



Claimed by the Lumberjack (Sexy Lumbersnacks)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She came to Pine Hollow for a story. He plans to make sure she never leaves.

Tessa Hart's latest assignment is simple—travel to Pine Hollow and uncover the mystery behind the viral Instagram account posting drool-worthy pictures of the town's hottest lumberjacks. When she finally tracks down the biggest, broodiest, sexiest one of them all, Sawyer Holt, he has no idea about the photos, and he's not happy about the attention.

Determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, Tessa convinces Sawyer to help her figure out who's behind the posts. But a massive thunderstorm rolls in, toppling trees and trapping her in Sawyer's remote cabin. With the roads blocked and no sign of them being cleared, Tessa is stuck with a man who makes her forget all about her job and her city life.

Sawyer has spent years living alone on his side of the mountain and is content to live that way forever. Fate had other plans and delivered Tessa right to his doorstep. He has no intention of letting her get away now that he's found her.

Tessa came for a story. Sawyer plans to ensure she gets one love story.

A broody, possessive lumberjack. A sassy city girl. Forced proximity, scorching chemistry, and a storm that changes everything.

Total Pages (Source): 13

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Tessa

There's a reason I avoid flying whenever possible, but it's not because I'm dramatic. Okay, maybe a little. But mostly, it's because regional planes are terrifying, and this one, currently shaking like it's about to split in half, is Exhibit A.

We dip suddenly, and I grip the armrest with white knuckles, praying softly to every deity I've ever heard of, plus a few I might've made up on the spot.

"Please let me live long enough to finish this story," I whisper through gritted teeth.

The man beside me, a farmer by the looks of his overalls and the bucket of something chicken-scented resting between his boots, chuckles.

"She don't bite," he says in a lazy Southern drawl. "Just bounces a little."

"She's bouncing like she's possessed."

He shrugs. "Spring air."

The plane lurches again, and I consider writing my obituary in the Notes app. Tessa Hart, 29. Died chasing viral thirst content. May she rest in pine-scented peace.

The flight attendant announces our descent like we haven't already been nosediving for the past fifteen minutes. I glance at the little plane icon on my travel app, inching toward the dot that is Pine Hollow—a town so small it barely registers on the map, but it sure as hell registered on the internet.

@TheMenOfPineHollow

The Instagram account that launched a thousand fantasies. High-def, woodsy thirst traps of flannel-clad men chopping logs, hauling timber, and looking like they just stepped off the cover of a rugged romance novel.

There's one in particular that haunts me. A man, shirt clinging wet to a broad chest, snow in his beard, eyes shadowed under a ball cap, standing in front of a log cabin like he's just waiting for someone. I saved that one. Purely for research, of course.

When my editor, Brooke, called me into her office three days ago, she didn't even say hello. Just shoved her phone into my hands and said, "Tessa. Find out who these men are. Interview them. Get the story before BuzzedUp or Modern Wilder does. Bonus points if one of them lets you chop wood with him."

So here I am, trading city traffic for tree-lined roads, overpriced oat milk lattes for questionable diner coffee, and—hopefully—trading dry spell energy for a little hands-on, boots-on-the-ground lumberjack action.

For journalistic integrity, obviously.

The plane finally lands on what might be the shortest runway I've ever seen, flanked by pine trees, fog, and one very unimpressed deer.

I step out into the thick, humid air and instantly regret my outfit. Heeled ankle boots. Skinny jeans. A trench coat that screams New York fashion week instead of rural mountain realism. My suitcase, hot pink, hard-shell, and very out of place, clunks along behind me as I navigate the tiny gravel parking lot in search of my rental car.

Rick's Rentals is more of a hand-painted sign on a shack than an actual business, but I grab the keys to a mud-splattered Subaru and follow my GPS into town.

Pine Hollow is adorable. Main Street has actual string lights. The general store is called “Dottie’s,” the café has a window full of cinnamon rolls, and I pass two pickup trucks with golden retrievers riding shotgun.

It’s also very quiet here. Still. Even the air has weight. Like, if you listened hard enough, you could hear the trees breathing.

I check into the Hollow Hearth Inn, the only one in town, which smells like cedarwood and lavender and might be haunted by a very sweet grandmother. There’s a handwritten card waiting in my room.

*Welcome, Tessa! - Dottie :) *

And cookies. Oatmeal. Still warm. Dottie might be a witch...or an angel.

After dropping my bags, I head into town, pulling up the Instagram account as I walk. The latest photo is tagged just outside of town: “Thirsty Thursday: Sawyer says hydrate or die-drate.”

Sawyer.

He’s the one from the photo. The one with the axe, the beard, the snow. My stomach does a little flip. The logical part of me says it’s from the bumpy flight and the fact that I haven’t eaten today. The other part? The one that has spent more time than necessary zooming in on a man’s forearms? Yeah. That part’s having a minor meltdown.

I find the café, Annie’s, by smell alone. The aroma of cinnamon, coffee, and vanilla pulls me in like a cartoon character floating on scent lines.

Inside, it’s bustling. Locals chatting over pie. A teenage couple sharing a milkshake.

An older man in a flannel shirt is reading the paper like it's the most riveting novel in the world.

As I step in, conversations dip. It doesn't stop, just shifts. I've got that outsider energy, and they know it.

A woman behind the counter waves me over. She's got a high ponytail, an apron dusted with flour, and a warm smile.

"You're not from around here," she says, pouring a cup of coffee without me even asking. "I'm guessing you're the magazine gal."

I blink. "How do you know who I am?"

She laughs. "Small town. Big gossip. Linda saw you step off the plane and called it in before you hit Main Street."

I glance around. Sure enough, there's a woman in a bold floral dress by the window whispering behind her hand and watching me like I might start handing out tabloids.

"I'm Tessa," I say, accepting the coffee. "And yes. I'm working on a story."

"Annie," she says, sliding a cinnamon roll toward me. "On the house. Call it a welcome to Pine Hollow, home of the sexy men, special."

I laugh. "You're embracing the fame, huh?"

She shrugs. "We don't get many headlines unless a bear breaks into the post office. This? This is fun."

I pull up the Instagram account again and show her the latest photo. "This guy.

Sawyer Holt. He's the one who shows up the most. Is he real?"

Annie snorts. "Oh, he's real, all right. Real grumpy. Real hot. Real hard to get a full sentence out of."

"So a dream."

She grins. "If your dream involves a man who growls more than he talks and prefers trees to people? Sure."

My gaze lingers on the photo. There's something about the way he stands. Like he's carrying weight. Not just physically but emotionally. Like he's holding back something big.

"Where can I find him?"

Annie leans in, lowers her voice like we're sharing classified information. "He runs Holt Timber. Lives up on the mountain past Ridgeway Trail. Doesn't come into town much. Except to buy supplies. Or threaten Dottie with bodily harm if she prints another one of his photos and tapes it to the bakery window."

"That happened?"

Annie just winks.

I take another sip of coffee and glance outside. The sky's gone heavy. Gray clouds are building like a mood shift.

"Thanks for the tips," I say, standing. "Guess I'll be heading into the woods tomorrow."

Annie hands me a to-go cup and a warning smile. “Wear boots. And maybe some body armor.”

I step outside into the wind, which whips my hair into a frenzy, and glance down at my phone again.

Sawyer Holt. A man who lives without Wi-Fi, avoids people, and looks like a god who got lost in the mountains.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

The axe bites through the wood with a clean, satisfying crack. The sun's out just enough to glint off the edge of the blade and catch on the sweat running down my back. It's warm today, unseasonably so for early spring. The kind of warmth that clings to your skin and makes your clothes feel heavy.

I don't bother with a shirt. No point. I'm already drenched, and it's not like anyone's coming up here. No one ever does. Not unless they're lost. Or trying to sell me something. Neither of which ends well.

I line up the next log on the stump, roll my shoulders, and swing. There's comfort in this work. In the rhythm. The sound. The sting in my palms and the ache in my forearms. Out here, the noise in my head gets quieter. Just me and the trees and the weight of the axe in my hands.

I'm halfway through the next swing when I hear the crunch of tires on gravel. My grip tightens. It's not the mail guy. He only comes on Mondays. Not the supply truck either; it's too light. This is something smaller and driving very slow.

I wipe sweat from my brow with the back of my arm and glance toward the tree line just as a car eases around the bend, kicking up dust and pine needles. Shiny. Red. Small. Not the best car for a mountain road. It crawls up my drive like it knows it doesn't belong here, which—spoiler alert—is true.

I see the driver and almost drop my axe. She steps out like she's on a runway instead of a muddy clearing in the woods. Skinny jeans. A fitted jacket that's probably never

seen dirt. And boots with heels, for Christ's sake. Completely impractical and exactly the kind of thing someone from the city would wear when they think they're doing "rustic."

She's tall. Curvy in a way that makes a man notice. Hair in a high ponytail that's already being tugged loose by the wind. She shades her eyes with one hand, squints up at me like I'm the one who's out of place.

Great. I sink the axe into the stump and wait.

She takes a few cautious steps forward, blinking against the sun. "Hi," she says, voice bright and a little breathless. "Are you Sawyer Holt?"

I don't answer right away. Just stare. Because what the hell is she doing up here?

She clears her throat, the smile on her lips faltering slightly. "I'm Tessa Hart. I'm a journalist with Roam magazine. I'm working on a—"

"No."

Her eyes narrow. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm not interested." I reach for the axe.

"You don't even know what I'm here to ask."

"I know enough."

She plants her hands on her hips, those curves doing exactly what they're supposed to under that jacket, and cocks her head. "You're here about those damn photos, aren't you?"

She blinks. “So you’ve seen them?”

“I don’t have to. Dottie printed one out and tacked it to the general store bulletin board like I’m the special of the week.”

I turn away, grabbing a log and setting it on the stump.

“Listen,” she says, following me. “The account has gone viral. People are obsessed. They want to know who you are, what you do, where you buy your flannel.”

“I don’t wear flannel.”

“Not today, but according to the pictures, you do.”

I shoot her a look. She doesn’t back down. She’s a city girl, but not soft. There’s something in her stance, chin lifted, shoulders squared, that says she’s not easily rattled. Even out here. Even staring down a sweaty, shirtless stranger with an axe.

“I’m not a story,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “Everyone’s a story.”

“Well, I don’t want to be yours.”

The log splits clean under my next swing. She watches me, her lips slightly parted, her eyes tracing the movement.

Yeah, she’s checking me out. She tries not to show it, but I see the flush in her cheeks, the way her gaze flicks over my chest, then quickly away.

“Look,” she says, a little breathier now. “I’m not here to make your life difficult. I

just want a quote. Maybe a short interview. Something about how a town full of hot, antisocial men became the internet's favorite fantasy."

"There's no fantasy here," I say flatly.

She makes a sound, half laugh, half scoff, and pulls her phone from her pocket. Swipes to something and holds it up.

It's me. Or at least, the version of me Dottie captured that snowy afternoon a few winters back. Flannel. Beard full of snow. Eyes like I hadn't slept in a week. Yeah. Fantasy.

"Tell that to the 820,000 people who liked this," she says. "You've been turned into a lumberjack thirst meme."

I grunt. "Great."

"Don't you want to set the record straight?"

"No."

The wind kicks up, rustling the pine trees and tugging her hair across her face. She brushes it back, her mouth pressing into a stubborn line.

"Are you always this friendly?"

"Are you always this pushy?"

"Only when someone slams a metaphorical, or literal, door in my face."

Another crack of wood. She doesn't flinch. Impressive.

“You should go,” I say. “Before the rain hits.”

She doesn’t move. Just looks at me with those eyes, brown, warm, and sharp. Like she’s already writing this scene in her head, framing me as the brooding mountain recluse with a tragic past and a well-defined six-pack.

“I came all this way,” she says quietly. “The least you could do is give me five minutes.”

I roll my jaw, exhale hard through my nose. “There’s no story here.”

“Then that’s your quote,” she says, and spins on her heel to head back to her car.

But she doesn’t get far. Right as she turns around, the sky cracks open with a rumble that vibrates through the ground and the rain comes down in sheets.

She yelps, ducking her head, sprinting for the car. I wince as her boots slip on the mud, and she catches herself against the hood.

The woman looks like a drowned cat in a fashion ad. Mascara streaked. Hair plastered to her face. That fancy jacket clinging to every inch of her body in a way that absolutely shouldn’t be legal. I swear under my breath and jog after her.

“You shouldn’t drive in this!” I shout over the rain. “The road could wash out.”

“I’ll risk it,” she yells back, fumbling with her keys.

A loud crack echoes through the trees. That’s not thunder. I turn just in time to see the pine tree, massive, old, and heavy with water, fall across the road behind her car with a crash that shakes the ground.

“Shit,” I mutter, and she spins, eyes wide.

“Well, that’s not ideal,” she says.

I shoot her a look. “You’re stuck.”

“No kidding,” she mutters, brushing wet hair from her face. “What are the odds?”

She stares at the tree like she’s trying to will it to vanish. The rain’s only getting heavier, and her boots are already caked in mud. She’s soaked through. Shivering. I can’t leave her out here.

I sigh and jerk my head toward the cabin. “Come on.”

She blinks. “What?”

“You can’t stay out here.”

“I wasn’t planning to build a treehouse.”

I level her with a look.

She groans. “Fine.”

She follows me back up the drive, muttering something about horror movies and axe murderers. Her boots squelch in the mud. She slips again and grabs my arm for balance, then yanks her hand back like I burned her.

I don’t say anything, but I feel the heat of that touch all the way through my skin.

The cabin’s warm, dry, and smells like firewood and cedar. I hold the door open and

watch her hesitate before stepping inside.

She looks around, wide-eyed. “It’s rustic.”

“It’s a cabin. Not a spa.”

“Could use a throw pillow.”

I grab a towel from the hook and toss it to her. “You’re dripping all over my floor.”

“Charming,” she says, but wraps it around herself. “Got a hair dryer? Hot cocoa? Flannel pajamas with little bears on them?”

“No. Yes. And maybe.”

She laughs. I hate that I like the sound of it. I head to the kitchen, stoke the fire, and try not to watch her strip off her jacket, revealing a soaked white T-shirt underneath.

She notices me noticing. Smirks. “This interview’s looking up, huh?”

I grunt and turn away, grabbing a pot to start dinner, but all I can think about is the way her shirt clings to her body. The way her mouth curves when she’s teasing me. The way my name sounds when she says it like a challenge.

This woman is a walking complication, and I don’t like complications. But I like her, and that’s a problem.

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Tessa

I've been in some ridiculous situations in my life. Once, I interviewed a pop star who insisted I crawl into her crystal meditation tent before she'd speak to me. Another time, I got locked inside a porta-potty at a desert music festival. And yet this? Stranded on a mountain in the pouring rain with a shirtless, scowling lumberjack? It might just be my favorite ridiculous situation.

Sawyer Holt is stomping around his cabin like I'm an intruder who tracked mud across his white carpet, which I would have if his floors weren't wood.

The storm is in full tantrum mode outside, wind slapping the windows and rain hammering the roof. The air is filled with the low growl of thunder and the occasional creak of ancient pine trees swaying in protest.

I hang up my soaked jacket, trying not to wince at the cold water clinging to my skin or the fact that my white t-shirt is now translucent. My boots squelch with every step, each one louder than the last in the quiet of the cabin.

"Shoes," Sawyer mutters without turning around, already crouched by the fireplace, stacking logs in the fire. "You're tracking mud."

I blink at him. "Nice to see your hospitality matches your charm."

"You're the one who showed up uninvited."

I toe off my boots with a sigh, leaving them by the door, then cross my arms tightly

over my chest. My shirt is soaked. My bra is soaked. Everything is clinging in ways that are decidedly uncomfortable and indecent.

He finally turns and catches sight of me standing there, wet and miserable. His eyes flick down for half a second, fast, but I catch it. A quick scan over my shirt, sticking to skin and curves and probably not leaving much to the imagination.

His jaw tightens. He mutters something under his breath and walks past me to a wooden chest under the window. He opens it and pulls out a stack of clothes—thick flannel and sweatpants.

“Here,” he says, thrusting them into my arms. “They’ll be big, but they’re dry.”

I look up at him. “You’re just giving me your clothes?”

“You want to sit around soaked all night?”

“I mean, maybe, for the attention,” I reply, letting him know I caught his wandering eyes.

His eyes narrow. “Bathroom’s through there.”

I head in with the bundle, closing the door behind me and locking it for good measure. It’s small but surprisingly clean. The mirror is slightly fogged from the heat of the fire in the next room, and the faint scent of pine soap lingers in the air.

I peel off my wet clothes and towel off quickly. The flannel shirt he gave me is soft from years of wear, oversized and warm, falling to mid-thigh. I tug the drawstring pants on and roll the waistband twice just to keep them from sliding off. The clothes—smoke and cedar.

When I step back out, Sawyer is stirring something in a pot on the stovetop. He doesn't look up, but I see the way his shoulders shift slightly. He's as aware of me as I am of him.

I sink onto the couch near the fire, my body aching with the kind of tired you only feel after a long day of travel, unexpected downpours, and verbal sparring with a very hot mountain man.

"Dinner?" I ask, gesturing toward the stove.

He nods. "Soup."

"Smells good."

"You want something else, you can cook."

I wrinkle my nose. "I burn toast."

He finally glances at me again and does a double take. His eyes catch on the flannel, the way it drapes off one shoulder, the rolled waistband of the sweatpants, my legs tucked under me on his couch. There's a flicker of something in his expression. Just for a second. Hunger. Curiosity. Want. Then it's gone, buried under that beard and a frown.

He ladles soup into two bowls and brings them over, handing one to me with a spoon. "It's hot."

"Thank you."

He grunts and drops onto the chair opposite me, the firelight casting his face in warm shadows. I take a bite. Okay. Wow.

I blink. “This is really good.”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “I make due.”

“You cook. You chop wood. You brood. Do you also moonlight as a sexy elf or forest king?”

His eyes cut to me, and I swear one corner of his mouth twitches.

I slurp another spoonful, letting the warmth seep through me. It’s quiet in here, just the soft pop of the fire, the occasional groan of the wind outside, and our spoons clinking against ceramic.

“So,” I say after a minute, “what’s your deal?”

Sawyer doesn’t look up. “My deal?”

“Yeah. Your backstory. The reason you live alone in a cabin with no internet and hate visitors.”

He leans back, stretching his long legs out. His socked feet rest near the edge of the firelight. “Not everything needs a story.”

“Spoken like a man who has one.”

He lifts his bowl, sips, and doesn’t answer.

I lean forward, chin in hand, spoon poised midair. “Come on. Give me something.”

He considers me for a long moment, then says, “I like the quiet.”

I wait, but that's all he offers.

"That's it?" I ask. "That's your whole vibe?"

He shrugs. "You wanted me to give you something."

"Yeah, but I wanted a little more oomph . Like 'I used to be a Navy SEAL, but now I make artisanal maple syrup and talk to wolves.'"

He snorts, actually snorts, and it's the first real sound of amusement I've heard from him. It's a nice sound. I want to hear it again.

"You're ridiculous," he mutters.

"And you're still shirtless."

He glances down like he forgot. Which, honestly, is probably true. If I looked like that, I'd walk around shirtless as much as possible. A small shiver runs through me as I look at his defined abs.

"Cold?" he asks, voice low.

"Not even a little," I say too quickly, spooning more soup into my mouth to cover the flush rising in my cheeks.

He stands, finally grabbing a T-shirt from the back of the chair and tugging it on. I try not to be disappointed. I fail.

We finish the soup, and I carry our bowls to the sink, rinsing them out while he throws another log on the fire. The flames catch and roar up, casting the cabin in golden light.

I dry my hands and turn to find him watching me.

There's something in his eyes I can't quite place. It's like awareness, but I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

"You're not what I expected," he says quietly.

"Oh? And what did you expect?"

He shrugs. "Someone louder. Flashier. Less persistent."

"I'm an acquired taste."

He nods. "So are Brussels sprouts."

We fall into silence again, and I sit back down on the couch, tucking my legs under me. He walks over and picks up a folded blanket from the back of the chair, tossing it at me with a grumble.

I catch it. "Thanks. You're a real softie under all that grump."

"Don't spread lies."

I giggle and drape the blanket over myself with a sigh, leaning back into the cushions. My body is warm, full, and more relaxed than it's been in weeks.

Sawyer disappears up the ladder to the loft and returns a moment later with another blanket and a pillow. He drops them on the couch opposite mine and gestures.

"I'll take the couch, and you can sleep in the loft."

“You sure?”

He nods. “You’re the guest.”

I smile. “This is the weirdest hotel I’ve ever stayed in.”

“Rate it one star and keep moving.”

I chuckle and pull the blanket tighter. Thunder rumbles again, quieter now. The rain has mellowed into a steady patter on the roof, soothing in its rhythm. The fire crackles, and warmth seeps through me, inch by inch.

“I’m sorry if I pushed,” I say softly.

He glances at me.

“Earlier,” I clarify. “About the photos. The story. I know you didn’t ask for any of this.”

He exhales slowly. “It’s not just about the photos.”

“What is it about?”

He hesitates, then says, “People see something, and then they make up a version of you that fits their fantasy. Doesn’t matter if it’s true.”

“And you hate being someone’s fantasy?”

“I hate being reduced to one.” His voice is quiet. Weighted.

I nod, watching the fire. “I get that.”

He doesn't answer, but I feel a shift, a slight softening of tension in the room. The way he sits a little closer to the edge of his seat. The way our silences don't feel so pointed now.

I lie back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. "This isn't how I thought today would go," I say into the quiet.

Sawyer's voice drifts back. "Less rain. Fewer trees."

"Less grumpy hot guy with an axe."

I swear I hear him chuckle. Just barely.

Outside, the storm begins to fade, but inside, something is just beginning. I close my eyes, wrapped in warmth, and I'm not in such a rush to leave anymore.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

The storm's long gone by the time the first light hits the cabin, but I've been up for hours.

It's the kind of quiet morning I usually enjoy, cool air creeping through the cracks, birds starting their chatter, the scent of woodsmoke still clinging to everything. Peaceful. Simple. Except now a woman is sleeping in front of the fire.

She started the night in my bed up in the loft, but after a few hours, she came back down with blankets and a pillow. She made a bed in front of the fireplace and drifted right off to sleep.

I lean against the kitchen counter, sipping coffee and watching the soft rise and fall of her breath from across the room. The fire's low, flickering embers now, but she's bundled in the flannel I gave her, tangled up in a blanket like she belongs here.

She doesn't. She doesn't belong in my space, or my quiet, or in my thoughts, which she's taken over with ridiculous ease.

I should've driven her back to town yesterday, but the road's still blocked, and the ground's too soft to risk the truck. That's what I tell myself. That's the reason she's still here. It's not because I like the sound of her laugh. Not because I can't stop thinking about the way she looked standing in my clothes, wet hair curling around her neck, eyes bright with challenge. Not that.

She stirs, groaning softly, and blinks against the morning light. "Is that coffee?" she

murmurs, her voice scratchy with sleep.

“Yes.”

She stretches, the flannel riding up just enough to flash a strip of bare thigh before she tugs the blanket higher. My eyes snap away too late. She must have taken the sweatpants off at some point.

I fill the second mug and hand it to her. “Careful. It’s hot.”

She accepts it with a sleepy smile. “So are you.”

I blink.

“I mean your coffee’s hot too,” she adds quickly, eyes wide. “Wow. That came out wrong.”

I smirk just a little. “Too early for flirting?”

“Never.”

She sits up, the blanket falling onto her lap. The sunlight catches the gold in her hair, and I find myself watching the way she cradles the mug, fingers curled tight like she needs the warmth.

“Did you sleep?” I ask.

She nods. “Eventually. I was cold in the loft, but once I moved in front of the fire, I slept good.”

I nod and head back into the kitchen. I don’t do breakfast, but I want to impress

Tessa, and I'm not going to even think about why. She's a complication wrapped in sarcasm and big eyes and a mouth that doesn't quit.

I make eggs, bacon, and toast with butter. Simple.

She pads over, still barefoot, and leans on the counter next to me. "I didn't peg you for the domestic type," she says.

"You're full of assumptions."

"I'm a journalist. It's a survival skill."

I glance at her. "Ever think about asking instead?"

Her lips twitch. "That's why I made the trip up your mountain."

We eat at the little table near the window, the morning quiet broken only by clinking forks and the occasional hum of approval from her when she bites into something. She's not shy about enjoying food, and I'm enjoying the sounds she makes a little too much."

"So," she says, licking a bit of jam from her thumb, "what's the plan today? Still stranded?"

I nod. "The tree's too big to move without a chainsaw and help. Ground's soft. Might be a day or two before we can clear it."

She frowns, but it's not a real one. More thoughtful. "Guess I'll make myself useful, then." She picks up our breakfast dishes and heads into the kitchen.

"You don't have to—"

“I want to.”

Once she’s cleaned up our breakfast to her satisfaction, she turns, brushing crumbs off her borrowed flannel, and looks around like she’s mentally assigning herself tasks. “What needs doing?”

I almost say nothing . I almost tell her to relax, to enjoy her forced mountain vacation. However, the set of her shoulders, the light in her eyes tell me she doesn’t want to sit still.

“Woodpile needs stacking,” I say. “Back side of the cabin. And I’ve got a few repairs to make before the rain hits again.”

She salutes. “Lead the way, boss man.”

She starts to pull her jacket and boots back on, but that just won’t work. I had her one of my lightweight coats and a pair of boots that are about twice the size of her foot.

She tucks some extra socks into the toes and pulls the boots on. We head outside. The air is sharp and bright, the ground damp but not soaked. A few branches litter the yard, but the worst of the damage is up the road. I hand her a pair of gloves and show her how to stack the chopped logs under the overhang.

To my surprise, she doesn’t complain. Doesn’t whine about the weight or the dirt or the way her hair keeps getting caught in the wind. She works in silence for a while, determined, cheeks flushed from effort.

I hammer a loose shutter back into place, glancing over at her every so often.

She’s something else. Funny. Smart. Too observant for her own good. But there’s grit to her, too, and a steadiness. She doesn’t just talk for the sake of filling the silence.

She listens. She watches. And she works hard.

By mid-morning, we're both sweating. I toss her a bottle of water, and she gulps half of it before sighing dramatically. "Do I get a merit badge now?"

"You want a sticker?"

"I want a bath. And maybe a trophy."

"You're doing fine."

She beams. "That's the highest praise I've ever gotten from you."

"Don't get used to it."

We take a break on the porch, sitting on the steps, boots caked in mud and hands calloused from the morning. She stretches her legs out in front of her and leans back on her elbows, face tipped toward the sun.

"You ever think about leaving?" she asks after a long minute.

"Leaving what?"

"The mountain. The quiet. Starting over somewhere else."

I shake my head. "No."

"Why not?"

"This is where I belong."

She nods slowly, like she's filing the answer away. "What about family?"

I stiffen. "Not here anymore."

Her eyes flick to mine. "Is that why you like the quiet so much?"

I don't answer. Just sip my water and stare out at the trees. She doesn't push.

Instead, she leans closer, bumping her shoulder into mine. "I get it," she says quietly. "It's easier to hear your thoughts out here."

"Not always a good thing."

She smiles, soft and sad and sweet. "Depends on the thoughts."

The moment stretches, warm and quiet. Then her hand brushes against mine, barely a graze, but enough. I look down, surprised by the softness of it, and by the way, she doesn't pull away. Neither do I. Her fingers shift, slow, uncertain, and then settle lightly on top of mine.

We sit there like that for a while. Just breathing. Just touching. Eventually, I stand, and she follows.

Back inside, she helps me prep for lunch, chopping vegetables like she knows what she's doing. We move easily around each other, passing bowls, bumping hips, trading teasing insults.

At one point, I reach for the salt at the same time she does, and our fingers brush again. She looks up, startled. We're close now. Close enough to see the flecks of green in her eyes. The tiny scar on her cheekbone. The way her breath hitches when I don't move away.

The air shifts and becomes heavy, charged. But before I can lean in, before I can cross that final inch, she turns away.

“Your soup’s gonna burn,” she says, voice light, but I see her hands tremble just a little.

After lunch, she insists on washing the dishes again. I don’t argue. I watch her instead. The way her hair falls into her eyes. The way she hums under her breath.

When she’s done, she leans back against the sink and meets my gaze. “You’re not as scary as you pretend to be.”

“Don’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my reputation.”

She grins. “Too late.”

I should keep my distance. I should remember that she’s temporary. That she doesn’t belong here. That she has a life waiting for her somewhere that’s not this mountain, not this cabin, not me. But when she smiles at me like that, all soft and sunlit and sure, I forget.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Tessa

There's a stillness in the cabin tonight that feels different than before. Last night, it was stormy, chaotic, full of wet clothes and sarcastic barbs, and me tripping over my curiosity. But tonight, the quiet is softer, yet heavy with the promise of something, like the whole place is holding its breath.

Sawyer's sitting on the couch, firelight casting golden shadows across his face. His hair's damp from a shower, curling slightly at the ends, and he's wearing a worn navy T-shirt and sweatpants that hang low on his hips.

I hate that I've noticed all of this. I hate even more that I keep noticing. There's something about the way he looks tonight. Not just the way his shirt clings to those arms or the hint of stubble along his jaw. It's the way he's so still, watchful, bracing for something.

"Beer?" he asks, nodding toward the bottle on the coffee table.

I nod. "Please."

He slides it toward me and watches as I take a long sip. The amber glass is cool against my palm, and the fire crackles in the background.

We've worked side by side all day, hauling wood, fixing a broken shutter, boiling water on the stove like we live in a pioneer novel. Somehow, I'm not exhausted. I feel settled. And I'm not ready for the day to end.

Sawyer leans back against the cushions, his thigh brushing mine in a way that feels completely casual and yet wildly not.

I glance at him. “Are you always this quiet?”

His mouth twitches like he’s considering a smile but thinks better of it. “I talk when there’s something worth saying.”

“So you’re a man of few words and fewer smiles.”

“Something like that.”

“Very brooding. Very on brand.”

I expect him to grunt or change the subject, but instead, he lets the silence sit for a moment before saying, “You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s kind of my thing,” I answer with a smile.

“Journalist thing?”

“Human thing.”

He takes a long sip of beer and stares into the fire. “What do you want to know now?”

I turn slightly to face him, legs tucked under me, one arm draped over the back of the couch. “Your story.”

He goes still.

“You said everyone makes one up,” I continue gently. “Let me hear the real one.”

His jaw tightens. “It’s not that interesting.”

“I don’t mind boring.”

His eyes flick to mine. “You don’t?” There’s a long pause, and just when I think he’s going to brush me off completely, he exhales and runs a hand over his face.

“I had a brother,” he says, his voice low and steady.

Had.

The word lodges somewhere in my chest.

“Jesse,” he continues. “Younger than me by three years. He was always the louder one, the risk-taker. He was the reason I ever left the mountain at all. He wanted more than this.” He gestures around the cabin.

“What happened?” I ask softly.

Sawyer doesn’t look at me. Just keeps staring into the flames.

“Car accident. Winter storm. He was driving back from Raleigh after visiting a friend. The roads had iced over, and he skid off the highway.”

My heart aches. “God, Sawyer. I’m so sorry.”

He nods once, but I can tell he’s far away now. “After that... I couldn’t stay in town. Everyone looked at me like I was glass, like I might break with a word. So, I came up here, built something with my hands. Stayed busy. Stopped answering calls.”

“Is that why you hate the Instagram stuff?” I ask quietly.

His laugh is bitter. “It’s not even really me they’re seeing. It’s a version. A filtered daydream in plaid. No one wants the guy who couldn’t save his brother. They want the guy with an axe and a beard who chops wood for fun.”

“Jesse’s death wasn’t your fault. You said it yourself, the roads were icy.” I take a deep breath. “I think you are so much more than a guy with an axe who chops wood.”

He finally looks at me, and his expression shifts. There’s no wall between us now. Just Sawyer, raw and unguarded, looking like he’s standing on the edge.

My hand finds his before I even realize I’ve moved. I lace our fingers together slowly, giving him the chance to pull away. He doesn’t.

His thumb brushes over the back of my hand, tentative, like he’s not used to being touched. Or maybe he is, but not like this. Not in the kind of silence that says I see you, and I’m not running.

“I’m tired,” he says after a minute. I can see in his eyes that it’s not a physical exhaustion but something much deeper than that.

“Me too.”

He looks at me, and I realize I haven’t told him anything real yet. Not like he just told me, and I want to share a part of myself with him. I squeeze his hand and let the truth fall out.

“I thought I wanted to tell stories. Important ones. Ones that mattered. The only job I was able to get was writing fluff pieces and gossip. I wrote an article that lists the top ten most dateable dog dads in Brooklyn. Deep dives on the latest TikTok breakup

drama. You know how long I spent writing about a woman who convinced her followers she was married to a ghost pirate?”

His eyebrows lift.

“Three weeks,” I say grimly. “He ‘cheated’ on her with her best friend’s ghost. There were charts.”

Sawyer doesn’t laugh, but something close to amusement flickers in his eyes.

“I thought this assignment would be different,” I admit. “Even if it started silly, I thought maybe, being here, chasing this story, I’d feel like a journalist again.”

He’s quiet for a second. “Do you?”

I nod slowly. “I think I’m remembering what it feels like to care about something real.”

The space between us shrinks. I don’t even realize we’re leaning until I feel his breath against my cheek. He’s so close. His hand still in mine. Our knees are touching. His eyes locked on my mouth.

I can’t breathe. I can’t move. My heart is thudding so loudly that I’m sure he can hear it. He shifts forward, just an inch, and I tilt my head, lips parting without thought. His hand slides to my jaw, slow and reverent. His thumb grazes my cheek. And then—

Bang!

There’s a loud thud against the cabin wall. We both jump. Sawyer is on his feet in a flash, muscles coiled, instincts sharp. He crosses the room in three strides and throws open the front door.

Nothing.

The wind picks up, tossing branches across the clearing. Something clatters off the porch—a loose shutter knocking against the side of the house. He steps out, checks the perimeter, then comes back in and locks the door.

“I think it was the shutter,” he says gruffly.

But the moment is gone.

Whatever it was that passed between us, whatever we almost did, it floating somewhere in the smoke of the fire, already cooling. I pull my legs up onto the couch and hug the blanket tighter.

Sawyer sits across from me this time, not next to me, and we don’t speak for the rest of the night. I don’t miss the way he looks at me when he thinks I’m not watching or how I already know I’ll never forget the feel of his hand in mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

I hear her gasp before I see the screen. Tessa's sitting on the porch, legs tucked under her, scrolling her phone like she does every morning. But this time, she's frozen, her coffee going cold beside her, eyes locked on the glowing glass in her hands.

I wipe my hands on a rag and walk over, my chest already tight. "What is it?"

She doesn't answer right away. Just tilts the screen toward me. I stare at the image. It's us. Taken from a distance, through the trees. Tessa sitting on the porch in my flannel. Me bent over near the woodpile. The photo's slightly blurry, like whoever took it zoomed too far in, but it's unmistakably us.

Caption: "Mountain mornings with mystery man ?? #SawyerSightings"

The timestamp hits me like a punch. It was posted ten minutes ago, in real-time. Every muscle in my body locks.

Tessa looks up at me, her eyes wide. "This wasn't me," she says quickly, voice tight. "I swear."

I barely hear her. My gaze is already sweeping the trees surrounding the cabin. My pulse is pounding in my ears. I step off the porch and scan the woods, looking for movement, for a lens glint, for anything.

"Tessa," I bark, "get inside."

She doesn't move.

I snap my head toward her. "Now."

That does it. She scrambles to her feet and backs into the cabin. I follow, locking the door behind us and pulling the curtain across the window. My heart's a drumbeat now, every instinct on high alert.

Tessa stands in the middle of the room, arms crossed over her chest, trembling slightly.

"I don't understand," she says. "Why would someone post that? How did they even get that photo? You said you don't have neighbors for miles."

"I don't." I grab the rifle from behind the door. She flinches at the sight of it.

"It's just for self-defense," I tell her quietly. "I'll use it if I have to."

Tessa wraps her arms tighter around herself, eyes shining. "Sawyer, someone's watching us."

I cross the room in two steps and gently take the phone from her hand. I scroll through the account there are other photos. One of me hauling lumber yesterday. Another of Tessa sitting by the fire last night. All of them clearly taken from outside the cabin.

"They've been here for days," I mutter.

She sinks onto the couch like her knees can't hold her up anymore. "Why? Why would someone do this?"

My jaw clenches. I don't have the answer, but I know what it feels like to be watched. I know how it twists in your gut, how it gets into your bones and makes every sound, every shadow, feel like a threat. I hate— hate —that she's feeling that right now.

I kneel in front of her and take her hands, her skin cool and trembling.

"We'll figure it out," I say. "I promise."

She swallows hard. "What if they're still out there?"

"They're not getting near you."

She searches my face, her voice barely a whisper. "You believe me, right? You believe I didn't know about this?"

"I believe you."

No hesitation. No doubt. Because even though I don't know everything about her, I know this: Tessa Hart is bold and loud and maybe a little reckless, but she's honest. She wouldn't lie about this.

Her breath catches, and I see it happen: her guard slips. Her eyes go glassy, and her chin trembles, and the weight of it all crashes down on her in a second. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my chest.

She clings to me like I'm the only thing keeping her from falling apart. Her face presses against my neck, her hands in the back of my shirt, and I hold her tighter, angrier than I've ever been that anyone would make her feel unsafe.

"I've got you," I whisper. "You're okay."

She lets out a shaky breath against my throat. “I don’t usually get scared.”

“You don’t have to be brave right now.”

She’s silent for a beat. “You’re warm.” I feel her smile against my neck, just the tiniest curve of lips, and it punches something loose in my chest.

We stay like that for a long time. Just me holding her, breathing, her heartbeat eventually steadies against mine.

The tension doesn’t fade, but it does change. Her hands move. One slides up my back, the other over my shoulder, fingertips curling around the nape of my neck. Her breath brushes my skin—faint, shallow. My pulse jumps.

I pull back just enough to look at her. Her eyes are glassy. Lashes wet. Mouth slightly parted. So close. I shouldn’t, but her hand slides to my cheek, and I’m gone.

I lean in, slow and unsure. Her eyes close. Her lips part, and then our mouths meet. The kiss is soft, just a brush, a question. She answers.

Her lips press into mine, hungry and fragile all at once. I deepen the kiss, my hand sliding into her hair, her body pressing into mine like she’s trying to crawl into my skin.

Just as fast as it starts, it stops. She pulls back, eyes wide, lips red, and breath shaky.

“I—” She doesn’t finish.

I nod, just once, backing away, giving her space. My chest is a mess, heart slamming, blood roaring.

We don't say anything, not for a long time. Eventually, she sits and curls into the corner of the couch, legs pulled up under her. She looks out the window like the forest might whisper answers through the glass.

I sit across from her, rifle in reach, eyes on the trees. But my mind? It's still on the feel of her mouth on mine. The way she trembled against me like she belonged there, and the terrifying, undeniable truth that I don't just want to protect her. I need her safe.

If something happened to Tessa, I don't think I'd come back from it.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Tessa

The wind howls like something out of a nightmare. It rattles the windows and groans through the trees, making the cabin feel like a boat caught in the middle of a storm-tossed sea. The fire's the only light now, crackling softly behind the grate while shadows dance along the wooden walls.

Then, just as I finish pouring water into the kettle—click. Everything goes dark. The lights blink out. The fridge hum dies. The soft buzz of Sawyer's ancient overhead bulb vanishes.

I stand frozen in the silence, holding the kettle in both hands.

"Power's out," I say uselessly.

Sawyer is already up, flashlight in hand, checking the window like he expects to see something more than darkness and wind.

"It happens," he mutters. "Lines are probably down up the ridge."

I set the kettle aside. "What now?"

He shrugs. "Candlelight. Fire. Blanket fort."

I raise a brow. "You build blanket forts?"

"No. But you look like the kind of woman who demands ambiance in a blackout."

I laugh despite the nerves twitching in my belly. “You’re not wrong.”

He disappears into the kitchen, and a few minutes later returns with three thick candles and an old oil lantern that throws golden light across the room in soft, flickering waves.

We sit in the quiet, listening to the wind and the occasional creak of the old wood cabin adjusting to the weather. It should be cozy. It is cozy, but under that comfort is something sharp and coiled and too hot for this fire alone.

Thick and humming, building between us like a slow burn, is undeniable tension. I feel it every time he looks at me. Every time he shifts a little closer. Every time he speaks in that low, gravelly voice that drags across my skin like smoke.

I shouldn’t want this, but I do. God help me, I do.

I stand abruptly, needing movement, space, something. “This place is unreal,” I mutter, pacing toward the window. “Like a fairytale.”

“You mean nightmare,” Sawyer says behind me.

I spin on him. “No, I mean fairytale.”

He rises slowly from his chair, crossing his arms over that broad chest. “You think this is a fairytale?”

“You don’t?” I tease.

He steps closer. “We’ve got no power. No running water. A stalker with a camera in the trees.”

“Sounds like chapter five of a bestseller.”

His eyes flash. “You romanticize everything, don’t you?”

“It’s better than living like everything’s a punishment.”

He’s close now. Too close. His jaw is tight. His eyes are hard, but he doesn’t move away. “Why are you really here, Tessa?”

I stare up at him, breath catching. “I told you. The story—”

“No. Not the story. Not the magazine. You. Here. With me. Now.”

The words lodge in my throat. Why am I here? Not for the assignment, at least not anymore.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. That’s the truth of it. Raw and unfiltered.

Sawyer breathes out slowly, like the fight just drains from his chest.

“You drive me crazy,” he says.

“Right back at you.”

His hands are at my waist before I realize what’s happening, his head dipping low. “Tell me to stop,” he murmurs.

I don’t. Instead, I rise on my toes and kiss him. It starts soft, a brush, a breath. Then he groans low in his throat, and everything explodes.

His mouth crashes into mine, hot, urgent, starving. His hands grip my hips, pulling

me flush against him. I gasp, and he swallows the sound, tongue sweeping into my mouth with devastating skill.

We stumble backward, knocking into the couch. He catches me, one arm around my waist, the other fisting in my hair.

I clutch at his shirt, yanking him closer, needing more. More of his mouth. More of his hands. More of this thing between us that's been threatening to detonate since the moment I laid eyes on him.

He kisses like he's angry at how much he wants me, and I match him, kiss for kiss, fire for fire.

My back hits the wall, and he presses into me, all hard muscle and heat. His thigh wedges between mine, forcing them apart just enough that I feel the thick, undeniable shape of him.

Sawyer pulls back, panting.

"Tessa..."

"Don't stop."

His eyes search mine, wild and dark. He lifts me. Just...lifts me like I weigh nothing. My legs wrap around his hips, and he carries me to the couch, laying me down carefully, reverently, before crawling over me.

Our clothes are a blur. My shirt goes first. Then his. His hands find the skin at my waist, sliding up to cup my breasts. He growls. Actually growls.

"Jesus, you're beautiful," he murmurs, mouth moving down my neck, across my

collarbone, between my breasts. I arch into him, fingers threading through his hair, tugging gently.

“You’re shaking,” he says against my skin.

“I want this.”

“Say it again.”

“I want you.”

Something in him snaps. His hand slides into my pants, fingers tracing over the damp heat between my thighs. I gasp, bucking against him.

He kisses me again, slower this time, savoring every second. Then he stills and his forehead drops to mine.

“God,” he rasps. “I want you so bad it’s killing me.”

“Then take me.”

His eyes meet mine. “I’m not going to rush this,” he says. “Not when it matters.”

I blink. “Matters?”

He cups my cheek, thumb stroking gently. “You’re not just some distraction.”

My heart slams because I feel it, too. This isn’t casual. It never was. He kisses me again slow and deep and aching with everything we can’t say. And when he sinks into me, it’s not just about lust. It’s about need.

His body presses into mine, claiming every inch, every breath, and I cling to him, legs wrapped tight around his waist, hands gripping his shoulders as he moves. Every thrust is deliberate. Measured.

He watches me like he's memorizing every expression, every sound I make. His name spills from my lips again and again, and every time, it breaks him a little more. The world fades. There's only this.

His body in mine. His mouth on my skin. His voice murmuring my name like a prayer. We come undone together, breathless, shaking. Lost and found in the same heartbeat.

Afterward, he gathers me close, his chest slick against mine, his breath slowing beside my ear. Neither of us speaks. There's no need. Because whatever just happened between us—it's not over. It's only the beginning.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

She's still asleep when I wake up. The fire's mostly gone out, just glowing embers in the hearth, but the room is warm. The sun filters through the windows in soft streaks of gold, catching in the strands of Tessa's hair where it spills over my chest.

She's curled against me, one leg draped over mine, her hand resting on my stomach like it belongs there. And hell if it doesn't feel like it does.

I stay still, watching her breathe, the rise and fall of her chest, the flutter of her lashes. I trace a path with my eyes from the curve of her cheek to the freckle near her jaw to the soft pink of her lips, kiss-bruised and parted.

Last night plays back in flashes. The storm. The kiss. Her body under mine, wrapped around me. Her voice in my ear. The way she looked at me like I was more than the man I've spent the last two years trying not to be.

I run a hand slowly over her back, fingers brushing the hem of my T-shirt she's still wearing. She shifts against me, murmuring something incoherent before nuzzling closer.

My heart does something stupid...it claims her. Mine. Mine. Mine . Pounds out in rhythm. I close my eyes and breathe her in. I don't name what I'm feeling. I can't because once you give it a name, it becomes real. I'm not sure I know what to do with real anymore.

She's quiet when she finally stirs, stretching like a cat in the sun before blinking up at

me with a sleepy smile.

“Morning,” she murmurs, her voice rough from sleep.

I brush her hair back from her face. “Hey.”

Neither of us moves to get up for a long stretch, but eventually, reality catches up. There’s still someone watching us, still someone taking pictures. Posting them. And now that I’ve let Tessa into my life—my space, my bed, my everything—that threat feels a hell of a lot more personal.

We get dressed mostly in silence. It’s not awkward at all. She steals my sweatshirt. I don’t even pretend to care. She makes the coffee. I fix breakfast. We don’t talk about last night, but when her hand brushes mine as she passes me a mug, she doesn’t pull away. It all feels natural.

By mid-morning, we’re packed and loaded onto the four-wheeler, heading down the mountain. The blocked road’s still a mess, but we can bypass it on the ATV trail.

Tessa wraps her arms around me from behind, snug and warm against my back. Her chin rests briefly on my shoulder, and I have to swallow the sudden knot in my throat.

We ride in silence, save for the growl of the engine and the wind tearing through the trees. Her grip tightens when we hit a bump, and I feel the press of her chest against my spine. I feel her smile.

At the bottom of the trail, the town opens up like it always does—quiet, simple, a little too curious for its own good. I park outside Annie’s café, and Tessa hops off, shaking out her hair and stretching like she’s just returned from a months-long trek through the wilderness.

“You okay?” I ask.

She grins. “Just trying to remember what it feels like to wear real pants.”

Annie’s wiping down the counter when we walk in. Her eyes jump from me to Tessa to the faint red mark on Tessa’s neck that neither of us has acknowledged. She lifts a brow but says nothing.

“Tessa,” she greets. “Mountain life not scaring you off yet?”

“Still holding on,” Tessa says, sliding into a booth.

Annie glances at me. “You look less homicidal today.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

Annie brings us coffee and settles into the booth across from us, folding her arms.

“Alright. Spill. You two are giving off a weird survival-bonded energy.”

I glance at Tessa. She’s the one who pulls out her phone and shows Annie the pictures. All of them. The ones taken through the trees. The ones that feel too close. Too real.

Annie’s face darkens. “These weren’t on the original account.”

Tessa nods. “Exactly. This isn’t the playful thirst-trap stuff. This is stalking.”

I add, “Posted in real time. Someone’s been close enough to the cabin to get these. And they’ve been doing it for days.”

Annie looks between us. “So, what are you thinking?”

“We need to figure out who’s running it,” Tessa says. “And how they’re getting the photos.”

Annie sighs. “The original account was done by a group of older ladies led by Dottie. It was just supposed to be innocent fun. Sadie’s the one who helped them with the original account. She’s good with tech. Maybe she can trace the posts or track the IP address or whatever it is hackers do.”

I nod. “Call her.”

Sadie shows up ten minutes later. Her phone is in her hand, and Reid Calloway follows behind her with a scowl that could kill.

“This better be good,” he mutters, sliding into the booth beside Annie.

Tessa shows her the profile, the photos, the timestamps. Sadie’s eyes narrow as she scrolls. “Okay, no. This isn’t us. We never posted anything creepy like this. We scheduled light thirst. This is full-on stalker territory.”

I arch a brow. “Scheduled light thirst?”

Annie shrugs. “Everyone loves a mountain man. We just branded it a little.”

I grumble under my breath, but I can’t argue. This? This is different.

Sadie taps and swipes, muttering to herself. “The account’s using a different email than the one we set up. We were hacked on Thursday afternoon, and since we hadn’t planned any more posts now that Tessa’s here, they were able to fly under the radar.”

Tessa leans in. “Can you get into it?”

Sadie's already on her laptop. "Give me twenty minutes and an oat milk latte."

Annie's up before she finishes the sentence.

While Sadie types furiously, I take Tessa outside for some air. We lean against the railing overlooking Main Street. The air smells like rain.

"You all right?" I ask.

She doesn't answer right away. "I keep thinking about how they must've been watching us. How close they had to be."

I nod.

"They saw us last night," she adds, voice low.

I don't flinch. But it lands hard.

"I'll find them," I say.

"I know," she says, like it's a fact. Then she turns to me, eyes clear. "We're doing this together, right? Not you disappearing into the woods on some solo hunter mission while I 'stay safe' in town?"

My mouth twitches. "Would you actually stay?"

"Not a chance."

We watch a truck roll by, windows down, someone's golden retriever hanging out the side like he owns the place.

“You know,” she says after a minute, “riding behind you on that four-wheeler, I kept thinking...”

“What?”

“That if we weren’t being low-key hunted, it would’ve been hot.”

I glance at her. “You were thinking about that?”

“Shut up.”

“Arms tight around me. Legs gripping—”

“Sawyer.” I laugh, the sound surprising even me.

She smiles widely. God, she’s trouble, and I want every second of it.

Back inside, Sadie looks up from her laptop, triumphant. “Gotcha, you little creeper.”

Tessa and I rush to the table.

“Who is it?” I ask.

She taps the screen. “Can’t trace it fully yet, but the account is posting through a third-party app. Someone’s either hacked in remotely or set up a timed post system. But the location data on the most recent photo?” She spins the screen. “It was taken from somewhere behind your cabin. Close. Less than fifty feet.”

I stare at the dot on the map. The ridge. The trees. The old hunting blind. “I know where they were.”

Tessa straightens. “Let’s go.”

I look at her. “You’re sure?”

She grabs my keys and grins. “Let’s ride.”

The four-wheeler ride back is faster this time. Tessa’s arms are tight around my waist, but she doesn’t bury her face in my back. She’s alert. Watching.

At the ridge, I park near the trailhead and dismount. We hike the last stretch on foot. The brush is thicker here. Wilder.

I find the hunting blind just where I thought it would be, tucked between two trees—half-collapsed, overgrown, but still standing. I push the door open and step inside. There it is, a camera.

It looks like it’s rigged to a motion sensor with a battery pack and a transmitter beside it.

Tessa swears behind me.

I lift the camera gently, unplug the transmitter. Someone set this up to monitor the cabin. To trigger with movement. To upload without needing to be nearby. And they’ve been watching, probably longer than we know.

Tessa’s face is pale, but her jaw is set. “Do you think they’re still out here?”

“Not now. But they will be.”

I look at the camera, then at her. This isn’t just about catching someone, this is about protecting her. This is about not losing what’s right in front of me. Because even if

neither of us can say it yet. I'm not walking away from her. Not after last night.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Tessa

The door clicks shut behind us, and just like that, we're back. The storm's moved on, the town is behind us, and it's just us and this cabin again, four walls and a growing ache in my chest that I don't know how to name.

Sawyer drops his keys into the bowl by the door, sets the camera bag down on the table, and exhales like he's been holding his breath since we left. His shoulders rise and fall beneath that old worn T-shirt I've come to associate with comfort. With him.

I know this version of him. Quiet. Focused. Protective. Still humming from the weight of the day. We've barely known each other for a few days, but I feel like I know him better than I've ever known anyone.

I cross to him, pressing a hand lightly to his back. "You okay?"

He nods, turning toward me. His hand lifts to my waist like it's instinctual now, fingers grazing the hem of my sweatshirt, his sweatshirt, that I don't plan on giving back.

"You hungry?" he asks, voice low.

I shake my head. "No."

We don't need to talk about what happened in town or about the way Annie looked at us like she knew what was happening between us. We don't talk about the camera, the threat. Not right now.

His mouth finds mine easily, like it's the most natural thing in the world. No hesitation. Just heat and rhythm and the faint taste of coffee and rain still clinging to his lips.

It's not the same kind of kiss as before—not rushed, not desperate.

This one is claiming. Familiar. Like we've already been here, but he still wants to discover me all over again.

I kiss him back, sighing against his mouth as he backs me toward the couch, his hand sliding under the hem of the sweatshirt, palm skating over bare skin. He's warm. Solid. Grounding.

When we sink down onto the cushions, I straddle his lap. We've found a rhythm, slow and fluid and full of quiet intensity that builds between touches.

I run my fingers through his hair, his scruff rasping lightly against my jaw as he kisses his way down my neck, over my collarbone. I tug the sweatshirt off and toss it to the floor. He does the same with his shirt.

My hands skim over his chest, the curve of his shoulders, the way his body tightens under my touch. I love the way he reacts to me, never with noise, but with that slight hitch in his breath, with the way he presses his forehead to my shoulder when I do something that makes him lose his grip.

I roll my hips against him and feel him throb beneath me, already hard and hot and ready. His hands are slow and thorough as they explore, tracing familiar paths like he's taking inventory of what's his. He lifts me just enough to slide his hands into the waistband of my leggings, then pulls them down slowly—no urgency, just the steady assurance that he's going to enjoy every inch of this.

When I'm bare in his lap, he just looks at me for a moment, eyes roaming, reverent, dark with want but soft with something else too. Something quieter. Deeper.

"You're unreal," he murmurs, voice rough.

I smile and reach for the waistband of his pants. "I'm very real and right here."

We shift together, moving toward the loft in a haze of touch and tension. There's no stumbling now. No nerves. He lifts me easily, helping me up the ladder, laying me across the bed like I'm the most precious thing he's ever held.

The firelight glows below us, flickering on the wood beams above, casting golden shadows across his bare back as he settles between my thighs.

He kisses down my chest, my stomach, the inside of my thigh. He takes his time and I let him, because with Sawyer, this is different.

There's no game. No pretending not to care. Every sigh, every kiss, every roll of his hips says I want you, I know you, and I'm going to make sure you never forget this . When he finally sinks into me, it's slow. Deep. I gasp, arching into him, legs tightening around his waist.

"Still with me?" he whispers against my cheek.

"Always," I breathe.

His pace is languid, almost teasing. He strokes deep, each thrust making me feel too full, too seen. My fingers press into his back, nails digging slightly as my breath catches.

Sawyer's eyes stay locked on mine, even as sweat slicks his skin and his control

begins to fray. He kisses me through every moan, every stuttered breath, until the sensation builds so high I'm sure I'll break apart.

And when I do, shaking, breathless, unraveling beneath him, he follows, burying his face in my neck, his whole body shuddering with release. We stay tangled together, bodies hot and humming, breath slowing in sync.

He presses a kiss to my shoulder. My collarbone. My temple. I bury my face in his chest, arms wrapped tightly around his ribs.

No words pass between us, but they don't have to. The way he holds me afterward, how our bodies fit without trying, the contented sigh he lets out when I kiss his chest— that's the truth.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

She's still wearing my clothes, even though we picked up her luggage when we were in town. There's sunlight cutting across the bed in golden streaks, catching the curve of her hip as she stretches with a soft, satisfied hum.

She opens one eye, looks over at me, and smiles. That smile. It hits me like it always does, low in my gut and somewhere even deeper I don't like to name.

"Hi," she murmurs.

"Hey."

She sits up slowly, tugging the edge of the shirt down over her thighs as she swings her legs off the bed. My T-shirt looks better on her. I watch her pad across the loft, hair swaying as she descends the ladder barefoot and still sleep-warm. I follow a minute later, throwing on sweats and tugging a hoodie over my head, but the scene I walk into nearly stops me cold.

She's already boiling water. Reaching for the coffee tin. Humming under her breath. Like she's done this a hundred times, like this is her home.

I know it's stupid. I know we've had less than a handful of mornings like this. It feels like something's clicked into place. Some gear in me that stopped turning years ago has started again. Smooth and easy.

She turns when she hears me step into the kitchen. "I hope you don't mind. I figured

it was either make coffee or start going feral.”

“You’ve got survival instincts.”

She smirks. “A whole lifetime running on caffeine.”

I reach for a mug, brushing past her to get it, and she doesn’t move away. Her hip leans into mine. Her hand curls around my forearm. Just for a second. Just long enough to remind me what it felt like to fall asleep with her tucked under my arm and wake up to her in my bed.

She pours the water into the French press and we wait together, quiet and close.

“How’d you sleep?” I ask.

Her eyes flick to mine. “Good. Really good.”

Something flickers in her expression. Not nervousness, exactly. Just weight. Like she’s feeling the bigness of this, same as I am.

She adds, “Being with you like that. It feels—”

“Perfect,” I finish.

She nods, almost shy. “Exactly.”

I slide the plunger down and pour her a mug. We sit at the table, knees bumping under the surface, hands wrapped around steaming ceramic, just looking at each other.

“I’ve never had anything like this,” I admit.

Her brows lift slightly.

“Not just the sex.” I glance at the bed, and she smiles. “I mean the mornings. The part after. The part where I don’t want to run.”

She’s quiet for a second. “Me neither.”

There’s more I could say. Probably should. But I’ve never been a man who speaks to fill silence. So I reach across the table and thread my fingers through hers instead. She squeezes three times.

She then asks, “Do you think it could be someone you know?”

The shift in tone is gentle, but it still pulls me back to the real world. The stalker. The camera. The weight that never quite leaves.

I shake my head slowly. “I don’t know. Could be a local. Could be someone who knows you, not me.”

Her grip tightens slightly. “That’s the part that makes me feel bad. I might have brought this danger into your life.”

“You didn’t.”

“But what if it is someone I’ve crossed paths with before? What if they followed me here?”

“Tessa.”

She looks up.

“You didn’t bring this. And you’re not alone in it.”

She nods and looks down at our hands. There’s a tension winding up inside her, one I’ve seen creeping in since we got back yesterday. It’s not panic. Not fear, exactly. Just... restlessness.

“You need out of the cabin for a while,” I say.

She glances up.

“You’re getting twitchy.”

“I’m not twitchy.”

“You’re vibrating.”

She sighs, leans back in the chair. “I’m used to movement. To streets and people and noise. This place is beautiful, but my thoughts are too loud in stillness.”

That’s my fear, that she won’t want to stay here in the middle of nowhere. Her life is in the city and she’s used to the noise.

“Alright,” I say. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Her eyes brighten. “Really?”

I nod. “Just through the woods. Someplace open but quiet. We’ll stay close to the ridge trail.”

She’s already pulling on my flannel from yesterday, stuffing her feet into boots she borrowed last time the power went out.

I grab the small backpack I keep stocked with water, snacks, a flashlight, and my knife. The second we step outside, the wind lifts her hair, and she exhales like it's her first real breath all day.

I watch her turn her face to the sky. Watch the way her cheeks color from the cold. Watch her stretch like the sun might kiss her bones if she opens up enough. I walk beside her, but she reaches for my hand and laces our fingers without a word. God help me, I don't ever want to let go.

We hike in easy silence, just the sound of boots crunching over pine needles and the creak of tree limbs overhead. The woods smell clean after the storm—wet bark and earth and that unmistakable mossy green scent that hits deep in the chest.

She chatters occasionally, pointing out birds, making up names for unfamiliar plants, and mocking a particularly lumpy tree just like someone who grew up far from this kind of landscape.

I let her talk. Let her fill the space with color and light. She's good at turning the ordinary into something you want to hold onto.

When we reach a clearing, I stop and tug her hand gently. "Come here."

She steps closer, and I guide her toward a moss-covered boulder overlooking a small dip in the land. From here, you can see the slope of the mountain, the dark stretch of pine canopy, and the way the clouds peel back just enough to let the sun through.

She stares for a long moment. Then whispers, "Okay. This was worth the hike."

I wrap my arms around her from behind, chin on her shoulder. "Thought you might like it."

She rests her hands over mine, and we stand like that for a while, swaying gently in the breeze, completely wrapped up in each other. Then she turns in my arms, slides her fingers into my hoodie, and tugs me closer, kissing me deeply.

My hands slide under her flannel, over the soft curve of her waist. She presses against me, rising on her toes, mouth warm and sweet. When she pulls back, her breath is uneven. Her cheeks flushed.

“I’m going to keep kissing you in inappropriate outdoor locations,” she says.

“Good.”

She tilts her head. “That was very un-Sawyer of you.”

“Maybe I’m evolving.”

“Careful. You might get a reputation for being romantic.”

I lean in and kiss her again—just to prove a point. And maybe because I can’t not kiss her. We kiss for what feels like hours. Against trees. Against the boulder. In the slanting light of late morning, with no audience but the forest.

Eventually, she exhales a dreamy sigh and presses her forehead to mine. “I don’t want to go back yet.”

“Then we won’t.”

We sit on the rock, shoulder to shoulder, sharing a bottle of water and the last granola bar in the pack. She picks out the chocolate chips and feeds them to me, grinning the whole time.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, I realize this isn't temporary.

She might still leave. She might still have a plane ticket or a deadline waiting for her, but what's growing between us? It's not just something we'll both look back on and smile about someday. This is a before-and-after. This is where everything changes.

If she asks me to follow her, wherever she goes, I already know my answer.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Tessa

The clock reads 2:17 AM. I turn over, again, pressing my face into Sawyer's pillow, breathing in cedar and smoke and the faint scent of his skin. But it doesn't help. My eyes refuse to close. My brain refuses to be quiet.

The cabin is still, but my thoughts are loud. The pictures. The camera. The feeling of being watched.

Even with Sawyer here with me, I can't fully shake the unease curling low in my belly. I'm safe here. I know I am. But the idea of someone out there, in the trees, watching us while we sleep—it gets in your head and refuses to leave.

Eventually, I give up.

I slide out of bed quietly, wrapping myself in one of Sawyer's flannels and tiptoeing barefoot down the ladder.

The living room is dark, save for the orange glow of the fire, now low and soft in the hearth. And Sawyer's there sitting on the couch, elbows on his knees, staring into the flames like they're talking back to him.

His hoodie hangs loose over broad shoulders, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His hair is tousled, jaw shadowed in scruff. He looks wrecked in the most beautiful, soul-twisting way. Tired but still so damn steady.

Like, even at 2 AM, he'd carry the weight of the world for me if I asked.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask softly.

He doesn’t startle. Just glances at me, then pats the space next to him. “Come here.”

I go to him without thinking. Instead of sitting beside him, I climb onto his lap and curl against his chest, legs draped across his, my cheek pressing to his collarbone.

His arms wrap around me instantly. One big hand cradles my thigh. The other strokes slowly up and down my spine. And just like that, I can breathe again.

“You okay?” he murmurs.

“Not really,” I admit. “I keep thinking someone’s going to break in. Or I’ll open my phone and find a new picture. Or worse—nothing at all, and I’ll just have to wait, and wonder, and not know what’s next.”

He presses a kiss to my temple. “I get it.”

“What about you?” I whisper. “You couldn’t sleep either?”

He shakes his head. “Been thinking.”

“About?”

He takes a breath and then answers, “You. Me. What happens when this thing between us stops? Is this just a fling?”

My heart stutters. “It was never a fling,” I say.

He nods like he knows that, but hearing it out loud does something to both of us.

His arms tighten around me. “I’m not used to letting people in, Tessa.”

“I’m not used to someone wanting me to stay.”

We sit like that for a while, just holding each other. No urgency. No heat. Just the solid, grounding presence of his body beneath mine, our breath syncing in time with the crackle of the fire.

“You scare the hell out of me,” he says into my hair.

I smile softly. “Right back at you.”

His hand slides to the side of my neck, his thumb brushing the edge of my jaw. “I want you,” he says. “Not just for tonight. For all of it. Even the hard parts.”

I pull back enough to look at him. His eyes are open and bare in a way I’ve never seen before. There’s no wall left between us. And that’s the moment I know I’m not falling. I’ve already fallen.

I kiss him gently, and he kisses me back with everything unspoken between us. Not to start something, but to remind us both that this is real. He stands with me in his arms, carrying me like I weigh nothing, and climbs the ladder back to the loft.

He lays me down in the bed, then slides in beside me, pulling the blanket over us and curling his body around mine. His chest against my back. His hand in mine. He doesn’t let go, and neither do I.

And this time, when I close my eyes, I sleep.

* * *

I wake to the smell of coffee.

It takes me a second to register that I'm still in his arms, one leg tangled with his, my cheek pressed to his chest. He's awake, looking down at me like I'm the best part of his morning.

"You slept," he says softly.

I nod. "Because you held me."

He leans down and kisses my forehead. "Always."

We move slowly this morning, we have coffee with the occasional grin over the rim of a mug. He makes breakfast. I steal half of his toast. We clean up together, and it's all so easy that it hurts.

Then, my phone buzzes on the counter. I pick it up, and a cold shiver races down my spine. There's a text.

Blocked Number: Cute view this morning. Hope you slept well.

Attached is a photo of the cabin taken from outside this morning. From the way the light hits the window, it was taken while I was still in Sawyer's arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:19 am

Sawyer

I know these woods better than anyone. I know how to walk them quietly and how to see without being seen. I know every break in the trees, every dip in the land. And right now, I'm using that knowledge like a weapon.

Tessa walks beside me, her fingers laced through mine. I haven't let go since the text came in.

"Cute view this morning. Hope you slept well." A photo of the cabin. Taken from the tree line. From behind the damn porch.

It was sent while we were in bed, wrapped in each other.

My blood's been simmering since I saw it. But the second she turned pale and whispered, "They were that close?"—I stopped simmering. I started boiling.

Whoever it is, they've been careful. Smart, but not smart enough.

I don't like leaning on people, but Tessa said we had to ask for help. Sadie and Reid had come right over and Reid helped me figure out the most likely place for the stalker to be.

Sadie and Reid stayed back our place, but Tessa insisted on coming with me. I didn't want her to. But the look she gave me, that mix of fire and steel, I couldn't say no.

Reid's directions led us here, to a trail off the ridge that barely qualifies as a path. It's

overgrown, full of ferns and low branches. The kind of place no one hikes unless they know where they're going.

We move in silence until I spot it, a plastic storage case, barely visible behind a split tree stump, just off the trail. I hold up a hand, and Tessa stops. I move closer. Crouch low. Flip open the box.

Inside: a tablet, wireless transmitter, a second phone. Wires, a car battery in a waterproof shell. Plus one very familiar trail camera, the same model as the one we found earlier. Same mount. Same rig.

There's movement ahead. Someone shifting behind the trees. Quiet, but not quiet enough. I straighten.

"Tessa," I say, low and firm. "Stay behind me."

She nods. I step into the clearing and see who has been stalking the woman I love—it's Tracy Cartwright. She's crouched near another camera, adjusting something. Doesn't even see me until I speak.

"Nice view this morning, huh?"

She jumps like I fired a gun. "Sawyer!" Her voice is too high, too fake. "I didn't see you there—"

"No," I say, stepping closer, voice flat. "I'm sure you didn't."

Tessa steps out behind me, eyes narrowing the second she sees Tracy. "What the hell is this?" Tessa demands.

Tracy stands up, brushing her hands on her jeans. "I was trying to help you. I knew

someone was watching you two and thought if I caught them, I could—”

“Stop lying,” I snap.

Her mouth twists. “You don’t know what it’s like. I’ve been waiting for you to notice me, and then I had to watch her waltz into town and into your cabin like she belonged there.”

Tessa steps forward, her voice stronger now. “You took pictures of us through the window. While we slept.”

“You weren’t supposed to sleep there,” Tracy snaps. “You were supposed to leave. That’s what they all do. Come in, flirt, play pretend, then go. But not you, you stayed, like that other one with Reid.”

“You don’t even know me,” Tessa says.

“I didn’t have to. You were in his space. His cabin. His clothes.”

“You were jealous,” I realize. “You thought what if she left, I’d finally notice you?”

She flinches, then lifts her chin. “You never gave anyone else a chance. Not once. You were just brooding and quiet and unreachable. Until her.”

“You violated our privacy. You stalked us.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone,” she mutters.

“You don’t know that,” I say, low and lethal. “You broke the law, and the sheriff is on the way. We’re taking the cameras. You’re done. If I ever see you near my property again, you’ll have a hell of a lot more to worry about than a trespassing

charge.”

Tracy doesn't argue. She sits and awaits her fate. I use my walkie-talkie to tell Reid where we are and to get the sheriff here. Only then do I turn back to Tessa. She's trembling.

I take a few steps toward her and pull her into my arms. She comes willingly. She collapses against me like her body's been waiting for this moment to fall apart. Her fingers dig into the back of my hoodie. Her forehead presses into my chest.

“She was so close,” she whispers. “For days.”

“I know, baby. I know.”

I hold her tighter, rubbing her back in slow circles, like I can ground her with touch alone. Like if I just keep her close enough, nothing will ever hurt her again.

“Tessa, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you. Not just in my bed, not just in my house, but in my life. You walked in like a storm and somehow made everything quieter. You see through me. You stay when it's hard. You make me feel like a man again, not a shadow.”

She blinks, eyes glassy.

I take her face in my hands. “I want you in my mornings. In my silence. In my chaos. I want to build a life around the sound of your laugh and your bare feet on my porch and the way you kiss me like you're afraid to let go.”

A tear slips down her cheek. I brush it away with my thumb.

“You make me believe in things I thought were long gone. And I'm not letting you

walk out of here thinking this was anything less than everything.”

She launches into me, her arms around my neck. Lips on mine. Mouth urgent and soft and shaking with emotion.

I hold her like a lifeline. Because she is.

She pulls back, breathless. “That’s the first time you’ve given me a speech.”

“You liked it?”

She laughs, wiping her cheeks. “I loved it. I love you.”

I smile, wide and full and real. Then I kiss her again, slower this time. Deeper. The trees stand quietly around us, but I swear they know. This woman will be mine forever.

Tessa

Sawyer Holt is building our forever. Out past the old vegetable garden, where there's a tangle of tomato vines and a suspiciously bold family of squirrels, he's hammering away at a new addition to the cabin. A real-deal construction site with planks of fresh wood, a wheelbarrow full of nails, and the faint scent of sawdust trailing on the spring air.

When I first met him, he wouldn't have let me step foot inside his cabin if the weather hadn't intervened. Now? He's giving me an office, a sunroom, and a bedroom big enough for the two of us and rooms for anyone else who might join us someday.

And I'm still in love with him in ways I don't fully have the vocabulary for.

I step out onto the porch, coffee in hand, and watch him work. His T-shirt clings to his back, the sleeves hugging his biceps just right. His hair's longer now, shaggier, and his beard's a bit fuller. He catches me staring. He always does.

"You're not even pretending to be subtle," he calls out, not looking up from his work.

"I stopped pretending a long time ago."

He pauses, leans back on his heels, and grins over his shoulder at me. "Want to come out here and 'supervise'?"

I sip my coffee slowly. "Is that code for 'sit on your lap while you pretend not to be

distracted by my cleavage’?”

He wipes sweat from his brow and grins wider. “Maybe.”

God, I love him.

I walk down the steps and cross the yard barefoot, the grass cool and damp under my feet. Spring in Pine Hollow smells like rain and promise. Wildflowers dot the hills, the birds won’t shut up, and the trees are that impossible shade of green they only wear for a few golden weeks before summer heat kicks in.

He sets his hammer down just in time for me to settle into his lap on the wide wooden beam he’s been using as a makeshift bench.

“You smell like wood,” I murmur against his jaw.

“Occupational hazard.”

He wraps his arms around me, warm and strong, and presses a kiss to my temple.

“So,” I say, pulling back to look at him. “How long until my new office is ready? I have deadlines.”

He raises a brow. “Deadlines, huh?”

“Yes. Just because I write from the woods now doesn’t mean I don’t work. I’m a very serious woman with a very important column about sexy flannel-clad men and small-town gossip.”

Sawyer snorts. “You wrote one piece about me chopping wood, and it broke your website.”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t love the attention.”

“I hated the attention.”

“But you loved the reward system I created for every ten thousand views.”

He tilts his head. “Is that what we’re calling it now? A reward system?”

“You’re not denying it worked.”

He growls softly and buries his face in my neck. “You are going to be the death of me.”

“I really hope not. We just ordered those new sheets.”

He laughs, pulling me tighter. I stay curled against him a moment longer, then sigh.

“We should get ready,” I say. “The Spring Fling starts in an hour, and Annie will call the National Guard if we’re late.”

Sawyer groans. “Remind me why we’re going to this again?”

“Because we live here and because we love these people. Sadie’s threatening to dye your beard pink if you don’t support her cupcake fundraiser.”

“Sadie’s terrifying.”

“Yes, but her cupcakes are divine.”

I kiss his cheek and climb out of his lap. He watches me go with a look that makes my knees wobble a little, even after a year of early mornings, late nights, and snowed-in Sundays tangled under quilts.

By the time we're both showered and dressed—me in a blue sundress, Sawyer in jeans and a fresh henley that I may or may not rip off later—we're halfway to the truck when he stops me.

“Wait.”

I turn, “What?”

He steps up behind me, wraps his arms around my waist, and rests his chin on my shoulder. “You happy?”

I lean into him without hesitation. “You know I am.”

“Even out here with the quiet? The slowness?”

“Especially here.”

He exhales against my skin, his voice soft and full of something unspoken. “I still can't believe you stayed.”

I turn in his arms. “Sawyer Holt, there was never a world where I left you behind.”

He kisses me like that truth matters more than anything.

* * *

Sawyer

Main Street is in full bloom—literally. Flower garlands hang from every lamppost. Tables are covered in gingham. Kids run wild with lemonade-sticky fingers, and someone's playing bluegrass on a small stage near the bookstore.

It smells like popcorn and fried dough.

“Welcome to the Spring Fling, lovers!” Annie calls out as soon as she spots us, waving from behind her pie stand like she’s the unofficial mayor of Pine Hollow.

Sadie’s beside her, wearing a bright yellow sundress and a glittery cupcake apron. She flashes a peace sign in our direction. Reid is beside her, loading trays of pastries and already halfway through what looks like a second cinnamon roll.

“Hey,” Tessa grins, hugging Annie and squeezing Sadie’s arm. “Tell me the lemon cupcakes survived.”

Sadie hands her one wordlessly.

“I’m putting you in my will,” I tell her.

“You should,” Sadie says with a wink. “I keep your woman happy.”

Reid groans. “Please don’t start this again.”

Tessa laughs, leaning back against my chest. I rest a hand on her waist. Her laugh is my favorite thing in the world.

“You doing okay, Mr. Holt?” Annie asks with a smirk.

I nod, glancing at Tessa. “You could say that.”

Sadie arches a brow. “Any big news? Secret elopement? Tiny Holt on the way?”

Tessa chokes on her cupcake. “We’re just enjoying the quiet,” she manages. When her eyes flick up to mine, there’s a secret smile that tells me all of that will happen eventually.

Later, we walk through the vendor booths. Tessa makes me carry a tote full of handmade candles, wildflower honey, and a print of the mountains that she insists will go perfectly in the new office.

Someone asks Tessa if she's going to write a follow-up story on how she tamed the town's grumpiest bachelor.

She smiles sweetly and says, "Oh, he's not tame, and I wouldn't want him to be."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from hauling her behind the pie tent and showing her what happens to women who say things like that in public.

When the sun begins to set, we find a bench near the square and sit with lemonade, our hands tangled on my knee.

"This is nice," she says, watching the crowd.

"This is perfect."

She glances at me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"Do you ever miss it? The quiet before me?"

I study her a moment. "No," I say honestly. "I liked it. But I didn't live in it."

She leans her head on my shoulder. She didn't just change my life. She became it. The world got louder when she arrived, but also brighter.

We sit in the warmth of a Pine Hollow evening, laughter ringing through the streets, lights strung from tree to tree like stars that decided to drop down for the night.

“I think,” she says after a long moment, “I was always meant to find you. I just didn’t know I was looking.”

I bring her hand to my lips, kiss her knuckles gently. “I was always waiting. I just didn’t know what for.”

She looks up at me, eyes soft and full of everything we’ve built.

“You’re my home, Sawyer.”

And that’s all I need to hear.