



Charmed by the Mountain Man (Mountain Man Summer #11)

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Category: Romance

Description: How NOT to make a great first impression:

Clumsily smear raspberry jam across a hot guy's bare abs. Whoops!

But maybe it wasn't a total disaster, since this gorgeous hunk of mountain man asked me out to dinner hours later.

His gravel voice gives me chills, yet he's charming, thoughtful, and lives next to a beautiful lake. Yet I want him for more than his fantastic supply of beach glass. The chill from Huxley's dark whispers turns to unfathomable heat, leaving me breathless and longing for more. Craving... everything.

Yes, things are moving faster than the hummingbirds at his feeder, and are more intense than his nearly black eyes. Every caress of his huge hands makes my head spin, as I think about what might come next.

At first, I assume this is just a summer romance, until he starts making life-altering shifts. Until Hux tells me that he's already picturing our future.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

WILLA

My hands are on autopilot, and I love it .

Measure coffee. Fill up the water. Run a damp cloth over every imaginable surface to keep it sparkling clean. I can feel myself smiling at the customers in the shop.

I've only been here for two weeks, but this is already one of the best jobs I've ever had. Charming Café certainly lives up to the name: Desire, the quirky owner, pours all her passion into this charming shop in downtown Cedarville.

Cedarville itself has been amazing so far, too. Fresh mountain air. Mellow, small-town people. It feels like a close-knit community. A chance for a fresh start. Very different from my family, put it that way.

My family . A shudder runs through me just thinking about them.

There is always a fight of some kind on the horizon—especially since Dad decided that he's enrolling me in University back in Pittsburgh when I return in the fall.

He doesn't realize that I'm seriously trying to find a way to stay here, out from under his thumb.

I really do love it here. The constant view of trees and mountaintops, plus access to the most amazing coffee in town, has me waking up with a smile on my face every morning.

Being surrounded by the fresh aroma of cinnamon Danish and carrot muffins is good for the soul.

Plus, Desire let me set up a small display of my hand-crafted jewelry at the far end of the counter.

She claims my charms have the “perfect sweet energy for the café’s overall vibe”.

I give my hands a quick scrub under the hot water, then grab a fresh cloth and wipe down every vacant table.

"Willa?"

I hurry over to meet Desire at the counter. "Yeah?"

She flashes one of her trademark toothy grins, as bright as the lavender sparkle scarf tied around her hair and her blue and green tie-dye dress. "There's usually a lull right around now. Could you run some coffees across the street for me?"

"Sure." I help her put together the order – two black coffees, and an assortment of pastries. The businesses directly across the street are a hair salon, a clothing store, and a tattoo shop. I didn't think any of them opened until eleven. "Where are they going?" I ask.

"My brother is getting a tattoo sketched out," she explains, shaking her head slightly. "I think he's nuts, but it's none of my business. Still, I'm not going to let him make any decisions undercaffeinated. He might end up with something ridiculous."

I laugh while picking up the coffee tray and pastry box. "Got it. Be right back."

The sign on the door of "As The Crow Inks" says they're not open. I knock, then

bump the door with my hip. It swings open, and I step inside and look around.

The front room is mostly white with stainless steel counters – almost surgical, except for the huge array of artwork on the walls. I've never noticed the odds and ends on shelves and in the front window – t-shirts, sunglasses, accessories like leather wrist cuffs.

"Hello?" I set the tray with two large cups on the counter. "Coffee delivery!"

Crow comes bounding out of the back room with a bright smile. He's been by the café many times and always seems to be in a great mood. His girlfriend Emma also works at Charming Café, and told me he's not only a tattoo artist, but a volunteer firefighter. "Hey, Willa. Thanks."

I'm still struggling to open the box of pastries, while he's already chugging his coffee. "Just because you're a fire expert doesn't mean you won't burn your tongue," I laugh, trying to unstick the tape from the cardboard with my thumbnail.

"Need a hand with that?" An unfathomably deep voice booms from barely a foot behind me, sending my heart into my throat. I jump with a squeal, spinning and almost letting the entire box fly out of my hands. My nose is an inch from a wall of deeply tanned flesh.

As I jerk to a stop, a raspberry-topped Danish flies out of the box and sticks to the ridiculously sculpted abs in front of me.

The owner of the abs takes the box from my hand and peels the Danish from his stomach with a chuckle. "Ahh...I guess this one's mine." As soon as the box is back safely on the counter, his massive hand lightly grips my elbow for a split second. "I'm so sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

Heat flashes through my cheeks as I reach for the stack of napkins in the box and dab at the red smear along the center of the picture-perfect six pack. "I'm sorry. It's?—"

He gently takes the napkin from me. Crap, I'm being far too intimate with a total stranger. I look up into his stunning face, and a deep shudder runs through me. He's... gorgeous . Rugged and rough, with deep brown eyes I just want to take photos of forever.

He frowns. "I know. I'm scary-looking. And I can't help my voice." I think he's speaking as softly as he can.

Oh boy. I hope I haven't offended the most handsome man I've ever seen.

He steps back and extends his hand. "I'm Huxley. Or just Hux is fine, too."

I'm still staring at him. Though to be fair, there's an awful lot to stare at.

He's huge – at least six foot four, with muscles like a bodybuilder.

Dark hair and eyes, tanned skin. The deepest voice I've ever heard in person.

And yet... There's a lightness in the way he smiles and laughs. In the way he studies my face.

His warm, rough palm belongs around the handle of an axe, but feels good against mine too. "Willa."

"She's the new girl at the café who thought up those new carrot apple chocolate chip muffins," Crow says. "This is what you miss when you take off for a few weeks."

Hux releases my hand and narrows his eyes as he growls at Crow. A second later,

he's laughing with him. "We all have family stuff sometimes. Geez." He crams a huge bite of the smushed Danish into his mouth, then his eyes roll back in his head. "Mmm. Mmm- hmm ."

I love that such a big man in his...thirties, I think?...is so melodramatic about pastries. Even though he's solid as a rock, there's a twinkle in his eye that makes me want to step closer.

Crow's eyebrow arches as he clears his throat. "You know, that ink's dry enough. You wanna put a shirt on and stop terrorizing this sweet young lady?"

Hux turns, walking toward the back room and giving me a mouthwatering glimpse of his broad, rippling back.

It's covered in thick slashing lines of what looks like marker, depicting trees surrounding a stone castle, with an overflowing treasure chest near the middle.

A full moon takes up a large part of his left shoulder blade.

"That's...not the finished artwork, is it?" I ask.

"Nah." Crow shakes his head. "We're still working on ideas. We want to keep it a little bit storybook and a little bit pirate. But we definitely know it needs to swoop around the contours of the muscle."

Hux returns, pulling down the bottom of a snug black t-shirt. It does nothing to camouflage his size. In fact, the sleeves end at a section of his bicep that makes them look even thicker.

"Did you bake these?" he asks before popping the last of the Danish into his mouth.

"Sort of. I helped."

"They're fantastic." As Hux washes the pastry down with a swig of coffee, it draws my attention to his lips.

The urge to stretch up for a kiss is overwhelming—not to mention ridiculous, and totally unlike me.

I don't even know the guy! But all I can think about is having those massive arms around me.

Quick – think of something vaguely intelligent to say. "That mountain scenery in the tattoo artwork—did you guys make it up, or is it based on a real place?"

Hux exchanges a glance with Crow and then chuckles, the deep rumble sending sparks through me. "Like your Danish— sort of . It's a mashup of several different real places."

Crow holds up his phone. "Check it out."

I stare in awe as he scrolls through several photos. None of them shows more than the roof of the house, but the rolling hills and rocky crags of Wolfe Mountain are seen perfectly. "Wow."

I should be getting back to work, but something stops me. As in, Huxley. I don't want to leave his orbit. Think of some more chitchat, fast. "I like the jewelry you have in the window," I say to Crow.

Huxley's head tilts, then he snaps his fingers. "Wait, I remember now! The new morning girl at Charming Café... Didn't Desire say something about you making jewelry?"

"Did she? Yes, I do. But it's stones and beads and wire spirals. Charms for bracelets and necklaces, stuff like that. Not cool rock 'n' roll accessories like these."

Crow shrugs while taking another huge swig of coffee. "Different doesn't mean not cool. We have the space to put a small collection of your stuff at the end there, if you like. Everyone in Cedarville loves to buy local."

Hux is giving me a look that makes it impossible to guess what he's thinking. Then his gorgeous lips curl into a smile. "Hey, I like rocks and stones. I'd buy some myself if I were a jewelry guy."

Crow snatches the pastry box away from Hux just as he's reaching for a chocolate cherry cruller. "That one's mine. And I don't think anyone makes jewelry that wouldn't fall apart from you stomping around in it." From the way they talk to each other, I can tell they've been friends for a long time.

"Well, enjoy breakfast. Good luck with the...um, storybook pirate." I wave, then spin toward the door just as Hux is giving me another look I can't figure out.

As I hurry back across the street, my heart is racing as fast as if I'd just jogged half a mile. I've never gotten so revved up around a man before—prickly, overheated, and completely at a loss of what to say or think.

All I know is that I cannot wait to see him again.

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HUXLEY

Who knew that having raspberry jam smeared across my abs would be such a thrill? Even though I've long since scrubbed it off, the sensation of Willa's sweet nervousness as she wiped my skin with that napkin lingers. And as I climb into my truck to drive home, I'm still a bit off kilter.

Willa's reaction to me triggered something.

It wasn't just how I immediately felt about her – i.e.

, starstruck. Her dark blue eyes were the exact shade of the lake at sunset, the kind of depths I could stare into forever.

Even without her pretty dark blonde hair that waved to her shoulders, without her sexy, curvy figure, those eyes alone made her the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

But that's not what really startled me. It's how the way Willa looked at me made me feel. More... solid, somehow. Grounded.

It cemented my decision to stay here in Cedarville. I'd already pretty much decided to do that, despite the family stress that will ensue. Knowing that Willa lives here has rocketed my decision from 70% all the way up to 97.3% – even though I know it will tick my mother right off.

I pause at a stop sign, waving for Mrs. Glendenning to go ahead in her old gray

clunker of a car. Then my body surges with determination and I turn my truck around to go back downtown. I park directly in front of Charming Café and stride in as if I know what the heck I'm about to say.

"Hux!" My younger sister Desire pops her head up from where she's arranging cookies in the display case. "Need more coffee?"

"I was wondering if I could please speak to Willa, if she's still here?"

A head of wavy dark blonde hair pops out of the back kitchen and she approaches nervously, her teeth scraping lightly across her plush bottom lip and her delicate fingers fiddling with the bottom edge of her shirt.

She's dressed casually, in jeans and a long-sleeved navy t-shirt, but still manages to look utterly glamorous, her soft, elegant features accented with just a small flick of eyeliner.

I wave her over to the end of the counter so we can have a moment of relative privacy.

Looking down between us, there's a hand lettered cardboard sign that reads, "Charms by Willa" next to a small piece of tree branch draped with jewelry.

It's mostly copper and silver wire fashioned into spirals and twists wrapped around small stones.

"These are really cute." I lift one of the charms with my finger to take a closer look. "Meticulous metalwork. I'm impressed."

Willa beams. "Thank you! I've only been doing it for about a year and a half, but it feels incredible to create things with my hands."

"Like raspberry Danish?" My eyebrow quirks up.

Her lips quiver as she tries to suppress a giggle, then fails. "I'm so sorry about that."

"Don't be." I smile, placing my hands firmly on the counter to stop myself from reaching out to stroke her hair. "Actually – yes. Be sorry. Be completely, utterly sorry. And then you can make it up to me by letting me take you to dinner tonight."

She freezes in place, blinking slowly before she finally speaks. "Really?"

"Really. Have you been to Betty's Bistro yet?"

"No, but I've heard it's fun."

"Perfect. I haven't gone out to have fun in far too long. What time can I pick you up?"

"Oh! I'm finished at three. So anytime after four?—"

"Let's say four-thirty. We can have an early dinner, before it gets busy."

She gives me the address, and I reach out for her hand, kissing the back of it gently. "See you soon, beautiful."

I'm not sure why, but I adore how stunned Willa seems. Does she not have guys asking her out every ten seconds? Has she never been on a proper date before?

On the drive back to my house, it hits me just how long it's been since I've been on a date. Certainly not in this...I do the math...decade. Ouch.

The split second I'm home, I text my sister.

Hey – can you please give me the scoop on Willa?

Desire: LOL! What kind of scoop? She's a little shorter than me, like, around 5 foot 5. 21 years old. Really AMAZING at rolling dough – her thumb is the perfect shape for crimping tarts.

How long has she been in town? Is she planning to stay here permanently?

Desire: She moved here about 3 weeks ago, staying with her aunt. It might just be for the summer, but she wasn't sure. Want me to ask?

No.

I'll ask her everything else myself. Thanks!

Desire: You're very welcome, big bro. For the record, she's a really lovely person. I have a good feeling about the two of you.

Thanks again.

I'll say it: normally I kinda dismiss Desire's "good feelings". She always thinks she's more in touch with the universe than the average person and claims she can pick up vibes or whatever.

This time, though, I'm choosing to believe her.

I have a good feeling about Willa as well.

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WILLA

Wow. I've apparently stepped out of my ordinary life and into some magical alternate reality where I date incredible men.

Betty's Bistro is kitchy and fabulous and every bit as fun as I've heard, if not more.

I've seen Betty herself around town – she's impossible to miss with her fifties pinup hairdo and fondness for rocking a leopard print scarf, pants, or purse.

She's kept the same sort of vibe going in her casually chic retro restaurant.

Huxley and I are out on the patio, sipping peach and blue fizzy drinks while making great progress on the traditional "getting to know you" conversation about our favorite TV shows, movies, and books.

"Have you lived in Cedarville your entire life?" I ask.

I'm surprised when he hesitates. "I lived here until I was nineteen. Then I joined the family business, which involves moving around a lot."

I catch his eye, feeling like I'm melting every time we stare at each other for more than a quick glance. "Are you an international spy or something?" I giggle. "Bouncing around the planet so that nobody can catch you?"

Hux laughs, reaching out to give my hand a quick squeeze and inadvertently sending a rush of tingles all the way up my arm in the process.

"Nothing that interesting, sorry. Most of my family – me, my parents, younger brother, and two uncles – are all house flippers.

Desire is the only one who opened a business and stayed put.

" He chuckles. "Of course, that was after she travelled the world for a couple of years following her 'inner tune' or whatever. "

"I think I saw a couple of TV shows about house flipping, but I wasn't really paying attention. What does it entail?"

"You identify an up-and-coming neighborhood where housing prices are starting to rise, then find an old house that is in terrible shape but has great bone structure.

We buy it cheap, move in while it's a complete shambles, and update the entire house.

Then we live in it like kings for a month or so and take a well-deserved break before selling it and moving onto the next one.

" He sighs. "Mom has a knack for finding the right neighborhoods, so we've been following along."

"Wow." I stare down into my drink, shaking my head. "I'm glad you're saving houses from becoming unlivable, but that sounds exhausting."

His index finger taps my wrist. "Frankly, it is. Which is why I'm taking an extended vacation at our grandfather's house for the summer. Hopefully longer."

"That sounds amazing."

"What about you? How did you end up in Cedarville?"

My long, low drawn-out exhalation makes his eyebrows shoot up. "My parents are both doctors. My older sister, too. Everyone expected me to follow suit, but?—"

He nods sympathetically. "Say no more. You'd rather be a lawyer or an investment broker."

I love how easily he can make me laugh. I also love how we gradually keep shifting closer together until our knees are touching.

"They gave up on the idea of me being a doctor when I was sixteen and still shrieking every time I saw a drop of blood.

Now they're just fixated on me ending up with any kind of certification." I swallow around the lump of annoyance in my throat.

"They want something to hang on the wall next to my sister's diplomas. "

"Gotcha. Any progress there?"

"Not really. How do I know what I want to do with my entire life if I haven't been out on my own yet?" I take a sip of peach fizz. "They wanted me to go to university and take general arts or something, but that seems like a huge waste of money when I have no direction yet."

Hux nods. It actually feels really good to vent to him. "So I downloaded the reading lists for a couple of general arts programs, figured out which were the most popular books, bought them all, and now I'm doing my own personal summer school while staying with my Aunt Carlie. Tada!"

This time Hux grabs my hand for real as he beams at me. "Your education, your way. I love it."

By the time we've finished our fiesta burgers and shared a slice of maple pecan pie, I feel both grounded from the food and completely uplifted by Huxley's deep laughter.

When I come back from using the restroom, Betty is picking up the check holder and laughing with Hux as she examines the back of his neck. "Hey, did you get a new tattoo?"

He smirks. "Not yet. Crow was just drawing it with markers today to get a feel for it before we start. It's going to be a massive piece."

Betty laughs. "Well, good luck getting all the marker off." She flashes me a grin, then flits off to another table.

Hux looks at me, his mouth suddenly pursed. "Damn. I didn't think of that. I figured it would mostly come off in the shower?"

"No way. You're going to need makeup remover and a good scrub," I say. "Trust me, I know. I used to draw bracelets on my wrist when I got bored in high school."

"I can't just splash some remover on it?"

I laugh sympathetically. "No. Sorry."

He looks crestfallen as he slumps slightly in his chair. It does nothing to camouflage his height and bulk. "I have a doctor's appointment in West Stoneburg tomorrow. Way overdue for a stupid physical. The guy is a bit uptight. Is he going to think I'm a maniac with marker all over me?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe?"

A pressure starts just below my heart, then spreads both up to my throat and down to

the lowest part of my belly.

I want any excuse to be close to this gorgeous man.

This sounds perfect. I take a deep breath before blurting, "I have a brand-new bottle of makeup remover.

Want to come to my place? My aunt is out at her book club tonight. "

There's something in his easy smile. The way he looks at me so intently. His large hand takes hold of mine, lifting it slowly as he leans down to kiss the center of my wrist.

"Thank you, Angel. That would be a huge help."

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HUXLEY

The way Willa's eyes lit up when I called her Angel is a memory I'll treasure forever.

She truly is an angel. A beautiful girl who is far too sweet for me, but I still can't help thinking how much I want her to be mine.

No, not want. Need . The second I became lost in her eyes, I turned into a different person. A man whose sole purpose in life is to care for this smart, sexy woman.

I feel like a burglar sneaking in as Willa double checks to make sure her aunt isn't home, then guides me up to her bedroom.

It's a nice house – casually comfortable, with lots of houseplants.

Willa's room is done in light blue, with a big fuzzy purple pillow in the center of her bed.

There's a dark wooden desk in front of the window with an industrial gray rubber mat on top of it, across which jewelry-making supplies are scattered.

She picks up a large bottle of light blue liquid and a sleeve of cotton pads, then pulls over the wastebasket. I perch on the edge of the bed with my back to her, then look back over my shoulder to catch a slightly tense look in her eyes.

"If this makes you uncomfortable, I'll figure out something else," I say quickly.

She shakes her head and flashes me a precious grin. "No, this is going to be fine. I just don't want to be the one to yank off your shirt."

"Fair."

Chuckling, I pull it off and turn my back to her completely.

She gets right to work, saturating the top third of my back with the makeup remover.

It's a little chilly, but I keep my mouth shut.

After a few moments, I'm holding back a moan from the amazing feeling of her left hand gripping my shoulder and the right scrubbing in brisk circles, and the immediate closeness between us.

She sighs softly, her breath warm against my spine. "I feel terrible erasing this gorgeous artwork."

"All good. Crow took tons of photos." My chin nods into the corner. "So, that's your jewelry making station?"

"Yes."

"The charms are super cute. I'm sure they'll be popular around here."

I catch her reflection in the mirror and notice the way her head shakes. "I love doing it, but I don't have any false hope it could ever be a real job. It's not important work or anything."

She blinks in surprise at me in the mirror when I frown and make a low growl. "I think it's important."

Her laugh is like a ray of sunshine bouncing around the small room. “How? It makes people happy, but it’s just decoration. It’s not saving a life, like what my parents and sister do.”

"People buy handmade jewelry as a treat, right?

Either to perk themselves up or mark special occasions.

" I point to a necklace on her desk. "I bet somebody is going to buy that for their best friend's birthday.

They'll always think of their friendship when they wear it.

And those earrings – they could be a three-month anniversary gift. "

Her lovely eyes grow wide. "I didn't realize you were so sentimental."

"Ha! Busted."

She smiles brightly. "I wish I had the materials to make more.

It's hard to find really interesting stones.

Of course, I'd love to use beach glass, but you know...

" She shrugs. "We're not by an ocean. Maybe at the small lake close to here, but it’s really hard to get to.

The only public access is a two-mile hike, so I haven't made it there yet. "

A wave of happiness fills me. "What if I were to take you to that lake tomorrow after

work?"

Her scrubbing has descended to the center of my back. It feels incredible on my tight muscles. "Really? That would be amazing!"

"Good. That's settled, then."

Willa is a magician getting rid of the marker, scrubbing firmly while asking me plenty of questions about Cedarville. I'm excited to tell her all about this charming mountain town that I've grown to love, especially after spending so much time away from it.

Once the marker has all been scrubbed off and I have yanked my shirt back on, Willa glances toward the clock. "Aunt Carlie will probably be getting home in about twenty minutes. Maybe?—"

"Say no more. I'll get out of here." I turn toward the door, then spin back. "Hey – weird question, but this is the second time you've seen me half-naked. May I examine a part of you, to make things a little more equal?"

Her eyes dance. "Mayyyybe. Which part?"

Placing my hands on her shoulders, I gently turn her around. Pulling her hair up with my right hand, I tug the back of her shirt down with the left, exposing just a few inches of the creamy skin of her back. "Has this spot ever been kissed?"

A shiver runs through her. "No," she barely breathes.

I can actually feel her trembling as my lips gently drift along her tender skin. I'm sure that taking my time with Willa is crucial to her trusting me. I'm a huge guy, and practically a stranger. The softer and more slowly I move, the better.

Her breath grows slightly uneven as I string loops of kisses that get gradually larger. When I release her, she turns, already enfolded in my arms.

I lean closer, our mouths just inches apart, then pause as her deep blue gaze locks on mine. "Kiss me." It's barely a whisper, but my voice is so deep, it comes out sounding almost like a command. Yet there's a spark in Willa's eyes. She likes that .

She stretches up, our lips meeting tentatively at first. Gradually she snuggles closer and the world melts into a dreamy, slow-motion haze as our lips part, her hands latching around the back of my neck as the kiss blossoms.

My palm slowly slides down her spine, shifting us until her breasts press against me.

I lift her without thinking, getting her up on the dresser so she can lean down and kiss me more deeply.

Her airy gasp sends a wave of fiery lust straight between my thighs.

I've never been so aroused by a woman before, or been so instantly sure that we were meant to be.

Our tongues tangle as I devour her soft mouth. Then I gradually pull back before we can pass the point of no return. When I lift her back off the dresser, Willa seems slightly dazed.

"I have to go right this second, before I picture you sprawled across that bed. But what time are you done tomorrow? I'll pick you up."

She grins. "I'm done at three."

We walk to the front door, where I sneak in one last breathless kiss. "Thank you for

scrubbing the marker off my back. I'll be thinking about you all night, Angel."

"Sweet dreams."

I wait until I hear the door latch and lock behind me, then head to my truck and drive home.

I'll definitely be dreaming of my girl all night. Even if we haven't officially established that she's mine yet, I get the feeling that Willa already knows.

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WILLA

Do I actually have a boyfriend? The question keeps swirling around my mind throughout the day.

My hands move as methodically and smoothly as ever as I pour coffee, bake, and clean. But my mind is busy singing sappy songs and wondering what's going to happen tonight when Hux takes me to the lake.

This is the first time I've felt wanted for who I am, not who I'm supposed to be. It feels... significant.

Kneading the dough for another batch of tarts, I put a little extra oomph into it as I try to puzzle it out. What kind of crazy luck would it be if my very first boyfriend was the one?

When Huxley picks me up at work, Desire is smiling so hard I'm legit worried she might sprain her face. He scoops me up in a massive bear hug, then helps me into the truck and murmurs, "Let's show you the lake, angel," in that low voice that does things to me.

On the drive there, Hux asks me what I'm reading this summer. I tell him about the philosophy, psychology and sociology textbooks I've already devoured, and how I'm eager to move on to history, especially human development.

He grins, taking a slow corner around a huge picturesque oak tree. "I've read my share of philosophy. The stoics, mainly. Some Voltaire. These days it's usually more

spy novels and equipment manuals, but if there's anything you'd like me to read with you so we can discuss it, just let me know."

Come on, brain – think of something light to say so he doesn't realize your heart is about to burst out of your chest from the most oddly romantic thing you've ever heard!!!

"You mentioned that you're tired of flipping houses and want to live here now. What are you going to do for a living instead?"

He grins. "I really do like renovating and repairing houses. Just not the whole damn thing at once. I've been doing some smaller projects – gutting a powder room, updating a dining room. Things that don't displace the family entirely but still improve their daily lives."

The entire rolling forest is lovely, but it gets extra lush as we drive up the hill and onto some private land to approach the lake. I don't know if we're technically allowed here, but Hux obviously knows his way around and doesn't seem too fussed.

We park in front of a timeless, quietly elegant country-style house right on the lake, set just back from the rocky shore. Hux turns to me with a grin. "This is my grandfather's house, where I'm staying now. Welcome."

"Wow," I sputter, staring in disbelief.

It's the kind of home that is passed down from generation to generation.

Not just because of the location, with a sprawling lawn that leads right down to a long dock and a wide rocky shore, but also because the house itself is large and rambling, and at the same time completely unpretentious.

It's designed to be lived in, not to impress anyone.

Hux wraps his arms around me as he helps me down from the truck. "You mentioned making charms from beach glass. I'd like to show you something."

He takes my hand as we walk down to the very edge of the water. It's not a huge lake, but big enough that there are noticeable waves.

I look down, and my mouth falls open. Among the polished stones are beautiful chunks of well-worn beach glass—deep bottle blue. Light green. Dark green. A wonderful teal color that I've never seen in beach glass before.

I kneel down to pick up several pieces, then straighten up, looking around the lake. The only other signs of life are a few cottages at the far end. "Is there a glass manufacturer or something around here?" I ask.

Huxley chuckles, wrapping a thick arm around me.

"My grandfather took my grandmother to the beach for every birthday, holiday, and anniversary.

She loved the water, and particularly adored searching for sea glass at the edge of the ocean.

While he was building this house, he collected a whole bunch of colored bottles.

He smashed them up and put the pieces in a rock tumbler to take the rough edges off and speed up the process, then dumped them near the center of the lake, so the waves would eventually push them ashore right here.

It took about twelve years for them to start showing up. "

My heart is pounding. This is the sweetest thing I've ever heard.

"Grandpa didn't want Grandma ever to find out it wasn't natural, so every summer when she went to visit her sister for a long weekend, he'd smash up and tumble more glass, and plant it in the lake."

I blink in surprise as I suddenly realize my hand is cupping the side of his rugged face.

It's becoming so natural to touch him that I'm not even noticing when I do it.

It feels incredible. "Lake glass that's semi-natural, with a helping hand.

That's so romantic." I don't mention that it seriously bodes well that Huxley comes from such a sweet family.

"Plus, it's amazing to think you could make pink beach glass if you wanted to. Or even purple."

"Any color you like," he chuckles. "It just takes a long time.

" He massages my lower back gently as he holds me.

"My grandparents moved to Arizona to be closer to her sister.

Grandma isn't that well, so she'll probably never get back here.

I'm sure she would love it if you made jewelry from some of this. "

"Oh! I couldn't. I mean... It belongs to her, right?"

"What's she going to do with it at this point?" His eyes twinkle. "You know, her birthday is coming up next month. Could you make her a pair of dark blue earrings but using silver wire instead of copper? I'd love to buy them from you."

"Sure. I mean, I've only worked with real silver a couple of times. It's a little expensive."

His eyes flicker. "How about you send me a list of everything you need tomorrow, and I'll get it to you. Plus, you need to make glass charms and stuff for Crow to sell in his shop. Mention that it's glass from Cedar Lake and they'll sell like crazy. People love that kind of thing."

"That's an amazing idea."

I collect a large handful of pieces, then we go into the house, where Hux already has dinner mostly prepared. I wander around a bit, admiring the solid, handmade furniture, the family photos, and the framed map of the Cedarville area.

He notices my interest. "Do you like this town so far?"

I drift over to join him at the dining room table. "Yes. I really do."

"How long do you think you'll stay with your aunt?"

"Hmm, not sure. We initially said just until the fall, but now I'm hoping to stay longer."

He reaches out to run his fingertips under my hair, circling the top of my spine, where he kissed me last night. "Good."

"Why is that good?" I whisper.

"Because it means I have a few months to make sure you completely fall for me and never want to leave."

I can't believe he just said that. This whole situation feels like a lucid dream: a gorgeous, sweet man with an endless supply of beach glass, encouraging me to make jewelry instead of pursuing some random certifications in topics I don't care about.

Huxley is the guy that I've never been brave enough to dream for. Plus, judging by the incredible aroma of dinner, he can also cook?!

My mind is beginning to spin – half of me wanting to believe that this is the start of the most incredible relationship ever.

The other half knows that if something seems too good to be true, some kind of stress must be coming. Nobody is this perfect.

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HUXLEY

Willa insists on helping clean up after dinner, so I load the dishwasher while she scrubs the stove and counters. Who knew that cleaning the kitchen with a woman could be such a blast? Not me.

"How does a person manage to spill so much pasta sauce on the stove?" she laughs.

I wipe my hands on a dish towel, then stand behind her and cup her luscious ass. "Maybe somebody was walking around with this and distracting me?"

She laughs again, spinning in my arms to face me. "Wait! My hands are all dirty."

"Good. Then you can't defend yourself."

I dip my head and kiss under her ear and along the side of her neck. Her soft, uneven breath sends my blood south until my jeans feel way too tight. Then I release her, spinning her around to face the sink so she can rinse off.

Maybe I came on too strong when I mentioned making her fall for me before she left at the end of the summer, but I need Willa to know I want her to stay – even though everything is happening too fast. I'm just getting settled here myself.

I'm not going to risk losing her. I already know in my heart, my soul...

and certainly the rest of me...that Willa is the one.

I put the last few things away, then Willa grabs a cabinet door before I can close it. "Oh! That teapot." She stares up at the yellow flowered china. "My grandmother had the same one."

"Was she a doctor too?" It was meant as a joke, but she sighs.

"Close. She was a nurse. My grandfather was a doctor as well."

I swing her up onto the kitchen counter. "Your parents are doctors. Your older sister is a doctor. And now your grandpa too? I feel like your family has had quite enough of those. Much more than their fair share. So you should feel free to do whatever you like."

Her eyes light up. "Wow. I've never thought of it that way."

"And as for that diploma... Did they ever say there was a deadline?"

"Everyone else went straight into?—"

My finger lands on her lips. "We're not talking about anyone else. We're talking about you. Have your parents ever explicitly told you that they will disown you if you don't get a diploma before you're, say, twenty-five?"

"N-no."

"So while you're here for your self-guided summer school, maybe we can toss some ideas around." Lifting her by the waist, I hoist her over my shoulder and march into the living room. "In fact, I'm going to start by tossing you around right now."

She dissolves into fits of giggles as I sit on the couch, pulling her down into my lap.

"I'm really grateful that you want to help me solve this problem," she says softly. "I guess I'm just so used to doing what's expected of me."

"Hmm. One of the amazing things about being twenty-one and living on your own is that you can make your own decisions."

My fingers walk up from her wrist to her elbow, then slide back down to hold her hand. "I'm older than you are, Angel. But I don't want it ever to sound like I'm telling you what to do. Anything I say is simply a suggestion. Is that okay?"

"Totally okay."

I nuzzle her neck gently, loving the way she cuddles right into me.

The feeling of her soft breasts against my chest sends another deep wave of lust surging through my system.

"I can't wait to see what kind of charms you make with that beach glass," I murmur, kissing along the top of her hair. "I love that you're so creative."

"You must be creative, too. I mean, who designs the interiors when you flip a house?"

I shrug. "Huh. I've never thought of it like that. I just kind of stick to whatever open, neutral layout those home design websites are currently featuring."

"Still, you're the one assembling everything."

"Beautiful, if you want to think I'm some sort of creative interior designer, you go right ahead. Honestly, I just think of myself as a trend follower. Plus Mom sends a lot of links when I'm starting a new house."

“Aha. You take direction well. Good to know.”

We both laugh for a moment, then grow quiet. Staring deeply into each other's eyes, we both lean in. The kiss is slow and soft, hesitant at first, then her lips open and her fingers thread into the back of my hair as she pulls me closer. Gradually our kiss develops, opens, becomes a blur of heat.

After several minutes, I force myself to pull away. "Decision time, beautiful. Shall I be respectable and drive you home?"

"What's the other option?" Her sweet voice is barely a breath.

"Well, you do appear to love the lake. And I have a very large bed. Plenty of room for two. If you want to stay over, I can open the window and we can listen to the waves all night."

Her bottom lip disappears between her teeth for a few seconds. "You know, I do have the day off tomorrow..."

"My coffee here isn't nearly as good as my sister's, but I'm sure we can struggle through in the morning."

"I'll just text my aunt quickly so she doesn't worry." She flashes me a slightly guilty look. "I...may have already mentioned you to her. She said the Turner family are all wonderful people, and she was pleased that we're...hanging out."

Clasping her hand, I bring it to my lips to kiss each knuckle. "Hanging out ? No way, baby. We're dating. You're my girlfriend. At least, that's how I see it. Sounds good?"

Willa is already nodding. "Sounds great." She jumps up to grab her phone from her purse to send her text, while I have a little chat with myself.

It's much too soon for us to sleep together.

Well, in that way. I can't run the risk of scaring her away, even though I can tell from the way she reacts to me that she wants more as much as I do.

But I feel like sleeping, as in just sleeping , with Willa in my arms might help her realize how special she already is to me.

And how I'm already thinking about forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

WILLA

Huxley leads me slowly to the bedroom, stopping every few feet to kiss me, caress me, and otherwise tell me without words that he's fine with taking our time.

Every single thing about him is thoughtful.

Caring. I don't think I've ever had anyone so concerned about every aspect of my life. Plus, the heat that rolls off him when he pins me to the wall takes my breath away. When he lifted me onto the counter earlier, it sent waves of desire to places I've honestly never paid much attention to before.

His strong hands are warm and firm yet gentle as he lifts me onto the edge of the bed. I love the way his huge hands are so careful as he slips off my shoes and socks, then pulls off my t-shirt.

Butterflies start to form a tornado in my lower belly as his dark eyes drink me in. Even though nothing has happened between us beyond kissing, my body has already decided: anything he wants is on the table. How could I not be under the spell of this breathtaking man?

His hands slide slowly up my sides, then up my arms to pin my wrists together.

Then he grabs a thin blanket and wraps it once around them to keep me in place.

It's more a suggestion of restraint – I could easily pull my hands out if I wanted – but I get his message.

He wants me to be still so that he can play. Okay, then!

His lips burn against mine, his strong fingers gripping my hip as he settles beside me. One long finger skims down my throat and into my cleavage. I gasp as his palm slides into my bra and across my breast, causing my spine to arch as I gasp into his lips.

His palm is warm against my skin, teasing my nipple with a quick stroke of his thumb until I'm melting against him. The more I gasp and flush and quiver, the darker Huxley's eyes burn.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip and I hold back a whimper as he unhooks the back of my bra. He pulls it up over my head, leaving it tangled near my wrists.

"Just relax, Angel." His deep voice is a soft growl. "I'm not going to take you tonight. I just need to taste you. Okay?"

My breath is shaky. "Okay."

He pulls off my jeans and panties together, and as soon as they hit the floor, Hux spreads my thighs, kneeling in front of the bed.

Even through his deep tan, I see a spark of color across his cheeks. His hands hook around the back of my knees, pulling me a few inches closer toward him. His palms caress down the back of my calves, then back up to my knees as he gently nudges them apart.

A deep shudder runs through me. This is actually happening .

My inhaleds are loud and ragged, but I don't care. My heart pounds in my chest as my tight nipples point straight at the ceiling. His gaze alternates between staring between

my thighs and then up at my breasts, rising and falling with each breath.

His firm fingers massage up my inner thighs. My skin tingles everywhere he touches me, leaving my head spinning. His thumb traces slowly through my crease as I shiver, hips twisting. It's not a tickle, but a feather light sensation that touches my body and soul at the same time.

My gasps fill the bedroom as Hux leans in and drags his mouth against my open pussy with a rough kiss. "Don't think you need to be quiet," he groans against my skin. "I want to hear every single sexy sound you make, Angel."

There's an intense spark in his eyes. If I didn't know how sweet and gentle he really was, it would almost look dangerous.

The next time I moan from the feel of his lips sliding against my flesh, he gives a quick nod and grins before his warm tongue slides through my folds, opening me up slowly, hitting every sensitive spot.

He finds my button easily, focusing his attention on it as soon as I begin to pant.

His tongue flattens, grazing slowly over the spot again and again until I feel a twisting and tightening in my lower belly.

I can't quite pull in a full breath as my thighs tighten around his shoulders. Much as I want to, I can't fist his hair and pull him closer. Maybe this is why he wanted to keep my wrists bound.

"Delicious," he mutters, his lips shiny with my juices.

He seems to love it, digging in again. I quiver and gasp as his tongue plunges into me several times.

Then he slides in a finger instead, returning his tongue to my clit as he laps it over and over.

His free hand scoops up my butt, tilting me so he can lick harder.

It's all-consuming. Fiery. Wildly intense.

As every muscle begins to contract, a flash of amusement dances in his eyes. He's clearly delighted that I'm about to come. Does he know that he's my first? Does that add fuel to the fire for him?

My thighs splay open, a rush of heat flooding my entire body as I cry out. My spine curls, pitching me forward, and I clutch the sides of his head, our eyes locking as I shake and quiver helplessly, my soaking pussy tightening around his finger in rhythmic bursts.

The world blurs, then I collapse back onto the bed in a wave of orange sparkling heat, as if my blood were fizzing with lust.

"Easy, Angel." Hux takes hold of my hands, removing them from his head and placing them at my side. He wraps the blanket around me, cuddling my naked body against him. "Wow. You have no idea how gorgeous you are when you come."

"I..." I can't make sense of all these feelings. Like we're connected. Like we were meant to be.

...But also like I'm afraid of anything that goes this smoothly.

My hand skims slowly down his chest until I reach his belt, but he grabs my wrist.

"That is one hundred percent off the menu tonight," he says with a chuckle. "But

you're staying so I can make you breakfast in the morning, right?"

I blink. He only wants to pleasure me for now? "Sure."

A few minutes later, Hux slides into bed with me, wearing boxer briefs that leave precious little to the imagination. It's not just the massive bulge in the front. It's the toned ass. Muscular thighs. Every part of him is the rugged mountain man I imagined.

Snuggling into his thick arms, I fall asleep almost immediately, wondering if tomorrow we can explore a bit more.

Oh, who am I kidding? A lot more.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

HUXLEY

I always thought my coffeemaker was pretty quiet. Now, as I tiptoe around the kitchen while trying not to wake up Willa, the gurgles and hums seem impossibly loud in the otherwise silent house.

I love having her here. It feels...significant. Like our lives are just starting to line up, showing the potential of a future together.

Staring at the trees outside the window, I replay the events of last night. Devouring Willa while not allowing her to touch me also felt meaningful. Showing her without words that she is always going to come first – I groan inwardly at the unintended pun – in my life.

She's going to be the highlight of my every day. The person I think of while falling asleep every night. The one that I'll always put ahead of everything else.

I've never thought of myself as a particularly romantic man, but now I can't stop thinking about the tornado in my soul springing from every single kiss, and how I want to help her collect beach glass here forever.

The second the coffee is ready, I pour myself a mug, slip on my stretched-out old loafers, and stroll into the back yard. Refilling the two bird feeders – one seed, one nectar – only takes a few minutes, and by the time I'm done, Willa is walking outside with her own mug.

The early morning sun brings out every blonde highlight in her messy hair. Her fair

skin practically glows, and her eyes flash with amusement.

Hearing a familiar whirr, I freeze in place instead of rushing to her. Turning my head extremely slowly, I catch a hummingbird enjoying some nectar right behind me. A few moments later, a sparrow hops onto the seed feeder, looks me up and down, then begins munching away.

Willa giggles quietly as I swivel my head slowly back to her. The ruby-throated hummingbird darts away from the feeder, hovering just over my shoulder. It looks back and forth between the two of us, then goes back to drinking.

I walk toward Willa as smoothly and slowly as possible, grinning at the way her hand is clapped over her mouth in disbelief.

"You're... a bird guy ?" she whispers.

"Yeah. I like having them around while I drink coffee out here. They're like wild pets."

She laughs a bit louder. "Dude, you just had a bird flying around your head. You're a fairytale princess."

Is it weird that it fills my heart with joy to see her laughing at me like this? After a swift, hot kiss, I grab my mug and we both sink into the patio chairs.

"Not just birds, actually." I gesture to the corner of the lawn with my bright green mug. "You see where the long grass is rustling? Just wait a sec."

She stares intently until a fluffy brown rabbit sticks his nose out. He peeks around for a moment, realizes that we aren't moving, then darts across the corner of the lawn and back into the forest.

Willa fixes me with a look and raises an eyebrow. "You knew the bunny was there before it appeared. Which means you have storybook animal powers. Seriously, dude – princess."

I grimace, screwing my face up into a frown, but burst out laughing a few seconds later. Everything about this sweet girl makes me feel lighter.

We spend the day lounging around the house. A slow walk on the lakefront for more glass and cool stones...a long leisurely lunch on the patio...a short walk into the forest... Suddenly, we realize we're hungry for dinner.

Although we chat about everything under the sun, there are also many stretches of comfortable silence, either walking hand in hand, or with her head resting against my chest.

We eat dinner inside: the only light is from a couple of candles, so the golden rays of sunset wash over us.

"It's beautiful out here," Willa says quietly. "I love Cedarville's quiet vibe, but it's even nicer out here in the forest. It's amazing."

My hand reaches for hers. "You're amazing. Shall I drive you home, or would you like to stay over again?"

"Oh." She smiles shyly. "Umm, if I stayed over, I'd need a ride to work really early."

"No problem. Desire will hook me up with some muffins, I'm sure."

Willa helps me tidy up after dinner, and I see a special light in her eyes when I suggest a movie in bed.

Ten minutes later, we're wearing nothing but underwear and oversized t-shirts, sitting propped up against the headboard. Seeing her in my clothing triggers a possessive twinge I've never felt before. Like I need to claim her. Announce to the world that she's mine.

This transition period of switching my career has left me feeling untethered. I've been expecting something terrible to happen, like my mother pitching a fit and turning grandpa against me, or my father somehow managing to torpedo the business contacts I've made here.

But suddenly I feel like I'm in the right place at the right time. Cedarville was definitely the right choice. I mean, come on, it led to this moment with Willa snuggled against me.

How have I charmed this breathtaking woman into my bed? It's more than I could ever deserve.

We barely make it twenty minutes into the old spy movie when I can't stop my hands from wandering around her shoulder and her arm, caressing her breast through the t-shirt. "I really like you in my shirt," I whisper against the top of her hair.

Willa grabs the remote and turns off the film before smiling up at me in the dim glow of the bedside lamp. "Is it weird that I like wearing it? It makes me feel..."

"Like you're mine?"

The tiny nod and flash in her eyes makes my cock swell almost immediately. Her hand is on my abs – she must feel the blanket moving, right? My mouth brands hers, my hand gliding along her inner thigh while Willa gently strokes my shaft through my briefs.

"I'm glad you're letting me touch you tonight," she whispers as she tips her head back so I can nuzzle her throat.

"I shouldn't be. Things like this are supposed to take time. I'm supposed to wine you and dine you, bring you flowers until...you know. You're really sure."

Willa's fingers tighten around my length, sending a shockwave through my entire body. "Just because I've waffled about choosing a career doesn't mean I'm unsure about everything. This?" She points back and forth between our hearts. "We were supposed to happen this summer. I can feel it."

I ignore the tiny alarm bell in the back of my mind pointing out she may have just suggested this was just for the summer, because it is followed by a much larger tremor shouting that I need us to be together forever.

My hand plunges into her panties to find her delicate folds already growing wet. She follows suit, then laughs when I groan at the incredible sensation of her soft palm against my rock-hard cock. The way she touches me is so tentative that I know for a fact I'm her first.

"Willa, I?—"

"I'm already on the pill," she blurts out. "Just, you know, in case."

My lack of condoms was the final thing that could have held me back, and that argument just went right out the window. My middle finger dips inside her, exploring her warm softness as my thumb flutters against her clit. Willa melts against me, her breath already slightly uneven.

Sitting up, I pull off her t-shirt slowly, dropping my lips to her left nipple. She moans, then lift her hips to help as I pull off her panties.

"Your turn," she whispers. "I haven't seen all of you yet."

"Anything you want, Angel."

I stand and yank off my shirt, loving her wide-eyed stare. Instinctively, I reach over to close the curtains, even though there is nobody around for miles. No way does anyone but me get to see Willa's sexy curves and smooth skin.

I lift my boxer briefs up and out to get them around my erection, then drop them. Willa's eyes grow huge. Before I can slip back into the bed, she lunges forward, taking my cock firmly in her hand before wrapping her luscious lips around the head.

I brace myself against the wall, trying to stop my knees from buckling. She's so eager, licking and sucking, covering as much of my flesh as possible as she uses both hands to stroke me.

"You have no idea how good that feels, Angel," I groan. "But I want you another way."

She removes my shaft from her lips with an audible pop. "Yeah? Well, in that case..." She kicks the blankets out of the way, sliding into the center of the bed.

For a moment, I can hardly breathe as my gaze wanders over her perfect full breasts, round hips, and toned thighs. Her pale skin and nervous smile. Not to mention those eyes...beautiful, dark blue, reminding me of the lake just outside.

Lying over her, I pin Willa's sexy, squirming body with mine and kiss her deeply, loving the feel of her fingers against the back of my neck as she holds me close.

Her tongue flutters against my own, then she moans as my stiff shaft eases between her legs, gently caressing her wet skin. Reaching down, I flick her clit briskly with

my thumb, my other hand in her hair as our hips shift and rock, both of us wanting more.

“Tell me you want me, Angel.”

Her smile is so sweet.

“I want you, Hux. Now.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

WILLA

I've never been this open with anyone.

Anyone else in my life has always told me what to do: my sister, my parents, my teachers. Aunt Carlie has been the least judgmental: as long as I'm getting some kind of education, she seems to be happy.

Hux, though, accepts me for precisely who I am right now.

Which makes this decision fairly simple, although I'm glad I had an extra day to think about it – an amazing day spent together, falling for him completely.

It feels like his body is everywhere. My breasts flatten against his firm chest as we both shift, my thighs spreading wide.

The heat between us is energizing, never stifling.

And I'm still tingling from how exciting it was to surprise him by sucking his cock for a few moments.

I'll definitely be doing that again soon.

Right now, though, I need him inside me.

"You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen."

Oh wow. I guess he's been trying to soften his deep voice around me. But now he can't control it, and its dark resonance makes me shiver. Hux is unbelievably hot. The man is walking, talking sex on a stick, and I can't believe I'm in his bed, naked, wet, and ready.

We both moan through our kiss as the thick, blunt end of his shaft traces up and down through my pussy lips. When he starts to press in, my fingers tighten on the back of his neck.

"You're trembling, Angel. Anything you want to tell me?"

"I'm just excited. And curious."

His voice turns worried. "If this hurts at all, gorgeous, just tell me to stop."

I try to stifle a laugh, shaking my head. "It's all good. I just want to feel you."

The slight dusting of his black chest hair tickles my nipples slightly as he nods, then eases his massive cock inside me. I love that he moves so slowly, maintaining control when it would be so easy for his excitement to get the better of him.

Just as I'm sure he's about to thrust into me, he takes my hands and places one on his lower back and the other on his sculpted ass. "Pull me closer if you want more. Pinch me if you want less."

I swallow hard, trying to catch my breath as he drags against me, my skin feeling slick and overheated.

This time Hux sinks several inches in, and his deep groan rumbles through both of us.

There's just so much of his massive body.

I adore the weight of him over me, pinning me comfortably against the mattress.

Holding me snugly, while caressing everywhere he can reach.

His head dips, warm lips branding my nipple, then flicking it with his tongue.

This gives me a bit more room to breathe as he presses deeper, every cautious stroke opening my pussy up for him.

I'm unbelievably wet, thank goodness, which is definitely helping, but I notice that his back muscles tense up as he gradually moves deeper.

"You're so tight, baby. So good... I can't believe how perfect you feel."

Even though my entire nervous system is already being flooded with lust and the brand-new sensation of my libido awakening, there's something chasing close behind.

From the moment we met, Hux has behaved like he truly wants me.

Me. Not my potential. Not what I'm supposed to be. Just me as I am right now.

Honestly, it feels like he's crazy about me.

This idea is what sends my legs in the air to wrap around him, pulling him against me. Our combined moans echo around the bedroom as he sinks deeper, as far as he can go. I feel stretched and completely full with his throbbing shaft inside me.

His jaw tightens as a deep shudder runs through him. "So hot," he rasps. I can feel the tension in his muscular thighs as he moves carefully, pumping slowly, all the way in and all the way out. His thumb flicks over my clit again, adding to the countless overwhelming sensations soaring through me.

"Mine." His warm breath is right in my ear. "You're mine , beautiful. I've never wanted anyone or anything as much as I want you."

"Yes, yours." My palm caresses his lower back as my heels tighten around the backs of his thighs. "All yours."

My whole body is a livewire, trembling and twitching as a deliciously deep pressure builds in my core, every single second pure bliss. I know it's just a matter of time before I explode.

"That's it, Angel." His eyes blaze as his thumb strokes my cheekbone while he brushes his lips against mine. "I cannot wait to feel you come on my cock. Just let go, beautiful. Let me feel you."

As if I had a choice! My body is beyond my mind's control at the moment. Everything is clenching and twitching, chasing the detonation that I can feel coming.

Hux smiles down at me, thumb moving faster, hips surging as he plunges deeper, quicker. From my scalp grinding on the pillowcase to my crossed ankles, everything tenses up as I begin to shake.

"Hux," I barely manage to gasp before the climax bursts through me with a tidal wave of unrestrained heat. "I..."

"Damn, baby, I can feel you...that's it...your sexy pussy squeezing me just right. Willa?—"

He stops breathing, his entire massive frame freezing as his eyes widen, every muscle stiffening. Then he thrusts quick and deep, kissing me so hard my lips might actually bruise. All the while, I can hear him half-muttering, calling me beautiful, calling me sexy, calling me his .

The feeling of his hot come pumping inside me gives me a rush I will never forget. So raw and wild. Just like Hux. The ultimate mountain man – part animal, part gentlemen.

And, as the entire town of Cedarville is going to find out tomorrow when he drives me to work first thing in the morning, all mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

HUXLEY

As I drive to Charming Café to pick Willa up after work, I debate telling her how much I've missed her all day long. That it's hard to imagine my life without her.

Time and experience have taught me that almost as soon as I become comfortable in a home, I have to leave it again. Start with another decrepit pile of bricks and turn it into something wonderful.

But Willa and I have been magical from the very beginning, so I want to believe that we are already a sure thing.

I park right in front of the café, then wave at Desire through the window. I see her call to the back, then Willa rushes out. Scooping her into my arms, I don't care that my sister is probably watching as I kiss my girl.

After a moment, Willa pushes me away with a saucy grin. "Hey buddy, this is my workplace, you know. Let's try to keep things a little respectable here."

My bottom lip sticks out as I roll my eyes, pouting. "Fine ." A warmth spreads through my chest as I realize I truly love it when she laughs at me.

Just before we head off, my phone pings. I throw the truck back into park, then read the text.

Dad: You didn't respond to my email. Urgent family video call in 35 minutes. Just us and Gabe – your uncles are in the middle of an electrical project.

Well, shit .

I'll be there.

"What's wrong?" Willa asks. "Your entire energy just changed."

"Family video call in half an hour. Apparently, I missed the email about it." I glance over sheepishly. "Since I'm taking a break, I've turned off my email notifications."

"No problem," she says brightly. "I have a ton of reading to do, and I'm overdue for a call to my family as well. We could do dinner tomorrow night instead?"

I lean over for a swift kiss that immediately turns heated, then reluctantly pull away. "Thank you for understanding, Angel."

I drive Willa home, where a five-minute breathless kiss in the front hallway of her aunt's house doesn't feel nearly long enough. As soon as I can force myself to pull away, I race home and boot up my laptop just as the call is starting.

Dad glares at me through the screen. "So kind of you to join us."

They must be taking this seriously, since my parents aren't side by side on the couch. Mom and Dad are in separate windows and are clearly in different offices. My younger brother Gabe's eyebrows are knit together uncomfortably.

"Huxley, your father and I have identified the perfect neighborhood for your next reno," Mom says, leaning toward the camera. "Arrangements are already being made to?—"

"Mom, stop. I told you I was taking an extended break. I'm working here in Cedarville for a while."

Dad's entire face tenses up. "If we let this opportunity slip away, some other flippers will slide in and take over that neighborhood. There are eight to ten houses that would be perfect for us. We need you to get in there since you can begin immediately."

"No, I can't, Dad. I'm not doing that right now." I feel my shoulders beginning to lock up. "I've told you this several times. Would you like me to translate it into French or Spanish for you? Perhaps hire a skywriter?"

"No need to get snippy." Mom's lips purse as she peers at me through the screen. "I don't like you staying at your grandfather's house. You're going to get too comfortable out there and never want to come back."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," I sigh. "I don't want to come back. Maybe once in a while for a special project, but that's it. Plus, I'm looking into buying Grandpa's house from him anyway. You don't have to worry about that."

My mother pins me with a stern glare. "Houses always fall apart when they are bachelor pads. You shouldn't have that nice house without a woman there. It will kill the resale value."

I keep my mouth shut. There's no way I'm going to tell them about Willa when they're in this kind of sour mood.

"What kind of work are you doing, then?" Gabe asks mildly. He's always the diplomat whenever there's a family spat.

"General contracting. Fixing up rooms instead of entire houses." I attempt a smile. "And at the end of the day, I can go home to a working shower and a comfortable bed."

"You're going soft," Dad grumbles. "I didn't even think about slowing down until I

hit sixty.”

Yeah, right. Dad’s idea of “slowing down” is doing two houses a year instead of three or four. Plus he and Mom always hire up to a dozen extra pairs of hands for a flip, whereas Gabe and I only call in a handful of locals here and there.

I also can’t tell him that I don’t want arthritis in my hands like him. It’s difficult to suppress my grin as I consider I now need a full range of motion to caress Willa and please her in every possible way.

Mom’s expression becomes exasperated. “We should probably just go ahead and buy the house and wait for you to pull yourself together. It can easily sit empty for a few weeks while you give your head a shake.”

“You do what you like with your money. I’m not leaving Cedarville.”

“And if we talk to Grandpa about taking his house back?” Mom leans closer to the screen. “It could be argued that he’s not of sound mind, considering selling you his house.”

My blood runs cold. “How dare you. He’s sharp as a tack, and everyone knows it.”

“Cecily, enough.” My dad’s dark tone is a warning. “Let’s discuss this again in a few weeks.”

I’m so furious that I end the call without another word.

It turns my stomach when my parents treat me like a child, but I can deal with that. I can even deal with finding another house on Cedar Lake if need be. Yet there's no way in hell I'm leaving Cedarville or Willa, or letting my family dictate my entire life.

As I pace around the living room, it occurs to me that Willa is in a very similar situation. Her parents have her whole future mapped out for her, with no thought as to what she actually wants. It's going to be harder for her to stand up for herself, since she's younger.

Well, she has me in her corner now. And I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure her life turns out exactly the way she wants it to.

Fingers crossed that that's here with me.

WILLA

After ending an exhausting phone call, I sprawl back on my bed, feeling hollow.

Do they actually teach parents how to push their kids' buttons? Is there some secret course where they learn to detect every weak point and make someone feel like – excuse my language – total shite?

Don't get me wrong, I am super proud of my older sister for becoming a doctor.

My parents, too – it's one of the most important jobs out there.

It's just not for me. And after twenty solid minutes of my dad insisting that I will never amount to anything unless I have a diploma in something, he has certainly proved that I could never handle the pressure.

Rolling onto my side, I hug the pillow against me. Although Dad didn't say it specifically, he strongly hinted that he would ask Carlie to kick me out in the fall, so I have no choice but to go back to my family.

There's no way I can handle them pushing me around again.

Although Hux and I have only been together a little while, it feels like everything clicks between us. Is there any chance... I sigh. No. He'd never want me to move in with him after just a few months. That's not a fair thing to ask.

I sit up, stretch out my shoulders, then spend an hour reading my giant history of art

textbook while taking notes. Then I grab a granola bar and juice from downstairs. By the time I get back to my phone, there's a text.

Hux: Hey, gorgeous. That call with my family has put me in a crappy mood, or I would phone you. Don't worry – I'll be able to shake it off in a few hours. Can I pick you up after work tomorrow?

I'm sorry it was a pain. I totally get it. I just had a call with Dad that wasn't great either. I think hanging out tomorrow would cheer us both up.

Hux: Not hanging out. Having a date. Remember?

LOL! Right. Maybe we could cook together at your place or something?

Hux: Sounds great. Looking forward to it, Angel.

Aww. In just a few moments, with a couple of messages, we've cheered each other up. That feels...important, somehow.

I spend the next hour making jewelry. As I work with the beach glass, intricately twisted copper wire and black cord, my mind becomes quiet. The entire world disappears when I focus on creating like this. The only thing that exists is the piece in my hands.

Honestly, this is the perfect job for me. There have been times when I've zoned out for an entire day and created more stuff than I could believe. Eventually I finish the last piece and tidy up, wondering yet again if there's any realistic chance I could make a living doing this.

I would be perfectly happy renting this room from Aunt Carlie indefinitely. Or eventually getting a small apartment. I don't need much.

As I get ready for bed, I wonder if I could be enough for Hux in the long run. He's an incredible man, with ties here in Cedarville. Yet he's used to travelling around wherever the market leads him. And what would his family think of me? Would they approve?

Just before I drift off to sleep, I start doubting whether I could hold his interest forever.

Sure, I know he really cares about me now , but it's only been a few days.

It's going to take a lot of time to get to know each other completely, and for him to decide if he wants to take a chance on a girl with no formal education and no official career.

For me , I'm enough. For him... I'm not so sure. A man that wonderful deserves the very best.

Which, logically, is probably not a self-taught jeweler with a day job in his sister's café.

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HUXLEY

The next few days are a happy blur of dinner dates, long walks around town, and a little trip to West Stoneburg to pick up some supplies for Desire.

Although I'm sure that Willa would be happy to stay over at my place again, I don't ask. Things are going really quickly, and I feel we should take a step back.

Especially since the next step I'm suggesting is going to be a big one.

Finally, I invite her to my place for dinner, where instead of actually cooking a meal, we put together a huge charcuterie board and settle in front of the fire with a bottle of red wine.

"Sometimes snacks are better than meals," Willa laughs. "As a contractor, do you appreciate things more when they're deconstructed?" she asks, gesturing at the platter.

"Hey, any time I can make my own mini sandwiches, I'm happy." I arrange a piece of cheese and a rolled-up salami slice between two crackers and pop the whole thing in my mouth.

Willa jumps slightly when my phone pings loudly from my pocket.

"Sorry, Angel. I almost always keep it on silent, but I've been expecting an important email."

I skim the message while Willa munches on some grapes, olives, and a weird cheese

with nuts in it. After a few moments, she asks, "What are you grinning about?"

I hand her the phone. She brushes off her fingers on a napkin, then takes it and reads. I watch in delight as her eyes grow huge and huge.

"Hux?" Her voice is unsteady. "Why is this lawyer preparing paperwork to purchase this house...and talking about putting my name on the deed as well as yours down the road?"

I reach out to snag the phone back, then take her hands in mine.

"I'm normally anti-paperwork. That's one of the reasons why it rubs me the wrong way that your parents are so fixated on you getting a diploma you don't even want.

My mother is also hell bent on having me come back to the family business.

She doesn't care that I want to buy this house, plus she swears that without 'a woman's touch', it's going to fall to pieces and lose its value.

"I roll my eyes. "She swears that only women pay attention to lighting and finishes, the sort of thing."

Leaning down, I kiss Willa's forehead gently. "So, I wanted to be sure that when we get engaged...which will be very soon, I hope...I can have you officially added as a co-owner of this house. The official lady of the house at the Turner residence on Cedar Lake. How does that sound?"

Her eyes are wide, her bottom lip falling open as she stares at me. When she finally breathes, her head shakes slightly. "I didn't...I mean, I'm not sure..."

"You can at least think about it though, right? I just wanted to make sure that it was

doable."

Her eyes close for a moment. "Just think about it? Okay. I guess I can do that."

"And as for your own paperwork..." My hands squeeze hers. "I did some research. There are a bunch of different programs for jewelry making and metalwork that provide certifications, all in cities less than a two hour drive from here."

"Those courses are expensive," Willa blurts, her spine stiffening. "And they expect you to work in gold and silver, not copper wire."

"I could get you all the tools – maybe we call it a birthday gift? And if you're not paying rent, all your salary from the café could go to materials. You can even use my garage as a workspace – it's huge."

I'd been hoping for a smile. Instead, her pretty face has gone pale. "Could you excuse me for a moment?" she whispers.

"Of course, Angel."

She rushes out the front door without saying another word.

Damn .

Every instinct screams at me to chase after her. But she left her purse and coat. She can't be going far. Maybe she just needs a moment to get her bearings. Or maybe... My blood runs as cold as the water at the center of the lake.

Maybe I'm just a learning experience, like her self-directed summer school. Maybe Willa didn't really see our relationship extending past this summer.

No, that's not possible. I know that she wants me. She just needs a little time to get used to the idea.

I hope.

WILLA

My shoes are nearly silent as I walk across the lawn to the edge of the trees. I don't want to go into the forest for fear of getting lost, so I just walk along the edge, slowly breathing in the greenery.

I take a moment to watch a couple of sparrows that are squabbling at the birdfeeder. Is it weird that Hux and I haven't disagreed once? We have different opinions on lots of little things, but for the important stuff, our values seem to line right up.

My head is spinning as I walk slowly to the far end of the yard.

"The lady of the house?" First off, it is wildly old-fashioned for his mother to think that way.

Then again, my own father doesn't think that I'll amount to anything unless I have a piece of paper that says I completed some arbitrary chunk of education.

My goal was to get through the summer, do a ton of reading, work in the café and make jewelry. And now Hux comes into my life out of the blue and shows me how I can increase my skills and make a real career from my jewelry-making, while also satisfying my parents.

It's too good to be true. He's too good to be true. And yet, he's the most real, solid person I've ever met.

So why are you hesitating, girl ?

I glance back to where a lark has scared off the sparrows. It's a bit chilly on this shady side of the yard, so I change directions, slowing down even more as I amble along the edge of the trees.

Maybe I can't trust anything that happens so unbelievably fast. Not to mention easily – everything I've ever done for myself has been a fight. Admitting that I wasn't cut out to be a doctor. Putting off university. Moving away.

For my very first relationship to be so easy breezy? It's...odd.

Hux is so gorgeous, so charming, so sweet... It's like I've fallen under his spell. What woman wouldn't want to live in a gorgeous house right on the edge of a picturesque lake on a beautiful mountain? It's gotta be every craftsperson's dream.

...And again, too good to be true.

The tips of my shoes are beginning to get damp, and I hug my arms around me as the evening breeze whips my hair around.

"Here we go." My chin snaps up to meet Huxley's deep brown eyes. "You're going to catch a chill, Angel." He helps me into my coat, then wraps an arm around me, leading me to the truck. "I've already got your purse in there and packed you up a snack and some dessert for later."

"I didn't mean that I wanted to leave," I explain quickly. "I just?—"

"I know, Willa. You need some space. I totally understand. Let me drive you home and you can decompress. Take a hot bath or read or something."

We've only driven a half mile when he reaches out to squeeze my hand. "I'm sorry if I overwhelmed you, Angel. It's okay. I'm a bit overwhelmed myself. I mean, what kind

of relationship comes out of nowhere like this and turns out to be completely perfect?"

My shoulders drop an inch as I exhale. "So, you get it."

He squeezes my hand gently again before releasing it.

"I'd like to think so, baby. This is moving ridiculously fast, and I certainly don't want to scare you away.

There's no reason to rush anything. Like my grandpa always says, we can take our sweet fancy time.

"His eyebrow raises. "Okay, fancy was the f-word he used when grandma was around."

My laugh is louder than usual. I don't even care. And by the time we get to my house, I feel like the tension has completely dissolved.

Hux walks me to the door, then glances over to see my aunt's car in the driveway. "I'm gonna chance it anyway, if that's okay with you."

His hand presses against my lower back as he pulls me close, his lips searing mine with a hot, wild kiss that almost feels out of control. Like the heat between us cannot be contained.

The low growl in his throat, the way he grips me so tightly with his hungry mouth on mine... I forget where I am for a moment until I step back, my head reeling.

"So gorgeous," he murmurs. "You have a nice, chill evening, and I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay."

He kisses my forehead, then spins me around to face the door before lifting the back of my hair. As his lips brush that sensitive spot between my neck and my shoulders, a deep shudder rolls through me.

His lips move until they're hovering beside my ear. "I love you, Willa. Have a good night."

By the time I snap my head around to stare at him in disbelief, he's climbing into his truck, flashing me a quick wink before driving away.

A man who knows how to give me space, solve all my problems, and on top of everything else say the words that I've been thinking myself for the past forty-eight hours...

Hux isn't just charming. I already can feel it in my bones: he's the one.

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HUXLEY

Open space is incredibly important in interior design.

When I first started flipping houses, I learned quite a bit about decorating pretty quickly. For example, some people want to pick a theme and then overwhelm the entire house with it to make their point.

I always took a more laid-back approach: have a nice framework with trim, lighting and doors that match the original era and style of the exterior of the house, then leave the rest of it fairly neutral, so prospective buyers could envision their own elements.

I smile to myself while driving home with a small load of supplies in the back of my truck.

This is exactly what I'm doing with Willa.

Giving her space and time to imagine what her life could be.

Allowing her plenty of breathing room, so she can see the basic structure of what I want to create with her.

We've been texting a lot, and I've been picking her up from work every day to take her home. Our conversations have been light, without talking about the future past a certain summer festival in West Stoneburg I'd love to take her to next month.

It's been three days since I suggested she move in with me. It's pretty clear that she

wants to, but I'm not surprised she's hesitant. She hasn't even known me for a month, for crying out loud.

I pull into my driveway, open the garage door, then start hauling everything inside. Then I spend half an hour clearing out the end of the garage by the window.

Standing back, I envision Willa's workspace.

I figure a workbench perhaps five times the size of what she has now should do the trick.

All the machinery and heavy tools can go at one end, and the fine work stuff in front of the window.

I might install a larger window so she has more light – and of course, I'm going to have to measure her height before I finish the workbench.

Which means it can't be a surprise. But I wonder if?—

I spin, surprised to see a car coming up the driveway. For a split second, my stomach lurches, then I see it it's not my parents.

Willa gets out of a blue car, then waves to the driver. "I'll text you later. Thanks!" An older woman waves back before driving away. I suppose this is Aunt Carlie.

Willa comes straight into the garage. "Is it okay that I dropped by?"

"Of course, Angel. Always." I wipe my hands on my jeans before enveloping her in a gentle bear hug. "How was work today? I was going to text you to see if you wanted to have dinner."

"That sister of yours..." Willa looks up at me with a grin. "She has some of her rather out there friends in for a seasonal coffee something-or-other. The incense was making me sneeze, so she said I should leave early."

I squeeze her tight, laughing. "Yeah, Desire is a bit kooky sometimes."

Willa's head fits perfectly against my chest as she murmurs, "She's a very caring person, though. The second she realized why I was sneezing she put it out, opened all the windows, and told me to take off. She's even still paying me for the full day."

"That sounds like my sister all right." I release Willa while keeping my arm around her, turning us both to face the garage window.

"The house sale goes through in a few weeks, but Grandpa said it was cool to start making updates now. I was thinking this could be a great place for your workbench... It could take up the entire wall. I'll get those special mats so you don't get tired from standing on the concrete, and a stool.

I'll sketch it all out, make sure you like it, measure the height you need, all that good stuff. "

Her chin tips up, lips parted, eyes wide. "You're serious?"

"Of course. If you decide to be with me, you'll need a nice...studio? Workshop?" My hand wanders down to cradle her hip. "Jewelry creation emporium? I dunno, you're in charge of naming it. I'm just building the damn thing."

"I can't believe you're doing this."

"And I thought we could look up all the gift shops and galleries in the area who might want to sell your pieces. I'm always down to check out new restaurants in Old

Hemlock Valley, or Spring Grove.

Heck, we could take a long weekend and hit every town on the way to Kingsville, maybe stay in a fancy hotel. ”

“Is Kingsville somewhere...” She trails off, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip, then smiles tentatively and begins again. “Somewhere we could go to pick up things like jewelry making supplies, and...maybe new lighting for the kitchen?”

Joy, relief and excitement surge through me.

“ Our kitchen, where we’ll be cooking together for years?

Where your parents can’t intimidate you or threaten to forbid you to stay at your Aunt’s any longer?

Yes. Definitely.” My lips press to her forehead.

“You’re right, you know – it’s not bright enough in the kitchen on cloudy days. ”

“I was thinking of midnight snacks when I’m up late working.”

“Good idea.”

Willa’s palm caresses the side of my jaw gently. “I’d love to live here with you. I don’t know about that ‘woman of the house’ stuff. But if it will help if your mom thinks that a woman is here to make sure everything stays balanced or whatever, and leaves you alone, I can do that.”

“You must know that’s only two percent of my concern. I really just want you here so that I know you’re not leaving at the end of the summer, and so that you don’t have to

worry about your parents freaking out at you.”

“I know.” Willa stretches up to kiss me. “I want to stay because... I love you.”

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WILLA

Huxley's eyes shine as his hands encircle my waist. "I love you so much, Angel."

"I got that feeling. It was super sweet of you to give me some time to wrap my head around everything."

He slides his palm around and massages my lower back gently. "I know what it's like to have a family ordering you around. I've had years to deal with it. But you, you're right on the brink of figuring out how you want your life to start. Everything should be your decision at this point."

"At least I have some distance from my family. If your mom really thinks you don't deserve your grandfather's house..." I hesitate. "It's none of my business, but I hope it doesn't create a lot of tension."

He bursts out laughing. "I went straight to Granddad and told him I was about to tell my parents off for the first time."

He begged me to let him do it, so we jumped on a video call.

He told them to stay the hell away from this house unless I invited them for dinner.

I told them that I had decided once and for all that I'm no longer interested in being involved with their business, and I'm officially striking out on my own. Permanently."

I pull in a breath. "How did they take it?"

"Mom was pissed off. Dad grumbled, but I could tell from the spark in his eyes that he's impressed that I'm standing my ground. And Gabe looked thrilled."

"Maybe we should have your brother over for dinner sometime, if he's ever in the neighborhood. He could report back to your mom that everything's cool?"

"Great idea. Besides, I really want them all to meet you once my parents settle down." Hux smiles. "They're going to be as dazzled as I am, Angel. You hungry? Can I make you dinner?"

I shiver as he leans in to nuzzle my throat. The way this hot man touches me sends sparks of lust surging through me in time with my pulse. My fingers spear his hair, pulling his lips to mine. "I'm hungry, but not for food."

I would never have imagined I could be so bold as to tell a man I wanted to go to bed with him, but everything is just so easy with Hux.

I gasp as he lifts me, carrying me into the house and straight to the bedroom.

He plunks me in the center of the bed, and I giggle when he disappears into the bathroom for a moment to wash his hands.

That's the level of care that everyone says women should expect. And here I am getting it from my very first boyfriend.

No. Not the first. The only .

When he returns, he slips my clothes off slowly, piece by piece, trailing meandering, looping kisses across my skin.

I had no idea that the inside of my knees were so hypersensitive.

Yet by the time I'm completely naked and spread across his bed, it feels like every single cell in my body is begging for his touch.

This time Hux is not quite as gentle, spreading my inner thighs with his rough palms as he fixes his eyes on my open pussy. I try to twist my hips, but he holds me still. "So sexy."

His tongue drags straight through my crease and across my clit, turning my mind staticky as I try to come up with something saucy to let him know how turned on I am. "I had no idea," I finally whisper, "that I could feel this close to someone who still has all their stupid clothes on."

His pupils dilate, the corners of his eyes smiling as he gives me a subtle nod. Then his thick middle finger slides into me as my head tips back, glazed eyes scanning the ceiling.

He already knows exactly how to touch me. How to read every gasp and breath. And I'm sure that when he takes me in a few minutes, we're going to speak each other's language even more fluently.

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HUXLEY

My Willa is delicious. Salty, and sweet, and delicate. Everything a man could dream of. The kind of woman that makes me want to be the very best man I can be.

I slide another finger inside while lapping at her clit and she begins to squirm restlessly, her hips lifting. My free hand splays across her belly to hold her down. “Easy, Angel. Just relax and come on my tongue.”

“Mmm.”

Feeling her tremble against my mouth is the most satisfying sensation in the entire world.

Willa moans louder, her soft pussy swollen and wet, her fingertips tugging at my hair as she writhes.

Every little squirm helps lock me into my task of making her shriek my name.

Her snug channel tightens around my fingers as I pump slowly and steadily, lapping at her clit as if it were my favorite candy.

I still can't believe that this gorgeous woman magically appeared in my life, but I'm going to spend the rest of my days thanking the universe for this incredible gift.

There's a soft, fluttery gasp that's different from the rest, and I feel the exact second she crosses that line, shaking, her silky thighs gripping my head and shoulders.

" Hux!!! "

Her luscious, curvy body trembles for me, her eyes half-lidded as she pulls in air before shrieking my name again. I spin my hand and press my fingertips against her G-spot while licking harder and faster.

I'm rewarded with the prick of her fingernails against my skin as her mouth falls open in a startled O, her shoulders shaking as the climax crashes over her.

She's so perfect. So sweet, so lovely as she loses control completely.

For me .

Her deep blue eyes are even more beautiful when filtered through her erratic blinking as she collapses back on the bed. I sit beside her, gently stroking her breasts, her thighs, letting my hands slowly meander across her soft skin.

Willa rolls onto her side, raising an eyebrow. "You're still extremely un-naked, mister."

"Beg pardon, Angel." I stand up, turn my back to her, then cock a hip to one side while slowly peeling off my t-shirt.

She giggles, then I hear her clapping. "Keep going. I just wish I had some dollar bills handy that I could tuck in your underwear."

The t-shirt lands on a chair, then I shake my hips from side to side while unfastening my belt and dropping my jeans and shorts together.

"Woo! Yeah, baby. Take it all off!"

I half turn, blowing her a kiss before spinning to face the bed as I lie down beside her. "I feel like you want something. Whatever could it be..." I grin, grabbing her hip and rolling her toward me.

She caresses my cheeks with her palms, fingertips sliding down to cup my jaw as she pulls my mouth to hers. Although there's no doubt in the world what Willa is after, I still need to hear her say it. "Tell me what you want, gorgeous."

"You."

"For the long run? Forever? Tell me you're going to move in with me as soon as it's convenient for you and your aunt, Angel."

Her thigh stretches, her heel hooking around my calf and pulling me toward her. "Yes. I'll be the lady of the house and make sure you don't turn this place into some horrible bachelor pad." She pulls a bit more, and I roll over to cage her soft body beneath mine.

"And then?"

Her hypnotic eyes look up at me with a gentle smile. "And then we are going to live happily ever after in this incredible mountain house next to the lake."

"That's my Angel."

I drag my stiff shaft through her wet pussy, making sure she's nice and open. Her hands slide around the back of my shoulders, pulling me to her as my cock notches at her entrance. "Go ahead, Angel. Take what you want."

Her head falls back with a laugh. "Is that the polite way to say, come and get it?"

"Well, since you don't have any damn dollar bills to throw..."

We dissolve into a kiss, the heat between us only amplified by our laughter. We both moan as I rub the blunt head of my shaft up and down through her slit, tapping against her clit several times before slowly nudging inside.

She shivers against me, her thigh wrapping around my hip. A rush of heat overtakes me as I sink in deep. She's so wet and soft. So perfectly tight. Every gasp and moan makes me gradually plunge deeper, faster, as I open her body up for mine.

"Angel." I meet Willa's smiling eyes. "I know. This is...a lot."

We rock together slowly, finding our rhythm. Her luscious pussy squeezes around me in time with every stroke. I lick my thumb and bring it to her clit, brushing it with a butterfly soft touch that's more of a tease than anything.

Even with all this lust and delicious tension, relief is flooding my body in waves. Willa and I are each other's everything. We're starting a brand-new chapter of our lives, and everything is going to roll out smoothly ahead of us.

My heart swells, filled both with the warmth of these thoughts of love and also the thrill of thrusting into her softness so hard we're both gasping for air. We can't breathe enough to kiss, so I nuzzle her neck, then up nearer her ear to whisper, "So sexy, baby. Let me hear you. Let me feel it."

Her moans become louder, fingernails scraping my shoulders as she lifts her hips toward mine. We move faster, our urgency building momentum. My light touch against her clit becomes firmer, and I can feel exactly when I hit the perfect pressure. Willa cries out, her thighs tightening around me.

I lose any remaining shred of self-control, pounding hard and deep as I feel her

tensing and tightening around me. Her breasts bounce against my chest, and I pull back to watch her lovely eyes. "Come for me, Angel."

I capture her lips again just as she shrieks, her tight pussy locking up around my shaft as her muscles stiffen. I rub her clit even harder, thrusting deep as I release her mouth to drink in her breathless cries.

My muscles burn, my heartbeat loud in my ears as I watch my gorgeous girl tremble from her climax. Somehow, I manage to hold off for a few more seconds, waiting until she's on the other side of the peak before pounding deep as I release burst after burst of hot come inside her.

A primal part of my brain flashes like a red blinking light – someday soon, she's going to go off the pill and I'm going to fill her with our child.

"Wow." Willa squirms against me, her hips still restless as she releases my shoulders, hands hitting the pillow on either side of her head. "That was...intense." She grins. "In the best possible way, of course."

"Good. Because if we're going to be the keepers of this house forever, we're going to have to break in every room."

She laughs merrily as I flop beside her, making the bed bounce. "What about the porch? And the beach?"

"And the beginning of the forest path. The garage." My eyebrows waggle. "Your workbench, when I build it for you."

She snuggles into my arms. "I hope your parents like me."

"Honestly, I don't give a damn if they do or not. But they will. They'll adore you as

much as I do."

I place a kiss in the very center of her forehead, then one more on each cheek before giving her a quick peck on the lips. "By the way, I love you."

"You said that already. But that's very convenient, because I love you too."

"Good."

As we cuddle, our arms around each other, listening to the trees rustle around the house, my mind is already racing, wondering how I can prove to Willa that I'm in this for the long haul. That this isn't just for the summer.

That we're going to create a life together.

WILLA

I've never thought in terms of "forever" before. I guess I never thought I'd be lucky enough to find someone who accepted me for me – a bit of a homebody who just wants to read, study subjects that interest me, and create quirky jewelry.

As I slowly pace the kitchen, waiting for the oven timer to go off, a wave of gratitude flutters through me. I can see clear across the mountain through the open window. On the other side, I can make out part of the lake. I have a plentiful supply of beach glass and interesting stones.

Even though I've never pictured myself as a mountain woman or a country girl, I'm positive this is the right place for me.

The oven timer buzzes. I pull out the lasagna and set it down to rest for a few moments, then hear a noise from the spare bedroom that Hux has turned into an office.

He comes in from the garage a few minutes later. "I've got all of the pieces cut for your workbench. Tomorrow I'm going to set it all up, then if I could please have you check the height again before I really screw it all together...?"

"That sounds amazing, thank you. Hey – I think I heard your printer in the other room."

His chuckle is rich and deep. "Yeah. I forwarded something Crow just sent so we can both take a look."

He washes up in the kitchen sink, then goes to the office, returning with several pages. He spreads them across the kitchen counter so we can study them together.

The first picture is a photo of a detailed sketch of Hux's proposed tattoo – the mountains at the top left, the medieval castle just below it and closer to the center, and greenery trailing down to the lake at the bottom right.

The next picture is a photo of Huxley's bare back, with the sketch roughly superimposed on top of it.

"Wow," I breathe. "That looks incredible."

"Yeah, Crow really does listen to every suggestion you give him, and always interprets them well." Huxley is examining the last few pages, which are zoomed in to show different areas of the artwork in greater detail.

Leaning in, my fingers tighten on the edge of the counter as I stare in disbelief. In the first draft I saw, the partial edge of the lake simply had a dusting of sand. Now it has sand, pebbles, and a few tiny fragments of green and blue that are obviously meant to be beach glass.

The treasure chest in front of the castle had stacks of gold coins in the original version. Now the gold coins have become a pile of jewels, with a large necklace hanging from the chest. In the center is a green charm wrapped in looping copper wire.

"You..." My fingers flutter against my lips. "Is that..."

"My favorite piece of yours? Yes. I bought it as a gift for Desire a few weeks ago and sent Crow photos of it."

"You can't...I mean...my art on your body...it's just—" Huxley cuts my stammers off with a kiss that I feel all the way down the backs of my thighs.

"Angel, I want to show you that you're my treasure, and already a permanent part of my life. Even though it's just a small fragment of this huge piece?—"

"I'll know it's there." I smile up at him, my hands landing in the center of his chest. "Even if it's just the tiniest smudge, I'm going to know what it means."

"Exactly. Good." His eyes dart back and forth. "Also, once we've found a bunch of places to sell your work and are driving around from town to town, we're going to have to drop by all the big jewelry stores."

My fingers press against his t-shirt. "Oh, no. They won't be interested. They only sell precious jewels. My stuff belongs in craft stores and cafés. Low-key, souvenir places."

"I was thinking more that I need to start doing some basic research like sizing this finger and asking it what it wants to wear forever." Huxley takes my left hand and gently kisses my ring finger. "So if you have any strong ideas there, the time to start sketching would be pretty much right now."

I can't feel my face. I swear, the air in my lungs stops moving. He's dead serious.

Then Hux tips his nose up and sniffs the air. "Okay, not right this second. Lasagna first. It smells amazing."

We laugh together, then he helps me plate up our dinner.

This is what our home life will be: always relaxed, always laughing, always planning for the future, but in a mellow way. Finding our own paths for career and work, and

the way we want to live.

If anyone had told me a month ago that I would meet the love of my life while flattening a raspberry Danish into his stomach, I would've said they were crazy.

Now I already know in my heart that's going to be a story we tell our children someday.

This charming, rugged mountain man and I will be together forever.

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HUXLEY

* One Year Later *

Even though I had wanted to pull out all the stops, Willa didn't want anything over the top for our anniversary. Especially since we disagree on the exact moment we became a couple. She says that our relationship started with our first kiss. I think it began the second we met.

But since there were only twelve hours between the two events, we at least agree on the date.

After a quiet, early dinner at Betty's Bistro, we come home and stroll along the edge of Cedar Lake. Willa noticed earlier that I have champagne and chocolate-dipped strawberries in the fridge, but she hasn't commented yet.

We walk slowly across the pebbled shore, scanning for large chunks of beach glass and interesting little stones. "How about this one?" I reach down to pick up an almost perfectly round black stone with three crisscrossing lines of white quartz.

"Perfect! Great eye, babe."

This has become a ritual at least once a week since she moved in.

Every step of the way, Willa seems dazzled that I've changed my space for her – from rearranging the kitchen so she can reach things more easily, to creating her jewelry studio in the garage and having the bench at the perfect height for her. Not to

mention, all of the wire pulling and assorted other jewelers' tools I've bought for her.

It's fascinating stuff, and I'm excited about assisting her with some of it.

She's researching courses in both jewelry making and metalwork, and I know it's only a matter of time before she has her certification. But she's doing it for herself, not her family.

Willa's hand squeezes mine, then she gasps, squatting down to grab an oblong light gray stone with bright white flecks. "This one will look so cool wrapped in real silver!" she squeals in delight.

We take a moment to look up at the sunset, where the orange streaks are just dipping over the tree line. It's one of those perfectly still moments where it feels like the entire forest and lake are holding their collective breath.

Five steps later, I pause again. "Hey, here's a pretty one."

I bend down, and she tries to follow my gaze, unable to see what I'm looking at. I spin on one knee, grabbing her hand as I hold up a tiny black box and flick it open with my thumb. I'll be honest: I actually practiced that move several times so this moment would go smoothly.

"Willa Emma Lilly Foster, will you marry me and be the lady of the house and mistress of my heart forever?"

Her free hand flutters against her lips and her breath sputters as she nods quickly. "Yes. Of course. Yes."

I slip the ring onto her finger as her mouth falls open. Then she lifts it closer, staring.

Over the past year, she had done many sketches with different stones, metals and styles. This is the one she kept coming back to. Yet her version didn't have a large enough diamond for my liking.

"You had in your notes that the sides should be pink zircons. Instead, I went with light pink rubies. I hope that's okay?"

" Hux . You shouldn't have."

I wrap her in my arms, swinging her around in a slow circle. "Of course I should. You like pink stones with pale metal. I pay attention, Angel – I've seen the way you look at diamond, ruby and platinum rings. Champagne, my love?"

She grins up at me, her palms caressing the sides of my face. "Why not, fiancé ."

She laughs at my exaggerated head to toe wiggle. "Baby, you have no idea how good that sounds to me."

"Good, because I'm going to say it a lot."

As we walk back to the house, she reaches up into the back of my t-shirt, knowing from memory where the treasure chest with her charms is tattooed next to my spine. Her fingertips trail in a few small circles, then she giggles sweetly.

"What's so funny, Angel?"

"You just keep surprising me. Keep outdoing yourself. I mean, you've already charmed me into staying here forever. What's next?"

I turn back to gaze across the lake to get one last glimpse of the fading multicolored sunset. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

WILLA

* Ten Years Later *

Children are always a handful. When they were both small, there were honestly a few days when I thought I was going to lose my mind. But now that Noah is six and Riley is four, they can entertain each other a bit, and I can actually take a breath.

I sprawl on a blanket under a tree that overhangs this section of the beach, watching the little ones run around on the shore. Hux is lying beside me, skimming his email.

"Oh, sweet." He flashes me a grin. "The Johnsons liked their new bathroom so much they're going to have me do the kitchen this fall."

"Amazing."

Many people don't like house renovations done during the dog days of summer. They would rather hang out on the back deck, not have workmen thumping around their home. So we've both taken the week off to relax in our own private paradise.

The children are playing one of their favorite games, which is finding the coolest stones and beach glass for me. And after last night's big storm, there are lots of new treasures.

I watch as Riley picks something up, shows Noah excitedly, then they both run toward me. "Look, Mommy – this one's pink!"

She drops it into my hand so I can examine it. Sure enough, it's a large chunk of beautiful pink beach glass. "Wow," I murmur. "I've never seen pink before." My chin jerks around to see Hux laughing. "You didn't."

His hand reaches out to play with the back of my hair.

"I...mayyybe? You mentioned it the first week we were together.

It took me about a month to find, but there was a candle shop getting rid of a whole bunch of pink jars.

So it was also recycling. Very environmentally responsible.

Plus I got to play with a rock tumbler for a weekend. "

My heart has been beyond full since we met – since I first moved in with Huxley, since we planned our intimate wedding right here on this beach, since he then surprised me the next night with a festive party at Betty's Bistro.

But this is... He's been planning this for ten years?

Noah comes running over to drop something in my hand. "Purple! That's way cooler than blue and green."

The kids race off to continue exploring, and I fall back, resting my head on Huxley's shoulder. "I still can't believe you did that."

"Anything for my Angel." His lips brush against my forehead. "I'm done with my email. Why don't you nap while I watch the kids." He makes a pillow out of a balled-up towel, so I can lounge comfortably beside him.

I always wondered if I'd be able to find meaningful work or a real career. And now

it's all around me. Raising two precious humans, creating whimsical jewelry that's now being sold all the way from Charlotte to Kingsville (!!!), and keeping a laughter-filled home with an incredible man.

I'm living my dream come true.

Check out the rest of the books in the

Mountain Man Summer series.

You'll meet more hot and rugged mountain men in *Rescued by the Surly Woodsman* , and the rest of the Wolfe Mountain Man series.

You'll meet Crow and Desire again in *She's Got That Spark* . Keep reading for a preview...

Emma

Quickly setting the tray down, I dash back to the front...

And stop dead in my tracks.

The most gorgeous man in the entire world is smiling at me.

He looks...dramatic. Like a movie star. No, a movie star playing a rock star.

His jet-black hair makes his dark brown eyes look nearly black as well.

He's very tall and beyond ripped, with layers of muscle along his wide shoulders and down his ink-swirled arms. The worn black jeans and black tank top are casual, and the leather studded wristband adds a hint of danger.

I'd bet my socks that the motorcycle across the street is his.

"Hey," he drawls. My knees almost buckle when I hear how low and smoky his voice is. "You're new."

"Yeah. I just started here. I'm Emma."

A grin lights up his eyes almost wickedly. "I'm Crow."

"Crow?" I blink in surprise, nervously smoothing down my apron. Yikes, I hope that didn't come out sounding too rude. "Well, at least now I know where the shop across the street got its name."

He runs a hand through his hair, chuckling. "Yeah. One of those things that cracked up my friends so hard I had to use it."

Crow nods, amused. There's something about the way he looks at me that makes me feel...what is it? Like that feeling in the air before a storm. I suddenly find myself wishing this counter wasn't in the way so I could get closer to him.

Suddenly he sets his mug down and dashes behind the counter at a frightening speed.

I follow him to the kitchen, where he's taking something out of the oven with tongs.

Oh no. It's a completely scorched muffin, smoking something fierce.

He opens the back door, getting the sad, smoldering pile of oat cinders out of the kitchen in seconds. "Open the windows quickly, so the fire alarms don't go off."

I obey immediately, then prop the door open as well, while he strides to the end of the back parking lot and deposits the blackened blob near the end of the pavement.

He comes back inside, turning on the oven and ceiling fans. There's only a slight smoky residue left. "You'll want to run those for just a few minutes so the smoke doesn't settle."

"Oh. Um. Okay. Thanks." I head toward the front, hoping the smoke doesn't follow me.

"Hey." Crow stops me in the narrow passageway between the kitchen and the area behind the front counter. His body feels huge so close to mine. "It's okay. It can happen to anyone."

"Thank you." My hands nervously twist my apron. "I just can't believe you smelled such a small bit of smoke. Have you had a lot of baking accidents or something?"

Crow chuckles, and my heart nearly stops when he reaches out to flatten the piece of my hair that always kinks into a freaky wave at the top of my head. "I'm a volunteer firefighter. We learn to use our noses as much as our eyes. We just finished our big annual training shindig, actually."

"So that's why you were closed."

"Yeah."

"Well, I really appreciate your help. Another minute and it would have stunk something fierce."

He fixes a different piece of my hair... Is it just an excuse to touch me? There's something in the way he stares so deeply into my eyes. I'm completely flustered from being this close to him.

Man, I hope I'm not blushing. He'll think that I'm hopeless.

“I’ll see you in around an hour.” Crow grins, then winks rakishly. “The place won’t have burned to the ground, will it?”

“I feel terrible about that fallen muffin.” My bottom lip thrusts out. “But I’m allowed to make one mistake, right?”

“As long as you keep a firefighter close by, sure.” My breath catches as he leans right against my ear. “I’m going to come back and ask you out tonight,” he whispers. “Are you going to say yes?”

It takes me a moment to swallow. To breathe. Blink. Focus. “I probably know how to say yes in two or three languages, for what it’s worth.”

I love the way his entire face lights up when he grins. “Good.” He hands me a business card. “Feel free to call or text if anything else catches fire. See you soon.” He strides out of the shop, grabbing his mug on the way.

I’m going to have to collect myself and top up people’s coffee. But for ten more seconds, I’m going to downright ogle Crow’s muscular butt as he walks away.

You’ll love Crow and Emma in

She’s Got That Spark .