grabbed a chair from another table and joined us. She was an exact copy of Joanne, just three years younger and with a bigger smile.

"Congrats on landing that huge client for the summer." Then she promptly stole Joanne's muffin.

Joanne glared at her but did nothing to stop it.

After my dad's funeral I threw myself into making Lost Creek Cabins a destination people dreamed of visiting for long romantic getaways, weddings, and for summer adventures hiking, horseback riding, and rafting down the river.

The businesses in our tiny Appalachian town had already been working together to create a symbiotic system for bringing different groups of tourists in at different times of year and packaging up our offerings. After a winter of pushing it even further, special things were happening for me, and everyone else.

I was just starting to breathe, to feel like a success, when I received the biggest booking in the history of our business. I knew because I crawled through all of Dad's records for proof.

Someone had rented out the Golden Hour cabin for the entire summer and paid in full from the first of May to the thirty-first of October.

The cash injection from the summer-long rental pushed us over the edge and into the black at an unusually early date in the year. Joanne declared our need for a celebration but all I would agree to was breakfast because it had the lowest probability of me seeing Scott Shaw.

"It means that even if we don't book another day this summer, even if we had a bunch of cancellations—which we won't—the money we sank into renovations and updating the cabins is covered." Joanne held up her coffee for a toast. "Congrats, boss."

I clinked my mug against hers and Lucy's and let a little pride warm my chest. I was damn proud that all that work paid off. Dad had done a great job carving out the business and keeping it running. All I did was take it to the next level and modernize it a little. New website, more social media, new colors. The reservations flooded in.

"You should come to the saloon Friday night and keep the celebration going," Joanne said.

Lucy nodded enthusiastically. "You haven't been out once. I love Friday nights so much. Scottie's done so much to the place. It's clean now. And the music! I mean, come on, live music in Lost Creek?"

I might not have stepped foot inside Still Standing Saloon, but I knew everything that changed when Scott took over the family business from his Uncle Jerry.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

Scott renovated half the bar to be an upscale bourbon and whiskey experience. The other half was a cleaner version of the dive bar we all knew and loved. He added local musicians on Friday nights and lured in bands from out of town for Saturdays. He hosted bourbon tasting experiences, which Joanne booked for our guests on occasion.

I knew all of this because I'd had a crush on Scott Shaw since my freshman year of high school.

I avoided Scott Shaw because he forgot I existed, and it crushed me. Four years of friendship apparently meant nothing to him. All along I feared he simply put up with me because he felt sorry for me. That I was a kid to him and once I was gone, easily forgotten. For years I hung onto the hope that when I finally ran into Scott again, he'd see me as a woman.

Instead, he didn't recognize me at all.

"I really don't like going out," I replied, hoping they didn't notice the blush on my cheeks. Embarrassment was never something I was good at hiding. "Bars aren't my scene."

Certainly not bars owned and operated by Scott Shaw.

"Hmph." Lucy stuck out her lower lip.

"It's not gonna happen," Joanne grumbled. "We should just quit trying."

Lucy leaned closer to her sister and tried to cover her mouth as she whispered, "But shelikeshim."

Great. My stupid crush was known just like everything else in this town.

Joanne didn't bother whispering. "She does and she's being stubborn. I've known Mack long enough to know that you don't make her do anything. You let reality smack her in the face."

"I guess that means we have no choice," Lucy sighed.

"We do not. I'm really sorry my friend, but this is for your own good." Joanne waved at Maeve.

"What are you sorry for?" My gut sank as I saw it all happening in real time. Maeve stood up, eyes locked on me. From my left Aunt Sharon emerged from a car I didn't recognize. Aviana Rendall approached on the sidewalk with her Australian Shepherd, Barnaby.

This was an ambush.

"You're going to book club," Lucy said. "It's time."

No.No, no.

"You can't hide forever," Joanne shoved a forkful of pancakes in her mouth.

"I'll go to the saloon on Friday. I'll have breakfast here every day."Anythingbut book club.

Lucy shook her head slowly. "It's too late. Book club it is."

I was surrounded.

"Hello my darling niece!" Aunt Sharon reached down to pat Barnaby's head all while grinning maniacally at me. "We hear you've finally decided to join us."

"I think there's been a misunderstanding." Maybe if I crawled under the table I could slither past their feet and run for it.

Aunt Sharon clamped her hand down on my shoulder. "No misunderstanding. We've all sat back and given you time. We hoped you'd come to us on your own. But we cannot, we simply cannot, watch you wallow a moment longer. We've given you so many opportunities, Mackenzie. I know murder mysteries aren't your thing, but we must start somewhere."

"It's fun," Aviana insisted. "And there's food. Even if you don't like the book you'll like the food."

I wasn't so sure about that.

My Aunt Sharon did nothing conventionally. She wrote a best-selling series of books and then quit. She traveled extensively...for cheese. Seriously, she spent a month in Italy and all she came home with, all she talked about, was the cheese. And she ran Lost Creek's one and only book club, This Book Club Is My Alibi, also known as the TBCIMAs (tee-buh-see-muhs), and/or the Alibis. But it was no ordinary book club. It was a murder mystery book club. The only thing they read was murder mysteries, preferably serial killers. So many serial killers. It was all they talked about, aside from town gossip. The books, movies, podcasts, all serial killers.

And did they meet at the town bookstore? Oh no. Of course not. They met at the saloon instead.

Fuck my life.

But it was morning and Scott worked late. Sharon had the keys to the bar because he wouldn't be there. This would be fine.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

"If it's so much fun then Joanne and Lucy should join us too." I shot daggers in their direction.

Joanne smirked. "I've got to run the office while the boss is getting some much-needed socialization."

"And I have a doctor's appointment," Lucy shrugged.

"Traitors. The lot of you."

Joanne covered my hand with hers and squeezed. "I can't sit back and watch you hide from the things you want anymore."

"And what is it you think I want?" I asked through clenched teeth.

She cocked her head and gave me a look that said everything she wouldn't say out loud because it would embarrass me even more than I already was. Talk to Scottie already.

"You want to spend time with your aunt, of course." Sharon replied instead. "And you're accepting my dinner invitation this week. I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Oh, can we do that?" Lucy asked. "Then you're definitely coming out Friday night. I'm not taking no for an answer either."

Maeve nodded. "Excellent. I'll see you for breakfast one day this week. I'll even let you pick the day."

"How gracious of you," I muttered. Forced socialization was the kind of thing that would only happen to me. "Well, I better get this book you're going to force me to read." I waved next door to the town's bookstore, The TBR Pile.

"I'll go with you!" Everyone offered at once.

"You've got to be kidding me." I rubbed my temples as a headache began to bloom. "I can be trusted to walk into a bookstore by myself, thank you."

"But will you show up at the saloon?" Maeve's lips pinched.

"I drove." Joanne held up her car keys. "So her only escape is hitchhiking or walking."

I would not be walking the narrow mountain road that ran along the river and they all knew it. "You think I'm going to hitchhike after listening to you all talk about serial killers for months? No. I will pop into the store and buy the book, then join you at the saloon." Where I would not see Scott.

Probably.

"I'll finish my pancakes and make sure she keeps her word." Joanne grinned.

Sharon huffed. "Fine. Can you give Willow back her keys?" She pulled two sets of keys out of her bag. One for the saloon and one for Willow, the owner of the TBR Pile.

"You really commit to a bit, don't you?" She borrowed Willow's car just to spy on me. Ridiculous!

"What's the point of reading all these books if we don't learn from them, Mackenzie?"

Maybe I could steal a bottle of bourbon from the bar. I was going to need something strong tonight. Scott probably wouldn't notice it was missing any more than he noticed me when I moved back.

Knowing I had no choice but to attend book club, I grabbed my bag. "I'll see you in a few."

A chorus of voices agreed, and I rolled my eyes before yanking the blue door to the TBR Pile open and colliding with a warm, hard, masculine wall of flannel.

We stumbled back into the store. He caught me by the elbows and righted me with ease, his large hands warm and steady. My head buzzed and warmth flooded my veins in an exciting and unusual way, which was really unfortunate for me considering who I'd just run into.

Scott. Freaking. Shaw. I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me whole. This day just could not get any worse. It couldn't. My celebratory breakfast was a trap, then I was ambushed, and for the cherry on top, I mowed over the one man I was actively trying to avoid. I would apologize, he wouldn't recognize me, and then I'd fling myself into the raging river for a grand finale.

But before I could open my mouth, he grinned. "Hey Mackenzie."

Two

Scott

I'm always a grumpy ass.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

"You look like shit."

I had the very best of friends. "Thanks?"

Travis Montgomery rolled his eyes. "No seriously, what is going on with you, Scottie?"

I looked around the offices of Outdoor Experiences of Lost Creek, or ODX for short. Travis spent two days a week in the offices helping with the business side of the operation and the rest of his life outdoors. Lucky for me, ODX was right next door to my bar and I could bother him all I wanted to on office days.

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"No shit. You should come on my hike tomorrow. Get out and away from work for a day."

Usually I had no problem taking Travis up on his outdoor adventure offers. We grew up hiking, rafting, and climbing together with our friends Digger and Huk. Travis and Huk made it their lives to be outdoors at all times, while Digger went to work for his dad, and I went to work at the saloon after a short detour through culinary school. When Huk moved away we kept up our routine, eventually adding poker nights to our rotations of activities. It wasn't the same without Huk, but there was nothing we could do to bring him home, so we made the most of our slightly off-kilter friendships. Lately I hadn't been in the mood for much of anything except cooking, and even that was proving frustrating.

"I'll think about it." It wasn't a terrible idea. I needed to do something to get me out of this funk and pushing my body to the limit was guaranteed to earn me a good night of sleep.

But all I really wanted to do was walk into the Lost Creek Cabin offices and ask Mackenzie why she was avoiding me like the plague.

"Was I a dick in high school?"

Travis balked. "No. Where the fuck did that come from?"

I shrugged. There had to be a reason Mackenzie hated me. She wouldn't make eye contact. If she saw me in the distance she changed her course. It was so fucking obvious it had to be intentional. Considering we hadn't really spoken since the day she left for college, whatever I'd done had to have taken place back then. "I dunno. Been contemplating life or some shit."

Travis grunted. "You know, I've noticed something."

Well that couldn't be good. "Okay?"

He shuffled a stack of release forms into a folder and set it aside. "You became a grumpy ass around the time Mack moved back."

I looked to the ceiling for patience. "I'm always a grumpy ass."

"True. But your mood has been decidedly awful for approximately six and a half months."

"Approximately?"

He leaned back in his chair and set his boots on the corner of the desk before threading his fingers behind his head. "Let me lay this out for you, buddy. In October you learned Mack was moving back and that her dad was dying. You were both sad and excited. You got a haircut, you fuckingshaved." For some reason he cocked an eyebrow at me. "You started dressing nicer."

"Is there a point to this?" I already knew all of this. I'd just been hoping no one noticed.

"And then she was here and your mood went south fast and has stayed there ever since."

A man didn't walk around with a spring in his step when the only woman he'd ever wanted was ignoring him. It was just a scientific fact.

"And you're a good dude. Her dad was dying. You gave her space. You let her mourn. But man, something has to give. You're a pain in the ass and Joanne won't shut up about how she has to get Mack a social life."

It was tricky being in love with a woman who didn't know you were in love with her. Even trickier when she worked with your best friend's sister.

"I also happened to notice the frequency of your visits to these fine offices escalated exponentially when Joanne started working with Mack. Me thinks someone is hoping for information."

"Me thinks?" But yes, dammit, I was hoping for information. Every little morsel he dropped I ate up and asked for more.

How is the new job going? Does Joanne like working with her best friend? Tell them to drop by the saloon after work. Drinks on me.

I was a fool. Of course Travis noticed. It wasn't like he wasn't well fucking aware of my crush on her in high school. She was two years younger than us and I treated our friendship with caution. Mostly because losing her friendship would have gutted me, but also because the age difference felt insurmountable at the time. She'd lost her mom and with it some of her core teenage experiences. She was playing catchup and the last thing she needed was an upperclassman drooling all over her while she did it.

"If you want the inside scoop, just ask." Travis spread his arms out wide, a stupid smirk on his stupid face.

Fuck it. "How is she?"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

His grin widened. "She's doing okay, considering the shitty reason she moved home. The business is thriving and aside from the fact she lives like a hermit, she seems happy."

My chest ached. Mackenzie shouldn't be hiding away at work and home. She should be with all of us, the people who cared about her. Again, it gnawed at me that this was somehow my fault. I'd done something that made it hard for her to come to town.

Travis sat up. "Okay, what is that face? This news should have made you feel better, not worse."

I scratched my neck. I wasn't sure why this was hard. Travis knew pretty much everything about me from all the shit we pulled as kids to my crush on Mackenzie to the mess that was cleaning up the bar and saving the family legacy.

"I think she hates me."

Travis stared at me for several beats. He stared so long I wondered if he'd turned to stone. Then he burst out laughing so hard he slapped his thigh. "Oh my god," he wiped away tears, "this has to be the funniest shit I've heard in a long, long time."

I waited while he laughed at my expense, crossing my arms and debating revenge. Tuna fish in his favorite boots sounded like an appropriate amount of payback.

He took a breath and let it out. "My good dude, she's crazy about you."

That...wasn't true.

He rolled his eyes. "She was crazy about you in high school. You just couldn't believe it. All your honor and code of conduct shit. She's always been into you. Joanne has been losing it trying to get her to talk to you. They even concocted a scheme to get her to book club today just to put you two in the same room."

The TBCIMAs. My murderous little book nerds. When Willow kicked them out of the bookstore, I took them in. It was a combination of curiosity—because how do you get kicked out of a bookstore—and compassion for Sharon. That woman had a huge heart and an even bigger mouth.

And she was Mackenzie's aunt. The only family she had left. I couldn't reach Mackenzie, I couldn't change the shit hand she got dealt, but I could give her wacky aunt and her book club a place to meet. For months I'd been hoping she'd walk through the door on the second Tuesday of the month, ready to talk about murder.

Today, apparently, was that day.

My world jumbled as everything I thought I knew shifted and rearranged itself.

"But...why is she avoiding me if she doesn't hate me?"

Travis stood up and clapped his big paw of a hand on my shoulder. "That's a question for Mack. Even Joanne can't figure it out. But I do know for a fact she doesn't hate you."

"Did Joanne come right out and ask, 'Do you hate Scottie?'"Because unless she did, I'm sticking to my theory." I did something or she overheard something. Hopefully it was a misunderstanding. Something we could laugh about and put behind us.

Travis shook his head. "Women know when their friends hate a man. It's like ESP or something. You didn't do anything nefarious."

Once upon a time—it felt like another life—we were friends. We liked the same music, had the same juvenile sense of humor. We'd share earbuds and listen to new songs and she'd fall asleep on my shoulder at basketball games because they were boring.

Mackenzie took a lot of naps those days. She had trouble sleeping and took all the hardest classes, so she had tons of homework, but she never wanted to miss anything. She didn't like basketball, but we had to go to the games. She didn't care for awkward school dances, but she bought the ticket and put on the dress, and even though I never took the chance and asked her to be my date, I was always there to keep her company and make sure she got on the dance floor at least once.

I didn't go to culinary school right after high school. I worked at ODX with Travis and Red, the owner, when I wasn't helping my Uncle Jerry at the saloon. So I was always available to pick Mackenzie up from school and take her home and to whatever school events she insisted on attending even after I graduated. She fell asleep in my car more times than I could count, and I would just sit there listening to music while she napped in her own driveway, curled up in the front seat like it was the most comfortable bed in the world.

For four years she was my world.

And then she was gone.

In the six and a half months she'd been back, she avoided me, and I let her because whatever she needed I would give it to her, even if it was space from me. But now I saw the error of my ways. Something was wrong and instead of addressing it head on and clearing it away, it festered.

No more. Today she was coming to murder book club at my saloon. It didn't matter to me if it was by force or not, it put us in the same room, and I would take it from there.

I wasn't letting another day go by where Mackenzie thought I was a villain. I wanted my friend back, even if she didn't want me as anything more. "Then it seems I need to have a long overdue conversation with Mackenzie."

"That's the spirit." Travis clicked the computer mouse and got back to work. "What goes on at these book club meetings anyway?"

"Shenanigans." Anything that involved Sharon and Maeve ended in shenanigans. "They talk about murder. So much murder. I don't blame Willow for kicking them out of her shop." I shuddered at the memory of them trying to reenact a murder scene last month. It was hilarious and macabre. "They gossip about everyone. And then I feed them to get them to stop talking." They were my test group. Whatever new menu idea I came up with, they ate it first and gave me surprisingly helpful feedback. Especially if it involved cheese.

Travis grunted. "Sounds...awful."

It was and it wasn't. There was something about it I enjoyed. Maybe it was the change of pace. My days had gotten pretty fucking boring. Aside from meeting up with my friends, all I did was work. I had my regulars who more often than not came in to unload their shitty days. Then I had my Friday and Saturday night crowds which were busy as all hell, but there was music and dancing and my special menu of food. I lived for those nights. To be honest it was probably the only thing that kept me from being bored out of my mind.

Except the second Tuesday of every month the strangest group of book nerds invaded my bar to talk about murder. They laughed and gave each other a hard time while I watched from just outside their circle.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:12 pm

Even though I never once let on, I read every book they picked and was listening along to their babbling while I worked. I liked knowing what they were talking about—even if it was gruesome shit.

"Thanks for the pep talk." We traded our usual handshake.

"Travis's Love Line is available from eight to eight every weekday, Monday to Friday. Any love emergencies on the weekend are to be directed to Huk's Heart Rehab, preferably at an ungodly hour as retribution for being long distance at all fucking times."

"You think he'll come back for Karis?" Huk's little sister was suddenly a single mom after her cheating husband skipped town without a backward glance.

A pencil snapped in Travis's hand. "Yeah, I do. I still can't believe that sniveling little shit disappeared before any of us could beat his ass."

We were all best friends, but we all knew there was a special bond between Travis and Huk. They watched over each other's siblings like protective bears. Travis took it hard that he'd been on a mountain when the news hit the gossip airwaves and he couldn't personally escort Julien out of town. Gossip either started in my bar or ended there. Unfortunately this was one of the times I heard about it last. Julien had packed two bags and roared out of town by the time any of us knew what happened.

"I'm sorry for Karis but I won't be upset if we get Huk back for a few days." I missed his grouchy ass. It sucked having to carry the grouchy load all alone. We all had our roles in our group. Travis was the ex-football player who charmed tourists and kept

our energy up. He was our happy. Digger on the other hand the quieter version of Travis. He had zero intention of ever having a traditional relationship and liked his sex life spicy. He was our intellectual schemer. Huk kept us on the straight and narrow, even from a distance. He was the voice of reason, hated large groups and loud noise, and kept to himself unless he was with us. I was the grouch behind the bar, providing the beer, and pining for a woman who would never love me.

"You and me both," Travis agreed. "We could all use a good head smacking."

"You just filled in pretty well."

"And I didn't particularly like it. I don't mind that shit with Joanne and Lucy but talking you through heart troubles gives me the ick."

"You shouldn't have opened up Travis's Love Line then." I opened the door and stepped outside.

"I take it back. The Love Line is closed. Only annoy Huk!"

The door swung shut and I took a cleansing breath as I stared at Still Standing Saloon. I loved my Uncle Jerry but a businessman he was not. He would have had to sell it if I hadn't plucked it out of his hands when I did. It was a shit ton of work, but worth it. Between giving it a facelift and finding some side streams of income, I was now turning a tidy profit.

Lost Creek was a tiny little postage stamp of a town nestled onto a strip of land deep inside the gorge carved out by the river. My bar marked the north end of town and the TBR Pile marked the south end. Between them lay only ODX and the Green Door on one side of the road, and our little store and the town's only administration building on the other, beside the river. That was the entirety of downtown Lost Creek. The schools and public works buildings were all on a road a quarter of a mile away and

our residents lived up and down the surrounding mountains. It was a small town, but it had everything we needed. And what it didn't have could be found in the bigger cities just over an hour away.

Instead of going straight to the saloon, I walked across the parking lot to the TBR Pile. There was an unusually large crowd on the sidewalk in front of the Green Door, but that was nothing new for Lost Creek. There was probably a juicy new piece of gossip everyone was babbling over. The town hadn't stopped buzzing about Karis Finn and most likely it had something to do with that.

The TBR Pile was a cozy and surprisingly large bookstore that leaned into the exposed wood beams, wooden bookcases and floors, and mixed it with plush couches, soft displays of the season—flowers for spring—and pale blue walls. Tourists wandered in thinking it would be a cute little shop to browse for a few minutes and got lost inside it instead.

I quickly grabbed a copy of next month's book selection off the display by the counter and paid. "Another serial killer? Can't they read books about crimes of passion or even accidental murder?"

Willow shook her head and shrugged. "That's why they're banned from meeting here, my friend. Good luck to you. I can't believe you're actually reading along."

I pointed the book at her. "That's our little secret."

She pursed her lips and slid a paper bag my way so I could disguise my book. "Your secrets are safe with me, my friend."

I could purchase the e-book instead and then no one would ever know what I was doing, but I preferred to shop in town as much as possible. It was hard enough keeping a bar up and running in a small town. I couldn't imagine how Willow kept a

whole assed bookstore profitable.

"Until next month." I slipped the covered book into my back pocket and opened the door just as a very frenzied Mackenzie Howard blasted through and into my arms.

Well, not quite the way I wanted her to, but her body was flush against mine and falling so I caught her as best I could without mauling her. She was soft and vibrating. The scent of chocolate and vanilla hit me a beat before syrup and pancakes and coffee. I wanted to haul her up against me and kiss her until I tasted every one of those scents.

Instead I steadied her on her feet and smiled. It's go time. "Hey Mackenzie."

Three

Mackenzie

It would be like the river turning to fondue chocolate, but no one was allowed to dip their strawberries and bananas in it.

Scott Shaw was holding me. And it felt so good. Why, oh why, did he have to go and forget me?

Maybe it was the whole disappearing for a decade that did it.

I didn't want it to end, but assuming I could simply stay in his arms was unwise. So was looking up into his smiling eyes when he said my name.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

My name? What in the ever-loving cheeseburgers was happening? "You remember me?"

"Did I hit you harder than I realized?" He cocked his cute head to the side. Besides the brown flannel shirt that was oh so soft against my skin, he wore a Lost Creek High School Bigfoot t-shirt underneath, worn jeans, and equally worn brown boots. He had his ball cap on backwards with his light brown hair curling along the edges.

In high school he was adorably cute, and kind, but also kind of a badass. He didn't fall in with the cool clique. He played sports but wasn't a jock. He got good grades but wasn't a nerd. He was just...Scott.

My Scott.

As I looked at him—really looked at him—for the first time in years, I realized he wasn't just cute anymore. He had a rough masculinity that wasn't there before. He was like one of these mountains: strong and immovable. And that shot his level of attractiveness from a ten, to ten thousand.

Lord have mercy on me. I could not—couldnot—exist in this small town with this level of hotness unavailable to me. It would be like the river turning to fondue chocolate, but no one was allowed to dip their strawberries and bananas in it. Cruel.

"I'm just surprised you recognized me," I blurted with the finesse of a teenager.

I really needed to stop thinking about high school.

He jerked back a little. "Seriously?" His eyes swept over me in a way that made my toes curl and my heart beat a lot faster.

"Uh, yeah?"

His eyes narrowed. "Is that why you've been avoiding me?"

"Me? No." I sputtered and flailed. "Okay yes. Maybe."

Everything about him softened from his broad shoulders to his brown eyes. "Oh thank goodness. I thought you hated me."

Wait...what? "Why would I hate you?" And why did I have to keep blushing from head to toe? I had to be beet red by this point. Plus my boots were entirely too small for this amount of toe curling.

"I don't know," he said with a bewildered shrug. "But you've been home since October and we haven't spoken once. You duck into doors or hide your face. I've been convinced I accidentally did something in high school and that you've hated me for all these years. Plus Joanne comes into the bar all the time. You and Joanne are joined at the hip and yet you're not there. Therefore, you clearly hate me."

"No! I, okay, let's back this up." I flung my hand at the store across the street. "I saw you in there and you didn't recognize me." That's what happened, right? Right?? I was sad and in a hurry and completely flustered after driving for hours in the rain...was it possible I read his reaction all wrong? That my insane hope I'd walk into town and Scott would see me as a woman—finally—and sweep me off my feet, had blinded me to reality?

If this was just a misunderstanding I was going to die of embarrassment.

"When?" his voice jumped two octaves.

"Literally the day I got back into town."

He frowned. "I...don't have any idea what you're talking about."

This was so bad. So. Bad. "You were looking at soap and I was buying crackers. There were a bunch of rowdy tourists buying beer."

"Oh shit." He went white. "Now I know what you're talking about. Shit. Shit!" He yanked off his hat and ran his big man-hand through his hair, spinning in a small circle before he plopped the hat back where it was and pressed his hands together like he was about to say grace. "Those assholes had made my life hell the night before at the saloon. I saw you when you walked in. I planned to come over and say hi but those jerks." He shook his head and sighed. "Look, I left out the back door because I was afraid I'd lose my shit on them. I didn't want to make a scene. I didn't want to start a fight with five guys. And I definitely didn't want to get arrested. So I left. It had nothing to do with you."

Well...that was a version of events I hadn't even considered. But it made sense. All the sense. That group was unusually obnoxious. Even poor Christine looked like she wanted to disappear behind the cash register. "So you did recognize me?" Something fluttered inside my chest. Something old and new at the same time. Something that felt good.

Scott remembered me.

"Of course. When you started avoiding me I thought I'd done something wrong. That's why I didn't say anything at your dad's funeral. I didn't want to upset you on that day of all days."

That was sweet. And kind. I pressed my hand to my forehead. "I'm so, so sorry. This is all just a mix-up." A stupid, embarrassing, boneheaded mix-up.

He let out a chuckle. "No, it's okay. I'm just relieved I don't have some deep, dark, completely forgotten transgression from a decade ago to make up for." Even his voice did things to me. It was smooth but soft. Warm and inviting.

"Nothing of the sort." I frowned. "You and I must have very different memories of high school if that's where your mind went." Scott was incredibly kind to me. I always felt safe with him. There was nothing better than listening to music over shared earbuds while resting my head on his shoulder. When my world flipped upside down, he was the calm steady center that kept me from spinning off into space. I could not imagine any scenario where he could ever have done something heinous enough for me to hate him.

He shrugged. "The first time you looked the other way I figured you were having a tough time and I should leave you alone. But then you kept doing it. The day you jumped into a pack of tourists to avoid me I figured it was bad."

And now I was ten times more embarrassed than when I thought Scott forgot me. "Nothing bad. Just me being me." It would be great if the earth swallowing would commence already.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

He sighed with relief. "I've been racking my brain trying to come up with something I did. But you want to know the good part about that?"

"Sure." I could not pull off cool. I don't know what part of me thought I could pull off flirting. I could not.

"I got to remember a lot of amazing things."

"Oh."

"I know a lot has changed but I was hoping we could be friends again."

Friends. Ugh, it was a wonderful word. I missed Scott and his soft comfort, but that word was so...not it.

He'd friend-zoned me. Again.

But it was a million times better than being forgotten, or even worse, hated. Being friends with Scott and his merry band of misfit lost boys had once been more than enough. It would be enough now, too. "Of course we can be friends. But I have my own car now so you don't need to worry about driving me places or that I'll fall asleep right before we get there."

He dipped his head to meet my gaze and my heart skipped an entire beat. "I don't mind, Mackenzie. If you need a ride, give me a call."

"I don't have your number," I blurted out. Smooth. So smooth.

He smiled again and my stupid heart swooped. "Yes you do."

Scott walked me across the parking lot to the saloon and then got to work while the book club pretended like they didn't just watch me enter the bar with Scott.

My friend.

"Yes, but the way he chose his victims is what really kept me turning the pages." Liam Goodrich was doing the bulk of the talking about the actual plot of the book, not that I was listening. My eyes caught on Scott every time he emerged from the back. "He didn't choose his roommates. He always picked someone else on the block."

"I thought that was so smart," Junie Sinclair gushed. "And he was careful not to leave any connections."

"Until he kept the dog," Aunt Sharon groaned. "How does a serial killer who enjoys murdering people care more about the dog?"

My gaze strayed to the bar where Scott was now doing inventory. He had a pencil he kept clamping with his teeth or sticking behind his ear. Every time someone said murder or death or killer he shook his head.

I had a feeling he wasn't a huge fan of the serial killer focus of the book club either.

"Because dogs are amazing!" Aviana laughed. "Isn't that right?" Barnaby drank up her attention as her hand dropped to scratch his head.

"Barnaby is the only one of you who isn't borderline psychotic," Scott grumbled.

Still Standing looked very different from the last time I stepped inside. The section

we were seated in had been completely transformed. The booths were renovated with new polished wood and buttery leather, the floor was clean and free of peanut shells, everything gleamed. It even smelled like vanilla. An array of bourbons and whiskeys neatly lined the shelves behind the bar.

It was all very, very impressive.

"Just because our favorite kind of plot involves murderers doesn't mean we are too!" Maeve said it like she said it every time she saw Scott.

He pointed his pencil at us. "The first time someone around here disappears, I'm turning every one of you in. Except maybe Mackenzie. I don't think you've totally corrupted her yet."

My heart did a weird swooping thing again and I had to remind it that Scott was not going to fall in love with me.

Friends. We were friends.

"You could corrupt her instead." Maeve winked.

Time stopped. My ears rang. She didn't just say that.

Scott's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

I sat there in stunned silence. Oh no. No, just no. But it kept happening anyway.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

Aviana grinned. "Maybe we should start a romance book club that meets a different week." Then she put her chin in her hand and bounced her eyebrows first at me, then at Scott. "You two could be the founding members."

Oh hell.

Scott tossed his dish towel over his shoulder and leaned forward on the bar. "I find my own dates, you murderous little book nerds. And so does Mackenzie." He looked right at me, nodded once, and went back to work.

That dagger went right through my heart. Yes, Scott finds his own dates because Scott is not interested in dating Mackenzie.

"I don't recall seeing you on any dates recently," Aunt Sharon shot back. "Perhaps you need a little help."

He hung his head, leaning on the bar. This was torture for him. We'd only just agreed to be friends again, just spoke more than a sentence for the first time in a decade, the last thing he needed was my aunt forcing me onto him romantically.

Maeve looked up from a red leather-bound notebook. "The last date of yours we noted was when you took Leslie Hilt to dinner at the Lodge one year and four months ago."

That was oddly specific and quite a while ago. "You keep notes of Scott's dates?" That was beyond extreme. It was disturbing. My Aunt and her friends were gossips but this was borderline stalking.

No, it was definitely stalking.

Maeve's eyes darted to me. "We keep notes on everything."

What was that supposed to mean?

But before I could ask, Scott's shoulders started shaking with laughter. "This is batshit insane. Go back to your books and leave me out of it or I'll kick you all out too." His eyes darted back to me with what I swear to all the fairies in the forest was a twinkle in his eyes but was probably just good old-fashioned friendly shared amusement.

Aunt Sharon pursed her lips. "Fine, back to the book."

The group was as animated and weird as I expected. Maybe even weirder. They spoke at length about the psychology of the serial killer, even acting out one of the murder scenes, but didn't spend a single moment debating the story structure or writing style. They put themselves into the shoes of the unfortunate sister who eventually unraveled the identity of the killer, debating how they would have approached things differently. They noticed things I was pretty sure no one would notice, maybe not even the author.

I felt the discussion starting to wind down—thank god!—when Aviana turned to me. "How are you doing? Ready to run for the hills?"

"A little," I admitted. "But I'm also impressed. If I ever need help tracking someone down or digging up dirt, I know who I'm calling." They could compete with Swifties. In fact, I'd pay money to see it.

"Thank you," she preened.

"Will you be joining us next month?" Junie leaned closer.

I had to admit, it was nice being out of the office. And the house. And talking to people who weren't named Joanne or Lucy. But there were some obvious downsides. All the murder talk for one, not to mention the painfully awkward suggestion Scott and I should start a romance book club.

Joanne, Aunt Sharon, and Maeve were all going to be mighty disappointed when they discovered we were just friends. "I don't know. Just listening to you all has me terrified that a serial killer is going to walk into my bedroom and murder me."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Scott freeze. Aviana's lips turned up and her eyes twinkled and I got the impression I'd just said the wrong thing. "But we don't have serial killers in Lost Creek."

"Yet," I muttered. "We're a small town in the mountains. A killer could slip in, do a murder, and slip out. He could hide in the wilderness, coming and going as he pleased."

Yeah, my imagination had gone into overdrive over the last hour and a half.

"Or..." she drawled, "you could have a big, strong bar owner protect you."

Harrison Smith groaned. "I was on board with getting them in the same room, but this is too much. You have to stop."

Even sweet Harrison was in on this? "What made you guys think this was a good idea? We're friends. Please stop."

As if there was some sort of secret signal, they all began gathering up their stuff. Aunt Sharon and Maeve slid out of their booth and came closer. "Look," Maeve said

first, "your dad asked us to make sure you found your way back. We tried getting you out of the house with Joanne. Didn't work. So we're pulling this card now." She glanced past me to the bar where I could only imagine Scott was either hiding or glaring daggers. "Your dad always liked Scottie, and well, Scottie has always liked you."

My stomach dropped. No, they misread the whole situation and now I was going to have to have an even more embarrassing conversation with Scott than the one we already had today. "You have no idea how wrong you are."

Aunt Sharon cupped my cheek. "Trust me. He's always watched you, and you've always watched him. Why neither of you ever made a move, we're not sure. But you're both here, you're both single, and you could both use some excitement in your lives. Let him make you lunch, huh? See what happens."

Somehow this strange day kept getting weirder. Like each incident said "Hold my beer, I can do better." "You set us both up on a surprise blind date?"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

She gave my cheek a pat. "Sure did. Have fun, sweetie!" And with that, the entire TBCIMA book club left. I stood staring at the door in stunned silence. Part of me in shock and the rest dying in flaming embarrassment.

It's only Flaming Embarrassment if it's from the Flaming region of Mortified In Front Of The Whole Town.

"You like mac & cheese bites?" Scott said as easily as asking about the weather. "I had enough for the group already in the fryer."

I spun around. "We're letting them get away with this? What happened to I find my own dates?" I didn't know whether to be angry, embarrassed, or relieved.

"Well, I also don't look a gift horse in the mouth." He shrugged. "We're back to being friends, aren't we? Let me feed you." There wasn't a trace of pity on his face.

In fact, he looked hopeful. What was happening? And why did let me feed you sound so damn sexy? "Okay. Sure. Fine. But you don't have to."

Scott rolled his eyes as he stepped around the bar and pushed open a swinging door. "Do I look like the kind of man who does anything he doesn't want to? Kitchen." He jerked his head.

Well this was new. Decisive and demanding were not words I previously would have used to describe him, but it sure fit now. And it looked good on him. "No you don't." I gulped and did as he said.

"Besides, this is hands down the most fun that group has ever been. You got them to stop talking about murder. You might be my new favorite person."

Favorite person but not the one he wanted.

In the middle of the kitchen sat a large stainless-steel table. Scott pulled out a stool. "Take a seat. You're in luck. I have a bourbon tasting group booked for 2pm so I was about to prep their lunch, which means you don't have to subsist on jalapeño poppers and nuts."

"No chicken wings?" My dad got takeout wings from the saloon once a week after mom passed.

Scott shot me a look. "That's on the rotating menu. If I keep them around all the time Big Al turns this place into a mess. Bones and sauce everywhere."

"Good to know some things never change, unlike this bar. Someone's been busy." Still Standing was the very definition of a dive bar. Well, it was. Now it was borderline trendy.

Scott's cheeks turned slightly pink as he turned away, busying himself with the fryer. "Uh, yeah. Uncle Jerry grumbled and said it was a waste of money, but now that our profits have tripled, he's keeping quiet."

I whistled. "Tripled? Nice work."

"Thanks." He set a plate in front of me with cube-shaped fried macaroni and cheese and a white dipping sauce. "How does a salad and a pimento cheese chicken sandwich sound?"

My mouth instantly began watering. "You're seriously making me lunch?"

The intensity of his gaze took my breath away. "I'm seriously making you lunch, Mackenzie. You in?"

This was not a date. This was two friends catching up after a long time apart. Aunt Sharon wanted there to be something here and there simply wasn't.

Even if my heart was more confused than ever, this was a good step in repairing a friendship that once mattered to me more than anything else. "I'm in."

Four

Scott

We're just two old friends sharing a lunch.

After taking it slow for years I was now careening down the road with all gas, no brakes. A few hours ago this exact situation would have had me second guessing everything, but now I was enjoying the ride.

Generally speaking, I was a laid-back guy. I let other people do the talking. I listened and observed. I didn't overreact or jump to conclusions. And because of that some people thought I didn't know what I wanted or didn't care.

That was, in fact, not the case at all.

At. All.

I cared a great deal and I knew exactly what I wanted. And in this particular case, I wanted Mackenzie. Now that I knew there was a better than decent chance the feeling was mutual, I wasn't holding back.

"Where have you traveled?" The quickest way to her teenage heart was to talk about all the places she wanted to visit.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

She looked a little lost sitting at my prep table with nothing to do. Her fingers moved over the smooth surface and her gaze pinged from the coolers to the pantry to the counters. "Oh, most of the cities on my list. A few I didn't expect."

"Did you do that overseas program in Rome?"

"Yep. And interned in London, then New York City. My first job was in Chicago and they sent me to France, Portugal, and Germany." She kept rattling off the cities and countries in the loose order she visited. Mostly for work, a couple for fun, like her two weeks in New Zealand with her dad and a girls' trip she took to Costa Rica.

I couldn't tear my gaze away. She was so happy. The tentative curiosity of high school had transformed into experiences, happy memories of all the things she'd wanted to do...and did.

"Where will you fly off to next?" I kept my hands busy with the salad prep, creating six for my guests and two for us. I held my breath and waited to hear Singapore or Tokyo. Far flung places that would take her away from Lost Creek.

"No plans."

I jolted with surprise. She shrugged and a frown pulled at her lips. "This is home. It's always been home...I just had other places to be, to see, you know?"

"I know."

"And I've seen them. I'm not saying I'm done traveling. I love it, but I also love this

town and all the things I left behind. I'm ready to be here again."

Goddamn that was great to hear. "We're glad to have you back."

"Are you? I mean the town?" She made a circle with her index finger. "I either get pity or told they thought I was too good for them."

"Fuck them." I drizzled dressing over our salads and packaged the rest, then set ours on the prep table. "I mean it. Fuck 'em. Everyone in this town is a gossip. Your aunt is the actual worst of them and she's ecstatic to have you back." I swallowed down my nerves. "I'm ecstatic to have you back."

Her eyes flew to mine and even though I didn't know how to flirt to save my life, I let my emotions show. No scowl, no frown. Just the hopeful attraction I felt for her and the need for some form of our old friendship to resurface.

"Oh." She glanced at the salad I made for her and then back up at me. "Oh." A whisper this time.

"Why did you stop messaging me?" I pushed away from the table to give her some time and space to process. Sandwiches needed prepping next. I grabbed my homemade pimento cheese and got to work, shooting glances at her from the corner of my eye.

She twisted her fingers and worried her lip. "I, uh, I'm not sure, really."

I shot her a look. I wasn't buying it.

Her shoulders sagged. "Fine, I...I guess I got caught up in college and figured you didn't need the sad girl nagging you and eating up your inbox."

"You never nag, Mackenzie. I looked forward to your stories." As the chicken cooked I found the hot honey. "I kept messaging you even after you stopped replying."

"I know." She stared at the table and I couldn't take it.

I went to her, cupped her chin and tipped her face up to me. The urge to swipe my thumb over her lower lip was strong. "I missed you."

"You mean that, don't you?"

I grabbed the other stool and sat without letting her go. I slid my palm over her cheek, my fingers brushing her hair. "Our friendship is important to me." I made sure to use the present tense. It may have lain dormant for a few years, but it never died. Not on my end.

Her lips twitched like she was fighting a frown. "I wasn't just the lonely kid you let hang around?"

"Why do you think I let you nap all over me, Mackenzie?"

"Because you felt sorry for me."

My heart fell. Yes, she was the kid who lost her mom in high school, and yes, a lot of people felt sorry for her, but I was never one of them. She was just Mackenzie. My Mackenzie. "I was a teenage boy."

Her frown deepened. "That doesn't make a good case for you, Scott."

I laughed. Just a little. "I mean yes, as a boy I really liked having a girl touching me, but specifically, I liked you touching me."

She blinked. "You never said anything. When? When did this happen?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I let my thumb brush her cheek. "My junior year this girl came into my physics class to give Mrs. Hopkins a piece of equipment."

She gave her head a little shake. "You remember that?"

But I just kept talking. "And time stopped for a second, you know? She had this incredible hair."

"You noticed my hair?" She looked at me incredulously

I grinned like the horny teenager I'd been. "I did. And your ass, if I'm being honest."

Her mouth fell open, but no words came out.

"And I just thought...who is that? How do I not know her? And then you turned around and it was you. The girl I'd always thought was the nicest, smartest kid with the biggest dreams...but you weren't a kid anymore."

"Why didn't you say anything? You never flirted with me. Not once!"

"You were a freshman and you were grieving. I thought it was an infatuation that would pass." It was the one time I wished I hadn't taken my mother's advice.

"It didn't?"

"No. It got worse. I told my mom and she was pretty shocked. She said I shouldn't be dating girls two years younger than me. And I don't think she was necessarily wrong.

Or right. High school is a tricky time." Especially for Mackenzie. "I thought if I still had the hots for you when you came back from college, then I'd give it a go."

"But I never came home," she whispered.

"It took a little longer than I expected to see if this crush of mine was real." But now that she was right here and my hand was on her skin and I was more than a little high on her scent, I knew it wasn't a crush at all. "This is more than infatuation."

The timer went off and while I was very sure of every word out of my mouth, Mackenzie was in shock. So I flexed my fingers in her hair and stood up. She tracked me as I washed my hands and moved around the kitchen assembling our sandwiches. I would make the rest later.

When I set her dish in front of her she looked up. "Is this a date?"

I cupped her thigh as I sat down beside her. "More like a warmup than an actual date."

"I...do you want to go on an actual date?"

"With you? Absolutely."

She was flailing now. "I don't understand!"

"What do you find confusing? Ask me anything. Let's get this all cleared up." I took a nice large bite of my sandwich because I was pretty sure it would take her a minute to form a coherent thought. The hot honey, pimento cheese, and chicken combined for a flavorful punch, and I hummed.

Her eyes zeroed in on me. "You find me attractive."

I let my gaze slide over her. I still wanted to feel that hair in my hands and I loved her eyes and smile, her body made me hard, and all I wanted was to touch her everywhere. "Yes Mackenzie, I am very, very attracted to you."

"You like me."

"Very much." I set the sandwich aside since we were actually talking. "I was attracted to you in high school, as I've mentioned, and I'm very attracted to you as a full-grown-assed adult. I liked you then. You were funny and sarcastic and touchy and we talked about anything and everything. It was always easy with us, wasn't it?"

She nodded, melting in front of me.

"And so far, it seems to me like nothing has changed in that department. Why is this so hard for you to believe?"

She pursed those very kissable lips to hold back a laugh. "Two hours ago I thought you'd forgotten me entirely. Give a girl a second to catch up."

"You can have all the time you need. I think I've proven I'm very good at waiting for you."

Her eyes rounded.

I jutted my chin at her food. "Eat."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Demanding."

And she liked it. I could tell. "Right now we're just two old friends sharing a lunch."

"That you made for me." She picked up the sandwich and examined it thoroughly. After she selected the perfect bite she sank her teeth into it and moaned.

My dick noticed. It wanted to hear that over and over again. Not now.

"When did you learn to cook?" She looked at me with wonder. "This is delicious!"

I shrugged but inside I was soaring. I loved making food that people enjoyed. That they craved. One of my favorite things in the whole world was finding the perfect dish for my friends and family and being the one to deliver it to them. Sometimes it was a flavor that just made them happy, or a dish that reminded them of home, whatever it was, I found it and created it.

Finding Mackenzie's perfect dish was my next Everest.

"After a couple of years of watching Uncle Jerry run the bar into the ground, I realized I was going nowhere and was bored out of my mind. If I was really going to take over one day I needed to find something about it to love. So I went to culinary school and took some business classes on the side."

Still Standing was a Lost Creek institution. It had existed for as long as the town had. And the Shaw family had always owned and operated it, passing it down from generation to generation. It was originally just called The Still since it started as a

moonshine still. After a couple of generations we got to be pretty proud of the fact that we'd stuck it out through thick and thin and updated the name to Still Standing. Tourists sometimes took it a step farther and bragged that they were "still standing" after a few drinks. The last thing I wanted to do was have it fall apart on my watch.

"You made it yours. I'm impressed." She set the sandwich down and dipped a fry into my special sauce. "Are you and Annie like town rivals now?"

Annie owned the Green Door Cafe. "Not at all. We're more partners than anything. She closes up early on Fridays so I can serve my special weekend menu. We try to not overlap specialty dishes. I mostly serve basic bar food except for the weekends and when I have bourbon tastings scheduled. If you want to cast someone as the villain it's Thomas DeGroot, mostly because he keeps stealing my ideas."

"Who is Thomas DeGroot?" she asked around a bite of salad.

"The new head chef at the Lodge at Lost Lake. He's a pretentious prick with no imagination."

"And I imagine it's not great for business if you're serving the same things."

"They run a full restaurant and have a lot more customers than I do. This is just a side hustle. So even though I come up with everything first, it looks like I'm the copycat."

"And that just pisses you off even more."

"You know it." Ever since the new owners renovated the Lodge it was one controversy after another. "Sometimes I wish the Wallaces never sold it off." Sure it was rundown and needed attention, but it was owned and operated by a local family that loved it. The new owners weren't from here and weren't interested in being part of the community. To them, the lodge was just a business.

"I've heard that more than a few times around town."

I ate another fry and tried to brush it off. "I think it's the way they act like they're the saviors of every business in the area."

"Yeah, they called my cabins a 'cute little venture' like we haven't been in business for twenty-seven years."

Well that sealed it. "The Lodge is officially on my shit list." I pushed my empty plate away and turned to face Mackenzie. "Any other enemies I should know about?"

"What will you do with them?" She teased.

Now we were really getting somewhere. "I'll vanquish them, obviously."

"Well, luckily for the town of Lost Creek, I don't have any enemies. I'm not sure this strip of buildings would survive your wrath."

I captured her hand in mine and squeezed. "Come hang out tonight. Like we used to."

"Don't you work?"

"Not tonight. I get things opened up for Heartbreaker and Dan. You don't think I live here, do you?"

She shrugged. "My vague memory is that your Uncle Jerry was always here, but since I wasn't exactly of drinking age, it wasn't something I paid much attention to."

"I try to stay scarce during the week, let them run the show. I'm here mostly on the weekends when we're busy and serving more than snack food."

"That makes sense," she murmured as she watched our fingers twine. "I'm not sure about tonight."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I didn't want to push her too hard, but I refused to let this continue open-ended. "I don't know if this is comforting or sad, but nothing has really changed. Everyone still hangs at my place; the boys are in and out all the time and so is Piggy."

She wrinkled her nose at my big brother's nickname. "I can't believe you still call him that."

"Like this town lets anyone shake their nicknames." At least mine was my name, just cute-ified. "Come over. We'll watch a movie or listen to music. We'll pick up where we left off and go from there. No obligations."

She worried her lip some more.

"I live on Creekside. Second house on the left."

"That's where Joanne lives." Her head popped up. "You're the blue house?"

I nodded. "And Joanne is the red house up the street." And Travis was the green house at the bottom and Piggy occupied the white house next door. Which was why everyone was always in and out of my house. To be fair, I was also in theirs, but mine was the hangout spot. At least during the week.

"That does sound like old times."

I wanted her in my house. I wanted her in my bed, but I was willing to take the house to start. "You used to like the controlled chaos." It drew her out of her shell in a safe space.

"You're sure?"

Her reluctance would be cute if it wasn't so damned frustrating. "I wouldn't be asking if I wasn't. I reached for her face again but stopped and picked up a strand of her hair, letting it coil around my finger. "I would really like to spend more time with you, Mackenzie. Please?"

I held my breath as her eyes drank me in, searching for clues or secrets. Or maybe she just needed to see that I was the same guy in a slightly older package.

She gave me a soft smile that made my heart soar. "What time?"

Five

Mackenzie

You deserve to have meals made for you.

I scooped up the basket from my back seat and steadied my breath. I was nervous and I didn't know why. Everything I learned today was chaotic but good. Scott and I were still friends. I hadn't been forgotten or swept under the rug with old high school memories.

But the rest? It was hard to reconcile. In my mind, my crush was unreciprocated, but now I knew that wasn't true. Not at all. It was more than a crush. It was full blown interest.

I slammed the car door and looked up at the house. Scott stood on the porch looking lethally sexy with his hands on his hips. "You didn't need to bring anything. You know that."

I clutched my basket tighter. It was filled with armor in the form of food. My barrier between my nerves and whatever this was becoming. "I wanted to bake you cookies."

His eyebrows shot up. "You want to bake for me?"

When he said it like that it sounded old fashioned. "I need something to do and you love cookies?" I shrugged.

He nodded once and met me at the foot of the steps to take it from me. "I'm glad you came. As promised, Piggy is playing video games in my living room."

So we weren't alone. A breath of relief escaped me. As much as I liked Scott, I needed an on-ramp. Some time to make my version of our past lineup with all this new information.

His other hand came to cup my elbow. The light contact sent a shiver over my skin and my belly swooping. "Welcome to my home."

I wanted to sway into his side, tuck myself there like it was where I belonged. He pushed open the door and I stepped into a short foyer that led to a soaring living room with wooden floors and large windows. A fireplace with gray stone dominated the far wall and a modern kitchen sprawled across the rest of the space.

Jasper—I refused to call him Piggy—sat in one of two low slung chairs in front of a large television playing something with enormous swords and ugly green creatures.

"Hey Jasper."

"Hey Mack! Long time no see." He didn't look away from his game and I didn't expect him to.

Scott set my basket on his large gleaming kitchen counter. It was a well laid out design which I should have expected from someone who made food his lifeblood. But still, I was a little surprised by all the smooth lines, the modern feel, and the gray. Scott had always been a flannels and jeans kind of guy and his wardrobe hadn't changed much, but apparently some other things had. In a way, I almost expected Scott's house to mirror the Shaw Homestead of our childhood, which was an older cabin-style home with wood everything and bright colors and ancient furniture.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"What do you think?" Scott asked, watching me examine his home.

"It's lovely. I didn't peg you as a lover of gray though." A staircase tucked into the corner led up to a loft and what I assumed was at least one bedroom. It was all so very grownup, another reminder we weren't kids anymore and a lot had changed.

Scott shoved his hands in his pockets. "Digger is all about modernizing the mountain aesthetic." Digger earned his nickname because as soon as he was allowed to, he started working the bulldozer for his father's construction company.

"You should see his place!" Jasper called out as his thumbs worked the controller.

Scott shrugged. "Digger went completely modern for his place. If you ask me, it sticks out like a sore thumb. I like this blend better. This doesn't feel like my parents' house or like I'm stuck in a time loop, but it still has that warm feeling you get from wood beams and roaring fires."

"I agree." Although I wanted to add a little more color and some softness.

Not that it was my place to do so.

"You're living back home, right?"

My gut twisted. "Yeah, for now." Some people wanted the memories, wanted nothing to change, but that wasn't me. I felt like I was stuck. Dad's room was just that. I slept in my old room and avoided the wall of pictures. I barely used the kitchen and ignored everything else.

"You should move into that fancy cabin," Jasper called over his shoulder. "What do they call it? Golden Hour?"

I'd thought about it for a hot minute before renting it out. But it was just toosomething. Too posh? Too isolated? Yeah, that was it. That fancy cabin up on that mountain all by itself. That was the last thing I needed. "I actually rented out that property for the summer. I think I might sell it after that."

Scott's eyebrows jumped. "I thought Digger was on board for developing it?"

I started unloading my basket, laying out my ingredients in the approximate order I'd use them. Without missing a beat Scott produced cookie sheets and mixing bowls.

"The plan is solid and it's a good property for something like that." Dad and Digger planned to add five cabins to the property. It would still give each one privacy and it would make it less isolated, but it would also mean ongoing construction for a couple of years. It was hard to sell a private luxury vacation in the peaceful mountains if there were chainsaws and nail guns running all the time.

"But?" Scott prompted.

I shrugged. "There are a few reasons. One of which being I don't have the bandwidth right now. Part of me just wants to focus on our current inventory of cabins. I could keep renting out Golden Hour and leave the rest of the property untouched, or I could sell it and take the injection of cash to balance our books better."

Scott hummed. "That makes sense. Joanne says you've been working nonstop to get to this point."

I welcomed the work. It was good to be busy, otherwise I might have crawled into bed and not gotten out. But at some point I would burn out.

"And it would be easier to take you out if you weren't working all the time." Scott covered my hand with his and squeezed before letting me go again. "Plus Digger would be all up in our business and no one wants that."

Yeah no, absolutely not. I liked the guy well enough to hang out with him, but Digger had an opinion on sex and didn't feel the need to hold back.

The front door swung open and the man himself walked in with Logan Finn. Digger held up a six-pack. "Hey Mack!" He gave me a quick hug. "You remember Huk's brother?"

I only recognized him because of the family resemblance. He was a spitting image of Huk from his brown hair to his light-changing eyes, only a little leaner and shorter. "Of course, Logan right?"

He blushed as he nodded. "I've been working with Digger."

"Mack is baking us cookies." Scott said with a pointed glare at poor, young, blushing Logan.

I almost felt bad for him, but I liked that glare far too much to care. "May I use your microwave to soften up this butter?"

"What's mine is yours, Mackenzie." He said it quietly with a low rumble that told me he meant it exactly the way he said it.

Which had the precise effect of turning my insides into butterflies and had my thighs squeezing together. If he said that while between said thighs would that rumble sink into my skin? For the last few hours I'd allowed my thoughts to stray more and more towards our potential chemistry, something I'd never done with much detail because wanting something I couldn't have was too painful.

But now...now I might just be able to have it and it was nearly impossible to think of anything else. If a gentle touch evoked such a strong physical reaction what would a kiss do?

While Logan and Digger joined Jasper in front of the television, Scott stayed with me, watching as I mixed together the simple ingredients to make chocolate chip cookies.

"It's not often someone cooks for me these days. This feels...new." He grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge, twisted off the caps, and set one in front of me while he settled onto the stool nearby. "But I think I like it."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Do you bake or just cook?" I dropped the softened butter into the bowl and began mixing ingredients.

"I almost never bake." He swallowed. Hard.

And that sent a thrill through me. I liked that I stumbled into something nice for Scott. I liked even more that he appreciated it so much.

He cleared his throat, but his voice was still rough. "Has anyone been cooking for you lately?"

My nerves disappeared. How could I still be anxious when he sounded so jealous and hopeful and disgruntled at the same time? "No one has cooked for me in a long time. Not until today." I shot him a smile as I mixed the wet and dry ingredients together. "It was really nice."

That disgruntled look multiplied. "I will cook for you anytime. I really wish we'd cleared this up sooner. You deserve to have meals made for you, Mackenzie."

Oh, he was too cute when he got his grouch on. My heart pattered away in my chest while visions of my skin colliding with his danced in my head. "I mean, technically, Annie cooks for me sometimes."

"Visiting the only restaurant in town and ordering off the menu is not what I mean, and you know it." He pointed at me. "I will be doing your cooking. You want breakfast dropped off at the office?"

My brain short circuited on the image of Scott standing in this kitchen in nothing but his boxers making me breakfast. It utterly ignored the office delivery part. "And what would you make me for breakfast?"

In went the chocolate chips. More than my grandmother's recipe called for because Scott liked them extra chocolatey.

"Anything you want. Pancakes, eggs, I'll make you a fucking soufflé if that's what you like. Place your order now because there's no convincing me otherwise."

"What if I don't eat breakfast?"

When he didn't reply I looked up to find him staring at me.

"What?" I shrugged.

"Mackenzie. You pass out two hours after waking up if you don't eat. You need protein and little to no sugar, so the pancakes are out, but I do make a high protein oatmeal pancake tower layered with Greek yogurt and fruit that might pass the test. Do you still hate fruit?"

Oh my. Scott paid attention. A lot of attention. And kept it memorized for years. "I don't mind fruit these days. I really like yogurt, granola, and fruit compote for breakfast. I fell in love with it when I interned in London."

"Shall I bring it to your house or meet you at the office?" He cocked an eyebrow, daring me to refuse him again.

I couldn't unhinge my jaw. The house? The place I barely existed? No. Absolutely not. I didn't want whatever this was becoming, this new and beautiful thing, to be tainted by the time capsule that was my current living arrangement. "The office."

He nodded once. "I'm headed to the city tomorrow to pick up supplies from my distributor, so I won't be able to make you lunch again. Do you need anything from town? I'm happy to pick up anything while I'm there."

The city wasn't the other side of the moon, but it wasn't a quick trip either. He'd be gone most of the day and for some reason that made me sad. I wasn't sure why since I'd be working all day just like always. Maybe it was just knowing he wouldn't be near. "Thank you for asking but I'm good."

"If you think of anything, call me or text me. I mean it." He nodded to the cookie sheet. "Those ready to go in?"

I glanced down, startled. I must have moved on autopilot because all the cookies were laid out in nice rows, ready to be baked. "Oh! Yes."

He took the sheet and slid it into the oven and set the timer. "Hungry? If I don't feed these animals they starve or eat chicken tenders from the microwave, which is sacrilegious."

My stomach growled, answering for me. "I could eat."

His fingers flew over his phone and a moment later it vibrated. "Looks like it's just the five of us tonight. Travis and Joanne have been called to family dinner."

"More for me!" Logan said as he poked his game controller.

Digger and Jasper had their faces scrunched, bouncing in their chairs. An intense battle of some kind was taking place. Nothing had changed in all these years except which video game was being played. Everyone gravitated to Scott, who fussed over and fed them, all while I shrank into a corner and watched it all play out.

Except this time Scott had no intention of letting me blend in. "Help me?" He hooked a hand around my hip and redirected me to the center of the kitchen.

"I doubt you need any help."

"Then keep me company. I'm not making anything complicated." He handed me a pot and nodded to the sink.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I filled it and set it to boil on the fancy gas range while Scott sliced mushrooms, onions, and garlic. I was entranced by how fast he moved, how long his fingers were. Would he handle me in such a precise, capable way? "What do they eat on the nights you're at the bar? Where do they go? If you leave them alone for too long, do they go feral?"

He huffed. "More often than not they wind up at the bar so I can feed them and keep an eye on them." His head jolted up. "Hey, no fucking fighting!" Then he muttered under his breath, "It's not a fucking episode of fucking *Peaky Blinders*."

Digger shoved Jasper over and Jasper smacked Digger upside the head with a couch cushion but then they righted the chair and went right back to their game like nothing happened at all.

Scott created a simple shrimp pasta that everyone devoured in a matter of minutes before attacking the warm cookies. Not a crumb was left. Then the boys went to work cleaning up and Scott took my hand. "Let me show you something."

"You trust them to do the washing and cleaning?"

He shrugged. "I've trained them well. It's the price they pay for my cooking. Besides, cleaning up is my least favorite part of the process."

Not that there was much to clean besides the dishes. Scott was also very good at cleaning as he worked, keeping the mess to a minimum.

Logan snapped a dish towel at Jasper who howled and vowed to put salt in his next

meal. As entertaining as this was, Scott's offer was more intriguing, so I took his offered hand and followed him out onto the deck.

Like the rest of the house, it was sleek and modern and looked into the jungle-like wilderness of the river's gorge we called home. With the door closed it was quiet except for the wind in the trees and hum of insects switching from day to night. "The bar must be doing quite well, Scott. This is such a nice place." I envied him. This truly felt like home, a place to curl up at the end of a long day and simply relax or have your gaggle of friends over for a big dinner.

"It helps that this land was owned by Digger's family. They divided it up and sold it to us for a steal."

"Us?"

He pointed as he spoke. "Joanne, me, Piggy, Travis. There are still two undeveloped lots they're saving for close family or friends."

"Oh!" I blinked as the information sank in. Joanne had said something about this, but my mind had been too preoccupied with my dad and keeping the business going to fully comprehend what she was saying. "That's incredibly nice of them."

"We've all got plenty of space and our neighbors are all family. We take care of our own in Lost Creek, you know that." The dim lights of the deck reflected in his eyes. "Right?"

Aside from Aunt Sharon, Maeve, and Joanne, I'd done an admirable job of pushing everyone away and hiding. It was easier on my heart to focus on the gossip and forget about the community. It wasn't perfect, but while the outside world fixated on dividends and profits, Lost Creek just wanted every resident to live a good life. "I think I needed to hear that."

"I know you did. That's why I said it. And I'll say it as many times as you need. You belong here, Mackenzie. You're not an outcast and the only thing these nights have been missing is you."

His gaze was too intense. It made me feel naked. My skin was too tight and my lungs couldn't quite expand properly. So I turned to watch the lightning bugs blinking.

"I'm glad you brought cookies to bake. I don't want you to be nervous around me. I want you to use my shoulder as a pillow again. So if cookies help you get your feet under you, then bake all the damn cookies. The boys will make sure your efforts never go to waste."

My breath finally whooshed out and I had to clutch my belly to keep the wild, swirling emotions inside. Scott was right here, so close, and all the things I thought were impossible were right here. He was right here. "What if we kiss and it's awful?"

"It won't be awful."

"How do you know?" I turned my head just enough to sweep my eyes over him.

"Because just being near you makes me feel things I've never felt with anyone before. I think you feel it too."

I gripped the railing because yes, my feelings were having feelings.

"And if you're that worried a kiss could destroy our friendship then I'll just have to kiss you now and put that to rest."

It all happened so fast. His hand cupped my cheek and his fingers threaded into my hair as he pulled me closer, all while he dipped down and pressed his lips to mine.

Scott Shaw was kissing me. My hands froze in midair and then finally settled on his chest as his other hand spanned the small of my back, pulling me even closer to him.

There was nothing awkward about this. Nothing friendly. The way he hungrily devoured me made me feel sexy and wanted. I kissed him right back, memorizing his lips, his soft moans, his gentle coaxing for more.

"Let me take you out, Mackenzie." He pressed his forehead against mine. "If it's terrible, we forget it and go back to being friends knowing we gave it a shot. And if it's as good as I know it will be, then we can start making plans."

"Plans?" I could barely breathe let alone think straight. What was in that kiss? Stardust? Magic?

"For the future. Like how you'll be sleeping here from now on."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

My eyes flew open to find his staring right at me, dark and desperate. "I'll be what now?"

His hand slid over my cheek, his rough thumb caressing my lower lip. "You heard me. But first a date. Say yes, Mackenzie."

This morning I thought Scott didn't even know who I was, and now he was demanding I move in with him?

"I want this, Mackenzie," he growled. "I want to prove to you that I've been mad for you since we were teenagers. Now that we've proven this is so much more than friends, I'm going to need that date as soon as humanly possible. I'm dying here."

Grouchy Scott turned me on.

Desperate Scott made me combust. "Then we better make plans."

Six

Scott

I worried it was becoming a medical emergency.

Letting Mackenzie go was painful. Physically painful. But I couldn't chain her to my bed and make her stay with me forever. Not yet. I stood on my front porch clutching my stupid phone unable to move because every cell in my body was being torn apart, trying to move my ass to her side.

But I couldn't because I lived here and she lived there and we weren't together.

So I stood planted to the wooden planks with my local owl watching me like maybe this was his chance to take me down and have me for dinner.

Five minutes later my phone vibrated and lit up with a text from Mackenzie telling me she made it home safely. I finally took a full breath and told my body to chill the fuck out.

My front door swung open and Piggy came out. He stuffed his arms into his coat and shot a smirk my way. "So you and the Mackster?"

"If I'm lucky." This date had to be perfect. She was too skittish, too battered by life. I needed to come in hot but not too hot. Steady and sure.

"Pffft. You don't need luck. Not with the Mack Attack. You've been head over heels for her since we were kids and she's only had those big eyes for you, even as grumpy as you are."

"That doesn't make it a slam dunk." I wanted the date to be memorable but also give me plenty of time to plead my case, so I suggested a hike. Her surprise was obvious, but she agreed.

Thank fuck.

"She was nervous tonight."

"I'm well aware." I hated it. Hated it like hell. I wanted her smiling and happy. I wanted her tucked into my side and her head on my shoulder. I wanted her to fall asleep on me and when that happened I would know all was right with the world because it meant my woman trusted me again.

"She wouldn't have come if she didn't want to. She wouldn't be nervous if she wasn't worried about losing something she cared about."

Except the thing she was worried about losing was our friendship, not me. "I'm not so sure, Jazz." Mackenzie was right. Using his old nickname felt wrong. It was time to upgrade to the one everyone else used since he graduated high school.

Jasper's eyebrows shot up. "If this is her influence then I'll do whatever it takes to keep her around."

"I'm still going to call you Piggy when you piss me off."

"Fair." He squeezed my shoulder. "I thought Mom warning you off her in high school was silly, but I was so impressed with your ability to make that friendship work. It shows you care about her. It proves that the two of you are more important than romance or misunderstandings or a decade apart. And she's going to realize all that and fucking melt for you, little brother."

She melted in my arms when I kissed her, which was a good sign. A very good sign. If my house wasn't full of assholes it might have ended very differently.

"Have a good night."

Jasper laughed. "Thanks for dinner, Dad."

"Thanks for doing your chores, young man!"

I watched my brother until he disappeared down the path that connected our two homes. Then I went inside and kicked Digger and Logan out.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

My dreams were filled with Mackenzie, which was a blessing and a curse. I relived that kiss a dozen times but each time it evolved into more. Her legs around my waist, her back to the door, or us kissing our way up the stairs and into my bed. I woke up so hard it hurt and no amount of willing it away worked.

It reached the point where I worried it was becoming a medical emergency when I took myself in hand and worked through those fantasies one at a time. My hand was a sad, sad stand in for Mackenzie and one orgasm barely took the edge off, so I walked my ass into a freezing shower and then checked on my yogurt. It took for fucking ever to make yogurt, but it was so much better than store bought and I didn't half-ass food.

The yogurt was fine. The fruit compote cooled nicely. My granola was still there. For some reason I felt the need to confirm it hadn't been carted off by rabid raccoons who somehow fought their way into my house.

And yet my dick still pointed towards Mackenzie like a fucking compass. This was going to be a real serious issue if I couldn't get this under control.

The problem was that I kissed her. Up until that point everything was theoretical. I wanted her, but that wanting was nicely caged away with careful restraint and a lack of carnal knowledge. But now I knew how she melted, how she tasted after eating my cooking, how she shivered when my lips touched hers.

Which was why I spent most of the night jerking off like a teenager until I was exhausted and finally fell into a dreamless sleep for approximately two hours. When my alarm went off I moved on autopilot, making coffee, prepping her breakfast,

getting dressed, and double checking my invoice for pickup later today.

I only found relief when I pulled up to the Lost Creek Cabin offices and only Mackenzie's car was parked outside.

Thank you Joanne. Her chronic lateness to absolutely everything was my salvation. "I have a breakfast delivery for one Mackenzie Howard."

I loved watching her fight that delighted grin. "Well good morning Scott. Fancy meeting you here."

I had a stupid fucking grin on my stupid fucking face and if anyone saw me they would have thought I'd gone feral. It was all wrong but so right. "How did you sleep?"

Her little shrug told me she slept as well as I did. "Fine."

I set my box on her desk and started laying out the dishes. "Well I slept like shit because I was all alone."

"You sleep alone normally, don't you?"

"Every miserable night." I let myself drink her in as she opened the lids on each of the containers. She tamed her hair in a low bun which I loved and hated. I liked her hair, but I also liked the idea of fisting that bun and holding her mouth right where I wanted it. She wore a soft, loose sweater that revealed nothing and yet I could still feel those curves pressed against me.

"This looks amazing. You're joining me, right?" She handed me one of the three bowls I packed.

"If you want me to."

"I insist."

I took the bowl. She dished my homemade yogurt into hers and topped it with a shocking amount of fruit compote—high school Mackenzie would never—and a generous helping of granola. She waited until I had my bowl and then we took seats by the large window that overlooked the stream that ran beside the offices.

Then I waited. Making food for people was my way of showing my love, but I was also selfish. Watching that first bite, drinking in their reaction, was where I got my hit of dopamine.

Mackenzie filled her spoon and popped it into her mouth. She blinked, her eyes rounded, and then they fluttered shut and she sighed.

Hellfuckinyeah.

"Scott, this is the best yogurt I've ever tasted. What brand is this? I need to stock my fridge immediately. You asked if you could get me something in the city. Well this is it. I need a fridge full of whatever this is."

I took my own bite and carefully chewed the granola while she babbled through bite after bite until her bowl was empty and sat back with her hands on her belly and a very satisfied smile on her lips.

"Damn that was good."

Not half as good as the show she just put on for me. I finished my bowl and stacked it with hers. "I'm glad you liked it. Would Joanne like the rest?"

Mackenzie shot to her feet. "This is all mine." She slapped the lids back on and stacked them with the unused bowl. "I'm hiding this in the back of the fridge."

That was almost as sexy as her smile. Down boy. Not now. "I'll make you more then."

She paused, her ass in the air as she hid away her treasures in the refrigerator. Then she turned, eyes narrowed as she looked at the Pyrex full of yogurt. "You made this yourself, didn't you?"

I shrugged. I would make her just about anything if I got this reaction every time.

"You're so over the top." She shoved it to the back and closed the fridge. "You know they stock tons of yogurt at the grocery store. Any of that would have been fine."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"But it wouldn't be good. I'm not serving you grocery store yogurt when I can make it for you."

"That had to have taken hours."

"It took all night," I confirmed. "And it was well worth it."

She stopped in front of me, shaking her head. "You're ridiculous. And...and I really appreciate that you did that for me. Thank you."

I couldn't have her this close and not touch her, so I closed the gap between us and put my hands on her hips where they belonged. "All you have to do is ask. I'll make you some to keep at home, but I plan on bringing you breakfast as many mornings as I can until you move in with me."

She huffed. "You keep bringing that up."

"Because it's what I want, and I believe in manifesting."

"This is very incongruous with your normal grumpiness."

"I can grump and know what I want at the same time."

I watched as my words landed. Tense and then melting. "We'll see after this date."

A date that was entirely too far off for my liking. "I can cancel my trip. We can go out today and I'll pick up my supplies tomorrow." I really couldn't but a part of me

wanted her to say screw it, let's go.

Or maybe I just needed to hear her say we could wait a day if this was real. I'd already waited years.

She splayed her hands on my chest. "A day will give me a chance to catch up with all of this. You're very close."

"I'd very much like to be closer."

"And I just need a day to breathe. I promise I'm bringing my A game on Thursday."

And that would have to do. I kissed her forehead and let her go. "We'll have breakfast first. Where would you like to meet?" For some reason she didn't want me at her house.

"Why don't we let Annie cook for both of us? We can head out from there."

I wanted to growl and drag her back to my cave. I was the only one allowed to cook for her now. It didn't have to make sense. I was the one who laid out the difference between being served at a restaurant and cooking specifically for someone, and yet I was still irrationally jealous.

"Fine. I accept your terms."

She pressed up on her toes and kissed my cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Seven

Mackenzie

You could fall on your face, roll down a hill, get covered in bee stings, and Scottie would still think you float instead of walk and a golden glow surrounds your incomparable beauty.

"I can't believe this actually worked!" Joanne smacked my arm.

"Violence is not the answer, sister." Travis scolded. He worked for ODX and was generally chronically outside. Which was why I requested he meet us for lunch at the Green Door.

Scott asked me out and I said yes. Of course I said yes. But I should have known that a date with Scott wouldn't be boring or normal. There would be no picnic lunches by the river or fancy dinners at fancy restaurants. Nope. Instead we were going hiking. Tomorrow. Joanne cleared my schedule and Scott took the day off entirely.

I was still anxious about the future, but my nervous energy flew the coop this morning over the sweetest breakfast of my life. I mean, the man made me yogurt. Made. Me. Yogurt. In his home. With ingredients. Who did that? No one. But Scott did it for me and I finally, fully understood that this wasn't an elaborate joke or wild idea he was chasing.

The man was serious and so I was jumping in with both feet. "I'm going to ignore that you manipulated me into this situation because I'm actually very happy right now and I refuse to let your betrayal rain on my parade."

Joanne slumped in the chair. "You already punished me by convincing Scottie to ban me from mac and cheese bites."

It was a surprisingly effective method of payback.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I turned to Travis. "I need your expertise. I like fishing but I haven't touched a rod in a decade." Hiking I had covered but I didn't want to make a fool of myself when it came to fishing.

"Scottie's not taking you out to assess your skills. If anything, it's to show off his." He cupped his glass with his giant paw of a hand. Travis was built for the outdoors. He hiked, kayaked, climbed, if it was something you could do outdoors, he was good at it.

Most of the girls we grew up with thought he was the hottest guy in town, but to me he was Joanne's brother, which made him my brother, which made him gross.

"So I should tell Scott how incredible he is?" I said it all breathy and high-pitched while batting my lashes.

"Not with that fake-ass voice. Have you met Scottie? He has a crazy bullshit detector. You say crap like that and he's going to dump your ass before the date's over."

Another thing I liked about Scott: he was genuine. He was also kind to the book club. He called them murderous little book nerds, which sounded bad, but he said it with such affection that it made me fall a little harder. "So enjoy the hike, let the fishing be what it is, and hope there's a spark?"

"There's a spark," Joanne snorted into her mug.

How was everyone so sure about this?

Travis threw an arm around his sister's shoulders. "What my annoying little sister is trying to say is that everyone in this town thought the two of you would be married by now. Maybe some little kids running around your ankles. There isn't one soul who missed the way you two pined after each other."

"I didn't pine. There was no pining."

"You pined. He pined. You remember who he took to senior prom?"

I tried but couldn't. "Maisy Smith?"

"Nope. No one. You know why? Because you were the only one he wanted to ask."

"It wasn't like he was an adult and I was a child. Two years is not that big of a deal."

"It was to him." Travis finished his iced tea and set it aside. "That's how much he cares about you. He'd rather be your friend, be there for you, than do anything to hurt you. Even if it tears him up in the process."

"I'm going to need him to stop being so friendly," I grumbled.

Travis flashed his killer smile. "I believe that's his plan."

"You're not a teenager anymore," Joanne added. "You are a grown woman who knows what she wants. Throw your old dynamics out the window and start over fresh."

I blinked at my best friend. "Well now, look who is using that psychology minor?"

She stuck her tongue out at me and looked up at her brother. "The whole gang is going to be back together soon. Huk is on his way to town. We're giving him the barn

on the Golden Hour property to bunk in."

Travis's whole face lit up. "Bastard hasn't come home in over a year. We're going hiking and climbing and rafting—"

"We get it." Joanne shrugged his arm away. "You're going to spend all your time with Huk and forget all about me."

Travis smacked a big wet kiss on her cheek, making her shriek. "I love it when you're jealous."

"You are so gross. Go to the woods and don't come back!"

"I thought you just said you didn't want me to go at all."

I rolled my eyes at their teasing. Having surrogate siblings was the best. I got the perks of a more intimate relationship with people close to my age but whenever they got to be too much I could retreat to my only-child corner.

"You can always come with us. Be one of the guys," Travis offered.

Joanne pulled a face. "I am good with hanging out, but I am absolutely not ever going on one of your caveman adventures. Nope."

"So it's a no?" he asked dryly.

"Look, I'm excited all the lost boys will be together again. I'm happy for you and I'm really happy for Karis to have some support. I never liked Julien."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Awww." Travis pulled Joanne into a hug that absolutely swallowed her whole.
"Love you too, kiddo."

"Do not call me kiddo!" Her voice was muffled by his shirt and muscles.

"Don't suffocate her," I laughed.

"She can last a lot longer than this." But he let her go anyway, smoothing her hair and pinching her cheek.

"You are such an ogre!"

I sipped my tea and nibbled on a truffle fry. "Any other advice for me?"

He took an enormous bite of his cheeseburger and magically swallowed it after only a few moments. It was truly remarkable how giant men ate food. "For hiking and fishing? Not really. Just have fun. If you don't know how to do something, ask for help. It's not a test. It's an adventure."

I had a feeling everything with Scott was an adventure. "What about the man?"

Travis examined me for a moment like he was trying to work out how honest to be with me. I didn't blame him. I had been gone for a long time and Scott was his best friend. My "little sister" status was still relocating its legs.

He ran his tongue over his teeth and sighed. "He's the same guy he's always been, just older and wiser. Taking over the saloon matured him more than he already was."

"He was always kind of an old soul, wasn't he?"

"Sure is. He still watches over us, he's still the best friend anyone could ask for. You need help? He's there. Having a bad day? He'll whip up your favorite meal and tuck you into his sofa with a game controller. He's a grump but he's our grump."

Joanne nodded along with every point. "And he's only ever been head over heels for you. I promise you can do no wrong."

"You could fall on your face, roll down a hill, get covered in bee stings, and Scottie would still think you float instead of walk and a golden glow surrounds your incomparable beauty." Travis stuck a fry in his mouth and dared me to deny it.

"Don't you feel that way about him?" Joanne asked quietly. "If he was covered in bee stings would you still think he was handsome?"

"Of course I would."

Joanne grinned. "She admits she's attracted to him!"

"I heard they smacked lips last night and they were so into it they could have powered the town." He popped another fry while Joanne swung her gaze my way, mouth hanging open.

"Whhhhhaaaaat?"

The boys hadn't glanced my way when I said goodbye so here I thought they hadn't noticed our little disappearing act. Instead, apparently, we'd had an audience. "I mean, technically we did kiss. Yes."

Joanne was speechless. Travis was highly amused.

I wanted to crawl under the table. I knew gossip spread fast in this town, but damn.

"I'll give you some different advice." Travis waved a fry at me. "The only person more gossipy than your aunt is Digger."

"Does everyone know?" Was my aunt about to come careening around a corner looking for details?

He shook his head. "That's a lost boys thing. We may gossip, but we keep it tight."

"How is this the first I'm hearing of it?" Joanne squeaked.

Travis just grinned as I glared. "I was hoping to keep our private moment private."

"Well it's not private anymore. Dish!"

If I didn't start talking Joanne was going to lunge across the table and yank it out of me. I blushed scarlet. Even thinking about the kiss made me want to combust. Who knew pressing your lips against someone else's lips could cause such a deeply physical reaction?

Not me. I'd had my fair share of lovely kisses but not one of them could hold a flame to the one I experienced last night.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Oh wow. Oh wow! This is really happening!" Joanne bounced in her seat and clapped. "You don't need to say a word. It's written all over your face."

"It really is," Travis agreed. "And on that note, I'm going to leave before you two go all girly on me. Have fun tomorrow, Mack." He gave my shoulder a squeeze as he moved towards the ODX offices.

"I'm as red as a tomato, aren't I?"

"It's starting to fade. You're more of a pink flamingo at the moment."

"It was a really good kiss."

She nodded once. "Did you really expect anything less?"

I shrugged. "I haven't thought about kissing Scott in years. I fully admit I fantasized about it several times in high school and even college. I was so sure he didn't see me like that. It's taking me a minute to catch up to what everyone else has apparently known all along."

"I don't know why he listened to his mom. His parents weren't even around enough to parent. Their opinions on everything should be thrown out the window."

I suspected the lack of parenting was why Scott assumed the parent role with his friends. It never occurred to me that it might have affected him in other ways. "It's one of the only times she actually parented. It must have hit him hard."

"Hmph." Joanne slouched down in her seat.

"I appreciate you being mad on my behalf. Tell me something going on with you so I can return the favor." To my complete surprise Joanne blanched and slid further down in her seat. "What is going on here?" I waved my finger. "Something is going on."

She whimpered. "There is a thing." Then she glanced around at our exposed surroundings. The check was paid and the food was eaten but there were other diners two tables over. "Let's shop for books."

"Twist my arm."

The bell to the TBR Pile jingled as we stepped inside. Willow waved from the back of the shop and two customers mingled in the graphic novel section, but it was otherwise empty. We beelined for Romance. "Explain yourself," I hissed.

Joanne plucked a Kate Canterbary novel off the shelf and started flipping pages. "I have a...asituationdeveloping and Travis cannot find out about it."

I blinked. Then I blinked some more. Joanne never kept her boyfriends away from Travis. She liked watching them squirm. Her reasoning was that any man good enough for her wouldn't be intimidated by Travis.

It was sound reasoning.

If she didn't want this guy around her brother at all... "What does that mean?"

She gulped, leaned even closer, and whispered so quietly I had to strain to hear anything at all. "Noah is back."

It took a moment for those three little words to sink in and make sense. I jerked back and stared at my best friend. "Has your brain been hijacked like Peeta's in *The Hunger Games*?"

"It was in *Catching Fire* and no."

I glared at her for nitpicking my question. Noah Harding was Joanne's high school sweetheart. They were essentially one person and everyone thought they'd be together forever. Until they weren't. Travis, Scott, Digger, and Huk drove him out of town, never to be seen or heard from again. Joanne's heart was so broken I worried about us being apart when we started college.

"What do you mean he's back?" I whispered louder than I probably should have.

She licked her lips. "He's living near Lost Lake. I ran into him at the Bigfoot Ren Faire a couple of months ago."

My eyes could have popped out of my head and rolled away. "I know you didn't just get all territorial about me not telling you about kissing Scott last night and you're over here sitting on this?"

She twisted the poor paperback in her hands. "I know. I know. But it's not like that. We're just talking. He's so sorry for breaking up with me the way he did."

"He broke up with you by getting caught with Lorna Lopez's tongue in his mouth."

"We were eighteen and stupid. I was fantasizing about our wedding and our white picket fence, for heaven's sake. I look back now and wonder what I was thinking. It's been good to get some closure."

And if Travis found out Noah was within a hundred miles of Lost Creek he would

punch Noah's face in and then boot him to the moon.

Willow shot us a curious look, so I picked up a Kennedy Ryan novel and pretended to read the back cover. "I'm here, okay? Talk to me."

"Are you going to talk to me?"

"Obviously."

"Good."

"Well now that that's settled," a familiar arm snaked between us to pluck another book off the shelf, "I say we read a romance next. I want something spicy." Aunt Sharon wiggled her shoulders.

I swear that woman could sneak up on a tiger and it wouldn't even know until it was too late. How much she heard, I had no idea, but if she knew what was best for everyone involved, she'd keep that knowledge to herself. I watched her flip the pages as her words finally sank in.

"Wait, This Book Club Is My Alibi only reads murder mysteries."

She grinned. "And you don't like it very much so we're starting a second book club. We're calling it Read What You Love," she made an arc through the air with her hand. "And we'll read through several genres. It just has to be something one of us really loves. I'm picking first, naturally."

"Naturally."

"And the opposite of death is Romance," she said matter-of-factly.

"Let's read this one." Joanne held up the book she was demolishing in her hands.

"Is it spicy?" Maeve joined us.

"Her books usually are, yes."

"Perfect!" She plucked the other copy off the shelf. "Next month we'll read a historical. My pick!"

I shook my head and laughed. "You two just run around however you want to."

"Of course we do, dear." Aunt Sharon smiled sweetly. "That's how you get what you want."

And it was right then that I realized why Scott and Sharon had a love-hate relationship. They went about life in their own ways, but they attacked it with the same absolute certainty.

Eight

Scott

You're just more emotionally constipated than I am.

I didn't mind following Mackenzie up the steep trail. Not one bit. It was still fairly chilly, especially at the higher elevation, so she wore thick leggings that gave me an unprecedented view of her magnificent ass. I wanted to bite it but managed to keep my teeth in my mouth and my hands to myself.

But I was only human. I could only resist for so long.

Between this incredible view and the full smile she greeted me with this morning, I was done for.

"The rhododendrons are looking good."

Not as good as you. I cleared my throat. "Uh, yeah. They are."

The ground leveled off and she stopped for a second to catch her breath when a bevy of deer decided to crash our date. "Well look at them." I stood behind Mackenzie, wanting to put my hands on her and just feel.

"I used to ask my mom if I could keep one as a pet."

Mackenzie rarely talked about her mother without an edge to her voice, so it caught my attention. She seemed wistful instead of sad. "And what would she say to that?"

"That deer were too big for the house."

"Very practical." The animals watched us but mostly stayed busy with their food, nibbling away at the vegetation.

To my complete shock and utter satisfaction, she leaned back against me. Her shoulder on my chest, her head on my shoulder. I squeezed my eyes shut because this was it. The kiss had been huge, but this was everything. I tentatively put my hands on her hips. "Is this okay?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

She hummed and nodded.

One of the deer cocked its head at that sound. Yeah, I like it too, friend.

"It's like we're the only two people in the world. I forgot it was like this out here," she whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

We had our deer friends about thirty feet away and of course the birds, squirrels, and insects, but no humans. We hadn't seen any since we left Lost Creek. Not even at the trailhead. My truck was the only one in the tiny parking lot. "It's still early for tourists to venture up this way. Or at all." This was mostly a locals trail. You had to know to even look for it. Every once in a while Travis got someone desperate for a unique adventure and he'd bring them up here, let them experience the complete isolation, but other than the height of summer, this trail was usually a perfect spot for solitude.

The wind raced through the fresh spring leaves creating a shimmering sound. It also made Mackenzie shiver. So I wrapped my arms fully around her. She was soft and warm and I never wanted to let her go. "Better?"

"Much better."

We stayed just like that while the deer ignored us. For all our touching I'd never had the chance to feel the whole of her body against mine before last night and feeling her again was short-circuiting my brain. I couldn't identify anything specific about her softness or the way we fit together that was just so right, only that our bodies belonged together, and when they touched, pleasure gripped me from the inside out.

Unfortunately the deer decided to move off leaving me with no excuse to keep her in my arms in the middle of an empty trail. "It's not too much further."

"Where are you taking me anyway? Why all the secrets?"

I reluctantly let her go. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not the most talkative human being on the planet."

"And yet you say many things to me." She shot me a sassy smile over her shoulder.

"I like talking to you. Just like always." Sometimes we didn't talk at all. We just sat together, and it was the same as when words came from our mouths. Some people needed the constant stream of thoughts to communicate what we did with existing in the same space.

"Well then where are we going?"

"It's one of the reservoir lakes the power company uses to supply the main plant. Excellent fishing and no one usually bothers me."

She paused and turned. "Are you taking me to your secret fishing hole?"

I waved for her to continue. "It's not secret. Just...under appreciated. And yes."

"Yes, it's your secret fishing hole?"

"The best fish I've caught have all come from here. When it warms up we can come back and swim."

Mackenzie missed a step but caught herself and kept going. "My, my. You do enjoy making big plans."

"Only way to live when you know what you want."

She turned to face me, hands on her hips, eyebrow arched. "Out with it. All of it. Confess, Scott."

"I think I've made myself pretty clear."

"Then repeat yourself. I don't recall hearing anything about swimming this summer until just now."

Damn she was adorable when she got all sassy. I stepped into her, our bodies just barely touching, her neck craning to look up at me. "I want many things, Mackenzie. First, I want you to move in with me. Immediately. I don't see a purpose to us taking anything slowly. We already know each other better than most couples. Move in and we can start to deal with your father's house. Together. Second," I didn't give her a chance to interrupt, "we are a couple. Call it whatever you want, but you're mine and I'm yours. Third, we live our lives. That includes secluded hikes and skinny dipping in lakes. We will cuddle and watch movies and read books naked in bed. I will cook for you and you will bake for me and we're going to be so fucking happy, Mackenzie."

"Just like that?" she whispered.

"Just like that. No reason to make it more complicated for no reason." I cupped her face. "I dare you to tell me you don't want it." I knew she did, but I held my breath anyway.

"It would have been nice to be asked instead of told."

I brought my other hand to her face and held her gently. "Mackenzie Howard, would you like to live your life with me? I have a charming home, a driving need to feed the

people I love, and a burning desire to worship at your feet. I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met. I love your heart and just about everything about you."

"That sounded an awful lot like a proposal."

I hummed. "Maybe it was. Or maybe those were my vows and we're already married."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"This is insane. You're insane."

"What about this is insane? We're spending the rest of our lives together. No sense in dragging our feet."

She pulled away and paced with her hand on her forehead. "We knew each other years ago."

"Have you changed? Fundamentally? Because you were my favorite person back then and I've seen nothing to change my mind in the last few days."

"No, I haven't changed!" She threw her hands in the air. "You don't go into a life pact after a couple of days!"

I could keep pushing the issue but I was afraid if I pushed too hard she'd turn and jump right off a cliff. "Then let's go to the lake and get busy getting to know each other." It wasn't going to change a damn thing but until she knew that, this conversation was pointless.

She turned and stomped down the trail. Five minutes later we were at the lake. Not a word was spoken as I laid out a blanket and assembled my fishing gear. I offered her the pole, but she shook her head.

"I don't have a fishing license."

"I do and there's no one here but us." I wiggled the pole, but she refused.

"You fish. I'm going to stare at the clouds and figure out which alternate dimension I slipped into."

"That's easy, it's the one where you're deliriously happy because you let me love you."

"You know, some people can't say that word at all and you're out here peppering it at me like candy."

Like me loving her was somehow inconceivable? "I love you, Mackenzie. I know it and you know it; you're just more emotionally constipated than I am, and for good reason. If I'd been through what you have, I'd be more cautious with my heart than I currently am. So until you catch up, I'll do the loving. I love you. It wasn't a slip of the tongue or a saying. I. Love. You. Now enjoy your cloud gazing while I prove my worth by catching our dinner."

"Crazy, foolish man," she muttered as she laid down and crossed her arms, scowling at the sky.

"Rather be a fool who took his shot than the fool I was before." I wasn't sure why loving her was foolish when it seemed like the most logical thing in the world to me, but I'd give her a few minutes to process.

Little Lost Creek Lake was a dammed creek turned into a small lake that was so secluded there were stories of the power company's crews getting lost on the way to do maintenance. Which was why they now included someone born and raised in these mountains on every crew. In the summer there would be families having lake days up here. But until it warmed up we would have the place to ourselves, most likely. It's why I enjoyed coming up here when I needed to clear my head and think.

The sky was a hazy blue today with clouds refusing to burn off. I had two decent

sized fish by the time Mackenzie came to stand beside me. "It really is peaceful here. We live in a magical place."

"You've traveled a lot more than I have."

"The gorge, the mountains, the clouds, the rain...we live in a fairytale. I'm glad it's hidden away and most people don't know how beautiful it is."

"I didn't realize you were so selfish," I teased.

She shrugged. "I can be with the things I love." She gulped and that driving ache returned to my chest. I wanted to be old married people already, and every minute she made me wait felt like an extra ton pressing down on me. "I can be very selfish actually."

"Do go on. I am dying to hear what you're thinking."

She huffed, bounced on her toes. "If...if I say yes to this madness, that's it. You're mine. I don't share. I don't cheat. I will go absolutely feral if you so much as glance at another woman."

Which was the best damn news I'd ever heard. I set my pole aside and turned to face this magnificent, jealous woman. "Babe, if I am looking at a woman it's because she's ordering something from my menu. Trust me, there's no one I will look at and appreciate but you. I'd rather gouge my own eyes out."

She made a noise in the back of her throat.

"I like this territorial side of you very much. It's good to know we're feeling the same things."

"You're territorial?"

"I've been pissing a circle around you for years. Every man in this town knows not to touch you. Why do you think I'm trying so hard to lock you down?"

She nibbled the corner of her lips, going all shy on me again. "Oh."

I hooked my arm around her waist and kissed her. It was every bit as life-altering as the first. My center shifted and my body was no longer mine to control. It wanted to mark and claim. "I'm yours. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you. Whatever you need, it's yours. I will make this work." I will make up for lost time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I didn't want to dwell on the years we spent apart, the years we hypothetically could have had together. We didn't. But I also didn't want to waste another minute of my life without her.

"Have you proven your manliness yet?"

I growled. "No. I need at least one more trout. The bluegill are hiding today."

"Well then I'll get back to appreciating how sexy you are while you do it." She slipped her hand into my back pocket and squeezed.

Maybe this was the key with Mackenzie. Be direct. Be clear. And then stand back and wait for her to catch up.

If that was the case, we were going to be just fine.

Nine

Mackenzie

This is either the start of a long and happy relationship or one of those serial killer stories my aunt loves so much.

The gorge was like a giant hug. Nature surrounded me on every side. Trees strained towards the sky on mountains that rose up all around us. Sometimes when I got homesick, I would close my eyes and picture exactly this. It felt like melting into its embrace. The real thing was even better.

While Scott showed off his impressive fishing skills, I soaked my feet in the freezing water. His secret fishing hole was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could ask for. I didn't hear a single car or human sound except for us.

"We're going to stink at this dinner." I wrinkled my nose as he finished stowing his gear and took my hand.

"That's what showers are for, darlin'."

Darlin'. I liked that a lot. "You think I'm showering at the bar?"

"Nope. My house." He gave my hand a squeeze as he grinned down at me.

"You think I'm showering at your house?" Scott had spent years waiting. It was clear there would be no more of that.

"Yep. And I'm finally getting you into my Bigfoot Varsity Football t-shirt."

Well then. "Was this your plan all along? Get us smelly, get me into your shirt, and then...?"

"Feed you. It might be a boring life to some, but I like it nice and simple. Thoughts?"

"Sounds like heaven to me." If I went back to eighteen-year-old me and said 'you can have Scott whenever you're ready' this is exactly the life I would have pictured. I had a job I enjoyed, I worked with my best friend, and now my other best friend was going to be my what? Boyfriend? Husband? "We're not really going to run off and get married right away, right?"

He brought my hand to his lips. "I'm more than ready to start our lives together but I'm not insane. I just need to know you're mine. That you believe me when I say I'm

yours. We'll do everything else one step at a time. Starting with showers and you promising that you sleep in my bed from now on."

My heart tripped over itself and fell down a flight of stairs. "This is either the start of a long and happy relationship or one of those serial killer stories my aunt loves so much."

"So I'm over-the-top." He shrugged and let go of my hand so I could navigate a narrow bend. "And it's fast, but Mackenzie, it's also been sixteen years. Half my life has been spent loving you from a distance."

True enough.

When we got to his place—ourplace?—he handed me clean towels and the aforementioned Bigfoot Varsity Football t-shirt and left me to shower alone. I worked his shampoo through my hair and liked that I would smell like him for the rest of the night.

Then I slid into a pair of too-big pajama pants and the shirt before heading downstairs. Scott had cleaned the fish and was assembling ingredients when he glanced up and smiled. "It looks as good as I fantasized."

I picked at the old cotton. "Is this from high school?"

"Sure is. You're making all my dreams come true today."

Scott fantasized about me wearing his shirt in high school? The past and the present collided like no time existed between where we'd been apart. My years traveling and his growing the bar and his craft were now footnotes on our story.

I glanced at the ingredients on the counter. "Can I help?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Nope. But you can figure out what you want to change when you move your stuff in. And before you second guess this, I saw the way you looked at my house the other night. You have ideas." He wagged his finger at me.

"I'm not second guessing anything. I just don't have much that's mine to move in." I'd spent the last decade traveling, moving from one city to another.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "That's not true. You have family photographs and your favorite bookcase. You have things."

He was right. I still thought of all that as Dad's. "I will redecorate in my mind while you shower."

"Good girl." He winked and sprinted up the stairs.

Home. Was this home? I ran my fingers along the kitchen counter and then toured the living room more closely. The gaming chairs the boys used were lined up beside the television. I wasn't a big gamer, but I loved the warmth I always felt when the house was full and the boys were goofing off.

I could picture us sitting in front of the fire on a cold day, swaddled in blankets while we read or watched a movie together. My bookcase would go there along the wall and my mother's sofa table lined with photographs fit perfectly too. It was like this house was waiting for me to complete it.

Yes, this was home, just as it was always supposed to be. I really believed that.

"I like that smile." Scott came straight to me for a kiss. It was quick and simple and perfect. "Hungry?" He was like a different person with wet hair curling around his ears. Instead of his usual uniform of jeans and a flannel he wore sweats and a plain t-shirt.

My mouth watered—and it had nothing to do with the mention of food. "I could eat." Our picnic lunch was light. Cheese, crackers, and nuts mostly.

"Then I'll cook for you." He took my hand and pulled me to the kitchen with him. "The menu tonight consists of fish caught by me." He waggled his eyebrows. "Have I proven my worth yet?"

I liked silly Scott. "Your ability to catch our dinner is impressive."

He waved at the ceiling. "I also provide shelter. A comfortable bed. I promise to be a generous lover."

"Yes, yes, I get it. You're all that is man. You can feed me, provide a home, and drug me with orgasms. I'm sold." There was no sense fighting the inevitable. I loved Scott and the only thing I wanted in this world was to finally have him.

I watched him whip up a quick meal that was so delicious I almost cried. It was seriously better than any meal I'd ever had in a fancy restaurant. "You could probably make a killing in a bigger city."

"Maybe. It's all a crapshoot. Location, traffic, reviews, the whims of social media...I could be a hit and then crash and burn. And where would I be then? A failure in a town that isn't mine? No, I'd rather take what I know and craft a lifelong business out of my community, something I can weather the storm in and can call home if it all goes down in flames because no matter what, Lost Creek is home."

I took the last dish from him and set it on the rack to dry, then slid onto the counter, beckoning him to me. When he was cradled between my thighs and my arms were around his neck, I sighed. Just touching him had me relaxing every muscle in my body. "Even with Aunt Sharon's meddling book club?"

His laugh rumbled his chest as he dropped kisses on my shoulder and the side of my neck, working his way up to my lips like we did this all the time. "Those meddling, murderous little book nerds are part of the package, yes. Can you live with the lost boys?"

I tensed. "Where are they anyway?"

His hands coasted down my sides to grip my hips, pulling me against him. "They've been warned away for the night."

I melted. "Then yes, I can live with them. It's nice knowing they take some direction."

"They always listen when I yell." His voice was rough and it made my insides flip and clench.

"Do they now?"

"I can be quite demanding."

"Is that so?" If we were just a little closer and had less clothes on...

"And quite convincing." His hand slid under my shirt to span my back.

I arched and gasped at the jolt of sensations it set off in me. "Scott."

"And you are quite responsive," he growled. He drew a single finger down my spine

and the way my inner muscles clamped down made it feel like he was driving inside me.

I shivered. "This is incredible."

"I've had a long time to think of all the ways I want to worship you." He bent down and lightly bit the swell of my breast through the t-shirt.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

It sent another jolt through me. My fingers dove into his hair, pulling. That earned me a groan which sent a surge of pride through me. I was more than happy to let him touch and play. He could demand and tell me exactly what was going to happen, but I needed to know I could do the same.

I lightly depressed my fingernail into his scalp and traced my way to his jaw, down his muscled neck, to his chest. Scott's entire body went taut and his pupils blew.

Then he pulled my hand away and kissed my palm. "You keep that up and we aren't making it to the bedroom."

"I don't mind." The counter was a great height for the things I wanted next.

"I do. Hold on." His hands kneaded my ass and then lifted me up and against him so that I could feel just how hard he was. Then he gently set me on my feet. "We'll have plenty of opportunities for kitchen sex, I promise. Tonight I want you in bed where we can be comfortable. I want my sheets smelling like us. Get moving." He swatted my ass and then wrapped his hands around my hips as he directed me to the stairs, following me up and into the bedroom.

With the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the trees it felt like we were floating. The bedroom wasn't large. Just enough space for the bed, nightstands, and a bench at the end of the bed. There was another door opposite the one we entered that led to the bathroom, and beyond that, the closet. A plush rug covered a portion of the hardwood floors.

"Do you like it?" he asked, setting his chin on my shoulder. His arms wrapped around

my waist as we looked out at the trees.

"I love it."

"Good, then you'll move in immediately?"

This room felt like mine. Ours. Like it had just been waiting for me. "That closet is awfully empty."

"I know you're not poking fun at my wardrobe and yet it sounds that way in my head."

I turned in his arms. "I love your flannels. Never get rid of them."

"And all my old t-shirts?"

"I love them too."

"Good." He drew the hem of my shirt up and over my head. "I have several I need to see you in. But right now, I really need you naked."

Goosebumps rose on my skin both from the cool air and from watching one of my favorite people devour me with his eyes. His gaze darkened as I pushed the pajama pants down and his jaw flexed as I stepped out of them.

I really did enjoy following his orders if it got that reaction.

He remained perfectly silent with his fists on his hips as he fought for control. Then with one hard swallow he stripped for me and before I knew it, I was in his arms in the deepest kiss of my life. It was like Scott wanted to crawl inside me.

And I didn't mind because I couldn't stop touching him. After years of wishing he'd see me as more than a friend, after months of thinking he forgot me, I had him in my arms and he wanted me. It was like a dream. It felt like a dream. But the way he sank his teeth into my shoulder felt very, very real.

"Mackenzie," he moaned, "say you want this. You want me."

"I need you, Scott. I've always needed you."

"Oh fuck." He lifted me and walked us to the bed. He stopped with the backs of my knees against the mattress. "You've never been just my friend. You've always been the one."

We tumbled to the bed all hands and lips. Every touch was an exploration of new territory. Something I'd thought familiar was now new and different. Scott was always a man of few words but in bed he used them with precision.

"Lift."

"Touch."

"Suck."

"Right. Fucking. Now."

I was such a goner. Done. Annihilated. I thought I was Scott's before we kissed but I had no idea. No idea. None. Scott took me apart and put me back together in a way only he knew. No other man existed now.

Ten

Scott

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I logically knew the lack of sex in my life was going to make this quick, but it didn't stop me from trying.

There was a vast fucking difference between having sex with someone you barely know and having sex with your best friend. We'd never touched each other like this before but it didn't matter. I knew what she needed and what she liked. I knew a pause meant she was processing, and a squeeze meant she wasn't fully onboard. I knew that silence was high praise.

And so very little about the night was awkward and almost all of it blew my fucking mind. Our chemistry was legendary. It was a wonder we hadn't blown Lost Creek off the map years ago.

But now that I knew? There was no going back. Not possible. If she ended things, I would have to move to the other side of the planet to keep existing.

"Lift." I demanded.

She pushed her hips up and I slid my palm along the small of her back. She responded to every command automatically and I liked that far too much. My fingers worked her slit. There was no doubting that my efforts were working. Mackenzie was as wet as the river. Slippery and ready, but I didn't want to rush anything. I wanted to learn as much as I could and make her feel good for as long as possible.

I buried my face in her breasts. The very same pair I'd imagined over and over again. The real thing was so much better than anything my mind came up with. They were soft—so fucking soft!—and supple. Her hard nipples were now my favorite toy to

play with.

Not that she minded based on the way she arched for more and moaned my name.

"Touch," I groaned. My cock ached. It fucking ached. Until her hand wrapped around it and I saw stars. I simultaneously needed her to stop and to jerk harder. I rutted into her hand anyway and hoped she'd forgive me if I blew my load before we even got started.

Her touch was delicate but confident and suddenly I couldn't stop picturing her mouth on me. "Suck." It came out as demanding as ever, but really, I was begging.

Maybe she heard the difference because her eyes glinted with mischief as she wiggled out of my hold, pushing her hair back behind her ear before licking me. I was dead. Mackenzie looking up at me with those eyes, her tits all smashed together and her goddamn fucking tongue running along my shaft. It was a wonder I was still alive.

But then she followed my order and sucked me into her mouth. I threaded my fingers into her hair and memorized every detail. Every fucking detail.

It was too good, so I pulled free of her lips and nodded to the pillows. While she took her position, I grabbed a condom and rolled it on. But I didn't throw myself on top of her and shove my way inside like my body desperately wanted me to. Instead, I coasted my fingers up the insides of her thighs, making her shiver. Her pussy glistened and I very seriously considered diving between her legs to guarantee her orgasm, but selfishly I couldn't wait.

Words failed me. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, how I couldn't live without her like this for the rest of our lives, how I was the happiest man to ever live, but they all died on my tongue as my brain malfunctioned and all I could comprehend

was the thumping need to make our two bodies into one.

I toyed with her some more, pressing my thumb to her swollen clit while my fingers traced the promised land.

"Scott," she moaned for me, making my dick jump in my hand. Her hips rolled and her body arched, mimicking the movements it needed. I slid my fingers into her heat to take some of the edge off. "Yes, oh yes!"

I squeezed the base of my cock to keep from exploding. I logically knew the lack of sex in my life was going to make this quick, but it didn't stop me from trying. When I felt her pulsing around my fingers I pulled them out and moved over her, notching right at her entrance.

Just pressing against that wet heat overwhelmed me. My mind went blank again and something shot down my spine, urging my hips forward. Even though I touched her and kissed her, even though we'd already blown way past friends, this moment still felt like a precipice.

Her hips rocked on me and I realized I needed her to take this step. I had needed her for so long, waited and wanted, and even though she was in our bed writhing beneath me, the only way for me to know for sure that this was real, was if she took the leap.

So I waited as she worked herself around the head of my cock, waited until her eyes blinked open in curiosity, and smiled.

She arched an eyebrow and slowly rocked onto my shaft. I nodded my approval. She did it again and again, until the pressure was unbelievable. One more wiggle and I'd be inside her. I'd be home.

"Do you want me?" she asked all husky and aroused.

"Right. Fucking. Now." I gritted out. My teeth were clenched so hard I probably needed to pay Dr. Omund a visit.

Mackenzie slid her hands down my back, gripped my ass, and shoved herself down my cock, taking me much deeper than I thought possible.

"Ohfuck," I shouted into the pillow, my whole body curling over hers as her thighs clenched my hips and her fingers dug into my skin.

"Scott!" she gasped for air, her body quaking around my shaft.

"I just need a minute, darlin'." No drug could feel as good as this. Not possible.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod!" Her quakes turned to full body trembles, which was not helping me. At all.

So I took one of her hands and threaded our fingers together above her head. Then did the same thing with the other. "Good?"

She looked up at me with big, round eyes. "So good."

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Hold on, darlin'." I pulled back, the most exquisite, painful, wonderful friction, and then very slowly thrust back inside, letting her feel every inch. I did that several times, grinding against her when I bottomed out, and then slowly picked up speed until she shattered, shouting and moaning incoherently as her muscles squeezed me so tight. I slammed once, twice, and then joined her in oblivion. My muscles turned to liquid and my skin felt electric as the orgasm shot through me and all I could do was collapse beside her and bundle her to me as we heaved for breath.

Thank fuck for foreplay because that was far too fast for my liking. Next time. Next time we would tease and play and try a dozen positions.

"That was perfect," she gasped, taking my hand in hers.

"Yeah?" I had just enough energy to lift my head and kiss her cheek.

She smiled at me over her shoulder. "If we're that good together in round one then round two through infinity should be remarkable, don't you think?"

How could she form sentences? I collapsed back onto the bed and sighed. Infinity. "Yeah darlin', I do."

I blinked my eyes open as the morning light danced over the bed with the blowing of the leaves outside. Mackenzie was curled into a cute little naked ball next to me and all was right in the world.

After our first round of earth-shattering sex we cleaned up and found dessert, which led to the kitchen sex I promised her. I was going to have to start locking doors, but

that was a necessary price to pay for the peace of mind. Knowing I could have Mackenzie in a compromising position when the boys walked in was something neither of us wanted.

And now she was here, where she belonged, and I still couldn't believe it was real. Her hair was a mess on the pillow and the sheet snaked between her legs in a way that made me want to reach between her thighs and rest there too.

Having a first full date on a Thursday was the dumbest idea I'd ever had because all I wanted to do today was keep Mackenzie in bed. Now that I had a taste it wasn't enough. I wanted to spend every minute with her until this crazed need eased a little.

Maybe I could convince her to take a sick day. Joanne could handle Friday check-ins and my crew could run the saloon without me if they needed to. Probably.

She woke with a start.

"Morning," I said quietly. Last thing I wanted to do was startle her more than she already was.

Her shoulders relaxed. "I forgot where I was." Then she pushed her hair out of her face and rolled towards me. "Morning."

I couldn't help but run my fingers through her hair too. "Regrets?"

She hesitated and every second she didn't respond was like another knife in my chest but then she shook her head, all timid and unsure.

I slid down beside her because I couldn't have that. "I don't have any regrets. I meant every word yesterday. I want to spend the rest of my life loving you."

"It's just so fast."

"It is fast. But we enjoy the same things, we've been very good friends even if we took a few years off, and we have the kind of chemistry that scorches everything around us. I don't want to waste any more time. Not another second."

She rolled her lips between her teeth and tucked her hands under the pillow. "I don't doubt us. Honestly I don't." Her lower lip trembled. "It's just..."

Well fuck. I was an idiot.

I pulled her into my arms and rolled to my back so that her head was on my chest and she was tucked beside me. "I can't promise you I'll live to be a hundred and I'm sorry for that. But I can promise to love you with my whole heart every day that we're on this earth." I knew this was always going to be the hardest part for Mackenzie. I just got caught up in how happy I was that I forgot she'd already had her heart broken twice.

I kissed the top of her head and tried to infuse her with my optimism. "I hope that building a new life together will help you hurt a little less."

She looked up. "I think it will."

"Then let me love you the only way I know how."

She blushed so pretty and smiled before she pressed up onto her elbow. "Can we host a family dinner? The boys, Joanne, Lucy, Sharon, and Maeve?"

"Of course. Sunday?"

"Sunday," she nodded slowly. "Oh my god this is real!"

I stroked her back as she bounced beside me. "It sure is. Pack a bag for tonight and we'll spend Saturday morning moving some of your stuff in." I'd rather spend it in bed, but I wanted her here. I wanted this place to become ours.

Mackenzie straddled my lap, taking my face in her hands. "I love you, Scott."

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"And I love you, Mackenzie." I bounced my hips, inviting her to take what she so obviously wanted.

"This is wild. We can just have sex whenever we want?"

After a lifetime of thinking we couldn't, it was a little confusing to have this much freedom, to be able to touch her any time.

"If you want me, you shall have me." I gripped her hips and ground my very hard cock against her. "But only if that's what you really want."

She plucked a condom from the nightstand. "Oh, it's what I want."

Eleven

Mackenzie

Don't regret chasing your dreams. Cherish what you've come home to.

Joanne cackled when I told her the news and congratulated herself on playing a role in getting us together. Scott moved an impressive amount of my stuff into his home—our home—in a few short days, leaving me with the difficult task of sifting through a family home that had been through too much.

But it was hard to feel the aches when I had a table full of family and friends. Everyone came to our first family dinner. Scott made lasagna and I made a chocolate cake. Sharon brought cheese, Digger brought wine, and I learned Travis brewed his

own beer. There was laughter and stories and so much love I almost cried twice.

"Why do you look sad?" Aunt Sharon asked, brushing my cheek.

"I'm not sad. I'm happy."

"You are, but you're also sad. Trust me, I know what that looks and feels like."

There was a burning ache in my chest as I watched Scott shake his head at his friends.

"No video games if you can't promise to keep it civil."

I rubbed at the ache, realizing what it was. "I didn't come home for so long because it hurt."

"True. But you were also living your life. Traveling, seeing the world, it's all you could talk about growing up. Your mother would be so proud of the way you chased your dreams. And I know your father was. We talked about it all the time."

He said as much to me over the years. He loved planning our next adventure and the quality time we got on those trips. "But I missed out on so much."

Joanne squealed when Travis tickled her, Maeve was giving Digger advice on sex toys of all things, and Scott was watching me very carefully from across the room. Paris was magical, but a room full of this was priceless.

"You can't experience everything. Not at the same time," my aunt said sagely. "Did you meet your person at a tender age? Yes. Sometimes that happens. And sometimes those people are together from that day until forever. It doesn't mean they were happy. Growing up together, in love, is a hard, hard thing to do."

Aunt Sharon was divorced. My Uncle Augustus was a good man, but I remembered

how unhappy they were before their marriage ended. They were high school sweethearts who got married at twenty and had their first kid at twenty-two.

I tried to picture what it would have been like to move back home after college or even a year or two after that. I was still finding myself, learning all the ways my grief still affected my choices. I made mistakes but finally got my feet under me.

I was sure Scott had his own missteps. He was always the mature, fatherly figure, and I could only imagine that dynamic would have shaped our relationship if we'd tried to form one before we each grew up on our own.

Aunt Sharon squeezed my hand. "I saw the way you two were together. He took care of you and you looked to him for comfort. But the way you are now? He's a grouchy bar owner who knows when to step in and when to let people figure things out for themselves. You're my wonderful, strong, resilient niece who knows what she wants and that she can weather whatever life throws at her next. The way the two of you have come together, so confident and sure in what you have, that's the stuff that lasts, Mackenzie. Don't regret chasing your dreams. Cherish what you've come home to."

She pressed a kiss to my temple and squeezed me in a tight hug. "Can we grab lunch this week? Wednesday?"

"I'll put it on my calendar."

No one stayed late since everyone had work the next day. We locked the doors and turned off the lights before heading upstairs.

"You okay? You looked upset with Sharon earlier." Scott closed our bedroom door and took me in his arms.

"Not upset. I got emotional and she talked me through it."

"Oh yeah? Anything I can help with?"

I shook my head. "You've already done it."

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

He arched an eyebrow but didn't push it. Instead, he informed me it was time to read.

"Oh really?"

"You remember the things I said I wanted? One of them was reading in bed naked together. Naked Reading Time. It will be a nightly ritual." He started undressing me.

"I don't get a vote?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Okay. What's your vote, Mackenzie?"

I lifted my hands in the air so he could peel off my shirt. "All in favor of Naked Reading Time being a nightly ritual say aye."

"Aye," he said roughly.

"The ayes have it, Scott. Your motion has passed."

He gave my backside a playful smack as I crawled into bed and flipped open my book. I only had a few chapters left and I had been waiting all day long to find out how it ended.

"Yes, this is the perfect way to end the day." He cracked open his own book, but his eyes were on my exposed breasts.

Then the book caught my eye. "Wait...what are you reading Scott Shaw?" I pushed at the cover and sure enough, it was this month's TBCIMA selection.

"Mind your business." He tried to turn away from me.

Silly man. "Is this our first secret? Are you lying to me?" I teased.

His shoulders sagged. "Okay fine. I've been reading along for months."

Which was adorable. "Why don't you participate?"

His face twisted and his eye twitched. "I have no desire to act out a murder or share my thoughts on the plot." He shrugged. "But I enjoy listening. It's easier to follow along if I know what they're talking about."

Oh my goodness this was the cutest, most adorable revelation about Scott I could have imagined. "I knew you liked them. You act like you don't, but you really, really do."

"They're murderous and they meddle, but fuck." He tossed the book onto the bed. "Full confession?"

"Of course." This night just kept getting better.

He turned towards me, watching me very carefully as he spoke slowly and deliberately. "When Willow kicked them out of the store...I volunteered the saloon because I hoped you'd eventually join in."

This adorable, grouchy man was all mine. "I'm sorry I avoided you for so long."

He gave my fingers a gentle tug. "Yeah, about that...I get that we didn't get a chance to talk that particular day, but why go out of your way to avoid me afterward?"

It was an extreme reaction and while I was embarrassed at first, now I simply

regretted being so selfish. "I was an emotional mess. I was trying so hard to not let any of it show and hold it all together and...and underneath it all I had a completely different current of emotions boiling over. I didn't want to be your younger friend who needed protection anymore. I wanted you to see me all grown up and have your eyes fall out of your head and realize you had to have me." I blurted it all out in a rush of words. "But instead you ignored me and left. I was crushed and embarrassed and that tiny hope I'd had that your sudden need for me would blur out all the bad was destroyed. I handled it poorly and I'm sorry."

He reached over and brushed his thumb across my cheek before taking my chin. "There's nothing to apologize for. It was a misunderstanding. That time was always going to be hard and messy, but now I have all the pieces and I get it." He nodded to the book in my hands. "Naked Reading Time."

Peace settled over me as we laid there side by side reading. We didn't have to have drama in our lives. Misunderstandings were just that. There was no need to complicate things when we were happy. So I got lost in the final chapters of my book and snapped it closed. "Damn. I hate cliffhangers but I also love them. Because damn." The Rebels Revengeseries was extremely popular. It felt like everyone had read the books and everyone was waiting with bated breath for the final book. Which was why I knew it had been delayed twice already and to not expect the conclusion any time soon.

"Good?" Scott licked his finger and turned the page.

"So good." I traced the cover and the author's name. Wait a second..."A.M. Quill." It couldn't be...could it?

Joanne was going to lose it when she found out.

If I was right.

"Everything okay?"

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"My guest. The one staying all summer. Her name is Marley Tranquill."

Scott put his book down, glancing from where my fingers traced the author's name, to my face. "And?"

"I made a copy of her license when she checked in. Her first name is Aurora. Marley is her middle name. A.M. Quill." I held the book out to Scott.

He took it and flipped it open, looking at the author bio. "Does this look like her?"

The black and white photo was of a woman in heavy makeup, styled hair, and designer clothes. She didn't look much like the woman with wild hair, no makeup and comfortable clothes who checked in, but she also resembled her quite a bit. "I'm almost positive it's her." Which...was beyond wild.

Scott shrugged and handed the book back to me. "So she's an author. I'm sure she'll autograph your book."

He didn't understand. "The whole world is waiting for the next book in this series. They've been waiting years. She's one of the most famous authors on the planet. I think she came here to disappear and finish the book."

"So let the poor woman finish her book."

He still didn't get it. "Do you know who George R. R. Martin is?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"Nora Roberts? Karin Slaughter?"

"Of course. Are you going to keep quizzing me on famous authors?"

I hopped out of bed and went to the bookshelf that held the books we were currently reading, about to read, or had just read, and found the first book in the trilogy. "Here. Read this next."

"You know I'll read anything. What's your point?"

I nodded for him to take the book from my hand. "A.M. Quill is just as famous as any of them and she currently has an entire fanbase out for blood if she doesn't get that book written. Read it and catch up."

"If they want blood maybe it's good to keep her identity as hidden as possible."

"Good point." I picked up the romance for the RWYL book club. "It's just cool to know."

Scott grunted. "My lips are sealed and so are yours."

"Joanne invited her to book club. Maybe she'll come. How cool would that be?" I held up my hands when Scott shot me a glare. "I won't out her. But I'll know and that will be a bucket list item I can cross off, you know?" I didn't normally fangirl over celebrities, but I'd also never had one of my favorite authors living in one of my cabins for the summer.

Luckily she was pretty much a hermit and hadn't come into town at all. I had time to get a grip before I delivered her next order of groceries.

I started the romance for Read What You Love and was immediately sucked away

from real life and into a new fictional world. After a while the words in my new book started to blur together and Scott reached over to squeeze my knee. "I'm ready to hit the sack and you look like you're about to fall over."

I followed him into the bathroom to brush my teeth and then snuggled up against his side when he pulled the covers up and over us. As I felt his breaths evening out I let myself drift. My life used to be exciting but lonely. Now it was Naked Reading Time, Sunday dinners, book clubs, and falling asleep in Scott's arms.

Life in Lost Creek was turning out to be pretty damn good.

Twelve

Scott

Is this how our story ends? Naked and eaten by a bear?

It was Friday night and the Still Standing Saloon was packed. A bunch of locals were playing classic rock and country songs in a makeshift band that was becoming surprisingly good, the dance floor was packed, and everyone was ordering my weekend special of fried chicken and waffles.

But best of all, Mackenzie was seated at the corner of my bar next to a table filled with my friends, including Huk. She turned to the table when I was busy and spun back to the bar when I had a second to talk to her, which was much less than I'd prefer. It was a double-edged sword making these nights successful. Good for business, good for the town, not good for being with my lover.

I poured a beer for Big Al and mixed a whiskey sour for Willow and then a gin and tonic for Annie. I disappeared into the kitchen for a while to make sure everything kept moving smoothly. Now that the dinner rush was slowing, things were calming

down.

I met Huk on my way back to the bar. "Hey, you headed out?" He looked tired and more than a little frustrated.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

"Yeah, I'm beat. See you tomorrow?" He ruffled his dark hair and yawned.

"I'll be around. How's Karis?"

His wide shoulders slumped. "Holding it together but also wanting to fall apart. I'm going to be here a while."

It wasn't good news for him, but it was great news for us. "We've got your back. You know that."

He pulled me into a strong hug. "I know, man. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." I watched him walk away as I filled a pitcher and took it over to the table he just left. "How is he?"

Digger shook his head. "Crawling out of his own skin. If it were anyone but Karis he'd already be gone."

To say Huk didn't get along with his old man was an understatement. The Finn Family was complicated at best, but when you had eight brothers and sisters, and unhappy parents, you tended to get complicated.

"It'll take a miracle to get him to stay permanently," Travis sighed. "Anyone got any miracles on hand?"

"We could drive his parents out of town the way you drove Noah out," Digger offered.

"Don't mention that fucker's name around me," Travis snarled.

"Why do men do anything?" Mackenzie asked. "You need to find him a woman he can't resist."

Everyone busted out laughing. "In this town?"

"Huk doesn't want anyone he grew up with. Not happening."

"And he's not driven by his dick like some people." I stared at Digger to make my point.

He shrugged. "I'm a man with particular tastes. Is there something wrong with the way I let my dick lead me around? Anyone unhappy with the time they spend in my bed? No."

Mackenzie shrugged. "To each their own, but aside from finding the perfect woman he can't live without or getting his parents to move, I'm afraid you're shit outta luck, boys."

God, I loved her.

"Red could give him ODX and he still wouldn't stay. And you know that man worships Red." Travis shook his head.

Both Huk and Travis owed a lot to Red. He took them in and gave them jobs when their own fathers were failing at life. Huk would do just about anything for Red...except move back. Which was a damn shame.

The bar stayed busy until closing time. Travis helped me move the last of the customers out, then he left with a tourist from Chicago. "Ready?" I asked as I flicked

off the lights.

Mackenzie wrapped her arms around me. "Very ready for our bed."

I kissed the top of her head and hummed. Once the door was locked, I steered her to my truck making extra sure she walked around the front instead of the bed. She didn't notice I wasn't driving home until we were two miles down the road in the opposite direction.

"Wait, where are we going?"

"The weather is warming up. I thought we could make a little detour."

"Detour?" She yawned. "What is going on?"

"Adventure, Mackenzie."

She sat upright as I began winding up the road to the trailhead. "Are we going night fishing?"

"Nope. Stargazing."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I shrugged. "It's dark and clear and the weather is very nice."

I didn't look at her because of the narrow, winding road, but I could feel her suspicious gaze. The thing about living quiet, comfortable lives was that it meant it was very easy to do something completely random and out of the blue, just to liven things up.

Today we wouldn't be hiking up to the lake, but the trailhead had a great view of the sky and bears generally didn't like the area. I parked us in the open and killed the engine. "You trust me?"

"I'm starting to think maybe I shouldn't, but yes."

"Then come on." I had dumped a mattress into the bed along with a ton of pillows and blankets. I let down the tailgate and offered to help her up, but she jumped up on her own.

"This is either amazing or ridiculous. Are we going to get eaten out here?"

I hopped up behind her and began arranging pillows. "I sure hope not. Sit." We sat with our backs to the window and our legs out long. I handed her an earbud. "Just like old times."

She stared at it. "Oh my goodness."

They were really nice earbuds. One for each of us. I watched as she bit her lower lip and slid it into her ear. Her eyes rounded as "Counting Stars" by OneRepublic played.

"That's a little on the nose." She settled against me, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Maybe, but you loved that song and we are stargazing." I looked up at the diamonds dotting the night sky and felt everything inside me relax. "I can't listen to this song without thinking of you drooling on my shoulder."

Her body shook with laughter. "Bruno Mars is a no-go for me. Every time I hear his voice, I picture you and get sad."

"Even now?"

She shrugged. "I haven't tried. But I guess it would be different now. Got any Bruno Mars?"

I did, but I wasn't going there. Not yet. "Maybe we'll test that tomorrow. Before the saloon gets busy we'll put it on the sound system and dance just the two of us."

She looked up at me. "I like that."

I did too. Dancing would be part of our lives. I had a whole dance floor after all. The first song faded out and the "I Will Wait" by Mumford and Sons replaced it. I held my breath and my heart started to hammer.

Mackenzie sat up, her eyes darting between mine. "This is a curated list."

I nodded. "I waited and I'll happily wait again if you ever need me to."

"And the next song?"

I hit the next button and John Legend's "All of Me" came on next.

"You are so cheesy." She shook her head. "But I love it. I love you."

"I can't help it. You make me happy, Mackenzie, and I wanted to use this part of us, of our past, to tell you how much I mean it."

"Stars, earbuds, music...it's a pretty spectacular way to say you love me. That you've always loved me."

"Is it working?" I pulled her onto my lap, her legs straddling my hips.

Her hands settled on my shoulders. "I hate to break it to you, Shaw, but I've been a sure thing for a while now."

I squeezed her ass in my hands. "When are we getting married?" I expected her to blush again, to look uncertain, and I was prepared for that. One day she'd smile when I asked, and I'd know it was time.

But instead she shrugged. "In the fall. When the leaves are changing and the air is crisp."

I shook my head. "The fall?"

She rose up on her knees and then ground down on my lap. "That gives us a few months to settle into each other, so we don't have any nerves when we do it. I don't want to be a nervous bride. I want it to be a party."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:13 pm

I flipped us so she was under me and I could put all my weight on her, feel every inch of where we connected. "Then we're going to have one hell of a party." I searched her face for any signs of doubt.

Her hand came to my face, her thumb brushing my lips. "I'm happy, Scott."

"Best damn sentence I ever heard." I spent the next few minutes wrangling every stitch of clothing off of us. Then I buried us under blankets.

"Is this how our story ends? Naked and eaten by a bear?" she laughed.

"You've clearly spent too much time around that damned book club. This is supposed to be romantic, Mackenzie. Stars, blankets, marriage plans under the sky." I bit her shoulder lightly and sank inside her.

"I do think about murder—even murder by bear—much more often than I used to. Oh god, yes. More of that."

I delivered soft nibbles all over her skin while her nails scorched my back. It was impossible to ruin sex with Mackenzie. We had too much fun for that to happen. Even contemplating death by bear couldn't ruin the way I needed her. Everything was still so new, but we were quickly developing some routines. Namely, Mackenzie liked it when I made her work for it. Just a little.

"What do you want, Mackenzie?"

"You." Her hips rolled.

"Take what you want." I held perfectly still, letting her use my cock however she liked. She hooked her leg over my hip and fucking rode me. Then she grabbed my hand and dropped it onto her breast. She was so gorgeous with pillows all around her and her hard nipple between my fingers. Holding back was good for me too. The need to thrust was overwhelming and it short-circuited my brain, the need growing with each passing second.

We deserved this kind of chemistry after all this time.

"Scott please!" She kept trying to take me deeper and harder.

"Of course, darlin'. This what you want?" I slammed into her, taking her hard until she was coming all over me, taking me right along with her. When we had wrung out every last ounce of pleasure, I bundled us up in the blankets and stared up at the sky.

"That's exactly what I wanted," she hummed.

Our wordless communication worked just as well when our bodies were joined as it did when we sat beside each other. I handed her an earbud and stuck the other in my ear, her head resting right at the crook of my shoulder where I'd been fantasizing about it for so long.

"I love you, Scott. So much."

I kissed the top of her head, feeling more content than I'd ever felt in my life. This was exactly what I wanted. "I love you too, Mackenzie. Always."