



# July's Bad Boy: Blaze (Bad Boys of Mustang Mountain #7)

**Author:** Kaci Rose

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Rockstar on the run. Small town in crisis. One stubborn woman who might just be his salvation.

When a PR disaster sends world-famous rockstar Blaze Nelson crashing into the middle of nowhere, his management team orders him to lay low in Mustang Mountain—the one place he swore he'd never go back to.

But this small town has bigger problems than a grumpy celebrity sulking on a ranch. When a deliberate act of sabotage blocks the only road in or out, the entire town is cut off—and survival depends on everyone pulling together.

Grace Hartman has always fought to keep Mustang Mountain strong, delivering food to those who need it most. The last thing she needs is a spoiled rockstar getting in the way—especially one who's far too charming for her own good.

When the town crisis forces Grace and Blaze into an uneasy partnership, sparks fly in more ways than one. And when a storm traps them together in a remote cabin, they both confront truths they've been running from.

But Grace refuses to lose her heart to a man who'll leave the moment the road clears—and Blaze has to decide if life on stage is worth walking away from the only place—and the only woman—that's ever felt like home.

In a town where loyalty runs deep and hearts are hard-won, will Blaze choose fame... or forever?

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

BLAZE

My first thought, waking up in the back seat of Jensen's pickup truck, is that I'm dying. My second thought is that death might be preferable to whatever fresh hell awaits me at the end of this dirt road.

"Rise and shine, superstar." Jensen's deep voice cuts through my hangover like a chainsaw. "We're almost there."

I crack one eye open, immediately regretting it as the Montana sunshine assaults my eyes. The truck bounces over another pothole, sending a fresh wave of nausea through my already fragile system.

"Could you find more bumps?" I mutter, pulling my designer sunglasses from my jacket pocket. "I don't think my head's quite split open yet."

Jensen chuckles, the sound grating against my eardrums. "City folk. Always so delicate."

The truck crests a hill, and suddenly there it is--the ranch I've been banished to sprawling across the valley like something from a tourism brochure. Rolling pastures, weathered wooden fences, mountains jutting up in the background like they've got somewhere important to be.

"That's it?" I ask, unable to keep the disdain from my voice.

"That's it," Jensen confirms, sounding way too cheerful. "Home sweet home for the

next three months."

Three months. Ninety days of exile, courtesy of my management team. They decided that after my third tabloid scandal in as many weeks, what I really needed was "perspective" and "manual labor" and all the other bullshit euphemisms for punishment they could dream up.

The truck pulls up to a rustic log cabin that I assume passes for a main house out here. A man about my age with dark hair, in worn jeans and boots, stands waiting on the porch with his arm wrapped around a curvy brunette.

"That's Shane," Jensen says. "Owner of this slice of paradise and his wife, Caitlin."

"Paradise," I repeat flatly. "No VIP passes. No after-parties. Just cow shit and empty space."

"You'll learn to love it," Jensen says, clearly not picking up on my sarcasm.

I grab my duffel. It's the only bag my team allowed me to bring, another part of my "rehabilitation." When I slide out of the truck, my designer boots hit dirt, and I swear I can hear them crying.

"You must be Blaze," Shane calls out, descending the porch steps. He's wearing a flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms corded with muscle. "Orville's told me a lot about you."

"All lies," I say automatically. "Especially the true parts."

Shane's laugh is genuine but brief. "He said you had a mouth on you. I'm Shane and this is Caitlin. This is our spread." He gestures to the vast emptiness around us like he's showing off a penthouse suite.

"Thrilled to be here," I deadpan. "Really. Can't you tell by my face?"

"You look like you went three rounds with a bottle of whiskey and lost," Shane observes.

"Four rounds. And it was tequila."

Shane nods, unimpressed. "Well, once you've settled in, we can talk about your duties."

I nearly choke. "Duties? I was promised a quiet break. Not forced labor."

"Nobody sits around eating bonbons in Mustang Mountain," Shane says, his tone hardening slightly. "You can sulk, or you can work. Up here, we pull our weight."

I'm about to unleash a carefully crafted retort when a phone rings. Shane pulls a cell from his pocket, frowning at the screen before answering.

"Yeah?" His expression shifts immediately, brow furrowing. "When? How bad? Anyone hurt?" A pause. "I'll be right there."

He hangs up, turning to me with a grim expression. "Change of plans. A concrete truck just wiped out on the main road into town. Full blockage, supplies scattered everywhere."

"Tragic," I say, already thinking about which of the buildings might house a decent Wi-Fi connection. "I'll just get unpacked while you--"

"Grab those work gloves on the porch," Shane interrupts, already striding toward a mud-splattered pickup. "You're coming with me."

"I'm what now?"

"Time to get your hands dirty, rock star." Shane's tone makes it clear this isn't a request.

"I literally just got here," I protest. "I haven't even seen my room."

"I'll take your stuff in and get it settled. Then Paisley and I will get dinner going," Caitlin says with a smile, like I have any idea who the hell Paisley even is.

"Want to see some real-life stakes instead of the kind you're used to playing for?" Shane tosses back, already climbing into the driver's seat.

I stand there, duffel bag still in hand, contemplating my options.

Jensen is already back in his truck and heading down the driveway.

Lucky bastard able to tuck tail and run.

I could refuse. What's he going to do, drag me?

But then I'd be stuck here alone with Miss Sunshine and my hangover for company.

Plus, I know Orville will be out there, and I have yet to see him.

Jensen drove me out as a favor to him because of some meeting Orville had to be at.

"Fine," I mutter, dropping my bag on the porch and snatching up the gloves. "But I'm not promising to be useful."

"Wouldn't expect miracles on day one," Shane replies as I climb into the passenger

seat.

The truck roars to life, and we're bouncing down a dirt road before I can even get my seat belt fastened. My stomach lurches in protest.

"If I throw up in your truck, that's on you," I warn.

"Bucket behind the seat," Shane says without missing a beat. "Wouldn't be the first time."

The drive takes less than fifteen minutes, but it's enough time for me to regret every life choice that led me here. When we round a bend and the crash site comes into view, I'm momentarily distracted from my self-pity.

A massive concrete truck lies half in the ditch beside the road.

All the concrete that was once inside of it spilled over the road and seeped into the ditches on both sides.

There is a semi-truck on the other side, its contents all over the road, and in the now drying concrete.

As we get closer, I can tell it's all building supplies, everything from wood, tiles, metal, and even power tools.

There is even yellow police tape fluttering in the breeze, trying to keep people back from the crash.

"Jesus," I mutter.

"Could've been worse," Shane says, parking on the shoulder. "The driver walked

away with just a broken arm."

We exit the truck, and immediately the sounds of organized chaos wash over us. People are shouting directions, engines are rumbling, and the crackle of radios adds to the chaos. I stand awkwardly by the truck, feeling as useful as a screen door on a submarine.

Shane, meanwhile, immediately gets pulled into a conversation with a sheriff's deputy and what looks like a town official. I catch fragments--"road closed for at least a week," "supply trucks can't get through," "need to coordinate alternate routes."

A group of locals gives me curious glances as they pass. One does a double-take, nudging his buddy.

"Is that...?"

"Later," his friend cuts him off. "We got work."

Shane returns, handing me a reflective vest. "Put this on. Start learning names, and start being useful."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to--"

"Figure it out," Shane says, already turning away to help a group trying to move a fallen tree.

Standing there, with my vest in hand, I feel like the new kid at school. Everyone else is actually doing important things while I'm just taking up space. I reluctantly slip on the vest, which probably costs less than my socks.

"You! Vest guy!" a voice calls out. "Make yourself useful and help with this lumber!"

When I turn toward the voice, I feel something shift in the universe.

She stands in the bed of a pickup truck with her dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. Sweat glistens on her forehead, and there's a smudge of dirt across one cheek. She wears work boots, jeans with actual wear, and a t-shirt, revealing tanned, toned arms.

"Today would be nice!" she calls again when I don't immediately move.

Without consciously thinking about it, I find myself walking toward her truck. She's already turning away, directing an elderly couple to take water to the workers clearing debris.

Up close, she's even more striking. Not in the contoured, filtered way I'm used to from LA, but in a raw way that makes everything else seem artificial by comparison. She's not even trying to look good, but hell, if she doesn't steal the whole damn scene.

"Here," she says, thrusting a case of water into my arms without really looking at me. "Take these to the guys working on the drainage ditch and pass it out."

"Where's the drainage ditch?" I ask.

This gets her attention. She looks at me fully for the first time, and I watch as recognition flickers across her face. Though it's not the usual excitement or awe, but something like suspicion.

"You're not from around here," she says. It's not a question.

"What gave it away? The fact that I don't know where the drainage ditch is, or the fact that my sunglasses cost more than that truck?"

Her eyes narrow slightly. "The drainage ditch is over there," she says, pointing. "And I don't care what your sunglasses cost."

Before I can respond, Shane appears beside us.

"Grace," he says. "This is Orville's cousin's kid. Blaze. He's helping."

"Blaze?" she repeats, raising an eyebrow. "Like the sports team?"

"Like the verb," I counter. "To burn intensely."

She looks unimpressed. "We don't need a celebrity. We need workers. If you can't carry it, do something else."

For possibly the first time since I was sixteen, I find myself speechless. No one's talked to me like that in years. Everyone either wants something from me or is paid to agree with me.

Grace has already turned away, calling out to someone about chainsaws and fallen branches.

"She always this friendly?" I ask Shane.

"Grace Hartman works with Ruby running groceries from the Merc, coordinates emergency response volunteers for the town, and coaches Little League," Shane replies. "She doesn't have time to stroke your ego, especially not today."

"Grace," I repeat. "Fitting."

"Those waters aren't going to deliver themselves," Shane points out.

I consider dropping the case right there and walking back to the truck. But something about the dismissive way Grace looked at me, as if I was just useless baggage, lights a fire under my ass.

When I carry the water to the drainage ditch, mud-covered men gratefully grab bottles. I return for another case and am given two and a new location to deliver, and another. By the third trip, my arms are burning, and my head is screaming, but I keep going.

An hour passes in a blur of manual labor. I help move debris, pass out supplies, and even hold a first aid kit while a paramedic bandages a volunteer's cut hand. No one asks for my autograph. No one takes selfies. They just nod thanks and keep working.

At some point, I find myself working alongside Grace, both of us loading salvaged tools into a pickup. We work in tense silence, with me sneaking glances at her focused profile.

"You missed one," she says suddenly, nodding toward a box of nails I overlooked.

I grab it, adding it to my stack. "You know, a 'please' wouldn't kill you."

"Neither will actual work, apparently," she replies, but there's the faintest hint of something less hostile in her tone. "You're not completely useless."

From Grace, I suspect this qualifies as high praise.

"Don't sound so surprised," I say, wiping sweat from my forehead with my sleeve. "I contain many layers."

"What you contain is an ego the size of Montana," she returns, but there's almost a smile threatening the corner of her mouth.

As the sun starts to dip toward the mountains, I realize my headache has faded to a dull throb, replaced by muscle aches from actual physical labor. My designer clothes are filthy, my hands are blistered despite the gloves, and my nose is probably sunburned.

And strangely, I don't hate it as much as I should.

I watch Grace directing the final cleanup efforts, completely in her element amid the chaos. Something tugs in my chest. Respect, maybe. Or curiosity. Or something else entirely.

Maybe this isn't going to be the vacation from hell. Maybe it's exactly what I need.

Not that I'd admit that to anyone. Especially not to Grace Hartman.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

GRACE

I don't have time for egos or incompetence. We have two weeks of food, max. That's the thought running through my head as I direct volunteers at the crash site for day two of the cleanup, clipboard in hand, trying to maintain some semblance of order in this chaos.

The supply truck for the Merc was supposed to be here later today.

Now it won't be able to get through. The concrete has dried all over the road with wood, nails, screws, and bolts, making it almost impossible to even walk over, much less drive over.

There is no way of going around it, either, with steep mountain banks on both sides.

"Careful with that!" I call out as two teenage boys nearly drop a pile of metal debris. "Set it in the designated area, please."

The concrete landslide took out not just the road, but also the delivery truck with construction materials. Lumber is scattered across a quarter mile of destruction. We've managed to salvage about sixty percent of it, but the rest is buried in the concrete or went over the edge of the mountain.

In the back of my head, I'm calculating what the town has and how we will get by.

They are saying the road will take a week or two to open.

Based on supplies this morning, assuming no one panics, we can go at least a week, but not much longer.

I wish there was a way to calculate what everyone already has in their homes.

The Senior Living residents need their medications. There is a single mom who has three kids under ten, and there are a few newborns in town as well. Everyone's counting on me to figure this out.

"Hey, Grace!" Shane waves from across the site. "I've got someone who can help."

And there he is. Blaze Whatever, trailing behind Shane like a lost puppy with designer boots. He's changed into jeans and a flannel shirt that probably cost more than my monthly mortgage payment, but still looks like he stepped out of a fashion magazine's "rugged outdoorsman" spread.

Just what we need. A rock star with callouses on his soul, not his hands.

"Great," I say, not meaning it. "Put him on debris clearing."

Shane grins. "He's stronger than he looks."

"I'm right here," Blaze says, raising an eyebrow. "And I can hear you."

I hand him a pair of work gloves. "Congratulations on having functioning ears. Now make yourself useful and start loading up that green pickup over there."

He takes the gloves without complaint, which is mildly surprising. "Yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am," I snap, already turning away to check another group of volunteers.

“Maybe be a bit nicer to him. The town can use his PR, you know?” My best friend Olivia says before handing me a water, her way of making sure I stay hydrated.

For the next hour, I coordinate volunteers, document damages, and try not to think about how this disaster is freezing my entire business. No road means no deliveries. No deliveries mean no income. No income means... I push the thought away. One crisis at a time.

When I glance over at rock-clearing duty, I'm annoyed to see Blaze chatting with Jenna, who should be taking her break and resting in the shade instead of swooning over some celebrity. He's smiling and nodding as she talks. At least he's moved a decent pile of rocks.

By noon, we've done all we can at the site. The county emergency response team has finally arrived to assess the damage, so I gather my volunteers.

"Great work, everyone. The road crew will take it from here. Remember the town meeting tonight at seven."

As people disperse, I catch Shane looking at me expectantly, Blaze at his side.

"What?" I ask.

"Blaze here worked hard," Shane says pointedly.

I sigh. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Celebrity."

"It's Nelson," he says. "Blaze Nelson."

"Right." I check my watch. "I need to get back to town. Some of us have actual jobs to figure out."

Shane winces, but Blaze just nods. "Need a ride?"

"Thanks but I have my truck. And thank for the help today." I turn and walk away before either can respond.

\* \* \*

The Mercantile is bustling when I arrive, townspeople stocking up on whatever they can get their hands on. I find Ruby behind the counter, her usual cheery smile strained around the edges.

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"Oh, we'll manage," Ruby says, ringing up a customer's purchases. "The town always does."

The town is panic buying. I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but I knew it would. It's human survival instinct.

Orville appears from the storeroom, his face like a thundercloud. "That developer is behind this. Mark my words."

"A developer caused the accident?" I raise an eyebrow. This is the first time I've heard Orville go after the developer without actual proof.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Orville grumbles. "That guy's been sniffing around again. Offering to buy up properties for his resort nonsense."

"Orville," Ruby chides gently. "Not everything is a conspiracy."

I lean against the counter. "Have you heard anything from the county about a timeline

for repairs?"

Ruby shakes her head. "They're saying two weeks minimum. Could be a month."

My stomach drops. A month. My delivery service can't survive a month of inactivity. And neither can the people who depend on it.

"I need to rework my distribution plan," I say, more to myself than them. "Figure out how to ration what we have."

"Use the back office," Ruby offers. "I've got inventory lists of what isn't on the shelves here, and I'm putting limits in place as we speak."

I spend the next two hours creating spreadsheets, making phone calls, and trying to suppress my rising panic. My laptop battery is at fifteen percent when the office door opens.

"Ruby said you'd be in here," Shane says, poking his head in. "We've got reinforcements to move supplies."

Before I can ask what he means, Blaze appears behind him, sleeves rolled up.

"You again," I say.

"Me again," he confirms. "Where do you want us?"

I close my laptop. "Ruby's handling inventory."

"Actually," Shane interjects, "Ruby asked if you could oversee the sorting. She's swamped at the register. She's mainly calming people wanting to talk, but she isn't one to rush anyone."

I want to say no, but I can't. This is about the town, not my personal feelings about some random celebrity.

"Fine. Follow me."

In the storeroom, boxes of stock wait to be sorted. I grab a clipboard and hand Shane a box cutter.

"Canned goods on the metal shelves, dry goods on wooden shelves, and household items against the back wall."

"Got it," Shane says, then glances at his watch. "Shoot, I promised Orville I'd help set up for the meeting. Can you two handle this?"

Before I can protest, he's gone, leaving me alone with Mr. Famous.

"You sure you know how to lift a box, or is that a job for your roadies?" I ask, unable to help myself.

Blaze picks up a heavy box of canned vegetables with ease. "I worked construction summers during college. Before the roadies."

"College? Let me guess, Berklee School of Music?"

"Engineering, actually. MIT." He sets the box down on the metal shelf. "I dropped out senior year when the band got signed."

I blink, momentarily thrown. "MIT?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" He's sorting cans now, arranging them efficiently.

"Yes," I admit, then catch myself. "I mean, you don't exactly scream 'almost engineer.'"

"And what does an 'almost engineer' scream?"

"Less leather pants, more pocket protectors."

He laughs, and it's frustratingly genuine. "I save the leather for stage. More breathable than you'd think."

"I'll take your word for it." I hand him another box. "These go on the wooden shelves."

We work in silence for a few minutes. He's not completely hopeless, I notice. He organizes systematically, doesn't complain, and lifts the heavy stuff without hesitation. I pull out the lists I made for the people I know won't make it into town and start setting things to the side.

"So," he says eventually, "delivery service, huh? Ruby mentioned it."

"Mountain Provisions," I confirm. "I deliver groceries and essentials to people who can't easily get to town. Elderly, disabled, families without reliable transportation. Ruby was already helping the best she could, but this is more reliable."

"And with the road out..."

"I'm effectively out of business." I don't know why I'm telling him this. "And people who depend on me are in trouble."

He considers this as he breaks down an empty box. "Could you use pack animals? Horses or something?"

I snort. "This isn't the 1800s. Plus, the road isn't safe to cross until it's cleared because of the nails and other items sticking out of the concrete."

"Just brainstorming," he says, shrugging. "What about the old logging trails? Do any of them connect to the main highway?"

I pause. "They're not maintained. Not only are they dangerous, but many haven't even been looked at in the last decade..."

"But possible?"

"Theoretically. With the right vehicle." I narrow my eyes. "Why do you care?"

He meets my gaze. "Contrary to what you seem to think, I'm not actually here to make your life harder."

Something in his tone makes me look away first. "These household supplies go against the back wall."

By the time we finish, the storeroom is organized, and I've reluctantly admitted to myself that Blaze isn't entirely useless. Not that I'd tell him that.

"Thanks," I say stiffly as we exit the storeroom. "This will help Ruby."

He nods. "Town meeting's starting soon, right?"

"You're coming?"

"Shane invited me. Said I should see how a real small town operates."

"It's not a tourist attraction," I say, more sharply than intended.

"I didn't mean..." He stops himself. "Never mind. See you there."

I watch him walk away, feeling slightly guilty but not enough to apologize.

\* \* \*

The town hall is packed by seven o'clock p.m. Mayor Orville stands at the front, trying to maintain order as voices rise in concern and frustration.

"One at a time, please!" he calls. "We need to work together!"

"What about the developer's offer?" someone calls out. "Maybe it's time to consider it. They'd fix the road."

"They're the ones that caused this," counters a woman from the back. "No, thanks."

"You can't prove that!" someone else yells.

The argument escalates, with people taking sides. I scan the room and spot Blaze leaning against the back wall, observing quietly. Our eyes meet briefly before I look away.

Orville bangs his gavel. "Please! We need solutions, not arguments."

Before I've made a conscious decision to do so, I find myself standing.

"We take care of our own," I say, loud enough to cut through the chatter. The room quiets. "We've done it before. We'll do it again."

All eyes turn to me. I'm not usually one for public speaking, but desperation loosens my tongue.

"We don't need some developer swooping in to save us. What we need is to share what we have." I take a deep breath. "I'm proposing a garden swap and pantry share. Those with extra supplies contribute to a community pantry. Those with garden space grow extra produce. We distribute based on need."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd, some hopeful, others skeptical.

"And how do we decide who gets what?" someone calls out.

"We form a committee. Keep track of inventory. Make sure everyone gets the basics."

"That sounds like socialism," grumbles one of the old men who gathers at the diner.

"It sounds like community," I counter. "Like neighbors helping neighbors."

Orville nods approvingly. "I think Grace has a good starting point. Let's form that committee tonight."

The meeting continues, with plans taking shape. I volunteer to coordinate the pantry share, while others sign up for garden planning and inventory management. It's not perfect, but it's something.

When the meeting finally adjourns, it's past ten. I'm exhausted, and my clipboard is filled with notes and volunteer names.

Outside, the night air is cool and refreshing. I pause on the steps, taking a moment to breathe.

"That was impressive."

I turn to find Blaze loading boxes into Shane's truck. He must have been helping with cleanup while I was finishing up inside.

"What was?"

"The way you stood up in there. Rallied everyone." He closes the truck bed. "You really give a damn about this place, huh?"

I'm too tired for our usual sparring. "Someone has to."

His expression is unreadable in the dim light. For once, he doesn't have a snappy comeback.

I turn and walk away, feeling his eyes on my back. If he thinks a pair of soulful eyes and a guitar can fix what this town needs, he's in for a rude awakening.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

BLAZE

I wake up feeling like I've been hit by a tour bus.

Every muscle screams in protest as I roll over, squinting at the sunlight just starting to stream through the thin curtains of Shane's guest room.

Who designed a bedroom with east-facing windows and no blackout curtains?

Probably the same sadist who invented morning people.

Already I can hear the bustling sounds of productive humanity outside. Voices calling to each other, engines starting, the clatter of things being loaded and unloaded. Who the hell voluntarily gets up at sunrise?

I pull the pillow over my head, but it's too late. I'm awake. My back feels like I've been sleeping on rocks, and my hands--I examine them in the morning light--are actually blistered. From one day of work. Pathetic.

The door swings open without a knock, and Shane appears with a steaming mug. The coffee smell hits me first, and I sit up a little too eagerly.

"Morning, superstar," he says, handing me the mug. Before I can properly appreciate the caffeine, he tosses something at me. I catch it reflexively in my other hand. It's a pair of worn leather work gloves. "Time to be useful. Grace needs help running supply drops today."

Before answering, I take a long sip of my coffee. "I think I've filled my manual labor quota for the decade. Besides, I'm pretty sure Grace would rather work with a rabid wolverine."

Shane shrugs, completely unmoved by my pain. "You can stew in here, or you can make yourself useful. Up to you."

He turns to leave, and I blurt out, "She probably thinks I'm useless, anyway."

Shane pauses in the doorway. "Only one way to change her mind."

I groan, knowing I'm being manipulated but unable to stop myself from falling for it. The thought of Grace dismissing me as some lazy poser celebrity is somehow worse than the physical pain of getting out of bed.

"Fine," I mutter. "Give me fifteen minutes."

Thirty minutes later, because a rock star is never on time, I find Grace loading the last of several boxes into her ancient pickup truck. The vehicle looks like it survived multiple apocalypses, held together by rust and stubborn determination, kind of like the town itself.

"You're late," she says without looking up.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine."

She finally turns, eyeing me from boots to bedhead. "Shane said you volunteered."

"That's a creative interpretation of events."

A ghost of a smile flickers across her face. "Get in. We've got twelve stops today."

The truck's interior smells like soil, coffee, and something vaguely floral that I can't place. Grace drives with practiced efficiency, navigating the rural roads while occasionally consulting a handwritten list.

"So what exactly are we delivering?" I ask, peering into the truck bed through the back window.

"Food staples, medicine, supplies. Some folks can't make it into town easily, and others have no desire to leave their property, so I deliver."

Our first stop is a farmhouse where an elderly couple greets Grace like she's their favorite granddaughter. Their eyes widen when they see me.

"Is that--" the woman starts.

"Blaze Nelson," I confirm, offering my hand. "Temporary delivery boy."

"Well, I never," she says, flustered. "I have your first album somewhere."

Her husband squints at me. "You the fella who set that hotel on fire in Vegas?"

"That was actually a misunderstanding involving a cigarette, one of my bandmates, and some very flammable drapes," I explain, feeling Grace's eyes on me.

"Hm," the man grunts, clearly unimpressed. "Well, come on in. Leave your cigarettes outside." He gives me a pointed look.

"I don't smoke." I hold up my hands, and the man grunts again.

Inside, Grace efficiently unpacks their supplies while I stand awkwardly by. The couple's living room walls are covered with family photos spanning decades. A

lifetime in one place. The concept is so foreign to me it might as well be science fiction.

"How are you holding up, Earl?" Grace asks as she checks off items on her list.

"Well enough," he sighs.

"I'm also supposed to remind you about your doctor's appointment next week."

"Here it is! Will you sign it for me?" The old lady walks in with a CD case of my first album, in almost brand new condition, and a Sharpie.

"Of course. What's your name?" I ask.

"Martha. Just wait until I tell my sister about this. She will just cry herself to sleep!" she says with a huge smile.

I sign the CD for her with a personal note and even pose for a photo before we head out.

As we leave, I notice the worry in Grace's eyes. "Are they going to be okay?"

"For now," she says. "But Earl's medications are getting more expensive, and Martha's too proud to admit she can barely see anymore."

The pattern repeats at each stop: Grace delivering supplies, checking on specific needs, and promising follow-ups.

She knows everyone's medications, their grandchildren's names, and which houses need roof repairs before winter.

The town is a complex web of interconnected lives, and somehow Grace holds all the threads.

By our sixth delivery, I'm actually being useful, carrying the heavier boxes and even managing some small talk with the residents.

But I can't stop watching Grace. The way she listens intently to each person, how she adjusts her approach from house to house.

Businesslike with some, gentle with others, or firm when needed.

She catches me staring as we leave the Johnsons' place.

"You waiting for applause, rock star?" she asks, but there's less bite in it than before.

"Just trying to figure out how you keep this all going," I admit.

She studies me for a moment, as if checking for sarcasm. Finding none, she sighs. "Someone has to lead."

"And that someone is you."

"Not by choice," she says, sliding back into the driver's seat. "Just by necessity."

Our last stop is a small cottage on the outskirts of town. A woman with silver hair sits on the porch, knitting something blue.

"Grace, right on time," she calls. Then her eyes land on me and widen. "Well, I'll be. Little Blake Nelson."

I step closer, confused. "I'm sorry. Have we met?"

"You don't remember Violet Mason?" Grace asks, surprised.

The name triggers a distant memory. "Miss Violet? Ruby's friend?"

The woman beams. "The very same. You used to run wild with those Nelson kids in the summer. Always climbing my apple trees."

Memories flood back. Summer visits with Orville, skinned knees, and stolen fruit. "You used to make those apple hand pies."

"Still do," she says with a wink. "Your grandfather was mighty proud of you, you know. Always talking about his musician grandson."

Something in my chest tightens. "He never told me that."

"Men of his generation weren't big on saying things out loud." She reaches for my hand. "You had a good heart then."

Had. Past tense. The word lands like a punch.

"Let me help with those boxes, Miss Violet," I say, needing to move.

Inside, while Grace checks Miss Violet's blood pressure, I notice the photos on her mantel, including one of my grandparents with a much younger Violet.

"They were good people," Miss Violet says, catching me looking. "I bet Ruby is happy you're back, helping out."

"I'm just passing through," I correct automatically.

"Mmm," she hums, unconvinced. "Well, while you're passing through, would you

mind taking a look at my porch step? It's got a wobble that's going to send me sprawling one of these days."

Twenty minutes later, I've fixed the step and accepted a still-warm apple hand pie as payment. The taste is exactly as I remember--tart and sweet and somehow like childhood itself.

Grace is quiet as we drive back to town, the day's light fading into dusk.

"Thanks," she finally says. "Having an extra pair of hands made a difference today."

"I'm shocked. An actual compliment."

"Don't get used to it." But there's that hint of a smile again.

We pull up to the Merc, and I find myself reluctant to end the day. As Grace starts unloading the empty containers, I notice the truck's taillight is cracked and held together with tape.

"Your left taillight's about to give out," I point out. "And that tape job won't pass inspection."

"Add it to the list of things that need fixing," she sighs.

"I could take a look at it," I offer, surprising myself. "I know my way around engines. Tour buses break down in the middle of nowhere more often than you'd think."

Grace studies me, suspicious of this voluntary offer. "Why would you bother?"

"Consider it payment for the tour of Mustang Mountain's shut-ins."

She hesitates, then nods. "If you're serious about helping, show up tomorrow. On time."

"I make no promises about the 'on time' part," I say, "but I'll be here."

On my way back to Shane's place, I realize something strange. For the first time since I got here, I wasn't thinking about when I could leave. I was thinking about when I could see her again.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

GRACE

"Grace, honey, you're going to wear a hole in my floorboards," Ruby says, appearing behind the counter with her third cup of coffee. Her silver hair is twisted into an immaculate bun, but the dark circles under her eyes tell the real story.

"Just making sure we have enough to distribute today." I tick items off my clipboard. "Canned goods are getting low. We should start rationing the coffee."

Ruby clutches her mug to her chest. "Let's not get drastic."

Orville emerges from the stockroom, dust clinging to his clothes. "Found another case of condensed milk. Expiration date's a bit questionable, but--"

"We'll take it," I say, adding it to my list.

The bell above the door jingles as Emerson walks in.

"Morning, Emerson," Ruby calls. "What can we get you?"

"Just checking if you got in any more of those cookies ." Emerson leans on the counter. "And wondering if that city boy is still helping out."

I pretend to be very interested in my inventory list.

"Blaze? He's been a godsend," Ruby says. "Fixed our air conditioning unit yesterday and wouldn't take a dime for it."

"Hmm." Emerson's mouth puckers like she's sucking a lemon. "Bear says he's just putting on a show. Says a man who leaves like he did doesn't change his spots."

"Well, Bear hasn't changed his underwear since 1997," Orville mutters, earning a swat from Ruby.

I shouldn't care what people think of Blaze. It's not like I'm his PR manager. But something in my chest tightens every time his name comes up, which is approximately every seven minutes in this town.

"He's been reliable so far," I say, aiming for neutrality and probably missing by a mile.

"Well, he is a handsome devil," Emerson says with a surprising twinkle.

I escape to the back room before anyone can notice the heat creeping up my neck. It'll be two more hours before I meet Blaze for deliveries. Not that I'm counting.

When I step out back of the Merc at nine sharp, I half-expect an empty parking lot.

Instead, Blaze is leaning against the wall, no hint of his usual smirk.

He's wearing a faded flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms that suggest he's been doing more than signing autographs in Nashville.

Why does he look like he actually gives a damn?

"Morning," he says, pushing off the wall. "Got the list?"

I hand him the clipboard, our fingers brushing for a microsecond. "Seven stops today. Mrs. Finch is first. She needs her insulin kept cold."

He nods, all business. "I checked the cooler. We've got enough ice packs."

"Great." I unlock the truck, surprised by his preparedness. "Let's load up."

We work in silence, loading boxes of supplies. It's almost unnerving how efficiently we move together, anticipating each other's movements like we've been doing this for years instead of days.

As I close the truck's back doors, Blaze clears his throat. "Your engine was making a clicking sound yesterday. Mind if I take a look after we finish the deliveries?"

"That would be... helpful," I manage. "Thanks."

He nods, and I'm struck by the absence of the sarcastic comeback I was braced for.

"There's coffee in the thermos," I say, gesturing to the front seat. It's not much, but it's the first intentionally nice thing I've offered him.

His smile is small but genuine. "You're a lifesaver, Grace Hartville."

"It's Hartman," I correct automatically.

"I know." He climbs into the passenger seat. "Just checking if you're paying attention."

There's the Blaze I know. Strangely, I'm almost relieved.

\* \* \*

The town hall is packed for the meeting. Every folding chair is filled, and there are people standing along the walls and spilling out into the hallway. The mood is tense.

We're five days into this crisis, with supplies dwindling and no clear timeline for the road clearing.

I stand at the front, trying to project confidence I don't entirely feel. "Thanks for coming, everyone. I know we're all concerned about how long this situation might last."

"My kids are down to their last box of cereal," calls out a single mom with three boys under ten. "And my boss in Whitefish is losing his patience. If I lose my job--"

"The Merc's almost out of diapers," adds someone else.

"And my meds," another pipes up.

The anxious voices multiply until Sheriff Lawson whistles sharply through his fingers.

"Folks, please," Mayor Orville says. "I understand. We've been coordinating with emergency services. They're working on the road, but it could be another week, maybe longer."

The room erupts again, and I wait for it to quiet down.

"Listen, we can't sit around waiting for the road to clear. We've got gardens. We've got pantries. We trade, we share." I look around the room. "I'm proposing a community exchange. If you have extra vegetables, canned goods, bring them in. If you need something, take it. No money changes hands."

Skeptical murmurs ripple through the crowd.

Frank, who hasn't met an idea he didn't hate, stands up. "That's just glorified begging."

My family's been self-sufficient for generations."

"It's not begging to help your neighbors, Frank," I counter.

"Easy for you to say," he retorts. "Not all of us have a trust fund to fall back on."

I bite back a retort about my very non-existent trust fund. Before I can respond, a voice cuts through the tension.

"When I was a kid here, this town looked out for each other. That's the whole point of a place like this."

The room falls silent as everyone turns to look at Blaze, who's standing by the back wall.

"My mom got sick one winter," he continues. "Couldn't work for months. Every day, someone showed up with dinner, or to chop wood, or just to sit with her so I could go to school. Nobody called it charity. It was just... Mustang Mountain."

I stare at him, momentarily speechless. In all our interactions, I've never heard him speak about his mother or his childhood here with such raw honesty.

"Blaze is right," Ruby says, standing up. "And I've got a cellar full of preserves I'll never eat through alone."

"I've got a greenhouse," offers Mrs. Peterson, our retired biology teacher. "Tomatoes coming out of my ears."

One by one, people start nodding, offering what they can. Even Frank grudgingly mentions he might have some extra venison from last hunting season.

"So we all agree?" Orville says. "We'll set up in the community center tomorrow morning. Bring what you can spare, take what you need."

The motion passes almost unanimously. As people file out, making plans and comparing inventories, I catch Blaze's eye across the room. He gives me a small nod, and I find myself nodding back.

I'm floored and secretly impressed.

Later, I'm in the community center, assembling folding tables for tomorrow's exchange, when a shadow falls across my work.

"Need a hand?" Blaze asks.

"Sure. Thanks for speaking up today."

"Just telling the truth." He starts moving crates. "This town saved my mom and me more times than I can count."

"Yet you couldn't wait to leave," I say before I can stop myself.

"It's complicated."

"Most things are." I say, while focusing on table placement.

We work in companionable silence for a while.

"Why do you fight so hard for this place?" he asks suddenly. "You could be running your business in a bigger town, making real money."

I consider deflecting, but something about the quiet moment feels like it deserves

honesty.

"My brother loved this town," I say, the words coming out rusty. "After he died in a car accident three years ago, my parents couldn't stand being here. Too many memories. They moved to Arizona and pretty much checked out."

"I'm sorry," he says softly.

"Mustang Mountain is all I have left," I continue, surprising myself with the admission. "Sometimes I feel like I'm holding it together with duct tape and sheer stubbornness."

"You're doing more than that. This place would have fallen apart these past few days without you."

I look up, startled by the compliment.

"What about you?" I ask. "Why'd you really come back?"

He runs a hand through his hair. "Honestly? I'm not sure. My career hit a wall. The songs stopped coming and my love for the music wasn't there. I thought maybe if I came back to where it all started..."

"And has it helped?"

"Not in the way I expected." He meets my eyes. "I didn't think I had anything left to fight for. Maybe I was wrong."

The air between us shifts, charged with something I'm not ready to name. I drop my gaze first.

"Don't say things you don't mean," I warn quietly. "People here can't afford more broken promises."

"I know." He nods, accepting the boundary. "But I meant what I said."

We finish setting up in silence, but it's no longer uncomfortable. When we're done, he helps me load my truck, then checks under the hood as promised.

"Just a loose belt," he says, wiping his hands on a rag. "Fixed it, but you'll want a proper replacement soon."

"Thank you," I say, meaning it.

He gives me a two-finger salute before climbing into his own truck. I watch his taillights disappear down Main Street.

I'm not sure if I trust him yet. But for the first time since this all started, I want to.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

BLAZE

Perfect.

After dressing quietly, I slip out of the room and head to the bathroom to get ready. As I step back into the hallway after my shower, Shane's bedroom door is yanked open.

"Someone better be dying," Shane growls. His hair sticks up in tufts, and his flannel shirt is buttoned wrong.

"Good morning, sunshine," I say, grinning. "Need some coffee?"

"What I need is for people not to show up at my door before the roosters." Despite his grumbling, he closes the door behind him and steps into the hallway. "What's the emergency?"

"Grace's truck." I follow him down to the kitchen. "I need parts."

Shane's eyebrows lift as he shuffles towards the coffee to get a pot going. "Grace's truck, huh? And this couldn't wait until, say, a time when normal humans are awake?"

"I want to surprise her."

"Yeah, I bet you do." Shane says, pouring us both coffee since it's ready.

"It's not like that." I accept the coffee and take a sip. "Her truck's a disaster. She can't

run deliveries with it."

"Uh-huh." Shane sips his coffee, eyeing me over the rim. "And this sudden interest in automobile repair has nothing to do with the fact that Grace Hartman is the prettiest thing that you will never have a chance with?"

"I can't fix the road," I say, ignoring his comment. "I can't fix her life. But I can fix her damn truck."

Shane sets down his mug. "Now that sounds like a man with something to prove."

"You going to help me or not?"

"Fine." He grins. "But only because I want to see how this plays out."

For the next two hours, we raid Shane's collection of parts in the barn. The man is a hoarder of automotive everything--engines, transmissions, filters, belts. By seven, we've loaded his truck and driven to Grace's place behind the Merc.

Her delivery truck sits in the side lot, unlocked like every small town door. When I pop the hood open, I sigh, still the same.

"This isn't an engine," I tell Shane. "It's a time capsule from 1992."

"That's optimistic. I'd say 1985."

We get to work. Growing up, my grandfather insisted I learn basic mechanics before he'd let me drive. "No grandson of mine is going to call AAA for a flat tire," he'd say. I never thought I'd be grateful for those sweaty summer afternoons under the hood of his old Chevy.

By nine, we've replaced the fuel pump, installed a new alternator, changed the oil, and fixed the radiator leak. By ten, I've moved on to the brakes, which were more theoretical than functional.

"You know," Shane says, watching me bleed the brake lines, "for a city boy, you're not half bad at this."

I wipe sweat from my forehead with my forearm. "Don't sound so surprised. After all, I did spend my summers here in Mustang Mountain."

"Oh, I'm surprised. Thought your type paid people for this kind of thing."

"My type?"

"Rock stars, suits, the people who tend to manage you. People who don't know which end of a wrench to hold."

I tighten the last bolt. "I'm a man of hidden talents."

"Clearly." Shane glances toward the market. "Speaking of which..."

I follow his gaze to see Grace standing at the corner of the building, watching us. She's wearing jeans and a gray hoodie, her hair pulled back in a simple ponytail. Seeing her makes my hands fumble with the wrench.

"I'll just go find some coffee at the Merc," Shane says, not even trying to hide his smirk as he walks away.

Grace approaches cautiously, like she's not sure if she should be angry or not.

"What are you doing to my truck?" she asks.

I close the hood. "Fixing it."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Didn't do it for you," I lie. "Did it because this town needs your wheels moving."

She circles the truck, inspecting our work. "How'd you even know what was wrong with it?"

"It's thirty years old and sounds like a blender full of nails. Everything was wrong with it."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "You don't seem like the guy I met at the crash site."

I wipe my hands on a rag, avoiding her eyes. "Maybe that guy wasn't worth keeping around."

When I look up, she's studying me with an intensity that makes me want to fidget. Her eyes are greener in the morning light.

"Want to see if it starts?" I ask, mostly to break the silence.

She nods, sliding into the driver's seat, and I watch as she turns the key. The engine catches immediately, purring like it's fresh off the assembly line.

Her face lights up, and something warm unfurls in my chest.

"Holy crap," she says, rolling down the window. "It hasn't sounded this good since, well, ever."

"Take it for a spin."

She hesitates. "Want to come?"

Ten minutes later, we're driving through town, windows down. Grace handles the truck with the ease of someone who's spent countless hours behind its wheel.

"It's like driving a completely different vehicle," she says, grinning. "The brakes actually work!"

"Novel concept, I know."

She laughs, and I find myself wanting to hear the sound again.

"Seriously, Blaze. Thank you. This helps a lot."

"It was nothing." I shrug, uncomfortable with her gratitude.

"It wasn't nothing." Her voice is soft but firm. "Most people talk about helping. You just did it."

We drive back to the Merc in comfortable silence. The town is coming alive, people heading to the community center setting up for the first garden and pantry swap. Tables appear along along the street in front of the center, with boxes of produce stacked alongside homemade jams and pickles.

Grace parks the truck and jumps out. "Looks like we ran out of room inside. I need to help set up. You're welcome to--"

"I'll give you a hand," I say before she can finish.

She looks surprised but nods and points to the box stacked by the back door of the Merc. "Great. Those boxes need to go to the main table."

Soon I'm hauling crates of vegetables, setting up folding chairs, and helping organize the swap system. People eye me curiously, but no one seems particularly hostile. A few even thank me.

"Heard you fixed Grace's truck," Jensen says, appearing at my elbow as I arrange tomatoes by size. "That was thoughtful."

"Just being useful."

"Mmm-hmm." He pats my arm. "You keep telling yourself that."

Throughout the morning, Grace and I work in tandem. We develop an unexpected rhythm. While she organizes, I execute. When our hands accidentally brush as we both reach for the same box, neither of us jerks away. Progress, I suppose.

During a lull, Grace leans against a table beside me. "My brother would have loved this," she says quietly. "He always believed Mustang Mountain could be more than just a dot on the map."

"Tell me about him," I say, surprising myself with my interest.

She does. Stories about a kid who organized neighborhood cleanups, who believed in community before he knew the word for it. Who grew up to be a man who saw the good in people, even when they couldn't see it themselves.

"He sounds like someone I would have liked to know," I say when she finishes.

"He would have liked you," she says, then adds with a small smile, "Eventually."

I almost tell her then how empty my life in the city had become. How I moved through days that blurred together, surrounded by people but never connecting. How

Mustang Mountain, for all its frustrations, feels more real than anything I've experienced in years.

But I don't. Some truths are still too raw to voice.

The swap is in full swing when Grace's phone rings. Her expression shifts as she listens.

"Everything okay?" I ask when she hangs up.

"Mrs. Ellison up on Ridge Road is running low on supplies. She's eighty-two and can't make it down the mountain." Grace glances at the darkening sky. "I should make a delivery run."

I follow her gaze to the gathering clouds. "Weather's turning."

"She needs her medication."

"I'll go with you."

Grace shakes her head. "You don't have to--"

"I know." I meet her eyes. "But two people make the work faster."

Twenty minutes later, we're winding up mountain roads as the sky darkens ominously. The delivery itself goes smoothly. Mrs. Ellison is delighted to see Grace and regards me with amused suspicion. We're back in the truck within fifteen minutes, groceries and medication delivered.

That's when the storm hits.

Rain slams into us like someone upended the sky. Lightning flashes, lighting up the road that's rapidly becoming a river. Grace grips the steering wheel tighter, slowing to a crawl.

"Maybe we should wait it out," Grace says, peering through the windshield.

Before I can answer, a deafening crack splits the air. Through the rain, I see a massive pine tree topple across the road ahead.

"That's not good," I mutter, as the truck stops.

Grace turns to look behind us, just as lightning illuminates the road we've traveled. Or what was a road. Now it's a small river of water, washing away the shoulder and half of the pavement.

"We're not getting through tonight," she says, her voice remarkably calm.

I scan the area, and through the curtain of rain, I spot a run down driveway, the kind that leads to a hunting cabin. A cabin, set back from the road. Recognition flickers. I know this place. My family stayed here once, years ago, when I was a kid.

"See that?" I point toward the light. "I think it's a hunting cabin. Should be empty this time of year."

Grace squints through the rain. "Breaking and entering during a natural disaster. Why not?"

After putting the truck in reverse, she carefully navigates toward the cabin's driveway. "Looks like we've got no choice," I say, as we start up the driveway. "Hope you don't snore."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

GRACE

I'm starting to think Mother Nature has a personal vendetta against me. Or maybe she's just got a twisted sense of humor. Either way, I'm not laughing.

"This is not happening," I mutter, staring through the windshield of my truck as we head up the driveway to a possible cabin Blaze mentioned.

The wipers are fighting a losing battle against the downpour, and ahead of us, an enormous pine tree blocks the entire road.

Behind us, the water has washed away the dirt driveway we just traveled, leaving nothing but a muddy ravine.

We're trapped about halfway up the driveway to this cabin.

Blaze is already out of the truck, rain plastering his hair to his head as he examines the fallen tree.

I roll down my window just enough to yell at him. "You think you can move that alone?"

He turns back to me, rain streaming down his face, and flashes that infuriating grin. "Not sure. Though I know I can't move the damn road, either. But I know there is a dry cabin just up the way."

"Of course you do," I reply.

But my options are limited to either trusting him or spending the night in my truck while the storm rages. I grab my jacket from the back seat, take a deep breath, and step out into the deluge.

The rain hits me like a cold shower, soaking through my clothes in seconds. Blaze is already gathering our bags of supplies and a case of water from the truck bed.

"We can come back for the rest tomorrow," he shouts over the wind. "Once the storm passes."

I nod, locking the truck and pocketing my keys. "Which way?"

He points to a barely visible trail leading into the woods. "Follow me. Stay close."

We trudge through mud and undergrowth, making the walk feel like miles.

The rain seems determined to drown us, and twice I nearly slip down an embankment.

When it happens the second time, Blaze's hand shoots out to steady me, strong fingers wrapping around my upper arm.

He doesn't let go right away, and I don't pull away as quickly as I should.

By the time the cabin comes into view, I'm soaked to the bone and shivering. It's a small, weathered structure nestled among the pines. The kind of place that looks like it's been there forever.

"Please tell me it's unlocked," I say through chattering teeth.

Blaze gives me an apologetic look. "Not exactly."

He leads me to the front door, then kneels down and feels along the bottom of a nearby rock. Nothing. He tries under the welcome mat, then above the door frame.

"Who are you looking for, the key fairy?" I ask, hugging myself for warmth.

"These cabins usually have a spare somewhere," he explains, moving to a window. "They're used seasonally. No one's been here for months."

After a few more minutes of searching, Blaze sighs. "Plan B," he announces, and before I can ask what that is, he starts pulling at the windows until one by the door gives and he's able to open it.

"Breaking and entering. Great." I shake my head. "Add it to your rap sheet."

"I'll leave cash for the stay," he says, as he starts to climb inside. "Besides, it's this, or hypothermia."

A moment later, the door swings open with a creak, and I stumble inside. The cabin is small. It's just one room with a kitchenette in the corner, a wood stove, a small table with two chairs, and only one bed just big enough for two, pushed up against the dark wall.

Blaze immediately moves to the wood stove, checking if there's anything inside. "We're in luck," he says, pulling out matches from a nearby drawer. "Dry kindling and logs. This'll warm us up."

I drop my bag and look around. Dust covers most surfaces, but it's clean enough. More importantly, it's dry.

"Check for some blankets in that chest," Blaze points as he works on the fire. "You should get out of those wet clothes."

I raise an eyebrow at him.

He rolls his eyes. "I'll turn around. But seriously, you're shivering."

Even though he's right, I'm not about to admit it. I rummage through the chest and find several thick wool blankets that smell musty but seem clean. When I turn back, Blaze has the fire going, orange flames licking at the logs.

"I'll step outside while you change," he offers.

"In the pouring rain? Don't be ridiculous." I grab a blanket. "Just turn around."

He does, and I quickly peel off my soaked jacket, shirt, and jeans, wrapping the blanket around me like a toga. My clothes make a sad, wet pile on the floor.

"You can turn around now," I say, and he does, his eyes carefully staying on my face. "Your turn."

I face the wall while he changes, fighting the urge to peek. The sound of wet fabric hitting the floor makes my imagination work overtime.

"All clear," he says after a minute.

Turning around, I find him with a blanket wrapped around his waist, his chest bare.

I've seen plenty of shirtless men before, but something about the way the firelight plays across Blaze's skin and across his tattoos makes my mouth go dry.

I look away quickly, focusing on hanging our wet clothes on chairs near the stove.

"I found some tea," Blaze says, holding up a dusty tin. "Probably ancient, but it's

something."

He fills a kettle with water from a jug we brought from the truck and places it on the stove.

I sit on the edge of the bed, blanket pulled tight around me, watching him move around the small space.

There's something different about him here.

No cameras, no audience, no image to maintain.

Just a man making tea in a cabin during a storm.

"You're staring," he says without looking up.

"I'm observing," I correct him. "There's a difference."

He smiles, handing me a mug of tea. Our fingers brush, and I ignore the little jolt that runs through me.

"So," he says, settling into one of the chairs. "Looks like we're stuck here for the night."

"Looks like," I agree, sipping the tea. It's stale but warm, and that's all that matters right now.

The storm rages outside, rain pelting the roof and windows. Inside, the fire crackles, slowly warming the small space. We sit in silence for a while, the tension between us shifting into something more comfortable.

"Your brother," Blaze says suddenly. "Tell me more about him."

The question catches me off guard. "Why?"

He shrugs. "You're fighting so hard for his dream. I'm interested."

Staring into my tea, I let the memories surface. "He was stubborn as hell, but he believed in this town when no one else did." I look up at Blaze. "He taught me that some things are worth fighting for, even when the odds are stacked against you."

"Is that why you stayed? For him?"

"I stayed because it's home," I say. "But I fight because of him, yes."

Blaze nods, his expression thoughtful. The firelight softens his features, making him look younger, more vulnerable.

"Your turn," I say. "Why are you really here? I've seen the stories. You don't strike me as the save-a-small-town type."

He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You mean the bad boy of rock isn't known for his charitable work? Shocking."

"I'm serious, Blaze."

He sets his mug down and runs a hand through his damp hair. "You want the truth? I fucked up. Big time. My manager thought some good PR might help. Small town, music festival, heartwarming story."

"So this is all just image rehabilitation for you?" The thought stings more than it should.

"It was," he admits. "At first."

"And now?"

He meets my gaze, his eyes dark and serious. "Now I'm not so sure."

The honesty in his voice catches me off guard. I've been prepared for charm, for lies, for manipulation. But not for this raw vulnerability.

"I used to think being seen by millions meant I mattered," he continues. "Lately, I'm not so sure."

"What happened?" I ask softly.

He looks away, into the fire. "I got everything I thought I wanted. The fame, the money, the adoration. And it was... empty." He laughs bitterly. "Turns out you can be surrounded by thousands of people and still be completely alone."

The pain in his voice resonates with something inside me. That same loneliness I've felt in a town where everyone knows my name.

"The PR mess," I prompt. "What was it?"

He sighs. "A girl overdosed at one of my parties. She was fine, but it was close. And I realized I didn't even know her name. She was just... there. Like all the others. Disposable." He looks up at me. "That's what fame does. Makes everything and everyone disposable."

The silence stretches between us, filled with the sound of rain and crackling fire.

"I'm sorry," I say finally.

"Don't be. It was a wake-up call I needed." He sets his empty mug aside. "What about you? Always been the town savior?"

I shake my head. "I left for college. Was planning to stay gone, actually."

"What brought you back?"

"My mom got sick," I say simply. "Cancer. I came home to help, Mom got better, and then... my brother was gone, my parents left, and someone needed to keep fighting for this place."

Blaze moves from the chair to sit beside me on the bed, careful to keep space between us. "That's a lot to carry alone."

"Says the guy with the weight of fame on his shoulders."

"Touché." He smiles, and for once, it doesn't seem practiced or performative.

I'm suddenly aware of how close we are, of the heat radiating from his skin, of how the blanket has slipped slightly from my shoulder. His eyes drop to the exposed skin, then back to my face.

"Grace," he says, my name almost a whisper.

The air between us feels charged, electric. He's close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in his brown eyes, and can smell the faint scent of his skin beneath the wood smoke.

"I can't do this," I whisper. "Not if you're just going to leave."

He moves closer, his hand coming up to gently touch my cheek. "I'm not playing at

this, Grace. Not with you."

And then he's kissing me, or I'm kissing him. I'm not sure who moves first. His lips are soft, insistent, and I feel myself melting into him, my hand finding his chest, feeling his heartbeat racing beneath my palm.

The kiss deepens, and for a moment, I let myself forget everything. The town, the road, the inevitable goodbye. But reality crashes back, and I pull away, breathless.

"I won't be a temporary thing, Blaze," I say, my voice unsteady. "If you're going to run the second you get the call, don't start something now."

He rests his forehead against mine, his breath warm on my face. "What if I don't want to run?"

"You will," I say, pulling back further. "This town isn't your world."

He doesn't argue, and that tells me everything I need to know. Instead, he nods and stands, taking one of the blankets to the floor near the stove.

"You take the bed," he says. "I'll be fine down here."

I want to argue, to tell him the bed is big enough for both of us, but that would be a dangerous lie. Instead, I nod and lie down, pulling the blanket up to my chin.

"Goodnight, Grace," he says softly.

"Goodnight, Blaze."

I listen to the storm outside, to his breathing slowly evening out, and stare at the ceiling. I'd spent so long building walls. And one stubborn rock star was chipping at

every single one.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

BLAZE

I wake with a crick in my neck and a cold draft snaking up my spine. The floor of the cabin, while technically flat, feels like I've spent the night on a bed of pinecones. My back protests as I shift, blinking still semi dark from the rain that is still coming down.

That's when I notice Grace is already awake. She's propped up on one elbow in bed, watching me with an unreadable expression. Her hair is tousled from sleep, catching the golden light in a way that makes my breath catch.

"Morning," I croak, my voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," she replies, her voice softer than I've ever heard it.

We both know what almost happened last night. The almost-kiss hangs between us like a physical thing, charged and undeniable.

"Next time, remind me to fight harder for the bed," I say, attempting to stretch the stiffness from my limbs.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a small, secretive smile. "Next time, you don't need to."

My heart does a strange little flip in my chest. I clear my throat and push myself to sit, pretending her words didn't just send my pulse racing.

"Coffee?" I ask, already moving toward the remnants of last night's fire.

"Please," she says, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

I busy myself with rekindling the fire and making some of the instant coffee I found in the cabinet last night.

It's not great, but it's caffeine, and right now that feels essential.

When I turn around with two steaming mugs, Grace has moved to the small table, wrapped in a blanket against the morning chill.

"Thanks," she says, accepting the mug. Our fingers brush, and neither of us pretends not to notice.

We sip in silence for a moment before Grace speaks again.

"I'm sorry about last night," she says. "Not for... you know. But for shutting down. It's just--" She stares into her coffee like it might contain the words she's looking for.

"You don't need to explain," I tell her.

"I do, though." She takes a deep breath.

"Since my brother died, it's been lonely.

Not just the normal kind of lonely, but the kind where you're surrounded by people who need you to be strong, to have answers, to keep everything from falling apart.

" She looks up at me. "Everyone wants a piece of me, but no one sees how hard it is to keep giving when you're running on empty. "

The raw honesty in her voice hits me like a physical blow. I recognize that emptiness she's describing. I've felt it for years.

"I get that," I say quietly. "Everyone wanted a piece of Blaze. No one cared about Blake Nelson."

Her eyes widen slightly at my real name, and I realize this is the first time I've said it aloud since arriving in Mustang Mountain.

"Blake," she repeats, testing it out.

"That's me. The real me, underneath all the bullshit." I gesture vaguely at myself. "The guy who grew up with nothing, who built himself into something, and then watched as everyone took what they wanted until there wasn't much left and I didn't care about any of it."

"I care," she says simply.

Two words. Just two words, but they land with the weight of a thousand. I stare at her, searching for any sign she's just saying what she thinks I want to hear. But all I see is honesty, and something else, something warm and dangerous and inviting.

"Grace--" I start, not sure what I'm going to say.

She reaches across the table and places her hand over mine. Her palm is warm from the coffee mug, her touch light but deliberate. I turn my hand over, our palms meeting, fingers intertwining.

Neither of us speaks. We don't need to. Everything that matters is in the way she looks at me, in the slight tremble of her fingers against mine, in the way she leans forward just a fraction.

This time, when our lips meet, there's no hesitation.

No pulling back. Just a soft, questioning touch that quickly deepens into something more urgent, more necessary.

We turn toward each other, and in the blink of an eye, she is climbing into my lap, the blanket falling forgotten to the floor as she presses against me.

"Are you sure?" I murmur against her lips.

"I made myself a promise when my brother died that I'd live with no regrets. I've regretted it all night that I didn't kiss you. The more I thought about it, the more turned on I got," she whispers against my lips before she kisses me harder.

Her hands slide into my hair, holding me to her like she's afraid I might disappear if she lets go. When she rocks her hips against mine, I groan, holding her tight.

Standing, I move us toward the bed and lay her down.

As I lower Grace onto the bed, every sense heightens. The cabin, once cold and drafty, now feels warm and intimate.

As we shed the last pieces of clothing it's like a layer of armor discarded, revealing not just skin, but the scars and stories beneath.

Grace's fingers trace the faded tattoo on my shoulder, a remnant of a past life.

I can see the questions in her eyes, but she doesn't ask.

Instead, she leans in, pressing a soft kiss to the ink, accepting it. Accepting me without words.

I explore her body with an attention to detail that I didn't know I possessed.

Each curve, each line, is a testament to her strength and resilience.

She's real, and perfect for me which is so much better.

Her breath hitches as I run my fingers along her side, finding a ticklish spot.

She squirms, laughing softly, and the sound is more beautiful than any music I've ever played.

"Ticklish?" I murmur, grinning.

"Don't," she warns, but her eyes are sparkling with amusement.

I lean down, replacing my fingers with my lips, kissing the spot gently. "Wouldn't dream of it," I say against her skin, feeling her shiver.

This isn't just sex. It's not a quick fix or a mindless release.

It's a conversation, a give and take, a silent confession of need and desire.

When she looks at me, her eyes hold a universe of emotion: fear, hope, and longing.

I want to be the man who deserves that look, who can hold her fears gently and turn her hopes into reality.

I reach for my wallet and pull out a condom, quickly rolling it on before I'm back over her.

As I lower myself onto the bed, covering Grace's body with mine, I feel a shiver run

through her that has nothing to do with the cold.

Her eyes meet mine, wide and vulnerable, and I can see the fears and hopes warring within her.

I want to chase away the fears and magnify the hopes.

I lean down, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead, then her cheek, and then the corner of her mouth.

"Blake," she whispers, her voice barely audible as I line my cock up at her entrance.

The sound of my real name on her lips sends a thrill through me.

It's been so long since anyone has called me that, since anyone has looked at me like this.

Like I matter. Like I'm more than just a means to an end.

Her hands are in my hair, on my back, pulling me closer. Her legs wrap around my hips, urging me on. But I don't rush. I can't. This is too important. She is too important. I want to savor every moment, to commit every detail to memory.

When I finally enter her, it's with a slow, deliberate movement. Her breath catches, her nails dig into my shoulders, and her eyes never leave mine. It's intense, overwhelming, and perfect. Each thrust feels so damn good I know I won't last long. I reach between us to rub her clit.

"Come for me, baby. You feel so damn good I'm not going to last long," I plead.

Her heels dig into my ass as her hips meet me thrust for thrust. The pressure builds in

my balls as I try to hold out for her to go over the edge first. Thankfully, a few more thrusts and she clamps down on my cock with my name on her lips.

I'm grateful no one is around because I sure do love hearing her yell my name.

My orgasm is one of the strongest I've ever felt. I lie there with my face buried in her neck, trying to catch my breath. Once my heart has stopped racing, I get up and remove the condom and clean myself up. Then I get a washcloth and warm water to clean Grace up.

"You don't have to do that," she says.

"I know," is all I say.

As I finish cleaning Grace, I can't help but feel a sense of intimacy that goes beyond the physical.

She looks up at me with an expression that's hard to read, but it's easy to see the wheels turning in her mind.

I toss the washcloth aside and climb back into bed with her, pulling her close.

Her head rests on my chest, and I can feel her breathing slowly return to normal.

As we lay there, my fingers trace lazy patterns on her bare shoulder. The storm outside has passed, leaving behind a pristine silence broken only by our breathing and the occasional pop from the dying fire.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, my voice hushed in the quiet room.

She's quiet for so long, I think she might not answer. Then, "I'm thinking that I want

to trust this. Trust you."

"But?" I prompt, hearing the unspoken hesitation.

"But I've been burned before." She props herself up on one elbow to look at me, her eyes serious. "Not just romantically. By life. By people who meant well but left, anyway."

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger against her cheek. "I don't want this to be temporary," I tell her. "Not this. Not you."

"Then prove it," she says, her voice both challenge and plea. "Because I can't survive another person walking away."

The weight of her words settles over me. I've never been good at staying. I've always been the one looking for the exit, planning my next move. But looking at her now, I can't imagine wanting to be anywhere else.

"I will," I promise, and I've never meant anything more.

She kisses me again, and we lose ourselves in each other once more, the outside world forgotten for a little while longer.

Eventually, though, reality intrudes. The sun is high now and the storm has passed. We need to get back to town.

"Ready to face civilization again?" I ask as we dress.

"Are you?" she counters with a small smile.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

We gather our things and step outside into the brilliant post-storm sunlight. The sun glistens off the water left by the rain, giving everything a little sparkle. The ground is all mud. No sooner have I stepped out of the door of the cabin than I come face to face with a massive grey wolf.

"Shit, get back in the cabin," I tell Grace while backing up through the door. I try to push her back inside without taking my eyes off the wolf that is still sitting and watching me.

"What? Why?" she asks, trying to push around me.

"Wolf," is all I say before she pushes through the door. Even though I try to reach for her arm, I can't because Grace is too fast.

She walks right up to the wolf and starts petting it like she's Cinder-fucking-ella as I stay frozen in the doorway.

"This is Hades. He's become a town pet. Jackson found him abandoned as a pup and raised him. He's wild but friendly, and he has helped wherever he can. He fell in love with one of Mack's sled dogs, and they had puppies, so there are some half-wolf pups people have as pets around town, too."

I stare at her petting this wolf like he's a dog. He rubs his head against her and closes his eyes as she starts talking to him.

"I don't know how you knew we were here, but I'm glad you did. If you come back to my truck with us, I have some snacks there for you," she says. Then she looks up at me. "Come pet him. I promise he's friendly."

Walking over, I tentatively reach out to pet Hades.

The massive wolf leans into my touch, his fur surprisingly soft under my fingers.

I glance at Grace, who smiles encouragingly.

This woman constantly surprises me, and her comfort with this wild creature only adds to her allure.

The tension I felt moments ago dissipates, replaced by a warmth that spreads through me as Hades accepts my touch.

"See, he's friendly," Grace says, her voice soft but confident. She scratches behind Hades's ears, and the wolf closes his eyes in contentment. I can't help but feel a sense of peace wash over me, a stark contrast to the usual chaos of my life.

We spend a few more moments with Hades before heading back to the truck, Hades leading the way. The walk back to the truck is companionable, with our hands occasionally brushing, and small smiles exchanged. It feels like we're sharing a secret, which I suppose we are.

The truck starts, and with the rain done, the fallen trees are a bit easier to move. We limp back toward Mustang Mountain after saying goodbye to Hades and giving him his promised snack. As we approach town, Grace grows quieter, more composed. I can almost see her putting her mask back on.

"People will talk," she says as we pull onto Main Street.

"Let them," I reply with a shrug. "Unless... do you want to keep this quiet?"

She considers this. "I don't want to hide, but I don't want to make a spectacle either. This is still new. Still ours."

I nod, understanding. "I'll follow your lead, then."

The town is bustling when we arrive. Faces turn our way as we park at her house, and I can practically hear the gossip machine whirring to life. Overnight in a cabin during a rainstorm? Scandal!

"Well, I should go and get a shower and you should too," she says.

"I can be back in about an hour to help with deliveries," I say.

"No deliveries today. I'm helping Ruby at the Merc so she can go to a doctor's appointment and then I promised Olivia some girl time to catch up tonight. You have a free day." She smiles.

"I doubt it. Shane probably has a honey-do list for me at the ranch," I say with a small smile.

"Blaze Nelson, Cowboy has a nice ring to it," she jokes.

"Blake," I correct her quietly. "When it's just us, I'm Blake."

Her expression softens. "Blake," she agrees.

Leaning in, I give her a chaste kiss before pulling back and getting out of her truck. If I stay much longer, we will end up in her bed and I don't want her to think I'm only in this for sex.

I walk back to the truck Shane let me borrow that's parked at the Merc, only a few blocks away. This amazing woman has somehow worked her way under my skin in a matter of weeks. Who has made me question everything I thought I knew about myself, and about what I want.

I'd come here ready to burn this place down. Now I'd burn it down to protect her.

The realization should terrify me. Instead, it feels like coming home.

I've finally found something worth staying for. I just pray I'm worth staying for, too.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

GRACE

The morning light filters through my curtains, and for a moment I lie still, absorbing the silence of my bedroom that suddenly feels too big, too empty.

"I let him in," I whisper to the ceiling. "Now what?"

Rolling onto my side, I pull the covers up to my chin, allowing myself exactly thirty seconds to remember our time in the cabin.

His hands, his mouth, and the way he looked at me like I was something precious.

Then I shut it down. Words are easy. Staying is hard.

I've learned that lesson too many times to count.

I shower and dress quickly and try not to think about what it would be like to shower with Blaze, no, my Blake.

The town square buzzes with activity when I arrive, another pantry swap is gearing up.

The town decided to do one every four days until the road is fixed to make sure everyone has what they need.

Tables are arranged in neat rows, people are setting up displays of homegrown vegetables, homemade preserves, and hand-knitted items. Despite everything

Mustang Mountain has been through, the energy feels hopeful, vibrant.

I slip into organizer mode, clipboard in hand, checking off vendors and directing traffic. If I stay busy enough, maybe I won't scan the crowd for a certain tall musician every thirty seconds.

"Need help with that?"

I nearly drop my clipboard at the sound of Blaze's voice. He's standing behind me, looking unfairly good in a simple grey T-shirt and jeans, holding a box of tomatoes from Ruby's garden.

"Didn't think you'd show," I say, trying to sound casual and failing miserably.

He's stopped in to the Merc to see me while I was working there, and I know he's been helping Shane at the ranch but part of me was ready to hear he's packed up and left.

His smile is soft around the edges. "Told you. I'm not going anywhere."

Something warm unfurls in my chest. I tamp it down quickly. "You can put those on Ruby's table. She's over by the gazebo."

"Yes, ma'am." He gives me a mock salute that shouldn't be charming but somehow is.

I watch him weave through the crowd, stopping to chat with Caitlin, and helping Orville with his awning. He's completely at ease among my people. Our people? The thought makes me nervous, so I bury it under logistics and vendor placements.

By noon, the swap is in full swing. Children dart between tables, music plays from radios set up at the booths, and the scent of Lily's famous donuts wafts through the

air. Orville takes the microphone, tapping it twice.

"Folks, if I could have your attention for a moment." His voice booms across the square. "I just want to say how proud I am of this community. When times get tough, Mustang Mountain pulls together. We share what we have. We--"

His words cut off abruptly. I look up from my clipboard just in time to see Orville sway, his face draining of color. Then his knees buckle, and he crumples to the ground.

For a heartbeat, everyone freezes. Then chaos erupts.

"Call 911!" someone shouts.

I drop my clipboard and run, pushing through the gathering crowd. "Give him space! Back up!"

Ruby is already kneeling beside her husband, her face a mask of controlled panic. And right beside her, steady as a rock, is Blaze, his hand on Ruby's shoulder.

"Ambulance is on the way," he tells her quietly.

Taking charge, I direct people to clear a path for the EMTs, sending someone to grab water, and keeping onlookers back. Through it all, I keep glancing at Blaze, who hasn't left Ruby's side. He's speaking to her in low, reassuring tones, his presence visibly calming her.

When the EMTs arrive, they work quickly, loading Orville onto a stretcher. His color is better, but he's still unconscious. Ruby clutches his hand until the last possible moment.

"I'm going with him," she announces, her voice brooking no argument.

The EMT closest to Ruby talks quietly, but I can still hear it. "We have no way to get him to the hospital with the road blocked. We can take him back to the doctor's office, but there is only so much they can do there," he says.

Ruby nods, stepping away, and pulls her phone from her pocket. I wouldn't have noticed except my friend Olivia appears at my elbow, nudging me.

"Who's she calling?" Olivia whispers.

I watch as Ruby speaks urgently onto the phone, her back to the crowd. When she finishes, she rejoins the EMTs. Her face is set with determination.

"Ruby," I say, approaching her. "Who did you call?"

She meets my eyes, her gaze steady, but revealing nothing. "An old friend. That's all you need to know." Her tone is firm but kind, closing the subject.

Fifteen minutes later, the distinctive whump-whump of helicopter blades cuts through the air. Heads turn skyward as a sleek black helicopter descends onto the park on the other side of the road, behind the community center.

"Since when does county emergency services have a helicopter?" someone asks.

I squint at the aircraft. There's a logo on the side, partially visible. Definitely not county emergency services. Others see it too, and questions fly.

"Who owns that chopper?"

"Who has that kind of pull?"

The whispers ripple through the crowd as the EMTs transfer Orville to the helicopter, with Ruby climbing in beside him. Through it all, Blaze stays back, letting Ruby take center stage, not drawing attention to himself despite this being his family. The restraint speaks volumes.

After the helicopter disappears over the horizon, the swap continues in a subdued fashion. I try to restore some normalcy, but there's an emotional fog hanging over everything.

Olivia finds me as I'm helping break down tables. Her eyes are bright with excitement.

"I got a photo of the helicopter," she says, showing me her phone. "I'm going to dig. We're going to find out who this 'friend' really is."

I frown, concerned about her sudden obsession with this helicopter and Ruby's friend, but too distracted to address it properly. "Olivia, maybe we should respect Ruby's privacy."

"Since when do you back down from uncovering the truth?" She gives me a puzzled look before hurrying off.

As the last vendors pack up, Blaze materializes beside me. "Let me walk you home."

The sun hangs low in the sky as we make our way through town. We don't talk much. Both of us are feeling the weight of the day. His hand brushes against mine once, twice, before he gently takes it, lacing our fingers together. I let him.

At my front porch, I turn to face him, suddenly shy after everything we shared the other night. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, and I lean into his touch despite my better judgment.

The moment shatters when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He glances at the screen, hesitates, then answers.

"Yeah?" His voice changes instantly, hardening into something I haven't heard before. Professional and distant.

I can hear the tinny voice on the other end and make out every few words.

"Tour's back on.... Open with Highway 55... PR clean.... You're needed.... We've got dates starting next week."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I step back, breaking contact with him, wrapping my arms around myself protectively.

Blaze's eyes widen. "I'll call you back," he says on the phone, then hangs up. "Grace--"

"If you're leaving, Blaze," I cut him off, my voice steady despite the storm inside me, "better you go now. I can't...."

"That's not--"

"Please." The word comes out sharper than I intended. I take a breath, soften my tone. "I need to be alone right now."

Before he can respond, I turn away and step inside, closing the door between us. I lean against it, sliding down until I'm sitting on the floor, tears falling silently down my cheeks.

Through the window, I can see his silhouette on my porch, looking down at the phone in his hand, clearly torn. But I've been left before. I know how this story ends.

And I won't survive it happening again.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

BLAZE

My phone vibrates for the fifth time in twenty minutes. I don't need to look at it to know it's Vince, my manager, blowing up my notifications with tour dates, venue capacities, and projected ticket sales. The numbers are big. Career-defining big.

I stare out at Shane's horses grazing peacefully in the morning sun, completely unbothered by my existential crisis.

"You gonna answer that?" Shane asks, leaning against the porch railing, coffee mug in hand.

"Eventually."

"Important?"

"Tour offer." The words feel strange coming out of my mouth. "Fifteen cities with Highway 55. Starting next week."

Shane nods slowly. "Sounds like what you've been waiting for."

"Yeah." I should be elated. This is exactly what I came to Mustang Mountain to prepare for--a career resurrection. So why does the thought of leaving feel like someone's slowly pulling my organs out through my throat?

Grace's words from last night echo into my head : If you're leaving, better you go now.

Her eyes had been so clear, so resigned. Like she'd known all along this moment would come.

My phone buzzes again. Vince again. Silencing it, I slide it into my pocket.

"Funny thing about getting what you want," Shane says, staring out at his land. "Sometimes you realize it's not what you need."

I could sell out arenas. I could disappear into another string of cities, hotel rooms, and backstage passes. I could slide back into the comfortable anonymity of being recognized by everyone but known by no one.

But none of it would mean a damn thing without her.

"I need to think," I mutter, standing up.

"Don't think too long," Shane replies. "Some choices don't wait around."

Main Street is busier than I've ever seen it. Cars with unfamiliar license plates line both sides of the road, and people with professional cameras mill about, snapping photos of storefronts, locals, and the surrounding mountains.

I pull my hat lower and duck into the Mercantile, where Ruby greets me with a harried expression.

"There he is," she says, waving me over to the counter. "The man who put Mustang Mountain on the map."

"What's happening out there?"

"What's happening is our little road mishap went viral." She slides her tablet across

the counter. "rock star Stranded in Mountain Town," "Road Sabotage Traps Famous Musician," "Singer Finds Refuge in Dying Community."

"Jesus," I mutter, scrolling through the headlines.

"The phone's been ringing off the hook. Three different news stations want interviews. The mayor's secretary is about to have a stroke trying to coordinate with state officials about the road situation."

"I'm sorry, Ruby. I didn't--"

"Don't apologize." She takes the tablet back. "This is the most attention this town has gotten since the eighties. Road crews have been working around the clock, and there is now one lane open on the road to get in and out."

Well, that explains how all the reporters got here.

"How's Orville?" I ask.

"Stable. He kicked me out of his room this morning when he heard the road was open, and told me to come check on everyone. He's had so many visitors, so I doubt he notices I'm even gone," Ruby says with a forced smile.

The bell above the door jingles, and Shane walks in, nodding at us both.

"Quite the circus out there," he says.

Ruby gestures for us to follow her to the back room, away from curious ears. Once the door closes behind us, she turns to me, eyes intense.

"You have a voice, Blaze. People listen when you speak. You can use it to help us."

I blink. "Help how?"

"The state's been ignoring our infrastructure problems for years," Shane explains. "The road issue was just bad luck. We've been worried about landslides for years. The hillsides need to be reinforced, and we need another way in and out of town."

"And now everyone's paying attention," Ruby adds. "But they'll forget as soon as you leave."

Shane crosses his arms. "You walk now, you'll regret it. You stay, you'll matter here."

The weight of their words settles on me. For years, I've sung to faceless crowds, written songs that meant everything to me and nothing to those around me but a paycheck. I've been important without being essential.

"What are you suggesting?" I ask.

Ruby's eyes light up. "A benefit concert. Right here in Mustang Mountain."

"Use your platform," Shane adds. "Make some noise they can't ignore."

I think about Grace, about her fierce protection of this town and its people. About how she's poured her life into keeping it alive.

"If I'm leaving," I hear myself say, "it won't be before doing one good goddamn thing first."

But even as the words leave my mouth, I know I don't want to leave at all.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Main Street has been transformed. A makeshift stage stands in the town park, built by Shane and a crew of local men. String lights crisscross overhead, and the entire town seems to have turned out, along with a healthy crowd of media and curious outsiders.

My phone has been blowing up non-stop. Vince is alternating between threats and pleas. The label executives want to know what the hell I'm doing. But for the first time in years, I'm not thinking about them.

I scan the crowd from behind the stage, looking for her. Grace stands at the back, arms crossed, expression guarded. She's watching me like I'm a storm about to change direction.

Maybe I am.

"You ready?" Ruby asks, handing me a bottle of water.

"As I'll ever be."

The crowd hushes as I step onto the stage. The setting sun casts everything in gold, and for a moment, I'm struck by the beauty of it all. These people, this town, nestled in the mountains, and the woman who showed me what it means to belong somewhere.

Clearing my throat, I adjust the microphone.

"I'm not much for speeches," I begin, and a light chuckle ripples through the crowd. "When I came to Mustang Mountain, I was running from my life. Running from fame that felt hollow, and from music that had lost its meaning."

The audience is quiet now, listening.

"I stayed because I found something worth running to. This town matters. These people matter." My eyes find Grace across the crowd. "And so does this woman, Grace."

I see her stiffen, her eyes widening.

"She taught me that real strength isn't about standing alone. It's about standing together. It's about fighting for your home, for your people."

When I pick up my guitar, the familiar weight centers me.

"This first song is for Grace, and for Mustang Mountain. For teaching me what it means to find home."

The first chord rings out, clear and true. I've been writing this song in pieces since I arrived, but it only came together last night. It's about mountains and mercy, about finding yourself in the place you least expected, about love that feels like coming home.

I pour everything into it. All the confusion, the longing, the certainty that's finally settled in my chest. When I look up, Grace has moved closer, her eyes never leaving mine.

As the last note fades, the crowd erupts. But I only see her, the slight tremble of her lip, the way she quickly wipes at her eyes.

I play for another hour, mixing my old hits with new songs written here in Mustang Mountain. The energy is electric, the crowd singing along to words they know and swaying to ones they don't. By the time I finish, my voice is raw and my fingers ache, but I feel more alive than I have in years.

As I thank the crowd, I spot a familiar figure pushing through toward the stage. Vince, my manager, his designer suit looking comically out of place among flannel shirts and work boots.

Great. Just what I need.

"That was cute," Vince says, cornering me behind the stage as people begin to disperse. "Really, the whole small-town savior angle is gold. We can work it into the tour narrative."

"Vince--"

"I've got a car waiting. We'll drive to Bozeman tonight, catch the the first flight out to LA. Dates start next week, and we need to get you into rehearsals."

I stare at him, this man who's guided my career for a decade, who's seen me through highs and lows. He's good at what he does. What he's never been good at is hearing no.

"I'm not going," I say.

He laughs. "Funny. Now seriously, we need to--"

"Not going. Not now." I take a breath. "Maybe not ever."

His smile freezes, then fades. "Have you lost your mind? This tour is everything we've been working toward. The label's finally back on board. The press is eating up this whole stranded rock star narrative."

"I've found something better than a career, Vince. I found home."

His eyes narrow. "It's the woman, isn't it? The one you dedicated the song to?" He shakes his head. "Jesus, Blaze. You can bring her with you if you want. But you walk away now, you'll tank your career. Everything we've built, gone."

I think about all the nights I've spent in empty hotel rooms, all the faces that blur together, all the songs that stopped meaning anything. Then I think about Grace's laugh, about mornings at the Merc, and about the way this town has crept inside me.

"Some things matter more."

Vince stares at me for a long moment, then sighs. "You're making a mistake."

"Maybe." I smile. "But it's mine to make."

\* \* \*

It's past midnight when I pull up to Grace's house. A single light burns in the living room window. For a moment, I just sit in my truck, gathering courage.

What if she sends me away? What if I'm too late?

The porch steps creak under my weight. Before I can knock, the door opens, and she's standing there. My heart clenches at the sight. She's never looked more beautiful with her eyes searching mine and her hair loose around her shoulders.

"It's late," she says softly.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"The concert was good. You'll be all over the news tomorrow."

"I don't care about the news."

She leans against the doorframe. "Did your manager find you?"

"Yeah."

"When do you leave?"

I step closer. "I don't."

Her breath catches. "What?"

"For the first time in years, I feel like I belong somewhere." My voice is barely above a whisper. "I feel like I belong with you."

She shakes her head, but I can see the hope fighting against doubt in her eyes. "You can't just--"

"I can. I am." I take her hand, half expecting her to pull away. She doesn't. "I've spent my life writing songs about things I've never felt. Until now. Until you."

"Blaze--"

"I love you, Grace. I love this town. I love who I am when I'm here."

Her resistance crumbles, and suddenly she's in my arms, her lips finding mine. This kiss is different from our first. There's no fear, no walls, just us meeting as equals.

When we finally break apart, she rests her forehead against mine. "I didn't want you to prove it with words," she whispers. "I needed you to prove it with this."

I brush a strand of hair from her face. "Then I will. Every damn day."

She pulls me inside, closing the door on the world. For now, it's just us, finding our way toward something real.

Later, as we lie together on her couch, her head on my chest, I hear her phone buzz. She reaches for it, frowning at the screen.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Just Olivia. Something about her grandmother sending a strange message." She sets the phone down. "I'll check on her tomorrow."

Pulling her closer, I breathe in the scent of her hair. I thought music was my life. Turns out life is making music where it matters. And that's right here. With her.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:34 am*

GRACE

I stand in Ruby's living room, arranging a plate of Ruby's oatmeal cookies while Blaze... Blake... hangs a hand-painted "Welcome Home, Orville" banner across the back wall. The smell of fresh coffee mingles with the scent of Pine-Sol from the morning's cleaning frenzy.

"Think we overdid it?" I ask, surveying the transformed space. Every surface gleams. Flowers from gardens across Mustang Mountain brighten each table. A mountain of casseroles fills the kitchen counter.

Blaze steps back to admire his handiwork. "Impossible to overdo anything for Orville."

Ruby emerges from the back of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "He's going to hate all this fuss."

"Which is exactly why we're doing it," I say, adjusting a stack of napkins.

So much has changed in just a few weeks. And yet, somehow, it feels more like home than ever. The house buzzes with anticipation as townspeople filter in, bearing more food and small gifts.

"They're here!" someone shouts from the window, and a hush falls over the crowd.

We spill onto the sidewalk as Jensen and Jonas, Ruby's nephews who lived with Ruby and Orville, pull up. Ruby rushes forward, her hands fluttering nervously at her

collar. Blaze follows, ready to help, while I hang back with the others, giving the family space.

The driver opens the side door, and there's Orville, looking smaller but with the same sharp eyes and wry smile that define him.

"Well, look at this," he says, as Blaze helps him from the truck, his voice gruff but strong. "All this commotion and I missed the real excitement."

The town laughs, tension breaking like ice on the spring creek.

Blaze steps forward, helping Orville toward the front door. "Don't worry, Orville. I recorded all the highlights. Even got footage of Six and Arrow singing karaoke."

"Now that's worth that horrible hospital food to see," Orville chuckles, reaching out to clasp Blaze's hand. The gesture is brief but meaningful. It's acceptance.

Ruby fusses around them both, directing people out of the way as Blaze walks with Orville into the house.

I watch them, this makeshift family that somehow works perfectly.

Blaze catches my eye over Orville's head and winks. He belongs here now, not as the reluctant visitor or the celebrity outsider, but as part of the fabric of Mustang Mountain. He's right where he belongs, here with family.

Inside, Orville holds court from his recliner in the living room, regaling everyone with hospital stories, each one more crazy than the last. I serve coffee and listen to the laughter, to the sound of a community healing itself.

"He's going to be fine," Ruby says, appearing at my elbow with an empty cookie

plate.

"Of course he is. He's too stubborn not to be."

She smiles, the worry lines around her eyes softening. "Thank you, Grace. For everything."

"I didn't do anything special."

"You brought him home," she says, nodding toward Blaze, who's showing Orville something on his phone, both of them laughing. "Maybe not intentionally, but you did."

I want to protest that Blaze made his own choices, that I was just in the right place at the right time, but I know what she means. Sometimes we're catalysts for change without realizing it.

"Well," I say instead, "he's not going anywhere now."

Ruby's smile widens. "No, I don't think he is."

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, I sit on my porch swing, feet tucked under me, watching the clouds drift over the mountains. Blaze appears at the bottom of the steps, two bottles of beer in hand.

"Room for one more?" he asks.

"Always."

He settles beside me, passing me a bottle. The swing creaks gently as we rock, a comfortable silence between us.

"So," I say finally, "how does it feel to be a local legend?"

He groans. "Please don't."

"I'm serious! Three different people asked for your autograph today. Mrs. Peabody wants you to sign her rolling pin."

"Her rolling pin?"

"She says she'll never wash it again." I giggle at the thought.

He laughs, that full, unguarded sound I've come to love. "I've signed weirder things."

"Like what?" I ask, my curiosity taking over.

"I've been asked to sign every body part imaginable. One guy even asked me to sign his dick. Thankfully, security stepped in when he tried to whip it out. I've had an older woman ask me to sign the urn that held the ashes of her dead husband, and multiple different kinds of sex toys," he grimaces.

I laugh and shake my head as I take a sip of beer. "But seriously, your little impromptu concert is all anyone can talk about. Ruby is already planning next year's festival with you as the headliner."

"Is that right?" Blaze's eyes crinkle at the corners. "Guess I'll have to stick around and make it official."

My heart does a little flip. "Good. You're not going anywhere."

He sets his beer down on the porch floor and turns to me, one arm stretched along the back of the swing. "No, I'm not."

When he kisses me, it tastes like promises and possibility. This isn't the desperate passion of our first kiss or the tentative exploration of our second. This is something steadier, more certain. A foundation.

"Get a room!" Olivia's voice breaks the moment.

I pull back to see my friend standing at the bottom of the porch steps, grinning like she's caught us passing notes in class.

"We have a room," I call back. "Several, in fact. This whole house is full of them."

"And yet, here you are, scandalizing the neighborhood." She bounds up the steps, waving a folder. "I've got something."

Blaze shifts to make room for her on the swing, but she's too keyed up to sit.

"I think I've got something on that helicopter logo," she says, pulling a printout from her folder. "Remember how I said it looked familiar? I was right."

She hands me the paper. It's a grainy enlarged photo of the logo from the helicopter. Not looking at the rest of it, I close the folder. I know Olivia and how she goes down the rabbit holes and doesn't stop until she has peeked in every dark corner.

"Olivia... maybe let it go. Right now, we need to focus on keeping the town strong."

"But don't you see? This could be important! What if--"

"What if it's nothing?" I interrupt gently. "What if it's just Ruby's private business?"

She hasn't told anyone for a reason. After everything, I think we need to respect that."

The thought of anyone digging too deeply into Ruby's affairs makes me nervous. She's protective of Orville, of her home. And now, by extension, of Blaze. The last thing any of them needs is scrutiny, especially after everything they've been through.

Olivia's enthusiasm deflates slightly. "I just thought with everything happening with the land developer, the road, and the festival..."

"I know," I say, reaching for her hand. "And I love your investigative spirit. But maybe this one time, let's focus on what we know is good. Orville's home, the town pulled together, and we saved the festival. We know Ruby. she isn't involved with the bad guys here."

She sighs dramatically. "Fine. But I'm keeping this file open."

"I'd expect nothing less." I squeeze her hand before letting go.

Blaze watches our exchange with quiet interest but doesn't comment. When Olivia finally leaves, promising to see us tonight at the potluck at the park, he turns to me.

"You're worried about Ruby."

It's not a question. "I'm worried about all of you. The spotlight isn't always kind."

He nods, understanding written across his face. "No, it's not. But sometimes the truth is better than secrets."

"Says the man who came to town to hide."

"Touché." He picks up his beer again. "For what it's worth, I think Ruby can handle

herself. She's been doing it a long time."

I rest my head against his shoulder. "I know, but I just want things to stay good for a while."

His arm comes around me, solid and warm. "They will."

Blaze and I spent the rest of the day together. After everything a lazy afternoon is just what we need.

Evening transforms the town park into a wonderland of string lights and laughter. Folding tables groan under the weight of potluck dishes. Someone's brought out a portable fire pit where children roast marshmallows under watchful eyes.

Orville is sitting in a comfy looking chair that looks like it was brought out just for him. He's near the fire, and telling stories to anyone who will listen. Ruby hovers nearby but gives him space to enjoy his celebrity status. I carry a plate of Lily's famous apple pie to their table.

"You outdid yourself," I tell her, setting down the dessert.

"Nonsense," she replies, her cheeks pink with pleasure. "Though I did try a new cinnamon this time."

Orville reaches for a slice immediately. "Woman, you could sell this pie in New York City for twenty dollars a slice."

"And who would travel all that way for pie?" she scoffs, but she's beaming.

From the gazebo, guitar chords drift through the evening air. Blaze sits on the steps, acoustic guitar in hand, playing softly. He's not performing, not really. He's just

adding to the atmosphere. But people drift closer, drawn to the music.

He catches my eye across the square and smiles, then launches into a gentle rendition of "Country Roads." Voices join in, hesitant at first, then stronger. I watch as teenagers stop checking their phones to sing along, and Orville taps his foot in time.

I used to think this town needed saving. Maybe what it needed was a reminder of its own strength. We still have a battle ahead of us, but I think we're stronger now than ever.

When the song ends, applause ripples through the crowd. Blaze plays a few more tunes. Nothing flashy, just good music for a good night before setting his guitar aside. He makes his way through the crowd toward me, stopping to chat, to accept thanks, to belong.

"That was beautiful," I say when he finally reaches me.

He shrugs, almost shy. "Just giving back a little."

"A little? Blake, look around. This is what you helped create."

He follows my gaze, taking in the scene. Families together, neighbors laughing, a community whole. "Not me. This was always here."

"Maybe," I say. "But sometimes we need someone to show us what we already have."

He sits beside me, close enough that our shoulders touch. "You sure you want a washed-up rock star hanging around?"

"You're not washed up. And you're not hanging around." I turn to face him fully.

"You're home."

His smile then is worth every moment of uncertainty, every argument, every doubt.

Tomorrow will bring new questions, new challenges. But tonight, under the vast Montana sky, we are exactly where we're meant to be.

Home.

GARNER

I leaned back and wiped the blood away from my client's chest. He was a regular, and we were wrapping up his third session for a bad ass tat to represent his time as a firefighter.

I'd done some awesome work before, but I was damn proud of this piece.

Might even enter it into an upcoming contest I'd heard about.

"All done for today, man." I set my tattoo gun down on the tray and reached for the plastic wrap. "You know what to do. Keep it clean and moisturized for the next few days."

I'd just started placing the plastic wrap over his new ink when the door to my room flew open.

"Garner, there you are! I've been looking all over for you." Olivia stood in the doorway, her chest heaving like she'd just run a fucking marathon.

I jumped off my stool and rushed over to her. "Hey, baby girl. Everything okay?"

She bit down on her lip and nodded. "We need to talk."

"Can you give me five, or do you need me now?" Either way, I'd be there for her.

There were few people in my life I'd drop everything for, but Olivia Vale was at the

top of the list. We'd grown up right next door to each other in Silver Springs.

When I moved to Mustang Mountain to start working in Priest's tattoo shop, I'd convinced her to come with me.

We'd even shared a tiny apartment together for the first few months until she got a job as a clerk at town hall.

Fuck, those were the best months of my life.

"Go ahead and finish." She lifted her hand in an awkward wave. "Hi, Cullen. Sorry to interrupt."

"No worries. Did you see what your man Garner just did?" Cullen glanced down at his fresh ink.

My gut twisted at the words "your man." As far as everyone knew, Olivia and I were just friends. Even though we did everything together—well, almost everything—we'd never crossed the line from friendship to more. And it wasn't because I didn't want to.

Olivia stepped into the room and looked over my shoulder. "That's awesome. Garner does absolutely amazing work, doesn't he?"

I thought it was pretty dope, but hearing the pride in her voice made my chest puff out.

"He sure as hell does. The guys on the crew are going to be knocking down your door once they see it," Cullen said.

"They know where to find me." I finished applying the wrap to his chest while I tried to ignore how it felt to have Olivia standing directly behind me.

She was close enough I caught a whiff of her new perfume...

the one that smelled like smoked sandalwood and sun-kissed skin. Just a trace of it drove me wild.

Cullen pulled his shirt on and got up out of my chair.

Olivia reached over and ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. "When are you going to come by and see me? Your hair's getting so long I can almost braid it."

My heart shriveled as Cullen let out an easy laugh. I had to look away. She had a side gig cutting hair at The Best Little Hair House for fuck's sake. It shouldn't matter to me if she was trying to drum up business. But seeing her put her hands on another man shredded me. Always had.

"I'll be by soon," Cullen said. "Thanks, Garner. Want me to wait for you up front?"

I grunted out a "yeah" while I peeled off my gloves. Olivia dropped down onto the chair Cullen vacated and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Be back in just a minute," I told her. With her waiting on me, I had extra incentive to get Cullen out the door as quickly as possible. He scheduled his next appointment, and I marked it down on my calendar. A few seconds later, I was on my way back to her.

"You know you can't just barge in on me when I'm with a client," I said, closing the door behind me.

She jumped out of the chair and pulled something from her back pocket. My attention shifted to her thick hips. I'd lost count of how many times I'd fantasized about grabbing hold of her with both hands and easing those sweet hips up and down while

she hovered over me.

“Garner? Do you see what I see?” She jabbed at a piece of paper, pulling me out of my X-rated daydream.

I focused on an image of a helicopter. “See what?”

“The logo. I knew I’d seen it before. The logo on the helicopter that rescued Orville is the same as that super pricey resort in Whitefish.” She held out another piece of paper with the Aspen Crest Lodge logo on it. “Why would a resort send a helicopter to rescue Orville?”

“Because it was the right thing to do?” I shook my head. She’d been going on and on about the helicopter for days.

“It can’t be just that. I looked into the resort, and it’s a dead end. Owned by a company that’s owned by another company. I think it might tie into that developer that’s been wreaking havoc on the whole town.” She put a hand on her hip and stared at me.

“You’ve been listening to way too many true crime podcasts, baby girl.” Satisfied her emergency was nothing more than another one of her conspiracy theories, I got to work cleaning up.

But Olivia wouldn’t let it go at that. She grabbed hold of my arm. “What if Ruby and Orville are working with the developer?”

She’d truly gone off the deep end with that one. I put my finger to her lips. “Shh. That’s ridiculous.”

She batted my hand away. “I don’t want to believe it either, but what if it’s true?”

“It can’t be. Ruby and Orville have been up to their ears in helping people around town. She’s the one who lined up financing for Levi’s construction company and the bookstore, and?—”

“And where do you think she got that kind of cash?” Olivia interrupted. “She could be putting on a front while trying to tear things apart on the backend.”

I wouldn’t believe anything bad about Ruby or Orville. They’d welcomed me with open arms when I’d moved to Mustang Mountain. “What would they have to gain from selling out the town?”

“Money? Land? I don’t know. It could be anything.” Olivia’s shoulders sagged. “A lot of people do dumb things for good reasons. You ought to know that better than anyone.”

The reference to my folks hit below the gut, but I wasn’t about to take the time to unpack that at the moment. “I think you’re seeing connections that aren’t there. How about we grab dinner from the cafe and take it back to my place for a movie?”

“I need to get to the bottom of this. That’s the only way I’ll have any peace of mind.” She looked up at me, her brown eyes wide with concern. “Will you help me?”

“Damn, Liv. You really can’t let this go?” I’d seen her get fixated on things before. She was tenacious as hell.

“Please, Garner?”

Fuck. It was the “please” that did it. That and the way she looked at me like I was her personal hero.

“Fine. What do you need me to do?”

She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth for a long beat, like she was nervous to tell me what hare-brained scheme she had up her sleeve this time.

“Just tell me.” I knew it would be whacked, but I was ready. I’d do anything for her, and she sure as hell knew it.

“Spend the weekend at the resort with me?”

That couldn’t be it. Not with the way her brows lifted and she waited for my answer like she was holding her breath. “That’s it?”

“Yeah. I already booked a room. There’s just one other little thing.”

I sensed her one other little thing wouldn’t be little at all. It was bad enough I’d have to spend a whole weekend sharing a room with her and trying to keep my hands to myself. “What is it?”

She took in a deep breath, then let the words out in a rushing exhale. “The resort’s hosting a retreat this weekend. The only way in is to participate. It’s not a big deal. We just have to pretend like we’re married.”

Need more Blaze and Grace? Sign up for our newsletter and get the free bonus scene here : [https:// www. matchofthemonthbooks. com/ blaze- bonus](https://www.matchofthemonthbooks.com/blaze-bonus)

Next up, meet Garner and Olivia in their fake marriage romance, August’s Bad Boy Garner. Get it here : [https:// matchofthemonthbooks. com/ august- garner](https://matchofthemonthbooks.com/august-garner)

Then grab Cooper and Riley’s age gap, ex’s dad romance in September’s Bad Boy Cooper here : [https:// www. matchofthemonthbooks. com/ September- Cooper](https://www.matchofthemonthbooks.com/September-Cooper)

Join Match of the Month Books on REAM for early access to the Bad Boys of Mustang Mountain, a monthly book club chat, signed paperbacks, and more!