



Claim Me, Colt (The Mountain Code #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Her family had plans. The mountain had other ones.

She's a senator's daughter, expected to smile, marry well, and carry on the political dynasty. But on the day of her engagement party, she peels out of the country club parking lot in heels and a white cocktail dress—and drives straight into the Appalachian mountains.

A wrong turn. A broken-down car. A quiet cabin.

And a mountain man with rough hands, broad shoulders, and eyes that see right through her.

Colt is everything she was taught to fear—rugged, poor, untamed. He's also everything her sheltered, performative family pretends to honor in speeches and campaign ads. A real veteran. A real man.

And now that she's on his land?

He's not letting her go.

Claim Me, Colt is a short steamy, grumpy/protector, mountain man, OTT instalove romance featuring a reclusive mountain man and a pampered runaway bride. No cliffhangers. No cheating. Just one possessive hero, one defiant heroine, and one very happy ending.

Total Pages (Source): 8

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:24 am

Colt

The first thing I hear is the sound of an engine.

It's too fast. Too smooth. A European purr that doesn't belong in these ancient Appalachian hills where my cabin sits like a fortress against the world.

Nobody ventures this deep into the mountain unless they're lost, running, or hunting something they shouldn't be.

My place is seven miles from the nearest paved road, past where the GPS signals die and the cell towers give up.

That's exactly how I built my life after Afghanistan—isolated, protected, and far from anything that could remind me of convoy engines and roadside bombs.

So when I hear tires screech and the distant crunch of metal meeting granite, every instinct I honed as an Army Ranger kicks in. I grab my rifle from above the mantle—muscle memory from too many nights when silence meant danger—and head toward the sound.

The storm clouds overhead have been building all afternoon, thick and bruised purple against the peaks. Mountain weather moves fast up here, and tonight's going to be a soaker. I can smell it in the air—wet earth, ozone, and the promise of lightning.

It takes me eight minutes to reach Miller's Creek, moving through the forest like the ghost I was trained to be. Long enough for my heart rate to settle into a steady

rhythm, for my eyes to adjust to the shadows between the pines.

I spot the wreckage first—a sleek black sedan with government plates, the kind that scream D.C. politics from a mile away. The front end is half-submerged in the shallow creek, water rushing around the crumpled hood. One wheel spins uselessly in the air, ticking like a broken clock.

Then I hear movement. My eyes swivel to the spot like a hawk's.

And I see her.

A curvy goddess climbing up the muddy creek bank in what used to be an elegant white dress, now torn and soaked transparent.

Designer heels dangle from one manicured hand while she claws her way up the rocky slope with the other.

Her honey-blond hair hangs in wet ropes around her face, and she's cursing under her breath—every word more out of place than the pearl necklace still somehow gleaming at her throat.

She doesn't notice me until she's almost on level ground, breathing hard from the climb. When she does, she stumbles back a step, her wide eyes taking in my rifle first, then my face.

"Oh!" she cries. "You scared me."

I don't respond. I just study her.

"Sorry about... um... that ..."

She waves one muddy hand like that explains the government car in my creek.

She's a mess, but not the kind of mess that breaks easy. There's steel in her spine and fire in her green eyes that reminds me of bottle glass catching sunlight. She's the kind of woman who belongs in marble hallways and campaign photographs, not crawling out of a creek in the middle of the nowhere. But she's not weak. She's an enigma.

"I was driving a bit too fast, I guess," she says, tucking a strand of wet hair behind her ear. "The road curved, and the brakes didn't quite catch in time." She attempts a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

Thunder rumbles overhead, and she glances up at the darkening sky.

"What are you running from?" I ask.

She blinks. "Excuse me?"

"Lady in a fancy dress speeding on a mountain road in the middle of nowhere?" I shift the rifle to a more casual position. "That's running."

Her mouth opens, closes. The fake smile drops completely, and for a second, I see past the polish to something raw underneath.

The fear. The fury. The desperation.

She straightens, shoulders squaring like she's facing a firing squad instead of one scarred mountain man.

"An engagement party," she says, voice steady despite everything. "My engagement party."

Can't say I've heard that one before.

A fat raindrop splats against her cheek, and she shivers. The storm's rolling in fast now—I can feel it in the pressure drop, in the way the trees have gone still like they're holding their breath.

She surveys her surroundings with the calculating look of someone weighing limited options. Ruined car, gathering storm, strange man with a gun in the middle of nowhere. Most city women would be crying by now.

She just stands there, chin lifted like she didn't just crawl up a creek bank looking like a runaway fairy tale gone wrong.

"Do you have cell service up here?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Tower's thirty miles east. You're not getting signal until you're back on the main road."

She pulls out her phone anyway—a thin thing with a shiny metallic finish that probably costs more than most people make in a month. The screen shows no bars, just like I told her.

"Of course not," she mutters, swiping at a smudge of mud on her cheek. "That would've been too convenient."

Her voice cracks just slightly at the edges. She's exhausted and angry. Not fragile... just stretched to the breaking point.

I should point her in the direction of town and send her on her way. But something about the way she's standing there—designer dress destroyed, makeup smeared, expensive heels dangling useless from her fingers, yet refusing to look defeated—gets under my skin.

Maybe it's the way she climbed out of that wreck without crying for help.

Maybe it's how she's not asking me to fix anything for her.

Or maybe it's just that she looks like she understands what it means to want to disappear.

"My cabin's about a mile up the ridge," I hear myself saying. "It has hot water, food, and dry clothes."

She tilts her head, studying me with those sharp green eyes like she's trying to solve a puzzle. "You live out here alone?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

The question hits different than I expected. Most people ask where I came from or what I do for work. She cuts straight to the why.

"Because people complicate things," I say. "Trees don't."

She doesn't flinch at the bluntness. Just nods slowly, like that makes perfect sense to her.

"Okay," she says simply. "Lead the way."

She follows close as I cut through the trees along a path only I know, stepping carefully over roots and rocks in her bare feet. She doesn't complain about the rough ground or the chilly spring day or ask how much further. Doesn't try to fill the silence with nervous chatter.

She just moves quietly through the forest while the first fat raindrops start filtering through the canopy.

By the time we reach the cabin, the wind's picking up in earnest, sending leaves spiraling across the clearing.

She pauses at the bottom of the porch steps, looking up at the log structure I refurbished with my own hands after I came back from my third deployment.

It was a dilapidated hovel when I bought it.

Now... well, it's not fancy but it's solid.

Weathered cedar logs, tin roof, wraparound porch with a swing I never use.

But it's mine, and it's been my sanctuary for five years now.

"You built this?" she asks, running her fingers along the smooth porch rail.

"More or less."

She nods appreciatively. "It's beautiful. Feels... safe."

That word—safe—does something to me I don't want to examine too closely.

"You want a place to hide from whatever you're running from?" I push open the front door, gesture her inside. "This is it."

She steps over the threshold without hesitation, and I catch a hint of her scent as she passes—something expensive and floral beneath the creek water and mud.

"Thank you," she says quietly, turning to face me in the warm lamplight. "I really appreciate it, Mr..." Her voice trails off as she waits for my name.

"Call me Colt," I say, my voice gruff.

"Thank you, Colt," she says, flashing me a dazzling smile. "I'm Simone."

She steps inside, and I lock the door. Not to keep her prisoner, but to keep her demons—whatever they may be—from barging in after her. I'll protect her from whatever's chasing her.

Outside, the storm breaks like a warning.

And I know—somehow—she's going to turn my world upside down.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:24 am

Simone

I ran away from my own engagement party.

The thought hits me like a physical blow as I stand dripping on this stranger's hardwood floor, my Oscar de la Renta dress clinging to my body like a second skin.

Who does that? Who abandons three hundred guests, a fifteen-piece orchestra, and enough champagne to float a small yacht just because—

Well, because I discovered the man I'm supposed to marry tongue-deep in a campaign volunteer's mouth in the hotel's utility closet.

And my darling fiancé had the nerve to look at me with dead eyes and say, “Don’t act so surprised, Simone. It’s not like you’re marrying me for love.”

There’s some truth in that.

From the moment I met Jonathan, I knew we’d get married. He’s wealthy, attractive, politically connected, and the man my parents chose for me. I like him well enough. Well, I did before today, anyway.

We have a lot in common, and we never run out of things to talk about.

I thought we’d have a marriage built on a foundation of trust and those family values that Jonathan likes to talk so much about in his political speeches. I certainly didn’t expect to find him feeling up another woman at our engagement party.

But earth-shaking, can't-live-without-you, passionate love?

No, I wasn't marrying him for that. I'm not sure that even exists.

The cabin smells like cedar and woodsmoke, nothing like the cloying floral arrangements and imported caviar I left behind at the Willard Hotel.

Everything here is simple, honest—dark leather furniture worn soft with use, bookshelves lined with actual books instead of decorative props, and a stone fireplace that looks like it gets regular use.

And there's not a single camera or microphone in sight.

Colt moves past me without a word, disappearing into what I assume is the kitchen. His presence fills the space even when he's not in the room—something solid and unshakeable that makes the constant anxiety I've carried for years ease just a little.

I catch my reflection in the dark window and almost don't recognize myself. My carefully styled updo has come completely undone, mascara smudged beneath my eyes, lipstick long gone. The dress is now see-through and torn at the hem.

I look like I've been through a war.

He returns with a thick towel and a bottle of water, setting both on the coffee table without ceremony.

"You're not going to ask questions?" I find myself saying.

He shrugs, his dark eyes steady on mine. "Not my business."

"There's really no cell service here?" I ask hopefully.

“Nope.”

I exhale slowly, and it's probably terrible that the thought comforts me more than it should. No texts from campaign managers. No calls from Mother asking if I remembered to smile for the photographers. No updates from the wedding planner about floral arrangements and seating charts.

"Good," I whisper. "I think I want to disappear for a while."

He watches me with unreadable eyes—dark brown, almost black, with lines at the corners that speak of squinting into harsh sunlight. There's something about his stillness that settles me. He doesn't rush to fill the quiet spaces or offer empty reassurances.

"Bathroom's down the hall," he says finally. "Clean towels in the linen closet. I'll find you something to wear, too. Everything I have will be too big, but at least you'll be dry and warm."

I hesitate at the kindness, so different from the calculating politeness I'm used to.

"Go on," he adds, voice gentler. "You can fall apart later if you need to."

And somehow, that's exactly what I needed to hear.

The bathroom is small but spotless, with white subway tiles and a clawfoot tub that looks original to the cabin. I catch sight of myself in the mirror above the sink and have to grip the porcelain edge to steady myself.

This morning, I was Senator William Morrison's perfect daughter. Jonathan Blackwood's pristine fiancée. The future Mrs. Blackwood, destined to be a political wife who smiles on command and never has opinions that might upset donors.

Now I'm a muddy, barefoot runaway hiding in a stranger's cabin on a mountain I couldn't name if my life depended on it.

The strangest part? I feel more like myself than I have in years.

I peel off the ruined dress—custom-made, fitted three times, photographed from every angle by Vogue's political correspondent. It hits the floor with a wet slap, and I feel a vicious satisfaction at the sound. Let it stay there. Let it rot.

The shower is basic but the water pressure is perfect, hot enough to wash away the creek mud and the lingering scent of Jonathan's cologne that seemed to cling to everything at the party. I scrub my skin until it's pink, washing off layers of expectation along with the dirt.

When I emerge, pink-cheeked and clean, I find clothes laid out on the bed—a soft flannel shirt in deep blue and a pair of sweatpants that will be enormous on me.

I button up the flannel shirt, enjoying the way it feels against my skin.

The shirt smells like him, like something indefinably masculine that makes my stomach flutter in ways it never did for my fiancé.

Ex-fiancé , I correct myself. Because whatever happened in that ballroom tonight when I grabbed my purse and ran, there's no going back from it.

I slip on the shirt and leave the pants—his flannel falls to mid-thigh on me, soft as silk and warm as an embrace. For the first time in hours, I'm not cold.

I pad barefoot back to the main room, hyper-aware of my bare legs and the way the shirt gapes at the collar. He's built up the fire and is standing with his back to me, broad shoulders moving as he adjusts the logs.

Without his jacket, I can see the definition of muscle beneath his henley, the way his jeans hug powerful thighs. He moves with economic precision, like every motion serves a purpose.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "I cleaned up the mess I made in the bathroom."

He turns, and his eyes sweep over me once—quick but thorough—before meeting my gaze.

"Didn't need to," he says. "But appreciated."

"I may be lost, but I'm not rude." I lift my chin, some ingrained politeness surfacing. "My mother would disown me if I were a terrible houseguest on top of everything else."

Something flickers across his expression. "Your mother know where you are?"

I shake my head. "She's probably still at the party, making excuses to the guests. Telling them I had a headache or pre-wedding nerves." I laugh, but it comes out hollow. "She's very good at damage control." And she cares a lot more about what others think than she does about me.

He hands me a steaming mug of coffee, black and strong. I wrap both hands around it like it's an anchor.

"This is the first time I've been alone in..." I pause, trying to remember. "Years, maybe. Alone with no one watching, I mean."

"No cameras here," he says.

"No judgment either," I add softly, meeting his eyes. "It feels strange. And kind of

wonderful."

I lean against his kitchen table, eyes closing as I breathe in the steam from the coffee. It's nothing like the elaborate espresso drinks I'm used to. It's just piping hot coffee that's intended to wake you up. Nothing more.

When I open my eyes, he's watching me with an expression I can't quite read.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says, but doesn't look away. "Just... you look different."

"Different how?"

"More... real."

The word hits me square in the chest. Real . When was the last time someone used that word to describe me?

"I don't think I've been real in a very long time," I admit.

He nods like he understands exactly what I mean.

And sitting in his simple kitchen, wearing his clothes, drinking his coffee while a storm builds outside—I realize I don't want to go back to being the other version of myself.

I want to stay just like this.

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Colt

She's sitting at my kitchen table in my shirt, and I'm losing my damn mind.

The flannel swallows her whole, hangs off one shoulder to reveal the elegant line of her collarbone. Her legs are bare beneath it, skin still flushed from the hot shower, and every time she shifts in the chair, I catch a glimpse of smooth thigh that makes my jaw clench.

I've been here five years, and in that time, there's never been a woman in my cabin.

After my last deployment—after watching my entire unit get torn apart by an IED outside Kandahar—I came home to nothing. No family left, no girl waiting, no idea what to do with the rage and grief that followed me back from the desert like loyal dogs.

So, I built this place. Taught myself carpentry and plumbing and electrical work. Learned to hunt and fish and grow enough food to survive without depending on anyone. Created a life where the only person who could let me down was myself.

For five years, it worked.

Then she walked out of the woods looking like a fallen angel, and every wall I built started cracking.

"Tell me about your fiancé," I hear myself say.

She looks up from her coffee, eyes widening slightly. "You want to know about Jonathan?"

"I want to know what kind of fool pushes a woman like you away."

She's quiet for a long moment, fingers tracing the rim of her mug.

"Jonathan Blackwood," she says finally. "Junior Senator from Virginia.

Harvard Law, old family money, perfect political pedigree.

" Her voice takes on a practiced cadence, like she's recited this biography a thousand times.

"Handsome, charming, ambitious. Everything a senator's daughter should want. "

A senator's daughter. That explains the car. "But?"

"But he's also a narcissistic sociopath who thinks women exist to make him look good." The practiced tone drops, replaced by something sharp and bitter. "And when I caught him kissing another woman at our engagement party, he acted like it wasn't a big deal."

My hands curl into fists. I want to knock the bastard's teeth out.

"Said it didn't matter because our marriage wasn't about love anyway," she continues. "It was about combining political dynasties. Creating the perfect power couple for his presidential run in twelve years."

"And your father knew this?"

She nods, not meeting my eyes. "Dad orchestrated the whole thing. Jonathan brings youth and charisma; I bring the Morrison legacy and the women's vote. A match made in political heaven."

Senator Morrisson. I met him once, after I was awarded the Bronze Star. I didn't care for him. He was smug and condescending as he shook my hand and thanked me for my service. But now that I know he's treated Simone like a political pawn, I loathe him.

"That's why you ran."

"That's why I ran." She looks up at me then, green eyes blazing. "Because I realized I was about to spend the rest of my life as a prop in someone else's story. Smiling for cameras and giving speeches written by committee and pretending to love a man who only sees me as a stepping stone."

She stands abruptly, pacing to the window to stare out at the storm.

"You know what the worst part is? I almost went through with it. Almost walked down that aisle and said sacred vows to an unworthy man, just because it was expected."

Lightning illuminates her profile, and I see the moment her composure finally cracks.

"I'm twenty-eight years old, and I've never made a single decision for myself. Never chosen my own clothes or friends or career. Never dated anyone who wasn't pre-screened by my father's campaign manager."

The pain in her voice does something to me I haven't felt since Afghanistan—that protective instinct that used to get me in trouble for taking risks to keep my unit safe.

I cross the room in three steps, stopping just behind her.

"You can figure out what you like now," I say quietly.

She turns, eyes bright with unshed tears. "I can?"

"Of course." I brush a strand of hair from her face, and she leans into the touch.

"I like you," she whispers.

The words hit me like a punch to the solar plexus.

I should step back. Should be the responsible adult who drives her back to town and helps her figure out her next move.

Instead, I cup her face in my hands and kiss her.

She melts into me immediately, all soft warmth and desperate need. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer as she kisses me back with a hunger that tells me she's been starving for affection longer than she probably even realizes.

I lift her easily, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the couch. She breaks the kiss to pull my henley over my head, her eyes going wide as she takes in the scars that map my chest and shoulders.

"Military?" she asks, fingers tracing a particularly ugly one near my collarbone.

"Army Rangers. Three deployments."

She nods, no pity in her expression. Just understanding.

"Is that why you live up here alone?"

"Partly." I sit down on the couch with her straddling my lap. "I came back from my last tour and everything felt... loud. Just... too much. I couldn't handle cities or crowds or people who complained about shit that didn't matter."

Her hands are gentle on my shoulders as she gazes into my face. "So you built your own world."

"Built a world where I could control the variables," I correct. "Where the only person who could screw things up was me."

"And now?"

I look at her—hair mussed from my fingers, lips swollen from my kisses, wearing my shirt like it belongs on her.

"Now I'm thinking maybe some variables are worth the risk."

She smiles then, the first real smile I've seen from her, and it transforms her entire face.

"I've never been anyone's worthwhile risk before," she says.

"Then they were all idiots."

I kiss her again, deeper this time, pouring five years of loneliness and want into the connection between us. She responds with equal fervor, her body arching against mine as my hands explore the soft skin beneath my borrowed shirt.

I gently pinch her nipples, and she gasps. I take the opportunity to explore her mouth

with my tongue, kissing her until we're both desperate for air. When I finally break away, we're both breathing hard.

"I don't want to be a rebound," I tell her honestly. "Or a rebellion against your parents."

She studies my face with those intelligent green eyes.

"You're not," she says firmly. "You're the first choice I've made entirely for myself."

And God help me, I believe her.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:24 am

Simone

I don't know who moves first—me or him—but suddenly we're tangled together, mouths crashing, hands searching, breathing like we've been drowning and just came up for air.

It's messy. It's desperate.

And it's exactly what I need.

He cups the back of my head, pulling me deeper into the kiss while his other hand grips my hip, fingers digging in like he doesn't quite believe I'm here.

I straddle his lap, feeling the heat of him through his jeans, hard and thick and ready.

It sends a jolt through me—because this isn't pretend. This isn't obligation or expectation.

This is raw, reckless want .

I rock against him, chasing friction, and the sound he makes—half growl, half groan—goes straight to my core.

“Simone,” he rasps. “If you don't want this, tell me to stop now.”

“I won't,” I whisper, breathless. “Don't ask me to.”

His eyes search mine like he's trying to be sure, like he needs this to be more than a reaction.

So I say it again, louder this time. "I want this. I want you."

That's all it takes.

He stands in one fluid motion, taking me with him, my legs wrapped around his waist, his hands gripping my thighs. I kiss his jaw, his neck, tasting salt and cedar and something uniquely Colt as he carries me down the hall.

The bedroom is dimly lit by firelight spilling through the open door. It flickers across his face as he lays me down on the bed, his expression dark with intent.

He kneels beside the mattress, eyes devouring me as I lie there in nothing but his flannel shirt. I start to unbutton it, but he catches my hands.

"Let me," he says, voice low and rough.

He opens the shirt slowly, reverently, like he's unwrapping something sacred. When he reaches the last button, he pushes the shirt open to reveal my bare body beneath.

His gaze scorches me.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he mutters, hands trailing from my collarbone to my waist, then lower. "You don't even know."

I shiver as he leans down and takes one of my nipples into his mouth, hot and wet and wicked. My back arches as he sucks, tongue circling, then switches to the other, giving it the same devastating attention while his hand slides between my thighs.

I'm already wet for him.

He groans against my skin, fingers teasing along my slit, then dipping in just enough to make me whimper.

“Colt...”

“You like that?” he asks, his voice like gravel and smoke.

“Yes,” I gasp. “More.”

He gives me more.

One thick finger, then two, pumping slow and deep while his thumb circles my clit with maddening precision. He watches every reaction—every shudder, every moan, every arch of my hips—and it only makes him touch me better, rougher, hotter.

“I’ve thought about this,” he growls, curling his fingers just right and making me cry out. “Since the second you walked out of that creek. Thought about what you’d sound like when you fall apart for me.”

I’m close—so close—and he knows it.

He leans in, brushing his lips against my ear. “Come for me, sweetheart. I want to feel you fall apart.”

And I do.

I shatter around his fingers, crying out his name, trembling so hard I have to clutch the sheets to keep from floating off the bed.

Before I can catch my breath, he's standing, stripping off his shirt, then his jeans, revealing a body built from labor and survival—scarred, powerful, fucking perfect . My eyes widen as I take him in, thick and hard and already leaking.

I reach for him, and he lets me wrap my hand around his cock, stroking slowly while he watches with hungry eyes.

“Condom?” I ask, breath still shaky.

“In the drawer,” he says, and I'm already reaching for it.

He rolls it on with shaking hands, then kneels over me again, kissing me softer this time. Slower. Like we have all night and the world outside has stopped turning.

And then he presses into me.

I gasp at the stretch, the perfect fullness of him. He groans low in his throat, like the feel of me around him is almost too much.

He starts to move—long, slow thrusts that build and build until I'm panting, clawing at his back, begging him not to stop.

“Harder,” I beg.

“Yeah?” His voice is wrecked. “You can take it?”

“ Yes. ”

He gives it to me. Hard and deep and perfect, each stroke driving me closer to the edge again. His hand finds my clit, and when he presses, I break all over again—louder this time, raw and shameless and free .

He follows a second later with a curse and a growl, burying himself deep one last time as he comes with a shudder that rocks the whole bed.

When it's over, he doesn't move away. He stays inside me, forehead resting against mine, both of us gasping for air.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He rolls onto his side, pulling me with him, and holding me tight. "No, sweetheart. Thank you."

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:24 am

Simone

I wake up in his bed, and for a moment, I can't remember where I am.

The mattress beneath me is firm but comfortable, nothing like the designer memory foam in my D.C. apartment. There's no traffic outside, no early morning news briefings blaring from the television in the next room.

Just silence.

And warmth.

Colt's flannel shirt is still wrapped around me like a cocoon, soft cotton that carries his scent. I tug it closer and breathe deeply.

When was the last time I woke up without immediately reaching for my phone to check messages? Without a color-coded calendar telling me exactly where I needed to be and who I needed to smile for?

When was the last time I felt this at peace ?

I sit up slowly, half expecting the familiar anxiety to come rushing back—the panic about the engagement party, the shame about running away, the dread about facing my father's disappointment.

But it doesn't come.

Instead, there's just a sense of rightness I've never experienced before.

I slide out of bed and pad barefoot across the hardwood floor, the shirt brushing my thighs with every step.

I find him in the kitchen, back turned as he stands at the stove.

He's shirtless, and the morning light streaming through the window illuminates every line of muscle across his shoulders, every scar that tells a story I'm only beginning to understand.

He moves with that same economic precision I noticed yesterday—no wasted motion, every gesture deliberate and sure.

I lean against the doorframe, suddenly self-conscious. What must I look like? Hair a mess, no makeup, swollen lips...

But when he senses my presence and turns, there's nothing but appreciation in his dark eyes as they sweep over me.

"Morning," he says, voice rough from sleep.

"Morning." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "You're up early."

"Always am." He gestures to the stove where something that smells incredible is sizzling in a cast iron skillet. "You hungry?"

My stomach chooses that moment to growl loudly, and I laugh. "Apparently. What are you making?"

"Nothing fancy. Eggs, bacon, toast." He plates the food with the same precision he

uses for everything else.

He sets a plate in front of me at the small kitchen table. It's the first time a man has made me breakfast. The thought makes my throat tight with unexpected emotion.

"Thank you," I manage.

He sits across from me with his own plate, and we eat in comfortable silence. I savor every bite of the simple but delicious meal.

"Can I ask you something?" I set down my fork, studying his face. "Why did you help me last night? You didn't have to bring me back here."

He's quiet for a long moment, his dark eyes thoughtful.

"You climbed out of that creek yourself," he says finally. "Didn't cry or scream or wait for someone to rescue you. Just clawed your way up and kept going." He meets my gaze. "Most people would have given up."

"Most people haven't spent their entire lives performing for an audience," I reply. "You learn to keep going even when everything falls apart."

"Is that the real reason you ran away?"

I consider the question while I finish my eggs. Why did I run? Was it Jonathan's cheating, or my father's manipulation, or the sudden realization that I was about to become a stranger to myself?

"I ran because I realized I was disappearing," I say slowly. "Disappearing into the person they wanted me to be. Piece by piece, year by year, until there was nothing left of the real me."

He reaches across the table and covers my hand with his—calloused fingers gentle against my soft skin.

"You're not disappearing now."

"No," I agree, turning my palm up to lace our fingers together. "I'm not." And I never will again.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:24 am

Colt

She's washing dishes in my kitchen sink, humming something under her breath.

It's such a simple thing—a woman doing dishes—but it does something to my chest that I haven't felt in years.

Contentment. Like all the jagged pieces inside me are finally settling into place.

She's changed into the sweatpants I left her, rolled up at the cuffs so she doesn't trip. My flannel shirt is tied at her waist now, and every time she reaches for another plate, it rides up just enough to show a strip of smooth skin above the waistband.

I should be helping her. Should take the dish towel from her hands and finish the job myself.

Instead, I lean against the doorframe and watch her move around my space like she belongs here.

Because maybe she does.

"You don't have to do that," I say finally.

She glances over her shoulder, suds up to her elbows. "I know. I want to."

"Why?"

She considers the question while rinsing a coffee mug. "Because no one's ever let me just... be useful . It's a nice feeling." She sets the mug in the drying rack with satisfaction.

I cross the room and take the dish towel from the counter, drying the dishes she's washed. We work in comfortable silence, her washing and me drying in a rhythm that feels like we've been doing this for years.

When the last plate is clean, she leans back against the counter, looking pleased with herself.

"What now?" she asks.

"Now you tell me what you want to do."

She blinks. "What I want to do?"

"Yeah. Not what someone else expects or what looks good for the cameras. What you want."

The question seems to stump her. She stares at me for a long moment, then laughs—but it sounds hollow.

"I don't know," she admits. "Isn't that pathetic? I'm twenty-eight years old and I have no idea what I actually want to do with my day."

"Not pathetic. Just honest."

She pushes off from the counter and walks to the window, looking out at the forest beyond. The storm cleared overnight, leaving everything green and sparkling.

"I used to paint," she says quietly. "In college, before I graduated and Dad decided I needed to focus on more 'practical' pursuits. I was actually pretty good at it."

"What kind of painting?"

"Landscapes mostly." She traces a pattern on the glass with her finger. "I haven't touched a brush in ages."

Something about the wistfulness in her voice makes me want to put my fist through a wall. What kind of people take someone's joy and systematically strip it away?

"I've got supplies," I hear myself saying.

She turns. "What?"

"Art supplies. Paints, brushes, canvases. Previous owner left them behind, and I never got around to throwing them out."

Her eyes light up like I just offered her the moon. "Really?"

"I have no idea of the quality," I add quickly, not wanting her to be disappointed.

I lead her to the spare room I use for storage, dig through boxes until I find what I'm looking for. The art supplies are dusty but intact—watercolors, acrylics, brushes in every size, stretched canvases still wrapped in plastic.

She handles them reverently, like they're made of spun gold. "Thank you."

I rub my neck awkwardly. "I didn't do anything."

She rises on her toes and kisses me—soft and sweet and full of gratitude that makes

my chest tight.

When she pulls back, she's smiling again. "Where should I set up?"

I grin back at her. "Wherever you want."

She chooses the back porch, arranging the easel so it faces the forest. I bring her coffee and then leave her alone, instinctively understanding that this is something she needs to do without an audience.

I spend the morning splitting wood, but I can't help glancing over at her every few minutes. She's completely absorbed in her work, brush moving with confident strokes across the canvas. Her whole body language has changed—shoulders relaxed, face peaceful in a way I haven't seen before.

She looks like herself. Finally.

Around noon, she steps back from the easel and calls my name.

"Colt? Can you come look at this?"

I set down the axe and walk over, curious. What I see takes my breath away.

She's captured the forest in perfect detail—every shade of green, every play of light and shadow through the leaves. But more than that, she's captured the feeling of this place. The peace. The wildness. The sense of being completely alone in the world.

"It's incredible," I say, and mean it.

She ducks her head, suddenly shy. "I'm out of practice."

"It's perfect."

She looks up at me then, and I see tears in her eyes.

"I forgot how much I loved this," she whispers. "How much I missed it."

I pull her against my chest, wrapping my arms around her. "Then don't stop," I murmur against her hair.

"I won't," she says fiercely.

And holding her there on the porch, surrounded by the scent of pine and paint and possibility, I make a silent promise to myself.

Whatever it takes, I'm going to make sure she never has to stop being herself again.

That afternoon, while she works on a second painting, I walk down to check on her car. It's totaled—engine flooded, front axle bent beyond repair. It's not going anywhere without a tow truck and a lot of money.

When I get back to the cabin, she's cleaning brushes in the kitchen sink, humming that same tune from this morning.

"Car's done for," I tell her.

She pauses, brush halfway to the water. For a second, I see panic flicker across her face—the reality of her situation hitting home.

Then she squares her shoulders and nods.

"Okay. I'll figure something out."

"You could stay."

The words are out before I can stop them. She turns to face me, eyes wide.

"Stay?"

"Here. With me. As long as you want."

She sets down the brush, studying my face like she's trying to read my mind.

"You don't even know me," she says softly.

"I know enough."

"What if I'm terrible company? What if I cry all the time or eat all your food or—"

I cross the room and cup her face in my hands, cutting off her words. "What if you paint every day and laugh at my terrible jokes and make this place feel like home instead of just a hideout?"

Her breath catches. "Colt..."

"I'm not asking you to marry me tomorrow," I say. "I'm just asking you to stay long enough to figure out who you are when nobody's watching. You owe it to yourself."

And yeah, I have selfish motives, too...

She searches my eyes for a long moment. "What about my family? The media? They'll come looking eventually."

"Let them come. This mountain doesn't give up its secrets easily."

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. "Is that what I am? Your secret?"

"You're whatever you want to be."

She rises on her toes and kisses me, soft and sure.

"Then I want to stay," she whispers against my lips. "For now."

For now will have to do... until I can convince her to stay forever. By God, I'm going to try like hell to keep her.

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Simone

Three days later, I'm chopping vegetables for dinner when I hear the vehicles. The grinding rumble of SUVs climbing the mountain road grows louder by the minute.

They've found me.

Colt appears in the kitchen doorway. His expression is grim but unsurprised—like he's been expecting this moment since I first walked into his cabin.

"How many?" I ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

He moves to the window, peers through the curtain. "Three vehicles. Government plates."

My father's cleanup crew. I should have known he wouldn't let his perfect political princess disappear without a fight. Not when there's an election in eighteen months and my engagement to Jonathan was supposed to be the centerpiece of his family values campaign.

"They can't make me go back," I say, more to convince myself than him.

"No," Colt agrees. "They can't."

But we both know they'll try.

The vehicles pull into the clearing. Two black SUVs and my father's signature Town

Car. Doors slam in quick succession, and I count the people as they emerge.

Secret Service agents in dark suits. My father's chief of staff, Marcus Turner, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. A woman I don't recognize with a tablet and the careful smile of a crisis management specialist.

And my father.

Senator William Morrison steps out of the Town Car like he's walking onto a debate stage—tall, silver-haired, radiating the kind of authority that's opened doors for him his entire life.

He straightens his tie and surveys Colt's cabin with the expression of a man who's found something distasteful on the bottom of his shoe.

"Showtime," I murmur.

Colt's hand finds mine, squeezes once. "You don't have to do this alone."

Before I can respond, there's a sharp knock on the door.

I take a deep breath, smoothing my hands over the flannel shirt I'm wearing, and walk to the door with Colt beside me.

When I open it, my father's pale blue eyes take in my appearance with barely concealed horror. The daughter he groomed for political perfection is standing barefoot in a mountain cabin, with paint under her fingernails, color in her cheeks, and grizzled mountain man by her side.

It's probably his worst nightmare.

"Simone." His voice is controlled, but I can hear the steel underneath. "Glad to see you're in better shape than the car."

"Hello, Dad."

His gaze shifts to Colt, taking in the way he's positioned himself protectively at my side. "Mr...?"

"Colt." No last name offered. No handshake extended.

"I see." Dad's tone could freeze water. "Well, Mr. Colt, I appreciate you providing shelter for my daughter, but we'll be taking her home now."

"Will you?" Colt's voice is deceptively mild.

"Of course. She's had her little adventure, worked through whatever pre-wedding jitters she was experiencing. It's time to return to reality."

The casual dismissal of my choices—reducing my desperate flight to "pre-wedding jitters"—makes anger flare in my chest.

"I'm not going back," I say clearly.

Dad's practiced smile doesn't waver. "Sweetheart, you're upset. Understandably so. Planning a wedding is stressful, and I know Jonathan's schedule has been demanding lately—"

"Jonathan was cheating on me."

The words drop into the silence like stones into still water. Dad's smile finally slips.

Marcus Turner shifts uncomfortably behind my father. The crisis management woman makes a note on her tablet.

"Personal relationships can be complicated," Dad says carefully. "But the bigger picture here—"

"The bigger picture is that you tried to sell me to the highest political bidder," I interrupt. "And I'm done being sold."

His mask of paternal concern finally cracks, revealing the ruthless politician underneath. He takes a step closer, lowering his voice to the tone he uses for behind-closed-doors negotiations. "You have responsibilities. Obligations. The Morrison name means something in this country—"

"The Morrison name is the only thing that's ever mattered to you," I say. "Not me. Not my happiness. Just the political capital I represent."

"That's not fair—"

"Isn't it?" I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "When was the last time you asked me what I wanted, Dad? When was the last time we had a conversation that wasn't about poll numbers or public perception?"

He opens his mouth, then closes it. Because we both know the answer.

Never.

"I'm twenty-eight years old, and this is the first decision I've ever made entirely for myself," I continue. "I'm not going back to D.C. I'm not marrying Jonathan. I'm staying here."

"Here?" He looks around the cabin like it's contaminated. "With him?"

His dismissive tone makes Colt straighten, and I feel the dangerous stillness that radiates from him.

"Yes," I say firmly. "With him."

"Absolutely not." Dad's voice turns cold, authoritative. "I won't allow it."

"You don't have a choice in the matter."

"I have every choice. You're my daughter—"

"I'm an adult woman who can make her own decisions."

"Not when those decisions threaten everything we've built." His mask slips completely now, revealing the calculating politician who's spent decades accumulating power. "Do you have any idea what this will do to the campaign? To the family's reputation? To Jonathan's career?"

"I don't care about Jonathan's career."

"Well, you should. Because if you think you can just disappear into the woods and play house with some..." His gaze rakes over Colt with undisguised contempt. "Some mountain hermit, you're more naive than I thought."

The insult hangs in the air like smoke. I feel Colt tense beside me.

I gesture around the cabin. "I matter here, not as Senator Morrison's daughter or Jonathan's fiancée, but as myself."

"And who exactly is that?" Dad's voice drips with scorn. "Because from where I'm standing, you look like a spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum."

The words hit like a slap, but instead of crumbling, I feel something inside me crystallize into diamond-hard resolve.

"Then you're not looking very hard," I say calmly. "Because I'm the woman who's finally found her spine."

Colt steps forward then, his presence suddenly filling the doorway.

"I think this conversation's over," he says quietly, but there's steel in his voice that makes the Secret Service agents shift nervously.

Dad looks between us, clearly calculating his options. Political men always do—they never make a move without considering all the angles.

"This isn't finished, Simone," he says finally. "You can't hide up here forever."

"I'm not hiding," I reply. "I'm living."

He turns to go, then pauses.

"When you come to your senses—and you will—don't expect the same opportunities to be waiting for you. Some bridges, once burned, can't be rebuilt."

"Then I guess I'd better learn to swim."

He stares at me for a long moment, this daughter who's suddenly become a stranger to him. Then he walks back to his Town Car without another word.

The entourage follows, all climbing into their vehicles with the efficiency of a well-oiled political machine.

As they drive away, disappearing down the mountain road like a bad dream, I lean back against Colt's solid chest. His arms come around me automatically.

"You okay?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Better than okay," I breathe. "I'm finally free."

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Epilogue

Simone

Three months later

I'm standing in the front yard, barefoot in the grass, painting the woods that stretch beyond our cabin.

Summer has deepened the greens, and the breeze smells like pine and wildflowers.

Colt's replacing boards on the front porch—shirtless, because he knows exactly what that does to me—when a battered pickup rumbles up the gravel drive.

“Expecting company?” I call.

Colt straightens, setting down his hammer. “That’s Boone. He’s got a cabin near the lake.”

The truck pulls into the clearing, and a tall, lean man climbs out. He’s got sandy hair and an easy smile, but there’s a tightness around his eyes that reminds me of how Colt looked when we first met. Somehow, I know Boone has monsters in his past that he still needs to slay.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he says, grinning as he approaches. “The hermit’s got himself a woman.”

Colt smirks. “Boone Mitchell, meet my fiancée, Simone. Simone, this is the bastard who taught me how to fish.”

Boone tips an imaginary hat. “Pleasure. I’ve been telling Colt for over a year that he needs to fix those porch boards. Guess it took a pretty woman to light a fire under him.”

“He’s been doing a lot of things he never used to,” I say, smiling as Colt wraps an arm around my waist.

Colt kisses the top of my head. “She’s changed everything.”

I shake my head. “You give me too much credit.”

“No,” he says gently. “You don’t give yourself enough.”

Boone raises an eyebrow, glancing between us. “Sounds like there’s a story there. How’d you two meet, anyway? Colt’s even more of a recluse than I am.”

I open my mouth, then pause. “Well, it’s kind of a long story—”

“The mountain code,” Colt says, cutting in with a knowing look.

Boone groans. “Oh, not that again.”

I blink. “The mountain what?”

“It’s just an old legend the locals tell,” Boone says, rubbing his jaw. “About men who move up here to be alone.”

Colt pulls me closer. “The saying goes: You stay alone... until the mountain sends you a woman. ”

I raise an eyebrow. “And you think the mountain sent me to you?”

Colt’s gaze doesn’t waver. “I don’t think . I know. The mountain always knows when it’s time.”

“Give me a break,” Boone mutters.

Colt laughs. “Who knows, buddy? Your turn may be next.”

The look on Boone’s face makes me laugh. “Until then,” I say, chuckling, “Would you like to join us for dinner?”

Later, after Boone’s left and Colt and I are tangled in bed, I marvel at the moonlight spilling through the windows. I love it here on the mountain. And it’s not just because of the gorgeous man beside me.

Okay, it’s mostly him . But I love the tranquility and the solitude, too. I’m at peace here, with him.

His fingers trace slow circles along my spine.

“Any regrets?” he asks quietly, like he already knows the answer.

“Just one,” I whisper.

He tenses. “What is it?”

I plant a soft kiss on his jaw. “That it took me so long to find you.”

He exhales, pulling me tighter. “The mountain sent you when I needed you most.”

I rest my cheek against his chest, smiling as I soak in the quiet certainty of his voice.

Maybe it's just a story.

Maybe it's fate.

Or maybe the mountain code is real after all.

Either way, I'm exactly where I belong.