



Mountain Man Summer

(Summer in the Pines #14)

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Category: Romance

Description: She came to hide. He made her want to be found.

DIDI:

I fled to Hope Peak Lake with three goals: stay hidden, stay quiet, and stay away from men. After my obsessed listener turned stalker, the last thing I needed was another complication. Then I met my next-door neighbor—six feet four inches of grumpy mountain man who thought I couldn't tell a fishing rod from a selfie stick. Detective Noah Sterling was everything I didn't want: protective, persistent, and way too perceptive for my secrets. But when he caught me skinny dipping off our shared dock one moonlit night, keeping my distance became impossible. By the time the Fourth of July fireworks lit up the lake, I realized the most dangerous thing in Hope Peak wasn't my stalker—it was the way Noah made me want to stop running.

NOAH:

The pretty city girl next door was trouble from the moment she nearly sank her rental boat. Didi claimed she wanted privacy, but everything about her screamed secrets. As Hope Peaks detective, I should have kept my professional distance. Instead, I found myself teaching her to fish, sharing midnight swims, and forgetting every rule I'd ever made about getting involved with summer tourists. When I discovered why she was really hiding at the lake, protecting her became more than my job—it became my mission. But as the July Fourth crowds descended on our small town, I realized the truth: I wasn't just guarding her from danger. I was falling for the one woman who might not stay once the fireworks faded.

A steamy small-town romance about finding love when you least expect it—and the mountain man who makes running away the last thing on your mind.

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“Hiding in Plain Sight”

Didi

My rental car's air conditioning surrendered with a pathetic wheeze as I crested the final mountain curve. After six hours of driving, the ancient Chevy's valiant battle against Montana's July heat had finally ended in defeat.

"Screw it," I muttered, punching the button to roll down all four windows at once.

A wall of humid mountain air slammed into me like opening an oven door, instantly plastering my thin blouse against my skin.

I swept my blonde hair into a messy bun, already feeling tendrils curling wildly in the moisture-laden atmosphere.

At least here I could sweat in peace, away from my persistent listener-turned-stalker who called himself 'ChicagoNightOwl.

' So much for the "cool mountain air" the resort website had promised.

The momentary discomfort vanished when Hope Peak Lake spread below me—a massive sapphire cupped between pine-covered peaks, late afternoon sunlight dancing across its surface like scattered diamonds.

"And this, dear listeners, is what running away looks like when you do it with style," I said, my voice dropping into its radio register without thought. The sultry tone

Jamie swears could "make a grocery list sound like foreplay."

No microphone tonight. No audience except myself. Just Deirdre Danielle Lawson—"Didi" to everyone except my mother and the IRS—driving alone toward a month of blessed anonymity, sunglasses hiding tired green eyes that scanned the road with habitual vigilance.

Sweat trickled between my breasts as the road wound down toward Hope Peak Lake Resort.

Each bend revealed another picture-perfect view, each descent cranked the temperature another degree.

July 1st in Montana was apparently determined to rival Chicago's worst heatwaves, but at least here I could sweat in peace, away from unwanted attention.

I'd chosen Hope Peak for its perfect trifecta: miles from Chicago, minimal online presence, and iron-clad guest privacy policies.

The ideal hideout for a radio personality whose late-night listener had transformed from enthusiastic fan to persistent stalker over the past three months.

The packages had started innocently enough—fan mail, small gifts—then escalated to photos of me entering my apartment building, notes about what I'd worn that day, promises of our "inevitable future together. "

The narrow road finally leveled out, and I followed the handwritten directions to Cabin 7.

Relief washed over me when I spotted its isolated position at the property's edge, surrounded by towering pines with only one neighboring cabin visible through the

trees.

Minimal neighbors meant minimal potential for unwanted recognition.

Not that my late-night radio fame extended much beyond Chicago's insomniacs, but ChicagoNightOwl had proven disturbingly resourceful.

As I stepped from the car, the heat hit me fully.

My lightweight traveling clothes—chosen for comfort during the long drive—now felt like too many layers in a sauna.

Perspiration immediately beaded along my hairline and upper lip.

The weatherman had announced "record-breaking temperatures" across the Northwest as I'd driven through Idaho, but I'd foolishly assumed the mountains would provide relief.

The key waited in a lockbox alongside a handwritten welcome note from the owner, Ruth Anderson. I fumbled with the combination, fingers slippery with sweat, cursing softly when I dropped the key twice before successfully unlocking the door.

Inside, the air hung thick and motionless. I immediately spotted the window unit air conditioner and lunged for it, twisting the dial to maximum. It responded with a concerning rattle before pushing out a feeble stream of barely-cool air.

"Perfect," I sighed, leaning directly into the pathetic breeze. "Just perfect."

Thirty minutes and one lukewarm shower later, I'd transformed into something resembling a human being again.

I'd abandoned my travel clothes for the simplest outfit possible—frayed cutoff shorts and a Northwestern tank top that had seen better days.

My damp hair was piled atop my head in what could charitably be called an artistic mess.

Makeup seemed pointless in this heat; it would slide off before I could finish applying it.

The cabin itself delivered exactly what the photos had promised—warm pine walls, furniture that balanced comfort with rustic charm, a stone fireplace (utterly useless in this heat), and beyond the rear windows, an unobstructed view of the lake, complete with a private dock jutting into crystal-clear waters.

"Home sweet temporary getaway," I said to the empty room, my voice falling automatically into its on-air cadence. The habit of narrating my life was an occupational hazard after five years of late-night confessionals with insomniacs and night-shift workers across Chicago.

I'd packed light—essentials plus broadcasting equipment.

After discovering my stalker had somehow obtained my home address, material possessions lost their appeal.

The smaller bedroom would serve as my impromptu studio.

I unpacked my tech arsenal—laptop, microphone, mixer—with practiced efficiency, setting up on the small desk beneath the window.

My fingers traced the familiar contours of the microphone stand, the tactile sensation grounding me amid the disorientation of new surroundings. I adjusted the acoustic

panels, feeling the padded fabric under my fingertips, sweat making my hands slightly slick against the equipment.

"Testing, testing," I murmured, then cleared my throat and let my voice drop into its professional register. "This is Late Night with Didi, coming to you from... somewhere with actual crickets and enough heat to make a shy girl consider skinny dipping."

The levels peaked perfectly. The internet connection stuttered but held.

I could maintain my career from this backwoods sanctuary while Chicago PD hopefully made progress on identifying my mystery stalker.

The security footage had captured only glimpses of a hooded figure, never a clear face for identification.

My phone buzzed with Jamie's text:

Landed safely? Chicago sweltering, 98 degrees today.

I tapped back:

Safe. Cabin perfect. Just arrived after a six-hour drive. Montana apparently didn't get the memo about mountain coolness.

Jamie responded immediately:

AC struggling here at station too. Getting questions about your "vacation." Maintaining cover story.

I smiled faintly at Jamie's loyalty. My producer was the only person who knew my exact location, and she'd die before revealing it—even to our station manager.

As far as Chicago was concerned, I was taking a well-deserved break at an "undisclosed location" after my stalker situation became too concerning to ignore.

Wiping a fresh trickle of sweat from my neck, I caught my reflection in the small mirror above the desk. My skin glistened in the late afternoon light, heat bringing a flush to my cheeks that no makeup could replicate. At least isolation meant I didn't need to worry about appearances.

By early evening, I couldn't bear the cabin's stifling atmosphere any longer, despite the air conditioner's valiant efforts. The back deck beckoned, promising at least the psychological relief of open space, if not actual cooling breezes.

The wooden planks had absorbed the day's heat, warm through my thin-soled sandals.

I leaned against the railing, surveying my temporary kingdom—lake stretching to the horizon, mountains rising beyond, sunset painting everything in warm amber light that would have been beautiful if it didn't remind me how long this heat had been baking everything.

A gravel path led down to my private dock, and I followed it, breathing in the heady mix of pine resin and freshwater.

Cicadas buzzed relentlessly, their chorus punctuated by the occasional splash of jumping fish.

My gaze swept the tree line—a habit born from months of feeling watched—before I allowed myself to relax marginally.

Movement on the neighboring dock caught my eye, and I froze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this peaceful moment to bring you breaking

developments from the Department of Unexpected Scenery," I whispered to myself, unable to tear my gaze away.

My dock neighbor was male, gloriously, unapologetically bare-chested, repairing loose boards with single-minded focus.

From my vantage point, I couldn't help but appreciate the view: broad shoulders carved from what must be years of outdoor work, a tapered torso that narrowed to a trim waist, defined abs visible even from this distance.

Muscles shifted beneath sun-bronzed skin as he worked.

Sandy hair, darkened with sweat at the temples, caught the golden light of the setting sun.

Something molten pooled low in my belly, a heat entirely separate from the summer air. It had been months since I'd allowed myself to look at a man with anything but suspicion, but this... this was pure, primal appreciation.

With each swing of his hammer, muscles rippled across his back in a mesmerizing display of controlled power.

Sweat highlighted the definition of his shoulders, tracing paths down to the waistband of his worn jeans.

His strong jawline remained focused on his task, a study in concentration.

The golden evening light caught the scattered freckles across his nose and cheekbones, adding an unexpected touch of boyishness to his otherwise rugged appearance.

He fixed the dock with unwavering attention, not a wasted motion in sight. His movements spoke of discipline and precision—qualities I'd stopped associating with men after my last relationship imploded spectacularly, followed by my stalker situation.

I was still staring—conducting thorough observational research, obviously—when he straightened and turned toward me.

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Even across the water, his gaze hit me like a physical thing.

My pulse quickened, and I found myself holding my breath.

Those eyes—blue enough to rival the lake itself—locked onto mine with unsettling directness.

Something in his stance made me want to both retreat and step closer.

The hammer hung loosely from one hand, his chest rising and falling with exertion in the thick evening air.

I backed away hastily, nearly tripping over a coil of rope. By the time I'd regained my balance, he'd returned to his task, but not before I caught the hint of amusement at the corners of his mouth.

Fantastic. Less than an hour in town and already providing entertainment for the locals.

As I retreated to my cabin, my body hummed with an awareness I'd nearly forgotten existed. The last thing my carefully constructed hideout needed was distraction in the form of six-plus feet of mountain-hewn male perfection next door.

Restlessness drove me outdoors again after nightfall. The resort welcome packet mentioned boat rentals at the main dock, and a sunset cruise promised the perfect reconnaissance mission—plus the hope of catching a cooling breeze off the water.

I changed into a sundress thin enough for the heat but modest enough for public appearance. The lightweight fabric still clung uncomfortably to my damp skin as I walked the path to the resort's main area, making me feel more exposed than appropriate despite the modest cut.

The main dock buzzed with early evening activity—families corralling children and equipment after day trips, couples embarking on sunset cruises.

An older man with leathery skin helped me select a small motorboat, rattling off instructions my anxiety-addled brain half-registered while my eyes performed their now-habitual sweep for anyone paying undue attention.

"Just bring her back before dusk settles in," he concluded, dropping the key into my palm. "Lake gets tricky to navigate after sunset if you don't know the underwater geography."

"No problem," I assured him, projecting confidence I didn't remotely feel. How difficult could it be to pilot a glorified bathtub with an outboard motor attached?

Twenty minutes later, I had my humbling answer.

The boat itself wasn't the issue. Starting had been straightforward enough. It was the stopping—or rather, steering while attempting to stop—that presented the challenge. Specifically, my inability to maneuver away from a menacing outcrop of rocks I was drifting toward with increasing speed.

"And here, folks, is what we call 'dead air'—that exquisite moment when you realize you have precisely zero idea what happens next," I said aloud, falling back on humor as my anxiety flared.

I jammed the throttle into what I hoped was reverse. The boat lurched sideways,

bringing the rocks into knife-edge focus. I cut the engine entirely, praying physics might intervene, but a treacherous breeze nudged me steadily toward what promised to be a mortifying shipwreck.

Just as I contemplated the indignity of shouting for shoreline assistance, another boat appeared, cutting through the water with confident ease. Its captain handled the craft like someone born to it, killing the engine and gliding alongside my floundering vessel with irritating precision.

To my dismay, it was Dock Neighbor, now sporting a threadbare navy t-shirt that did absolutely nothing to diminish his impact.

Up close, I realized he was older than I'd initially judged—mid-thirties probably, with features that balanced rugged angles against unexpected gentleness around the eyes.

His eyes, now narrowed slightly, were the impossible blue of deep water.

Scattered freckles dusted his nose and cheekbones, somehow making him even more appealing.

"Engine trouble?" he asked, his voice a deep rumble that vibrated across the water and seemed to resonate somewhere low in my body.

"Operator incompetence," I admitted, refusing to shrink despite the heat crawling up my neck. "Evidently my broadcasting skills don't translate to nautical ventures."

Something flashed across his features—a hint of recognition?—before his expression closed into neutral territory. "You're drifting into Miller's Rocks."

"The rocks weren't on my itinerary," I replied, grasping for dignity despite my ridiculous predicament.

He exhaled, reaching for a coiled rope at his feet. "Line. Secure it to that cleat near the bow."

The rope arced perfectly across my boat. I snatched it, fumbling with the knot he'd described.

"Not like—" He cut himself off with a slight shake of his head. "Let me."

He maneuvered his boat alongside mine, then vaulted across the gap with the easy confidence of someone who'd made that jump a thousand times before.

The boat's dimensions seemed to shrink around his presence.

He smelled of sun-warmed skin, cedar, and whatever that male pheromone was that bypassed my brain entirely and headed straight for more primitive regions.

He secured the rope with weathered, capable hands.

When our fingers brushed accidentally, a jolt ran between us that had nothing to do with static.

His eyes flicked to mine, acknowledging the contact before refocusing on the task.

I was suddenly, uncomfortably aware of how my dress clung to my skin, how the thin fabric left little to the imagination after hours in the heat. His proximity made it hard to breathe, the air between us charged with something beyond the day's lingering warmth.

"Noah Sterling," he said as he moved to examine the engine. "Local. You're in Cabin 7?"

Not a question. He knew precisely where I was staying, which confirmed he was my immediate neighbor. Wonderful.

"Didi," I replied, offering only my nickname. "Just drove in from Chicago. For vacation," I added, the lie coming easily after weeks of crafting cover stories.

"Hmm." The sound carried volumes of skepticism as he inspected the controls. "Gear's stuck. Push here. All the way."

He demonstrated with a quick adjustment, then stepped away. "Try it now."

I followed his instruction, and the boat responded smoothly, edging away from the looming rocks.

"Thank you," I managed, genuine gratitude wrestling with wounded pride. "I would have sorted it out eventually, but... I appreciate the intervention."

"Eventually might have been after you'd given Miller's Rocks a new paint job," he observed, voice dry as kindling. "Lake turns treacherous fast."

His tone carried something beyond mere condescension—the weariness of someone who'd fished too many careless tourists from these waters.

"I'll bear that in mind," I replied, unable to keep the edge from my voice. "I'm grateful for the rescue, but I can handle myself."

His expression shifted, those blue eyes taking me in with a thoroughness that felt almost physical. "Where's your life jacket?"

I glanced down, noting with chagrin the life jacket I'd stashed beneath the seat instead of wearing.

"Oops. I'm typically more cautious," I said, which was sort of true.

"Most people are, until they aren't," he replied with cryptic finality, then nodded toward shore. "Follow my wake back."

Without awaiting response, he leapt back to his own vessel with a grace that defied his size, fired up the engine, and began a measured course toward the resort's main dock.

I followed, torn between annoyance and unwanted fascination with my surly mountain man savior.

Everything about him screamed law enforcement or military—the keen eyes, the efficient movements, the rapid assessment of the situation.

Exactly the type of person I didn't need scrutinizing my hastily constructed cover story and risking unwanted attention.

Back at the dock, he secured my boat with minimal conversation, his hands working knots I couldn't have managed with an instructional video and three practice sessions. I couldn't help noticing how his wet shirt clung to his torso, outlining every ridge of muscle across his chest and abdomen.

"Thank you again," I offered as we stepped onto the main dock. "For the timely rescue and impromptu boating lesson."

"Just doing my job," he replied, one corner of his mouth lifting slightly. "Can't have tourists drowning in our lake."

"I wasn't going to drown," I protested. "Shipwreck, certainly. Mild humiliation, definitely. But drowning seemed like an outside possibility."

That almost-smile deepened fractionally. "Tell that to Miller's Rocks."

Before I could muster a suitably cutting retort, he nodded once. "Welcome to Hope Peak, Didi from Chicago. Watch yourself out there." His tone carried a weight beyond casual advice—more professional assessment than neighborly concern.

With that enigmatic parting shot, he turned and strode away, leaving me with the uncomfortable certainty that he'd learned more from our brief encounter than I'd intended to reveal.

I returned to my cabin as twilight bled into darkness, trying to shake our encounter from my thoughts. Inside, the messages awaiting on my phone jolted me back to harsh reality.

Jamie had texted five times in escalating urgency:

Update: Security footage shows someone leaving another package at the station for you.

Police reviewing but still can't ID the guy.

Contents: CD with a mix of songs about "destiny" and "forever love" + a collage of photos of you from station events. Creepy.

Management finally taking it seriously.

CALL ME.

My stomach tightened with familiar anxiety, but not terror. I sank onto the sofa, grateful for the distance between me and Chicago.

I called Jamie immediately. Our conversation was brief but resolute.

The station had finally agreed to involve a private investigator after this latest incident, since the police hadn't been able to identify ChicagoNightOwl from the partial security footage.

Security had been enhanced at the building entrances.

My "vacation" cover remained intact—as far as anyone knew, I was taking a much-needed break at an undisclosed location after a stressful year.

After hanging up, I moved through the cabin methodically, checking locks, drawing curtains, securing windows.

Through a sliver between kitchen drapes, movement caught my eye—Noah, standing on his deck, phone pressed to his ear, gaze sweeping the property with the unmistakable attention of a professional rather than casual interest.

Watching.

I dropped the curtain, pulse quickening. The rational part of my brain insisted it was innocent—just a neighbor noting lights in a previously vacant cabin. Not everyone harbored ulterior motives. Not everyone was like my obsessive fan, lurking in shadows and leaving unwanted "gifts."

But as I double-checked the locks before bed, unease flickered through me.

I'd wedged myself between two perplexing situations: the threat I'd fled Chicago to escape, and something altogether different but equally unsettling next door—a man whose watchful eyes might see more than I wanted anyone to know.

I'd come to Hope Peak seeking sanctuary and solitude. Instead, I'd landed myself between a persistent admirer with boundary issues and a neighbor whose too-perceptive eyes seemed to see right through me.

So much for hiding in plain sight.

And worst of all? As I slipped between sheets still warm from the day's heat, it wasn't fear of my stalker that kept me awake, but the memory of sun-bronzed skin, impossible blue eyes, and the electric touch of Noah Sterling's hand against mine.

I'd fled Chicago to escape one man's unwanted attention, only to find myself unable to stop thinking about another's.

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“The Thin Blue Line”

Noah

The lake at dawn was my religion.

I sliced through the water with practiced strokes, each pull and kick cutting through the morning stillness.

Five a.m. light filtered through the pines, casting long shadows across the glassy surface.

The water—still cool before the day's heat took hold—shocked my system into full alertness, washing away the restless night's broken sleep.

My mind kept drifting back to the woman from Cabin 7.

Didi from Chicago. A tourist who claimed to be on vacation but whose eyes constantly scanned her surroundings with the vigilance of prey.

I'd caught that wariness immediately during our impromptu water rescue.

That, and the way her thin sundress had clung to her curves in the evening heat, outlining a body that would make a saint reconsider his vows.

I rolled onto my back, letting the water cradle me as I stared at the sky shifting from indigo to pale blue.

The distant call of an osprey echoed across the water.

My dock stretched nearby, the fresh boards I'd installed yesterday standing out against the weathered planks.

Next to it, her dock remained empty, though a light had flickered on in her cabin moments before I'd begun my swim.

Was she an early riser too? Or just having trouble sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings?

Thirty more laps, then reluctantly I hauled myself onto the dock. Water sluiced down my six-foot-four frame as I towed off, gaze involuntarily drifting toward Cabin 7. The kitchen curtain twitched—just slightly—but enough to confirm my suspicions.

She was watching me.

The realization sent a jolt of heat through my core that had nothing to do with the morning exercises. I took my time drying off, lingering longer than necessary before heading inside to dress for work. Let her look. I certainly had when our positions were reversed.

By six-thirty, I'd traded swim trunks for my department-issued uniform—dark blue tactical pants, light blue button-down with the Hope Peak Sheriff's Department patch on the sleeve, duty belt with standard gear. The badge felt heavier than usual as I pinned it to my chest.

I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror—sandy hair still damp from the shower, the scattered freckles across my nose and cheekbones more prominent after yesterday's sun exposure.

My mother's Irish heritage visible in every one of those freckles and in the deep blue eyes that stared back at me, looking more distracted than I cared to admit.

Her image flooded my mind again. That cascade of blonde waves catching the sunset light.

Those green eyes that shifted like the lake itself—darkening when she'd challenged me about the life jacket.

That voice with its distinctive cadence that hinted at something professional beneath her casual demeanor.

A city woman clearly out of her element but too stubborn to admit it.

"Snap out of it, Sterling," I muttered, holstering my service weapon. "She's just another tourist."

But tourists didn't typically look over their shoulders every thirty seconds or try so hard to be forgettable when everything about them demanded attention.

The morning briefing at the station started at seven sharp.

I slid into my usual seat with two minutes to spare, nodding to Betty at dispatch on my way through.

The department employed a grand total of twelve officers including Sheriff Callahan, which meant everyone knew everyone's business.

From Betty's raised eyebrow, I sensed my business was currently under scrutiny.

"Morning, Detective." Sheriff Callahan dropped a stack of folders on the conference

table. At fifty-six, Mike Callahan retained the build and presence of the college linebacker he'd once been, though his hair had long since turned silver. "Late night?"

"No, sir. Just the usual patrol of the lake perimeter."

"Uh-huh." He didn't sound convinced. "Heard you had to fish another tourist out of trouble near Miller's Rocks."

News traveled faster than wildfire in Hope Peak, especially when it involved a woman who looked like Didi. I suspected Matt Sorenson from the resort's adventure program probably witnessed the rescue and passed the story along.

"Minor boating issue," I said, reaching for my coffee. "Woman unfamiliar with the throttle mechanism. Situation resolved without incident."

Sheriff Callahan's eyes narrowed slightly. He'd known me since I was a gangly teenager fishing off the public dock, had personally recruited me to the department after I graduated from the academy. He could read my deflections like large-print road signs.

"This woman have a name?" he asked casually.

"Didi. From Chicago." I kept my tone neutral, professional. "Renting Cabin 7 for a few weeks."

Something about her story didn't add up.

People from Chicago typically came to Hope Peak for the resort's organized activities—guided fishing, water sports, horseback riding into the mountains.

They didn't rent isolated cabins for solitary stays unless they were either having

affairs or hiding. And Didi had arrived alone.

The morning briefing proceeded with updates on the usual summer concerns—increased traffic violations, seasonal visitors wandering onto private property, noise complaints from the vacation rentals, petty thefts from unlocked vehicles. Sheriff Callahan saved the most pressing issue for last.

"Fourth of July weekend is coming up," he reminded us, leaning against the whiteboard. "Lake population triples, alcohol consumption quadruples, and common sense gets cut in half. We'll need all hands on deck."

He outlined the security plans for the fireworks display, the additional patrols around the most popular beaches, and the coordination with resort security for their Independence Day bash.

"Sterling, you'll be coordinating the lake patrol rotations." He slid a folder my way. "I want schedules finalized by end of day tomorrow."

I nodded, already mentally arranging the rotation. Then Callahan dropped his bombshell.

"And after that, you're taking the Fourth off."

My head snapped up. "Sir?"

"You heard me. You haven't taken a personal day in eighteen months. You look like hell, and I need my best detective sharp, not running on fumes."

"I'm fine," I protested, aware of the other officers studiously pretending not to listen. "The department needs all hands on—"

"That's an order, Sterling." Callahan's tone brooked no argument. "The schedule shows you working every major holiday for the past three years. You're due. Take the day. Go to a barbecue. Watch the fireworks. Remember what it's like to be a civilian."

"Yes, sir," I managed, jaw clenched against further argument.

The briefing adjourned, and I retreated to my desk to review the case files that had accumulated overnight.

Nothing major—a dispute between neighboring vacation rentals over noise, reports of teenagers sneaking onto the resort's boats after hours, a fender bender in the grocery store parking lot.

Standard summer fare in a small lakeside town.

But my mind kept wandering back to my new neighbor. To Didi. To the wariness in her eyes that didn't match her cover story.

Vacation, my ass.

At lunch, I scrolled through my contacts and paused at Shawna's name. We'd had an arrangement for the past year—casual, convenient, no strings attached. Perfect for a man who'd learned the hard way that commitment led to disappointment.

I texted, already imagining how her practiced touch might drive thoughts of blonde hair and green eyes from my mind.

Free tonight?

Her response came quickly:

Sorry, not anymore. Been meaning to tell you—I'm seeing someone. Like, exclusively. Think he might be the one, Noah.

I stared at the message, surprised to feel only mild disappointment rather than rejection.

Good for you , I replied sincerely. He'd better treat you right.

He does , she texted back with a smiley face. Friends?

Always , I confirmed, setting my phone aside.

So Shawna had found "the one." Good for her. She deserved happiness after the string of losers she'd dated before our arrangement. I ignored the hollow feeling that expanded in my chest, the one that whispered I might be the only person in Hope Peak not moving forward with their life.

My Philly cheesesteak sat half-eaten as memories ambushed me with the stealth of well-trained attackers.

Jessica, my wife of just shy of three years, announcing she "needed more excitement" than Hope Peak could offer, then moving to Seattle with her executive boyfriend two weeks later.

The highway patrolman at our door, hat in hand, explaining about the patch of black ice, the semi-truck, the instantaneous nature of my parents' deaths.

The silence of the cabin I'd inherited, my grandfather's fishing gear still hanging on the wall as if he might return to claim it.

Each loss had carved something from me, leaving a shell that functioned perfectly

well as Hope Peak's detective but struggled with anything requiring emotional availability. I'd built a life around work and solitude, convincing myself it was by choice rather than fear.

I was better off focusing on what I could control—keeping the community safe, renovating my grandfather's cabin into something that felt like mine, protecting the lake that had been the one constant in my life. Entanglements led to pain. Better to keep things professional, casual, contained.

Which brought me back to the mystery woman next door.

By late afternoon, I'd wrapped the day's cases and headed home, the temperature climbing toward ninety as the July sun beat down mercilessly.

My cabin offered immediate relief as the central air conditioning hit me—one of the major upgrades I'd installed during the renovation of the old place.

I might embrace the rugged outdoor life in most ways, but Montana summers demanded modern solutions.

I changed into worn jeans and a faded t-shirt, then grabbed a beer from the fridge and stepped onto my deck. The heat hit like a physical wall after the cool interior, but the lake sparkled invitingly below. Maybe another swim before dinner would—

Movement on the neighboring dock caught my eye.

Didi stood at the edge, a fishing rod in one hand and what appeared to be a tangled mess of fishing line in the other.

She wore cutoff shorts that showcased legs that seemed to stretch forever, and a tight tank top that showed off her assets.

Her blonde hair was piled haphazardly atop her head, tendrils escaping to curl against her neck in the humidity.

Even from this distance, her frustration was evident as she attempted to thread the line through the rod's guides, the wind catching the loose strands and tangling them further. She muttered something I couldn't hear, then cast a longing glance at the cool water below.

I should mind my own business. Let her figure it out herself or give up trying.

Instead, I found myself walking down the path to my dock, then along the narrow strip of shared shoreline to hers. She didn't notice my approach at first, focused on the increasingly hopeless tangle in her hands.

"Didn't take you for the fishing type," I said.

She startled, nearly dropping the rod, then composed herself with visible effort. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me, Detective Sterling."

So she'd figured out my profession. Observant. Those green eyes assessed me with a mixture of guardedness and something else—interest, perhaps, though she was clearly trying to hide it.

"That's not a great knot for this lake," I said, nodding at her attempt. "The bass here will snap that in seconds."

She lifted her chin slightly. "I suppose you know a better one?"

"Been fishing these waters since I could walk," I replied, stepping closer. "Mind if I show you?"

A heartbeat of hesitation, then she held out the tangled mess. Our fingers brushed during the transfer, and that same electric awareness from yesterday's boat rescue sparked between us. From her quick intake of breath, I knew she felt it too.

"I'd appreciate the help," she said, her voice dropping into a lower register that sent heat rushing through me like wildfire.

As I began untangling her line, I studied her from beneath lowered lashes. Up close, I could see the faint smudges of fatigue beneath her eyes, the tension she carried in her shoulders despite her casual pose.

Didi from Chicago was running from something. Or someone.

And despite every instinct telling me to maintain professional distance, I found myself inexplicably drawn to her secrets—and to the beautiful woman keeping them.

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“Fish Out of Water”

Didi

"So you're actually going to teach me to fish?" I asked as Noah wrestled with the tangled mess I'd made of the fishing line. His fingers worked quickly, somehow turning my disaster into something usable.

"Seems like you could use the help," he replied with a wry smile. "Have you ever fished before?"

"Is it that obvious?" I sighed, watching him thread the line through the rod guides. "This is definitely a first for me."

"What made you decide to try fishing in the middle of your vacation?" His tone remained casual, but I caught the subtle shift to detective mode. Those perceptive blue eyes missed nothing.

I leaned against the dock railing, trying to appear more relaxed than I felt. "I needed a break from work, and every picture I've ever seen of people fishing shows them looking completely at peace. Plus, I have this beautiful private dock. Seemed like a shame not to use it."

"What kind of work has you needing that kind of break?"

"The kind that never stops," I replied, deliberately vague. "Old habits die hard, I guess. Even on vacation."

His hands paused momentarily before he kept going. "I can relate to not knowing how to relax. Sheriff Callahan just ordered me to take the Fourth of July off. Apparently, I haven't taken a personal day in eighteen months."

"You? A workaholic? I never would have guessed," I teased, surprised by how easy the banter felt.

His lips quirked upward. "At least I do know how to fish. And yes, it can be very relaxing." He tied a complicated knot I'd never manage to copy. "Tell you what—I'll grab my gear and join you. We can enjoy the sunset while we fish off the pier."

I hesitated. The idea of spending more time with Noah Sterling was simultaneously appealing and alarming. The last thing I needed was to develop an attachment to anyone during my self-imposed exile—especially not someone who noticed too much.

"I don't want to impose on your evening," I said, trying to sound casual rather than cautious.

"No imposition." He handed me back the now-properly-rigged rod. "Besides, if you catch a fish, I'll cook it for dinner. Can't beat fresh lake bass."

"You cook too?" The words slipped out before I could stop them, tinged with more interest than I'd intended.

"Nothing fancy," he replied with a half-shrug that did fascinating things to his shoulder muscles beneath his t-shirt. "But I can throw together a decent fish fry. Local specialty."

The offer was tempting. Dinner with a gorgeous man who could save me from both shipwrecks and culinary disasters? After weeks of takeout and microwaved meals, the

prospect of a home-cooked dinner—even one I'd technically caught myself—was almost irresistible.

"It's a deal," I said impulsively, surprised by my own answer. "Although I can't imagine I'll actually catch anything."

His smile reached his eyes this time, crinkling the corners in a way that made my stomach flip. "You'd be surprised. Fish are biting this time of evening. Be back in ten."

As he walked away, I watched the confident set of his shoulders, the way he moved with such assurance. What was I doing? I'd come to Hope Peak to hide, to recover, to avoid men entirely—not to go on impromptu fishing dates with the local law enforcement.

"This isn't a date," I reminded myself firmly. "It's a neighbor being neighborly."

But the flutter in my chest told a different story.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent an evening with a man who wasn't a colleague or an interview subject.

Not since catching my fiancé with his coworker in a compromising position three months ago.

I would have probably believed Brittany's excuse for why she'd been on her knees under Ryan's desk if his pants hadn't been unzipped when he stood up.

The memory still stung, though less than I'd expected.

Maybe because I'd been too preoccupied with my stalker situation to properly mourn

my relationship.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Jamie's name flashed on the screen along with a text that immediately tightened my stomach.

Another package arrived at the station today. Security confiscated it, but I got a look before they took it. Photos of you at the coffee shop across from your apartment. From last week, Didi. LAST. WEEK. How did he know you go there? Has anyone from Chicago contacted you directly?

I clutched the railing, suddenly lightheaded. The thought of ChicagoNightOwl watching me, photographing me at my regular coffee shop made my heart pound. The station was supposed to be keeping all correspondence from him, but clearly he was escalating.

Before I could reply, another text came through.

Thomas Vincetti from CPD called. They're getting a warrant to check security footage from businesses near the coffee shop. Stay put where you are. Don't post ANYTHING online, not even with location services off.

I typed back quickly:

I'm being careful. No posts, no check-ins, nothing. Tell Officer Vincetti thanks for the update.

My hands shook as I slipped the phone back into my pocket. The brief peace I'd found vanished as reality crashed back. I was hiding for a reason. Playing house with the attractive neighbor wasn't part of the plan.

"Everything okay?"

I jumped at Noah's voice. He stood a few feet away, fishing rod in one hand, a small tackle box in the other, and two bottles of beer tucked under his arm. How long had he been watching me?

"Fine," I said, forcing a smile. "Just a text from my best friend."

"Must've been some text." He handed me one of the beers, his expression neutral but eyes sharp. "You went pale."

"Friend drama," I said dismissively, accepting the cold bottle. "Nothing serious."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't press. Another point in his favor—perceptive but thankfully not pushy.

"So," I said, deliberately changing the subject, "now that I have a properly rigged rod, what's next?"

"Bait," he replied, setting down his tackle box and flipping it open. "You've got two options—artificial lures or live bait."

"Please tell me 'live bait' doesn't mean actual worms." I wrinkled my nose at the thought.

His laugh rumbled across the water. "It absolutely does. Or minnows, if you prefer."

"Is there a third option? Maybe something that didn't recently have a heartbeat?"

"City girl confirmed," he teased, pulling out a small plastic container. "Artificial it is. Less effective, but you'll sleep better."

I watched as he attached a colorful lure to my line, his hands moving with the same

confidence he'd shown when securing the boat last night.

The simple domesticity of the moment struck me—standing on a dock at sunset, having a man teach me to fish.

It was so far removed from my Chicago life of soundproof booths and midnight broadcasts that it felt like playing a role in someone else's life.

"Ready to go," he announced, handing me back the rod. "Now for the casting lesson."

"The what now?"

"You don't think the fish are going to jump onto the dock when you whistle, do you?" His eyes crinkled with amusement. "You need to get the line in the water."

"Right. Obviously." I gripped the rod awkwardly. "Just... throw it?"

He moved behind me, close enough that I could feel the heat of his body. "Not quite. Here, let me show you."

His arms came around me, hands covering mine on the rod. The sudden proximity sent my heart racing, his chest solid against my back. The spicy scent of his aftershave immediately made my knees embarrassingly weak.

"Grip here," he instructed, his voice low near my ear. "Then you pull back to about two o'clock."

He guided my arms through the motion, his body moving with mine.

"And then forward, releasing the line at ten o'clock."

We cast together, the line arcing through the air before landing with a satisfying plop about twenty feet out.

"Nice," he murmured, his breath warm against my neck.

For a moment, neither of us moved. I felt every point where our bodies touched, his hands still covering mine, how easy it would be to lean back against him fully. The tension between us had nothing to do with fishing.

Then he stepped away, clearing his throat. "Now you reel in slowly. Gives the impression of a swimming baitfish."

I nodded, not trusting my voice immediately. "Got it. Slow reeling."

He cast his own line with a smooth motion that made it look simple. We settled into a surprisingly comfortable rhythm—casting, reeling, recasting. The repetitive motion was oddly calming, and I found my thoughts quieting for the first time in days.

"You were right," I admitted after several minutes. "This is relaxing."

"Told you." He took a pull from his beer. "Nothing like focusing on something simple to clear your head."

The sun dipped lower, washing the lake in rich golds and pinks. In this light, Hope Peak looked like something from a travel magazine—pristine waters reflecting the mountain silhouettes, pine trees swaying gently in the evening breeze. For a moment, I could almost forget why I was here.

"So," Noah said casually, "what do you do in Chicago when you're not on vacation?"

I tensed slightly, preparing my usual vague response. "Nothing exciting."

"Let me guess," he said, eyes still on the water. "Something that involves talking."

I nearly dropped my rod. "What makes you say that?"

"Your voice," he replied simply. "There's a quality to it. Professional, trained. You modulate it without thinking." He cast again before continuing. "Plus you narrate to yourself sometimes. Old habit?"

My pulse quickened. Most people didn't notice these things about me. I prided myself on blending in when needed, on controlling how much I revealed. But Noah Sterling was more observant than most.

"I work in communications," I admitted, which wasn't exactly a lie. "Client services."

"Hmm." The sound was noncommittal but skeptical. "Must be important clients."

Before I could come up with a suitable deflection, my rod bent suddenly.

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"Oh my God!" I yelped, nearly dropping it. "What's happening?"

Noah's face lit up. "You've got a bite. Reel it in!"

"How? It's pulling!"

"That's the point," he laughed, stepping closer but not taking over. "Keep the rod tip up and reel when it's not fighting."

I struggled with the unexpected weight on the line, the rod bending alarmingly. "It feels huge! Is this normal?"

"Completely normal," he assured me, watching with a barely hidden grin. "You're doing great."

After what felt like an epic battle but was probably only thirty seconds, a flash of silver broke the surface.

"I see it!" I exclaimed, genuine excitement bubbling up inside me. "I'm actually catching a fish!"

Noah moved closer, reaching for a small net I hadn't noticed before. "Bring it in a bit more... perfect."

With a quick movement, he netted my catch and lifted it onto the dock. The fish—about twelve inches long with silvery-green scales—flopped energetically in the mesh.

"Bass," he announced proudly, as if I'd accomplished something remarkable. "Nice one, too. Probably about two pounds."

I stared at the fish, then at Noah, then back at the fish. A startled laugh escaped me—genuine, unfiltered joy I hadn't felt in months.

"I caught a fish!" I exclaimed, bouncing slightly on my toes. "An actual fish!"

Noah's smile was warm, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You're a natural."

"I am absolutely not," I laughed, setting down the rod to get a closer look at my catch. "That was pure luck."

"Maybe," he conceded, kneeling to unhook the fish with a gentle touch. "But you didn't give up. Most first-timers would have handed me the rod at the first tug."

Pride bloomed in my chest at his words. When was the last time I'd tried something completely new?

Something I wasn't immediately good at? My career had been a steady trajectory of playing to my strengths—my voice, my quick wit, my ability to connect with listeners.

Fishing had absolutely nothing to do with any of that.

"What happens now?" I asked, watching as he handled the fish with care.

"Now," he said, looking up at me with that half-smile that did unreasonable things to my insides, "I keep my promise. This beauty will make a perfect dinner for two."

The implication hung between us—an evening together, just the two of us.

"I did catch it," I said, trying to sound casual. "And a deal's a deal."

"Give me an hour," he said, standing with the fish secured in the net. "Bring your appetite and maybe that beer you owe me."

"I owe you a beer?"

"Professional fishing guide services don't come free," he teased. "First lesson's a beer, second is dinner."

"And what's the third?" The words slipped out before I could stop them, tinged with a flirtation I hadn't intended.

His eyes darkened slightly, gaze dropping briefly to my lips before returning to my eyes. "Let's get through dinner first."

The implications sent a shiver up my spine. As he walked away with my fish—my first-ever catch—I found myself watching him go with decidedly unprofessional thoughts.

I gathered our empty bottles and my borrowed gear, taking a moment to admire the sunset spreading across the lake.

Hope Peak was undeniably beautiful, the kind of place that made you believe in fresh starts and second chances.

The kind of place where people probably didn't need to lock their doors at night or check over their shoulders walking to their cars.

Back at my cabin, I surveyed my limited wardrobe options.

I hadn't packed for impressing anyone—just comfort and practicality.

After a quick shower, I settled on a simple sundress in a pale green that supposedly brought out my eyes, according to my sister Emily.

I let my hair down, the blonde waves falling past my shoulders, and applied enough makeup to feel put together without looking like I was trying too hard.

"It's just dinner with a neighbor," I told my reflection. "Not a date."

My phone buzzed with another text from Jamie.

How's Montana treating you? Send pics of the cabin—but nothing identifiable!

I smiled, snapping a quick photo of the interior that showed the rustic charm without any identifying features.

Not bad for a hideout , I texted back. Made a friend. Going to dinner.

Her response was immediate:

A FRIEND? Male or female? Hot or not? Details required!

I laughed out loud.

Neighbor. And yes, ridiculously hot. Making me dinner—I caught a fish!

YOU caught a fish? Who are you and what have you done with Didi Lawson? Also, BE CAREFUL. Remember why you're there.

My smile faded slightly.

I know. Just dinner. Promise I'm being careful.

I slipped my phone into my small crossbody bag along with my keys and a bottle of wine I'd picked up during my grocery run yesterday. As I walked the short path to Noah's cabin, butterflies danced in my stomach—a sensation I hadn't felt in months.

The scent of grilling fish greeted me before I reached his door.

I paused for a moment, taking in the scene—warm light spilling from the windows, smoke curling from a small grill on the deck, the silhouette of Noah moving inside.

It looked like a snapshot of a life I'd never considered for myself, simple and grounded in a way my Chicago existence never was.

I took a deep breath and knocked, suddenly nervous in a way that had nothing to do with stalkers or secrets. This was a different kind of vulnerability altogether—the kind that came with letting someone new into your life, even if just for dinner.

"What are you doing, Didi?" I whispered to myself one last time.

I'd come to the mountains to escape one man's attention, not to invite another's.

Yet here I was, accepting dinner with a man who noticed too much, who saw beyond the casual deflections that usually worked so well.

A man whose touch made my skin tingle and whose smile made me forget—momentarily—why I was hiding in the first place.

One meal. That's all it was. A neighborly thank-you for a fishing lesson.

But as Noah opened the door, his face lighting up at the sight of me, the rush of

energy through my body told a different story. Detective Noah Sterling was dangerous in ways ChicagoNightOwl could never be.

And that scared me far more than any stalker.

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“Dinner and Defenses”

Noah

I'd caught, cleaned, and cooked more lake bass than I could count over the years, but none had ever made me this nervous.

Back in my cabin after collecting Didi's catch, I surveyed my home through a stranger's eyes.

The open floor plan suddenly felt too sparse, too utilitarian.

I'd renovated my grandfather's old fishing cabin with practicality in mind—hardwood floors that wouldn't show dirt from my boots, stone countertops that could take a beating, furniture built for comfort rather than style.

The place was clean but unmistakably masculine, with fishing gear organized on hooks by the door and framed topographical maps of Hope Peak Lake on the walls.

"Get a grip, Sterling," I muttered, firing up the grill on the deck. "It's just dinner."

But it wasn't just dinner, and I knew it.

Something about Didi from Chicago had gotten under my skin in a way that hadn't happened in years.

Maybe it was the way she'd lit up when she caught that fish, her guard momentarily

dropped to reveal genuine joy.

Maybe it was how she scanned her surroundings with trained vigilance while trying to appear casual.

Or maybe it was simply those curves that her tight summer clothes did little to conceal.

I filled a bowl with ice water and submerged Didi's bass, then gathered my cleaning supplies—sharp fillet knife, cutting board, bowl for scraps. The routine calmed me, automatic after years of practice. I'd just laid everything out when a knock at the door sent a jolt through me.

Didi stood on my porch holding a bottle of wine, her blonde hair falling loose past her shoulders. She'd changed into a simple sundress in a pale green that made her eyes practically glow in the evening light.

"I come bearing gifts," she said, her voice dropping into that melodic register that reminded me of warm honey. "Though I realize now I should have asked if you even drink wine."

"I'm not much of a wine expert," I said, holding the door wider, "but I've been known to enjoy a glass or two."

She stepped inside, and I caught the scent of something floral—her shampoo or perfume—that quickened my pulse. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the cabin.

"Wow," she said, turning in a slow circle. "This is... not what I expected."

"Disappointed?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"The opposite," she replied, running her fingers along the stone countertop. "I was expecting mounted deer heads and beer can pyramids. This is beautiful."

Pride bloomed in my chest as she explored. The renovation had been my therapy after Jessica left—something tangible I could transform when everything else felt beyond my control. Every plank, tile, and fixture represented hours of work, sweat, and occasional blood.

"Did you do all this yourself?" she asked, admiring the hand-built pine shelving that separated the kitchen from the living room.

"Most of it. Called in professionals for the electrical and plumbing." I uncorked the wine she'd brought and poured two glasses. "Ready to see what becomes of your fishing triumph?"

She accepted the glass and followed me to the counter where I'd set up my cleaning station. "Is this the part where I get squeamish and you judge me for being a city girl?"

My lips curved upward. "No judgment. Not everyone grew up learning this stuff."

"Then I'm all eyes," she said, leaning against the counter beside me. "Teach me, Mountain Man."

The nickname sent an electric current down my spine. "First lesson—a sharp knife is safer than a dull one." I demonstrated the proper grip on my fillet knife. "You want clean, confident cuts."

Her attention fixed on my hands as I scaled the fish, my movements practiced and efficient. When I made the first cut behind the gills, she winced slightly but didn't look away.

"The key is knowing the anatomy," I explained, working the knife along the backbone. "Feel for the resistance, let the blade find the natural separation."

"There's something oddly graceful about watching you do this," she observed, sipping her wine. "Like someone with muscle memory for a complicated dance."

I glanced up, catching her eyes. "That's exactly what it is—muscle memory. My grandfather taught me when I was seven. Said a man should know how to feed himself from what nature provides."

"Smart man," she said softly.

"He was." I finished filleting, setting aside the perfectly cleaned pieces. "What about you? Who taught you to cook?"

"Bold of you to call my forays into the kitchen cooking," she laughed.

"My culinary expertise stops at ordering takeout and heating up frozen meals.

My mom worked double shifts most of my childhood, so dinner was whatever I could microwave for me and my sister.

After that, I never bothered to learn properly. "

I nodded, understanding washing over me. Her self-sufficiency wasn't just a personality trait—it had been a necessity. "Sounds like you had to grow up fast," I said quietly.

"Well, you're about to expand your resume," I said, nodding toward the refrigerator. "Would you mind putting together a simple salad while I get this fish ready for the grill? There's lettuce and veggies in the crisper drawer."

She looked momentarily uncertain, then squared her shoulders. "I think I can handle chopping vegetables without disaster. Point me to your cutting board and knife."

I directed her to the drawer with utensils, and we soon established a natural rhythm—me preparing the fish with my special blend of herbs and spices, her carefully slicing cucumber and tomatoes for the salad.

The domestic scene resonated in an unexpected way, as if we'd done this a hundred times before.

"I'm also going to need you to butter those rolls," I said, nodding toward a package of bakery rolls on the counter. "If you think you're up for such an advanced culinary challenge."

She flicked a piece of lettuce at me. "Don't push your luck, Sterling. I'm already exceeding my kitchen competency quotas here."

I laughed, enjoying the easy banter. By the time the fish hit the grill, Didi had not only assembled a decent salad but had set the table on the deck—plates and utensils arranged with the precision of someone compensating for unfamiliarity with the task.

"I bet you were the kid who color-coded their school folders," I teased, noticing how she'd aligned the silverware at perfect right angles.

"Says the man whose fishing lures are organized by color and size," she countered, gesturing toward my tackle box that sat open on the counter.

"Touché."

The sun hung low over the mountains as we settled at the table, the fish perfectly grilled, her salad providing a crisp accompaniment. The warm evening air carried the

scent of pine and lake water, creating an atmosphere that no high-end restaurant could match.

The first bite pulled an appreciative moan from her that shot straight through me. "Oh my God," she said, eyes closing briefly. "I've never tasted fish this good."

"That's because it was swimming a few hours ago," I replied, savoring her reaction perhaps more than the food itself. "Can't get fresher than that."

We ate as night fell around us, the conversation flowing as easily as the wine.

I learned she knitted when stressed, that she was allergic to cats but loved them anyway.

Small details that painted a fuller picture of this woman who'd dropped into my life just yesterday but already felt strangely significant.

Throughout dinner, I noticed how she deftly changed the subject whenever questions about her work or reason for visiting Hope Peak arose. Her redirections toward the town or lake life were so smooth they might go unnoticed by someone less observant.

After dinner, we moved to the deck chairs with the remainder of the wine. Stars emerged above us, bright against the dark sky. The soft glow from the cabin windows illuminated her profile—the delicate curve of her nose, the fullness of her lips, the way her hair caught the light.

"You know," I said, circling back to something that had been bothering me since our fishing lesson, "you've managed to dodge every question about your work. But that voice of yours—it's distinctive. Trained. Professional."

A faint blush colored her cheeks, visible even in the dim light. "Anyone ever tell you

that you're persistent, Detective Sterling?" she replied, swirling the wine in her glass.

"Part of the job description," I countered with a half-smile.

She adjusted her position, fingers tracing the rim of her glass. "Do many people stay in Hope Peak year-round? I can't imagine what it's like in winter."

I noted her continued evasion, filing it away as another piece of the puzzle. Whatever her secret, she guarded it carefully. I let her change the subject, answering her question instead of pressing mine.

"Not always," I told her, keeping details minimal. "Had different plans at one point. Sheriff Callahan suggested I consider law enforcement. Said I had good instincts."

"He was right," she said softly. "You noticed immediately that I was in trouble on the lake yesterday."

"That was just basic observation."

"No," she insisted, her body angling more fully toward me. "Most people wouldn't have recognized the signs so quickly. You pay attention in a way most don't."

Her eyes held mine, and the atmosphere between us transformed. The conversation faded as we looked at each other, the distance between our chairs suddenly feeling like both too much and not enough space.

My body inclined forward slightly, drawn toward her like a magnet. Her lips parted, her gaze dropping to my mouth. The moment stretched, electric with possibility.

My phone buzzed loudly against the wooden table, shattering the connection. I swore under my breath, checking the screen.

"My cousin Kyle," I explained, reluctantly answering. "Hey, what's up?"

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"What's up? Nothing much," Kyle replied. "Just calling to see if you're planning to make an appearance at the Petersons' beach bonfire tonight."

"Hadn't planned on it," I said, glancing at Didi. "Got company for dinner."

There was a beat of silence before Kyle's voice returned, notably higher with interest. "Company? As in... female company? You've got a woman over there? And you're actually cooking for her?"

Turning slightly away, I lowered my voice. "Yes, Kyle."

"Holy shit," he laughed. "Now I definitely need to meet her. Bring her to the bonfire! It'll be fun—s'mores, music, Howard's terrible jokes. Come on, man."

I hesitated, looking back at Didi who gazed out at the starlit lake. Maybe a social gathering would be good for her—she still carried so much tension in her shoulders and around her eyes.

"Hold on," I said to Kyle, then covered the phone. "The Petersons—elderly couple who've been coming to Hope Peak every summer for decades—are hosting a beach bonfire tonight. My cousin thinks we should make an appearance."

Her eyebrows rose. "We?"

"Kyle's words, not mine," I said with a small smile. "But it might be nice. Good people, beautiful spot on the beach. S'mores involved."

She hesitated only briefly before nodding. "Maybe I should take your advice—think about work less, loosen up more. That's why I came here after all, right?"

Relief swept through me at her agreement. I hadn't realized how much I wanted her to say yes until she did.

"We'll be there in twenty," I told Kyle before hanging up.

We worked together to clean up, falling into an unexpectedly comfortable rhythm in the small kitchen space. When her hand brushed mine as we both reached for the same glass, the earlier connection rekindled, crackling between us.

The walk to Peterson's cove took us along the lake shore, our path lit by the nearly full moon.

Even as night fell, the air remained comfortably warm, the heat of the day slowly releasing from the earth beneath our feet.

The distant glow of the bonfire guided us, along with the sound of laughter and music.

"The Petersons host these gatherings all summer," I said as we approached. "They're retired teachers who love bringing the lake community together. Really good people."

She looked up at me, moonlight catching in her eyes. "Sounds nice. I can't remember the last time I went to something like this."

The vulnerability in her voice caught me off-guard.

Before I could respond, we rounded the final bend and the bonfire came into full view—a crackling blaze surrounded by perhaps twenty people, some familiar faces,

others summer visitors.

The scent of toasting marshmallows filled the air as children and adults alike held skewers over the flames.

"Noah! You made it!" Kyle's voice boomed across the beach. My cousin bounded over, all six-foot-two of him radiating his usual boundless energy. His eyes immediately fixed on Didi with undisguised interest. "And you brought your dinner guest. Excellent!"

"Kyle Sterling," he introduced himself, extending a hand to Didi. "The better-looking Sterling cousin."

"Didi," she replied with a warm smile. "The neighbor with questionable boating skills."

Kyle glanced between us, eyebrows rising. "Neighbor? Wait, you're staying in one of the lakeside cabins?"

"Cabin 7," she confirmed.

Kyle laughed. "Now the story makes even more sense. Noah's famous rescue mission at Miller's Rocks. Half the lake has heard about it by now."

I bit back a groan. "Don't believe everything you hear."

"Noah!" Martha Peterson's voice called from near the fire. The silver-haired woman waved enthusiastically, nudging her husband beside her.

"Come meet everyone," Kyle said, guiding us toward the gathering.

The next hour passed in a blur of introductions and conversations. Didi gradually relaxed among the group, her natural charm drawing people to her.

"First time at Hope Peak?" Howard Peterson asked, handing her a skewer and a marshmallow.

"Yes," Didi replied, accepting both with a smile. "Just arrived yesterday, actually."

"Perfect timing," Martha said, settling on a driftwood log beside her. "The Fourth of July fireworks here aren't to be missed."

From a short distance away, I observed Didi as she carefully held her marshmallow over the flames, rotating it with perfect precision until it turned golden brown.

Martha showed her how to sandwich it between graham crackers and chocolate, and the genuine delight on Didi's face when she took her first bite caused my chest to constrict with an unfamiliar emotion.

"I haven't had s'mores since I was a kid," she admitted, licking a smudge of chocolate from her thumb.

"Best enjoyed with good company," Howard said with a wink in my direction.

Ruth Anderson, the resort owner, joined their circle and soon had Didi laughing about "Flessie," the legendary lake monster of Montana's Flathead Lake, said to rival "Bessie," that of neighboring Lake Erie.

Across the fire, Kyle caught my eye and gave me an exaggerated thumbs-up that prompted an eye roll.

"She's lovely," Martha Peterson said quietly, appearing at my side with a s'more. She

handed me one, her kind eyes warm in the firelight. "It's nice to see new faces at our gatherings. The same lake stories get old after a while."

I accepted the gooey treat with a nod of thanks. "She's my neighbor, just moved into Cabin 7 yesterday."

"Well, we're glad you brought her," Martha said simply. "Howard loves having new audiences for his terrible jokes."

A smile formed as I found Didi again across the fire.

She was helping a young girl perfect her marshmallow roasting technique, demonstrating how to keep it just above the flames.

As if sensing my attention, she looked up, our eyes meeting over the fire.

Her expression softened into a look of quiet understanding that seemed meant only for me before returning to her marshmallow mentoring.

The bonfire began winding down around midnight, with families with children departing first, followed gradually by others. Kyle had wandered off with a pretty tourist from California, and eventually only a handful of people remained.

"Ready to head back?" I asked Didi, noting the fatigue beginning to show in her eyes despite her animated conversation with the Petersons.

"Yes, please," she said, stifling a yawn. "It's been a long day."

We said our goodbyes, with Martha insisting we join them for a ride on their pontoon sometime soon. To my surprise, Didi agreed readily, genuinely charmed by the elderly couple.

The walk back featured a peaceful quiet between us as we followed the moonlit path. When we reached her cabin, she paused on the steps, turning to face me.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For dinner, for the bonfire... for making me feel welcome."

"You did that yourself," I replied honestly. "Everyone loved you."

She glanced down briefly, then back up, her green eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Still, it was nice not feeling like a stranger."

We stood there, the night wrapping around us, neither moving to leave.

Her gaze drifted to my lips then back to my eyes, a silent invitation my body responded to instantly.

Every nerve ending sparked with awareness of her—how easily I could close the distance, discover if her lips tasted as sweet as they looked.

But something held me back—not just professional caution, but the sense that whatever was happening between us deserved more than rushed impulse. She was hiding something significant, and I was nothing if not thorough.

"Goodnight, Didi from Chicago," I said, my voice rougher than intended.

"Goodnight, Detective Mountain Man," she replied, disappointment mingling with desire in her eyes.

She turned and entered her cabin, glancing back once before closing the door. I remained on the path for a moment, my body rigid with restraint, desire pulsing through me at the memory of how she'd looked at me.

Whatever secrets she was keeping, whatever had brought her to Hope Peak—it could wait. For now, knowing the attraction wasn't one-sided was enough.

I walked back to my cabin under the stars, the memory of her smile and the scent of her perfume lingering in my thoughts, already counting the hours until I'd see her again.

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“Into the Woods”

Didi

I woke to sunlight streaming through the cabin's thin curtains, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling above me. The events of the previous night rushed back—the crackling bonfire, the sweet stickiness of s'mores, and most of all, that moment with Noah at my doorstep.

My fingers traced my lips, remembering how close they'd come to meeting his.

The memory sent a flutter through my stomach that had nothing to do with hunger.

The way his blue eyes had darkened as they dropped to my mouth, the almost imperceptible lean of his body toward mine—all signs pointing to a kiss that never happened.

I stretched, feeling oddly rested despite the late night. Hope Peak was working its magic on me, the clean mountain air and distance from Chicago like a balm to my frayed nerves. Even the persistent heat seemed more tolerable this morning, a soft breeze stirring the curtains.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, Jamie's name flashing on the screen. I smiled, grabbing it.

"Good morning, sunshine," I answered, my voice still husky with sleep.

"Didi." Something in Jamie's tone immediately set off alarm bells. "Are you alone? Can you talk?"

I sat up straight, wide awake. "What's wrong?"

"ChicagoNightOwl posted something on the fan forums last night." She paused, and I could hear her taking a deep breath. "He wrote that he's 'getting closer to finding his night star' and that 'distance won't keep us apart for long.'"

My blood ran cold. "That could mean anything," I said, but my voice lacked conviction.

"Maybe, but there's more. He mentioned mountains and lakes—said something about how 'even the highest peaks can't hide true love.' I know it's vague, but Didi, I'm worried he might have figured out you're somewhere in Montana."

I swallowed hard, my momentary peace shattered. "How could he possibly know that? Only you and the station manager know I'm here."

"I don't know. Maybe it's just a coincidence, but..." Jamie trailed off.

"But you don't believe in coincidences," I finished for her. We'd been friends long enough for me to know her thinking.

"The Chicago PD still can't identify him from the security footage. Too grainy, and he always keeps his face hidden. Officer Vincetti says they're trying to trace his IP address from the forum posts, but this guy is careful."

I forced myself to breathe deeply, fighting back the familiar tide of anxiety. "I'm in the middle of nowhere, Jamie. Even if he somehow narrowed it down to Montana, there are thousands of lakes here."

"I know. Just... be careful, okay? Don't post anything online, don't use credit cards if you can avoid it. And maybe let someone there know what's going on?"

Noah's face immediately flashed in my mind. A detective would know exactly how to handle this situation. But telling him would mean revealing everything—my real job, the stalker, my reasons for hiding at Hope Peak. The thought of opening up to anyone—making myself vulnerable—after Ryan's betrayal made my stomach clench.

"I'll think about it," I said noncommittally. "Meanwhile, keep me posted if anything else happens."

After hanging up, I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to recenter myself. Montana was nearly a thousand miles from Chicago. ChicagoNightOwl was just fishing, trying to spook me into revealing my location. The odds of him finding me here were astronomical.

A knock at the door jolted me from my thoughts.

"Who is it?" I called, heart suddenly racing.

"Noah," came the deep voice from the other side. "Just checking if you survived the s'mores challenge last night."

Relief washed over me as I quickly pulled on shorts beneath my sleep shirt and padded to the door. I opened it to find Noah standing on my porch, looking unfairly good in hiking boots, worn jeans, and a forest green t-shirt that made his blue eyes even more striking against his tanned skin.

"I survived," I said, trying to appear casual despite my racing thoughts. "Though I may have dreams about chocolate and graham crackers for weeks."

His gaze swept over me, taking in my disheveled hair and sleep attire with an appreciative glance that sent warmth blooming across my skin. "Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. I was just..." I gestured vaguely behind me, not wanting to mention Jamie's call.

Noah's expression shifted, those instincts of his clearly sensing something off in my demeanor. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I said, too quickly. "Just morning brain fog. Not fully caffeinated yet."

He studied me for a moment longer before thankfully dropping it. "Well, I was wondering if you had plans for today?"

"Plans? I was thinking of achieving a record-breaking level of absolutely nothing. Why?"

His mouth quirked up at one corner. "How would you feel about experiencing a real Montana adventure instead?"

"Define 'adventure,'" I said cautiously, thinking of my boating disaster.

"Hiking," he replied. "There's a trail about twenty minutes from here that leads to a waterfall only the locals know about. Perfect spot for a picnic lunch."

The invitation caught me off guard. A remote hike with Noah Sterling meant hours alone together in the wilderness. After Jamie's warning, maybe I should stay close to the resort where there were people around.

But something in the way he looked at me—hopeful but not pushing—made my resistance crumble. What better distraction from stalker fears than exploring the

mountains with a man who made my heart race for entirely different reasons?

"I'm not exactly REI's best customer," I warned. "My hiking experience is limited to the stairs at the L station when the elevator's broken."

He laughed, the sound warming me from the inside out. "It's an easy trail. And I promise not to leave you behind if you need to catch your breath."

My mind flashed to Jamie's warning, then to the almost-kiss last night. One was a reason to stay, the other a reason to go.

"Give me fifteen minutes to shower and change," I said, making my decision. "And fair warning—I don't own hiking boots."

Noah's smile was worth whatever blisters awaited me. "Sneakers will work. I'll pack lunch."

As I closed the door, I leaned against it, questioning my sanity. I'd fled Chicago to escape one man's attention, yet here I was, eagerly seeking another's. But something about Noah made me feel safe rather than hunted. Protected rather than pursued.

Maybe that was the most dangerous feeling of all.

"You didn't mention the elevation gain," I panted, pausing to take another swig from my water bottle.

Noah turned back, not even slightly winded despite the steep trail we'd been climbing for the past forty minutes. "If I had, would you have come?"

"Probably not," I admitted, taking in the breathtaking vista that had opened up behind us. The lake sparkled like a massive sapphire below, surrounding mountains creating a perfect natural bowl. "But I would have missed this view."

"Worth the burning calves?"

"Ask me again when we reach this mythical waterfall of yours."

We'd left the resort in Noah's Jeep, driving along winding forest roads until reaching a trailhead unmarked by any official signage. Just as promised, the path seemed known only to locals—we hadn't encountered another soul since starting our hike.

I'd dressed in my most outdoor-appropriate clothing: yoga pants, a lightweight tank top under a long-sleeved shirt (which I'd already tied around my waist), and my most supportive sneakers.

Noah carried a backpack with our lunch and water, moving with the easy confidence of someone who'd hiked these mountains his entire life.

"We're about halfway there," he said, reaching down to offer his hand as we approached a rocky section of the trail.

I took it, trying to ignore the now-familiar spark when our skin connected. His hand was warm and calloused, enveloping mine completely. When I nearly slipped on loose gravel, his grip tightened, steadying me effortlessly.

"Thanks," I mumbled, embarrassingly breathless from both the altitude and his proximity.

"City girl," he teased, but his tone held admiration rather than mockery.

The trail wound through alpine meadows dotted with wildflowers, stands of fragrant pines, and rocky outcroppings that offered increasingly spectacular views. Noah pointed out local landmarks and wildlife with the expertise of a born naturalist.

"Red-tailed hawk," he said, pausing to point at a large bird circling above. "They mate for life. That one's probably hunting to feed its family."

"How do you know all this?" I asked, genuinely impressed.

He shrugged, seeming almost embarrassed by my admiration. "My grandfather. He taught me everything about these mountains—the plants, the animals, where to find the best fishing spots. Said understanding nature was the first step to respecting it."

"He sounds like a wise man."

"He was." A shadow crossed Noah's face. "This was his favorite hike. He brought me here for the first time when I was eight. I fell in the creek and came home soaking wet with a pocket full of interesting rocks."

The image of a small, freckled Noah splashing in a mountain stream made me smile. "Some things never change, Detective. You rescued me when I was metaphorically drowning just two days ago."

His answering smile reached his eyes, crinkling the corners in that way that made my stomach flip. "Occupational hazard."

After another twenty minutes of hiking, we reached a clearing with a fallen log perfectly situated for resting. Noah slipped off his backpack and gestured for me to sit.

"Break time," he announced, retrieving a small container of trail mix and offering me

some. "How are those city feet holding up?"

"Surprisingly well," I admitted, accepting a handful of nuts and dried fruit. "Though I might need to invest in actual hiking boots if I plan to do this again."

"Planning to stick around for a while, then?" he asked, his tone deliberately casual.

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The question prodded at the lie I'd been maintaining. "I'm... flexible with my return date," I hedged.

Noah nodded, not pushing further, though I could practically see the gears turning behind those observant eyes.

We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the only sounds being the whisper of wind through the pines and the occasional birdcall. The peacefulness was something I rarely experienced in Chicago and I breathed deeply, sensing the new awareness of my inhales and exhales.

"My mom was a nurse's aide by day and waited tables at night," I said, surprising myself with the disclosure. "My sister and I basically raised ourselves."

Noah turned toward me, giving me his full attention without interrupting.

"Emily—that's my sister—she took after Mom.

Practical, organized, always had a plan.

Got a scholarship to nursing school, married a doctor, now has two perfect little girls and a house in the suburbs.

" I tried to keep the hint of envy from my voice and failed.

"Meanwhile, I chased a communication degree and ended up with student loans and a broken engagement. "

"Your sister sounds like she found her path early," Noah said carefully. "Not everyone does. Doesn't make your journey less valid."

I plucked a wildflower growing near the log, twirling it between my fingers. "Try telling that to my mother. In her eyes, Emily did everything right, and I'm just... still figuring things out."

"At thirty-one?" Noah asked with a small smile.

"Ah, you were paying attention during the bonfire introductions," I noted, returning his smile. "Yes, at thirty-one. Pathetic, right?"

"Not at all," he said, his voice softening. "Some of us take detours before finding where we're meant to be."

Something in his tone made me look up, catching an expression of understanding that made me wonder about his own detours. Before I could ask, he stood, offering his hand again.

"Come on. Waterfall's just around the bend, and we've earned that picnic."

I took his hand, letting him pull me up, noticing how he didn't immediately let go as we began walking again. Our fingers remained loosely intertwined, a casual intimacy that felt simultaneously new and completely natural.

The sound reached us before the sight—a rhythmic rushing that grew louder with each step.

Then the trail curved, and the waterfall revealed itself in all its glory.

Water cascaded down a series of stone ledges, creating a multitiered fall that dropped

at least fifty feet into a crystal-clear pool below.

Mist rose from the impact point, catching the sunlight and creating fleeting rainbows.

"Noah," I breathed, momentarily speechless. "This is incredible."

Pride flashed across his face. "Worth the hike?"

"Absolutely worth it," I confirmed, drinking in the scene. "How is there no one else here?"

"It's not on any tourist maps," he explained, leading me toward a flat rock outcropping near the pool. "Local secret. Most visitors stick to the designated park trails."

We settled on the sun-warmed rock as Noah unpacked our lunch—thick sandwiches from the resort deli, apples, and homemade cookies that Howard from the bonfire last night had contributed when he'd heard about our hike.

"So," I said, biting into my sandwich, "since I've shared my family dysfunction, it seems only fair you reciprocate. What made the son of Hope Peak become its protector?"

A shadow crossed Noah's face, but he didn't deflect. "My parents died in a car accident during my sophomore year at Montana State. Black ice, semi-truck couldn't stop in time. They were gone instantly."

"Noah, I'm so sorry," I said, immediately regretting my question.

He shook his head slightly. "It's okay. It was twelve years ago."

" He took a breath before continuing. "I was studying environmental sciences, thinking I might work for the Forest Service or National Parks.

But after they died, everything changed.

I came back to handle the funeral, never really left.

Dropped out and joined the local Police Academy instead.

Sheriff Callahan had known me since I was born—took me under his wing.

Said Hope Peak needed someone who cared about it. "

"And you do," I observed. "Care about it, I mean. It shows in everything you do."

He met my eyes. "This place, these people—they're all I have left. Worth protecting."

The intimacy of the moment wrapped around us, neither of us looking away. I understood suddenly why Noah had never left Hope Peak, why he threw himself into his work, why he maintained such careful distance from relationships. Loss had shaped him just as surely as my family dynamics had shaped me.

We were both interrupted by a distant rumble. Noah glanced up, frowning at the sky where dark clouds had begun gathering over the peaks behind us.

"That's not good," he muttered, quickly repacking our lunch. "Montana thunderstorms can move in fast, especially during heat waves like this. We should head back."

I followed his gaze to see that the previously pristine blue sky was rapidly disappearing behind ominous clouds. The temperature had dropped subtly, and the wind picked up, carrying the distinct smell of approaching rain.

"Is it dangerous?" I asked, helping him pack.

"Lightning in the mountains is nothing to mess with," he confirmed, shouldering his backpack. "But there's a gazebo about ten minutes down the trail—part of an old Forest Service outpost. If we hurry, we can wait it out there."

We set off at a much quicker pace than our leisurely ascent. The wind grew stronger, bending the tops of the pines and sending fallen leaves swirling around our feet. Another rumble of thunder, closer this time, urged us forward.

The first fat raindrops began falling just as a small wooden structure came into view—a hexagonal gazebo perched on a small clearing overlooking the valley. We made a final dash as the skies opened, reaching the shelter just as the rain turned from scattered drops to a proper downpour.

"Perfect timing," Noah said, dropping his backpack on the gazebo's wooden bench.

I caught my breath, looking out at the sudden transformation of our surroundings. The rain created a silver curtain around our shelter, the distant mountains now obscured by mist. Lightning flashed, followed almost immediately by a crack of thunder that made me jump.

"That was close," I said, wrapping my arms around myself as the temperature continued to drop.

Noah stepped closer, his body radiating warmth. "Storm's right on top of us. Might be here a while."

The gazebo, charming in theory, offered minimal protection from the wind that now drove the rain sideways. I shivered, wishing I'd worn something warmer than my lightweight hiking clothes.

"Here," Noah said, noticing my discomfort. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out a fleece jacket, draping it around my shoulders. "Better?"

The jacket carried his scent—pine, cedar, and something uniquely Noah. "Better," I confirmed, pulling it closer. "Thanks."

"Can't have you catching pneumonia on my watch. I'd never hear the end of it from the sheriff."

I laughed, grateful for the moment of levity. "Already imagining his lecture?"

"In vivid detail," he agreed with a wry smile.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the gazebo, followed by thunder so loud it seemed to vibrate through the wooden structure. I flinched, and Noah's hand found my shoulder, steadying me.

"It's okay," he said. "We're safe here."

The simple touch and reassurance broke something loose inside me. Maybe it was the intimate setting, the storm isolating us from the rest of the world, or just the accumulated tension of the past months seeking release—but suddenly I was talking.

"My fiancé cheated on me with his coworker," I blurted out. "I found them together in his office. She was under his desk, and he was... well, his pants weren't where they should have been."

Noah's eyes widened slightly, but he didn't interrupt.

"Three years together, and that's how it ended. The worst part? I wasn't even that heartbroken." I gave a hollow laugh. "Hurt pride, sure. But mostly I just felt stupid

for not seeing it sooner. All those late nights at the office suddenly made a lot more sense."

"He's the stupid one," Noah said, his voice quiet but intense. "Not you."

"Maybe," I sighed. "But it made me question my judgment. Like, how did I miss that? What else am I missing? And then the stalker situation started, and I just—" I stopped abruptly, realizing what I'd let slip.

Noah's expression sharpened instantly. "Stalker situation?"

My heart pounded. This was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid—revealing too much, becoming vulnerable, being seen. "It's nothing," I said, attempting to backtrack. "Just an overly enthusiastic... client. From work."

His eyes held mine, seeing through the half-truth. "Didi," he said simply, my name somehow carrying a wealth of questions.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating his face—concerned, intent, and so very close to mine. The thunder that followed seemed to shake something loose between us, the charged air inside the gazebo matching the electric atmosphere outside.

"I can't," I whispered, not even sure what I was refusing—his questions, his concern, or the growing pull between us.

He stepped closer, one hand coming up to gently touch my cheek. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he said. "But I need you to know something."

I looked up, caught in the intensity of his blue gaze.

"Whatever you're running from, whatever brought you to Hope Peak—I won't let

anything hurt you here." The simple promise carried the weight of absolute certainty.

The final barrier between us dissolved. I'm not sure who moved first—maybe we both did, drawn together like the inevitable collision of storm fronts. His lips found mine with surprising gentleness, a questioning touch that quickly blazed into certainty when I responded.

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I rose to my toes, hands finding his shoulders as his arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me against him. The kiss deepened, his mouth warm and insistent against mine. Thunder crashed around us, but I barely noticed, lost in the sensation of finally knowing what Noah Sterling's kiss felt like.

It was better than I'd imagined—and I'd imagined it more than I cared to admit. He kissed with the same focused intensity he brought to everything, as if nothing existed beyond this moment, this connection. One hand slid up my back to tangle in my hair, angling my head to deepen the kiss further.

I made a small sound of pleasure against his mouth and felt his smile in response. When we finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, the storm seemed to match our intensity, rain lashing the gazebo and wind howling through the trees.

"I've been wanting to do that since I pulled you away from Miller's Rocks," Noah admitted, his voice rougher than usual.

"Even though I was a helpless tourist who couldn't operate a boat?" I teased, staying within the circle of his arms.

"Especially then," he smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Something about the way you admitted you were in over your head but refused to panic. It was... compelling."

Another flash of lightning reminded us of our precarious situation. Noah glanced out at the storm, which showed no signs of abating.

"We should probably make a run for it once there's a break in the lightning," he said reluctantly. "Getting dark soon, and we don't want to navigate that trail after sunset."

As if the weather heard him, the rain suddenly intensified, sheets of water making visibility beyond the gazebo nearly impossible.

"Or not," I laughed, pressing closer to his warmth.

He smiled down at me, arms tightening around my waist. "I guess we're stuck here a little longer."

"What a terrible fate," I murmured, rising to my toes to press another kiss to his lips.

This one was slower, more deliberate, both of us exploring what we'd started. His hands were respectful but confident, spanning my waist, tracing the curve of my spine. I let my fingers wander into his hair, slightly damp from the rain, reveling in the solid strength of him against me.

When we separated again, I saw something flash across his face—a hesitation that hadn't been there before.

"What?" I asked.

"This isn't just..." he started, then paused, searching for words. "I don't want you to think this is how I behave with every tourist who passes through."

The confession touched me, his concern for how I might perceive him revealing a vulnerability I hadn't expected from someone so outwardly confident.

"I don't think that," I assured him. "And for the record, I don't make a habit of kissing local law enforcement in every town I visit."

His smile returned, relief evident. "Good to know."

Just then, the downpour eased slightly, though thunder still rumbled in the distance. Noah stepped to the edge of the gazebo, assessing the conditions.

"We should go now," he said decisively. "There's enough of a break that we can make it back to the trailhead if we hurry."

He helped me back into his jacket, zipping it up despite my protests that he'd get soaked. We shouldered his backpack together and stood at the edge of our shelter, looking out at the rain-slick trail.

"Ready?" he asked, taking my hand.

"No," I laughed, "but let's do it anyway."

We burst out of the gazebo into the rain, immediately drenched despite the lessened downpour.

Noah kept a firm grip on my hand as we half-ran, half-slid down the muddy trail.

What had been a pleasant hike up became a treacherous descent, but Noah navigated it with confidence, steadying me whenever I slipped.

The combination of adrenaline, exertion, and the lingering euphoria from our kisses created a giddy lightness in me.

I found myself laughing as we splashed through puddles and ducked under dripping branches.

Noah's answering grin flashed white against his rain-darkened face, his eyes alight

with the same wild joy.

By the time we reached his Jeep, we were completely soaked, mud-spattered, and breathless with exertion and laughter. The drive back to the resort passed in comfortable quiet, the Jeep's heater slowly drying our clothes as rain continued to drum on the roof.

When we pulled up to my cabin, the storm had eased to a gentle shower. Noah insisted on walking me to my door, though we were both already as wet as we could possibly be.

Standing on my porch, I suddenly felt shy, the intimacy of our gazebo kisses seeming almost dreamlike in the return to reality. Noah sensed my hesitation, maintaining a small distance between us despite the obvious desire still simmering in his eyes.

"You should get inside, get dry," he said, voice husky. "Don't want you catching cold."

"You too," I said, reluctant to end our time together. "Thank you for today. Waterfall, storm and all."

"My pleasure," he replied, his gaze dropping to my lips briefly before returning to my eyes. The restraint evident in his posture made my heart race—he wanted to kiss me again but was holding back, giving me space.

The realization of his thoughtfulness, his careful respect for boundaries even after what we'd shared, made me want him even more. I stepped forward, intending to close the distance between us, when a crack of nearby thunder made us both jump.

The moment broke, and Noah stepped back with visible reluctance. "I should go," he said, though everything in his stance suggested he wanted to stay.

"You should," I agreed, not meaning it at all.

His smile told me he knew exactly what I was thinking. "Goodnight, Didi from Chicago," he said, echoing his words from the previous night.

"Goodnight, Detective Mountain Man," I replied, watching as he turned and walked back to his Jeep, rain plastering his shirt to the broad planes of his back.

I stood there long after his taillights disappeared, rain mingling with the lingering warmth of his kiss on my lips.

Whatever was happening between us had just shifted into dangerous territory.

Noah Sterling was no longer just my attractive neighbor or a potential friend—he was quickly becoming something much more complicated.

And as I finally turned to enter my cabin, I couldn't help wondering if I was making the biggest mistake of my life by letting him get so close—or if pushing him away would be the real mistake.

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“Heat Wave”

Noah

I couldn't get the taste of her out of my mind.

Sitting at my kitchen table hours after dropping Didi at her cabin, I stared unseeing at the patrol schedules for the Fourth of July weekend.

The papers lay spread before me, notations half-finished, my concentration utterly shot.

Every time I tried to focus, I was back in that gazebo, the rain hammering the roof, her lips soft beneath mine.

The kiss shouldn't have happened. I knew better than to get emotionally involved with summer visitors.

They always left—that was the whole point of a vacation.

Since Jessica, I'd carefully maintained a life built around casual encounters and physical release without emotional entanglement.

The occasional hookup with Shawna had been perfect—satisfying, uncomplicated, and with clear boundaries.

And yet.

There was something about Didi that felt different. The way she'd looked at me in the storm, vulnerable yet unafraid. The way she'd laughed as we ran through the downpour, finding joy in the chaos. The glimpses of her past she'd shared, revealing layers beneath her carefully maintained facade.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, the storm making another pass over the mountains. I scrubbed a hand over my face, pushing back from the table. The patrol schedules could wait until morning. Right now, I needed to clear my head.

My phone rang, Sheriff Callahan's name lighting up the screen.

"Sterling," I answered, grateful for the distraction.

"Noah," Callahan's gruff voice came through. "Just checking in on those schedules for the holiday weekend. With this heat wave, I'm expecting even more lake traffic than usual. People trying to cool off however they can."

"Working on them now, sir," I said, staring at the barely-started notes. "Should have them to you by tomorrow morning."

"Good. Make sure we've got extra coverage around the public beaches, especially during the fireworks. And I want double patrols on the water. Last thing we need is drunk boaters when the lake's this crowded."

"Already planning on it," I assured him.

"Alright then. Get some rest, Sterling. You've been putting in long hours."

After hanging up, I leaned back in my chair, the weight of my professional responsibilities settling heavily against my growing feelings for Didi. My personal life was separate from my role as Hope Peak's detective, and I intended to keep it that

way.

A flash of lightning illuminated the room, followed by a rolling boom of thunder. The storm was circling back, the oppressive temperatures creating unstable weather patterns across the mountains. Through my window, I could see Didi's cabin, lights still blazing despite the late hour.

That was unusual. In the short time she'd been here, I'd noticed her lights typically went out by eleven. It was nearly midnight now.

I told myself it was neighborly concern that made me grab my jacket and head out into the light rain.

The humidity hit me like a wall as I stepped outside, the day's warmth barely diminished by the storm. Another wave of the record-breaking temperatures that had gripped the region for days. By the time I reached Didi's porch, my t-shirt was sticking to my back despite the short walk.

I hesitated before knocking. What exactly was I doing here? But then I heard what sounded like a frustrated groan from inside, and my concern outweighed my second thoughts.

My knuckles had barely touched the door when it swung open. Didi stood there, hair piled messily atop her head, wearing nothing but a tank top and shorts that revealed miles of leg. Her skin glistened with perspiration, face flushed from the heat.

"Noah," she said, surprise evident in her voice. "Is everything okay?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," I replied, noting the discomfort in her expression. "Saw your lights still on. Everything alright?"

She gave a defeated laugh, gesturing me inside. "My air conditioner gave up the ghost about an hour ago. Complete surrender. I've been trying to revive it, but I think it's officially dead."

I stepped into her cabin, immediately feeling the stifling temperature. The small window unit was silent, despite the dial being turned to maximum cooling.

"These old units aren't made for heat waves like this," I said, crossing to examine it. "Compressor's probably overheated and shut down."

"So my options are what? Melt into a puddle on the floor?"

I smiled at her exasperation. "Resort maintenance can probably replace it, but not until morning at the earliest." I hesitated, then offered, "My cabin has central air. You're welcome to crash there tonight."

The moment the words left my mouth, I realized what I was suggesting. After our kiss in the gazebo, inviting her to spend the night—even innocently—carried different implications.

Didi seemed to reach the same conclusion, her eyes widening slightly. "I don't want to impose," she said carefully.

"You're not," I assured her. "I've got a spare room. And it's too hot to sleep here."

She bit her lip, considering. "You're sure?"

"Positive. Grab whatever you need for the night. I'll run to the corner store, pick up some supplies. Meet you at my place in fifteen?"

Relief washed over her face. "You're a lifesaver, Mr. Mountain Man."

"Just being neighborly," I said, the words feeling inadequate for what was growing between us.

I drove to the small market on the resort property, picking up ice cream, cold drinks, and breakfast supplies for morning. By the time I returned, Didi's cabin was dark, and her silhouette was visible on my porch, a small overnight bag at her feet.

"Sorry," I called as I approached, arms full of grocery bags. "Thought I'd grab some cold treats. This weather isn't letting up anytime soon."

"My hero," she smiled, helping me with the bags as I unlocked the door.

The cool air of my cabin enveloped us as we stepped inside, and I heard Didi's appreciative sigh.

"Oh my God, this feels amazing," she said, closing her eyes briefly as the air conditioning washed over her. "I might never leave."

I set the groceries on the counter, trying not to think too hard about that possibility. "Make yourself at home. Spare room's down the hall, first door on the right."

She nodded, picking up her overnight bag. "Thanks, Noah. Really."

While she settled in, I unpacked the groceries and grabbed two beers from the fridge. When I returned to the living room, Didi had emerged from the spare room and was studying the framed photos on my mantel.

"Your family?" she asked as I handed her a beer.

I nodded, pointing to one showing an older couple standing proudly beside a teenage boy with a fishing rod. "My parents and me, about a year before the accident."

She touched the frame gently. "You have their eyes."

"My mom's side," I said. "Irish blood."

We drifted out to the deck, the night air marginally cooler than inside.

Despite the temperature, something about being outdoors felt necessary for the conversation building between us.

The storm had moved on, leaving behind a sky washed clean of clouds.

Stars blazed overhead, the Milky Way a bright smear across the darkness.

"I've never seen so many stars," Didi murmured, head tilted back to take in the view. "In Chicago, you're lucky to spot the Big Dipper through the smog and light pollution."

"One of the perks of small-town life," I said, taking a pull from my beer.

"There must be others," she said, glancing my way.

"Plenty," I admitted, watching how the moonlight silvered her profile. "But right now, the view from this deck might be my favorite."

Her eyes met mine, understanding my meaning instantly. A flush spread across her cheeks that had nothing to do with the temperature.

We fell into easy conversation, the beer and the night air loosening our tongues. I found myself drawn to the way she laughed, how her hands moved expressively when she spoke, the occasional brush of her knee against mine as she shifted in her chair.

The summer heat pressed down despite the late hour, the air thick with humidity. Didi's tank top clung to her skin, her neck glistening with perspiration. I wasn't much better, my t-shirt sticking uncomfortably to my back.

"It's still so warm," she complained, fanning herself. "Even with the air conditioning inside."

An idea formed, dangerous but irresistible. "I know somewhere cooler."

Her eyebrows rose in question.

"The lake," I explained. "There's a private cove just down from the dock. Water's perfect this time of night."

"Swimming?" She looked intrigued but hesitant. "I didn't bring a suit."

The words hung between us, loaded with possibility.

"Neither did I," I said, heart pounding as our gazes locked.

A slow smile spread across her face, decision made. "Lead the way, Detective."

We walked down to the water in silence, the only sounds our footsteps on the wooden dock and the gentle lapping of waves against the shore. The lake stretched before us, a vast mirror reflecting stars and the rising moon. The air here felt marginally cooler, stirred by a light breeze off the water.

At the end of the dock, I paused, suddenly unsure. This was the point of no return. If we did this—if we crossed this line—there would be no going back to simple neighborly friendliness.

As if reading my thoughts, Didi reached for my hand, her touch grounding me. "Noah," she said softly. "I want this."

Three simple words that cleared away my doubts.

I led her to the small, secluded cove just beyond our docks, hidden from view by a stand of pines and a natural rock formation. The moon provided just enough light to see by, casting everything in silver and shadow.

Didi didn't hesitate. With a boldness that took my breath away, she crossed her arms and pulled her tank top over her head in one fluid motion. The moonlight sculpted her curves in silver, her skin luminous against the dark water.

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"Are you coming?" she asked, her voice teasing as she stepped out of her shorts, now completely naked.

I couldn't have looked away if I wanted to.

She was magnificent—all soft curves and feminine strength.

Her full breasts were tipped with dusky pink nipples that hardened in the night air, her waist curving into generous hips, and between her thighs, a neatly trimmed patch of blonde curls.

When she turned and waded into the water, I finally remembered how to move, shedding my clothes with considerably less grace.

The water welcomed us, cool silk against flushed skin. Didi dove beneath the surface, emerging with a gasp of pleasure, her hair slicked back from her face, water droplets clinging to her eyelashes.

"This feels incredible," she sighed, floating on her back. The water lapped at her curves, partially concealing, partially revealing her naked body.

I swam to her, drawn by an invisible current. When she righted herself, we were face to face, treading water, the space between us charged with anticipation.

"Hi," she whispered, a smile playing at her lips.

"Hi yourself," I replied, reaching out to brush a wet strand of hair from her cheek.

She leaned into my touch, her eyes never leaving mine. "I've been thinking about kissing you again all day," she confessed.

"Just thinking about it?" I teased, closing the distance between us.

"What are you going to do about it?" she challenged, her body against mine.

I answered by capturing her mouth with mine, tasting the cool lake water on her lips. She responded immediately, arms twining around my neck as I wrapped mine around her waist, drawing her closer. Our kiss in the gazebo had been exploration—this was hunger.

We drifted toward the shallows, where I could stand with the water at my waist. Didi wrapped her legs around me, the position bringing our bodies together. My cock, already hard, pressed against her center, and I groaned against her mouth as she rolled her hips, creating delicious friction.

"Fuck, you feel good," I murmured against her neck, trailing kisses along the sensitive skin.

"So do you," she gasped, her head falling back to give me better access. "I want to feel all of you, Noah."

I walked us to the shore, laying her gently on the small stretch of sand. The moonlight bathed her body in silver, making her skin glow. I took a moment to simply look at her—the rise and fall of her chest, the curve of her hips, the way her eyes darkened with desire.

"You're beautiful," I told her, voice rough with want.

She reached for me, pulling me down beside her. "Touch me," she demanded,

guiding my hand to her breast.

I cupped the soft weight, brushing my thumb across her nipple. She arched into the touch, a soft moan escaping her. I captured her mouth again, deepening the kiss as my hand explored her body—the curve of her waist, the flare of her hip, the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"Noah," she whispered, my name a plea on her lips.

I kissed my way down her body, savoring every inch of her—the hollow of her throat, the curve of her breast, the soft plane of her stomach.

I took one nipple into my mouth, sucking gently before grazing it with my teeth.

She writhed beneath me, fingers tangling in my hair as I moved to give the other breast the same attention.

"More," she breathed, her hips lifting in invitation.

I continued my journey downward, trailing kisses across her ribs, dipping my tongue into her navel, following the fine trail of blonde hair to the apex of her thighs. When I reached her pussy, I glanced up to find her watching me, eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

"Is this okay?" I asked, my breath ghosting over her sensitive flesh.

"God, yes," she breathed, thighs falling open wider. "Please, Noah."

I settled between her legs, inhaling her arousal before tasting her with a broad stroke of my tongue.

She was already wet, her pussy glistening in the moonlight.

I took my time, using my tongue to explore every fold, every secret place, learning what made her gasp and what made her moan.

When I finally focused on her clit, circling the swollen bud with deliberate pressure, her hips bucked against my mouth.

"Fuck," she cried out, hands fisting in my hair.

I slid one finger inside her, then two, curling them to find the spot that made her back arch off the sand. Her inner walls gripped my fingers, hot and tight. I established a rhythm, fucking her with my fingers while my tongue continued its assault on her clit.

"Don't stop," she pleaded, grinding against my face. "Please don't stop. I'm so close."

I had no intention of stopping, not when she was coming apart so beautifully. I increased the pressure, feeling her pussy begin to pulse around my fingers as her thighs trembled on either side of my head.

"Noah!" she cried out as she came, her entire body tensing before dissolving into trembling release. Her pussy clenched rhythmically around my fingers as I gentled my touch, coaxing her through the waves of her orgasm.

I placed soft kisses on her inner thighs as she caught her breath, her body still quivering with aftershocks.

"Come here," she said after a moment, tugging at my shoulders.

I moved up her body, bracing myself above her. She pulled me down for a deep kiss, tasting herself on my lips. Her hand slid between us, wrapping around my cock with

confident strokes.

"I want you inside me," she said, her voice husky with desire. "Now."

"You sure?" I asked, my cock throbbing in her grip.

In answer, she guided me to her entrance, eyes locked with mine. "Fuck me, Noah."

I pushed into her slowly, both of us groaning as I filled her inch by inch. Her pussy was slick and tight, gripping my cock like a velvet fist. When I was fully seated within her, I had to pause, the sensation almost overwhelming.

"You feel so good," I groaned, fighting the urge to move until she was ready. "So fucking tight."

She rocked her hips experimentally, drawing a harsh breath from me. "So do you. So big... God, Noah, move. Please."

I began to thrust, setting a slow pace that quickly built as her nails raked down my back, urging me on. She met each thrust, her legs wrapped around my waist, changing the angle to take me deeper.

"Harder," she demanded, her voice ragged. "Fuck me harder."

I complied, driving into her with increasing intensity.

The sound of our bodies meeting, the crash of the small waves on the shore, and our mingled breathing created a primal symphony.

I could feel my control slipping, the tight grip of her pussy around my cock driving me toward the edge faster than I wanted.

"Touch yourself," I commanded, needing her to come again before I lost it completely. "Make yourself come on my cock."

She slipped a hand between us, finding her clit with practiced ease. I watched, mesmerized, as she circled the swollen bud, her movements becoming more frantic as she chased her release.

"Oh God," she moaned, eyes widening. "I'm going to come again."

"That's it," I encouraged, feeling my own orgasm building at the base of my spine. "Come for me, Didi. Let me feel that tight pussy squeeze my cock."

Her body went taut beneath me, her back arching as she cried out my name. The pulsing of her pussy around my cock pushed me over the edge, my own orgasm tearing through me with unexpected intensity.

"Fuck," I groaned, burying my face in her neck as I emptied myself deep inside her, hips jerking with each pulse of pleasure.

For several minutes, we lay tangled together, catching our breath, the cool water occasionally lapping at our feet. I shifted to take my weight off her, but kept her close, unwilling to break the connection between us.

Didi traced idle patterns on my chest, her head resting on my shoulder. "That was..."

"Yeah," I agreed, knowing exactly what she meant.

We swam again afterward, washing away the sand and sweat, our touches gentler now but no less intimate. When we finally made our way back to the dock, I wrapped her in the towel I'd brought, then pulled on my shorts.

"You're shivering," I noticed, pulling her against me to share my warmth.

"Good shivering," she assured me with a smile that made my heart skip.

Back at the cabin, we fell into my bed without discussion, her body fitting perfectly against mine as if we'd been sleeping together for years rather than hours. I pulled the sheet over us, the air conditioning a relief after the humid night air.

"Noah?" she murmured, already half-asleep.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for rescuing me from the heat."

I pressed a kiss to her temple, breathing in the scent of lake water and something uniquely Didi. "Anytime."

As she drifted off, I watched her sleep, memorizing the peaceful expression on her face, the way her hand curled against my chest, the soft sound of her breathing.

This wasn't what I'd planned. I was comfortable with my casual hookups and no-strings arrangements.

But Didi was quickly becoming something more than just a physical release, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should be concerned about her stalker situation—the threat that had driven her to Hope Peak in the first place.

But as I finally gave in to sleep, I couldn't bring myself to regret a single moment of our night together.

For the first time in years, I fell asleep without the weight of loneliness pressing down

on me. Whatever tomorrow brought, tonight had been worth it.

I woke before dawn, my body attuned to early rising after years of habit. Didi was still asleep beside me, her blonde hair spread across my pillow, one arm thrown over my chest. In the dim light, she looked peaceful, the tension she usually carried completely absent.

Carefully, I slipped from the bed, not wanting to wake her. I pulled on a pair of boxers and padded to the kitchen, starting coffee and gathering ingredients for breakfast. The simple domesticity of the moment wasn't lost on me—how natural it felt to be preparing a meal while she slept in my bed.

As the coffee brewed, I stood at the window, watching the first hints of sunrise color the eastern sky.

The lake was perfectly still, mirroring the gradual lightening of the heavens.

Another scorching day ahead, according to the weather report, but right now, in this moment of perfect peace, I couldn't bring myself to care.

I knew we needed to talk about what happened. About her stalker. About what this meant for us. About the fact that she would eventually return to Chicago and her life there.

But that conversation could wait. For now, I was content to make breakfast and carry it back to bed, to watch her wake slowly in the morning light, to steal a few more precious hours before reality intruded.

Whatever happened next, last night had changed something fundamental between us.

And despite every instinct for self-preservation I'd cultivated since Jessica left, I couldn't regret it.

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“Midnight Confessions”

Didi

I woke to the scent of coffee and the unfamiliar touch of worn cotton sheets against my naked skin.

Sunlight filtered through half-drawn curtains, casting golden stripes across an unfamiliar room.

For a disorienting moment, I couldn't place where I was.

Then the memories flooded back—Noah's rescue from my sweltering cabin, moonlit skinny dipping, his mouth on every inch of my body, the way he'd filled me so completely as we moved together on the lakeshore.

A flush of heat rose to my cheeks as snippets from the night replayed in vivid detail. I stretched languidly, my body pleasantly sore in ways that spoke of thorough satisfaction.

Noah's side of the bed was empty, the sheets cool to the touch. I slipped from beneath the covers, borrowing his discarded t-shirt from the floor. It hung to mid-thigh, swimming on my frame but carrying his scent—which instantly caused my stomach to flutter.

I followed the aroma of coffee and bacon down the hallway, pausing at the threshold of his kitchen.

Noah stood at the stove, his back to me, wearing nothing but low-slung shorts.

Morning sunlight accentuated the defined muscles of his shoulders and back, calling to mind the way those muscles had flexed above me last night.

As if sensing my presence, he turned, a slow smile spreading across his face when he saw me in his shirt.

"Morning Beautiful," he said, voice still rough with sleep. "Coffee?"

"God, yes," I replied, padding across the cool hardwood floors. "I'm useless without caffeine."

He poured me a mug, sliding it across the counter.

Our fingers brushed during the exchange, and even that simple touch sent sparks skittering up my arm.

After last night, I shouldn't be reacting like this to casual contact, but the morning-after domesticity felt even more intimate than our naked encounter in the lake.

"Sleep okay?" he asked, turning back to the stove where he was flipping pancakes.

"Better than I have in months," I admitted, settling onto a barstool at the counter. "Though I'm not sure how much of that was actual sleep versus... other activities."

His chuckle was low and warm. "No complaints here."

This was the part that should be awkward—the morning after an impulsive hookup—but it wasn't. There was an unexpected comfort between us that defied our brief acquaintance.

Three days ago, Noah Sterling had been a stranger rescuing me from Miller's Rocks.

Now, I was drinking coffee in his kitchen wearing nothing but his t-shirt after a night of mind-blowing sex.

"You cook too," I observed, watching him plate perfectly golden pancakes. "Is there anything you're not good at?"

"Emotional vulnerability," he replied with surprising candor, then quirked an eyebrow. "And origami. Never got the hang of it."

I laughed, grateful for the moment of levity that eased the morning-after tension. "Well, I'm terrible at cooking, fishing, boating, and apparently choosing stable men, so you're ahead of the game."

Something flickered in his eyes at my self-deprecating comment, but he simply slid a plate in front of me. "Eat. You'll need your strength."

"Planning a repeat performance, Detective?" I teased, the memory of last night sending another wave of heat through me.

"Planning to fix your air conditioner," he corrected, though his darkening eyes suggested he wasn't opposed to my interpretation. "But I'm open to multitasking."

We ate at the counter, knees occasionally brushing, the casual domesticity punctuated by loaded glances that promised more.

Noah asked about my preferred coffee (strong, with just a splash of cream), whether I was a morning person (decidedly not), and if I had any food allergies he should know about (none, though I don't particularly care for mushrooms).

Simple questions that carried unexpected weight.

"So," he began, clearing our empty plates, "about last night—"

My phone rang from somewhere in the living room, interrupting whatever he'd been about to say. I recognized Jamie's ringtone instantly.

"Sorry, I should get that," I said, sliding off the stool. "It's work."

Noah nodded, understanding. "Take your time."

I found my phone in my overnight bag and answered, turning away from Noah's curious gaze. "Hey, Jamie, what's up?"

"Where the hell have you been?" Jamie demanded, her voice pitched higher with anxiety. "I've been texting you for hours!"

I glanced at the screen, noticing a string of missed texts. "Sorry, I... my phone was on silent."

"Are you okay? You sound weird." Her producer's intuition was too sharp by half.

"I'm fine," I assured her, though I couldn't suppress the slight breathlessness in my voice. "What's going on?"

"The stalker, Didi. He posted again last night."

My stomach dropped. "What did he say?"

"He wrote this creepy poem about following a star to a mountain lake. Said something about how 'even in Montana, I'll find my Midnight Star.'"

The room tilted slightly. I gripped the back of the couch for support. "Montana? He specifically said Montana?"

"Yes. Didi, I think he knows where you are."

The blood drained from my face. All the safety I'd felt moments ago evaporated. "How? I've been so careful."

"I don't know. Maybe he tracked your credit card purchases? Or he could have followed me? I'm so sorry, Didi, I've been so careful, but—"

"It's not your fault," I cut her off, trying to keep my voice steady. "We knew he was persistent."

"There's more," Jamie continued, her voice dropping lower.

"Officer Vincetti called from Chicago PD.

They think they've identified him from security footage at the station.

His name is Preston Barrett. He's a marketing executive, mid-thirties.

They're watching his apartment, but Didi. .. he hasn't been home in days."

The room seemed to shrink around me. Preston Barrett. My stalker had a name now, a face, an identity. That made him more real and more terrifying.

"What should I do?" I asked, hating how small my voice sounded.

"Vincetti suggests you contact local law enforcement. If this guy really is heading to Montana, they need to be aware."

I turned slightly, catching Noah's concerned gaze from the kitchen. A detective. Right here.

"I'll handle it," I said with more confidence than I felt. "Keep me posted if you hear anything else."

"Didi?" Jamie's voice softened. "Be careful, okay? This guy sounds unstable."

"I will."

I ended the call, my hand trembling slightly as I set the phone down. When I turned back, Noah was watching me intently, his detective's instincts clearly engaged.

"Everything okay?" he asked, though his expression said he already knew it wasn't.

I opened my mouth to deflect, to offer some vague reassurance as I had before. But the weight of Jamie's news pressed down on me, and suddenly, I couldn't maintain the pretense anymore. Not after what we'd shared last night. Not when my safety might be at risk.

"No," I answered, voice cracking slightly. "It's not."

Noah was beside me in an instant, guiding me to the couch with a gentle hand at my waist. "Tell me what's happening," he said, his tone balancing professional concern and personal care.

I took a deep breath, the confession I'd been avoiding for days finally spilling out. "I'm not just visiting Hope Peak for vacation. I'm hiding."

His expression didn't change. "I figured as much. From what?"

"A stalker." The word hung in the air between us, heavy with implication. "I'm a radio host in Chicago. 'Late Night with Didi.' It's a call-in show, mostly relationship advice, life stuff. I have a pretty loyal following."

Noah nodded, encouraging me to continue.

"About three months ago, I started getting messages from a listener who called himself 'ChicagoNightOwl.'

' At first, it was just fan mail—compliments about the show, that sort of thing.

Then it escalated. Gifts at the station.

Detailed accounts of what I'd worn that day.

Photos of me entering my apartment building. "

Noah's jaw tightened, but he remained silent, letting me tell the story at my own pace.

"The Chicago police couldn't do much. He was careful, always staying just on the right side of legal. Then last month, security cameras caught someone trying to get into my apartment building. He ran when confronted, but... it scared me enough that the station suggested I take some time off."

I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling suddenly vulnerable in just Noah's t-shirt. "Jamie—my producer and best friend—helped me arrange this. The lake cabin, working remotely. Nobody knew where I went except her and my station manager."

I reached for my phone, pulling up the messages Jamie had been sending me about ChicagoNightOwl's posts. "But now... Jamie just called to tell me that he's figured out I'm in Montana. He posted online about following me to a mountain lake."

I handed Noah my phone, letting him read Jamie's frantic texts detailing the stalker's recent activity. His eyes narrowed as he scrolled through the messages.

"The Chicago PD identified him," I continued. "Preston Barrett. He's a marketing executive. They've been watching his apartment, but he hasn't been there for days."

Noah set the phone down, his expression darkening. "You should have told me this sooner, Didi."

"I know," I said, unable to meet his eyes. "I was embarrassed. And scared. And I thought I could handle it myself. Being here, it felt like I could pretend it wasn't happening."

"Look at me," he said gently, waiting until I raised my eyes to his. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. This isn't your fault."

His understanding cracked something open inside me. Tears I'd been holding back for months suddenly spilled over. Noah pulled me close, his arms encircling me with steady warmth.

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"I'm so tired of being afraid," I whispered against his chest. "Of looking over my shoulder. Of wondering if every stranger is him. Of not knowing who I can trust."

"I know," he murmured, his hand stroking my hair. "But you're not alone anymore."

I pulled back slightly, searching his face. "You're not mad that I lied to you?"

"You didn't lie. You just didn't tell me everything." His touch was gentle as he wiped away a tear. "And considering we've known each other all of three days, I can hardly hold that against you."

The absurdity of our situation washed over me—how quickly we'd gone from strangers to lovers, how I was sitting in his living room wearing only his t-shirt while confessing my darkest fears. A laugh bubbled up, slightly hysterical.

"What?" he asked, a smile tugging at his lips.

"This is all so... much," I said, gesturing between us. "Three days ago, you were rescuing me from my own boating incompetence, and now I'm crying on your shoulder half-naked after mind-blowing sex, confessing about my stalker."

His smile widened. "When you put it that way, it does sound a little unorthodox."

"A little?" I scoffed, but I was smiling too.

Noah's expression grew serious again. "About this Preston Barrett. If he really has figured out you're in Montana, we need to take precautions."

"What kind of precautions?"

"First, I need to alert Sheriff Callahan. He should know there's a potential security concern."

I nodded, relieved that Noah wasn't suggesting a full public announcement.

"Second, we need to make your cabin more secure. Better locks, motion-sensor lights. I've got some security equipment at the station I can bring over."

"Is that really necessary?" The idea of turning my peaceful retreat into a fortress made my heart sink.

"It's precautionary," Noah assured me. "Hope Peak is small, Didi. A stranger would stand out here, especially during tourist season when we're already on high alert. But better safe than sorry."

"Okay," I agreed, still not loving the idea but trusting his judgment.

"Third," he continued, his tone softening, "I think you should consider staying here until the Fourth is over."

This surprised me. "Here? With you?"

"It's more secure than your cabin. Central location, better visibility, and..." He hesitated, a rare moment of uncertainty. "I'd feel better knowing you were safe."

The protectiveness in his voice warmed something deep inside me. It had been so long since anyone had truly looked out for me—not because they wanted something, but simply because they cared.

"I don't want to impose," I said, echoing my words from last night.

"It's not an imposition," he replied, echoing his response. "Besides, I like having you here."

The simple honesty of his statement caught me off guard. "I like being here," I confessed. "But I also don't want to let this situation control my life. I came to Hope Peak to find some peace, do a little work, not to hide in your cabin—as pleasant as that might be."

Noah considered this, respect in his eyes. "Fair enough. How about a compromise? We secure your cabin today, and you decide where you feel most comfortable staying. No pressure either way."

"I can work with that," I agreed, relieved that he wasn't insisting on taking over.

"There's one more thing," he said, reaching for his phone. "The resort just sent out notifications about the Fourth of July celebration. Fireworks over the lake, barbecue, live music—the whole small-town America experience."

I glanced at the email he showed me, detailing the festivities planned for the holiday. Under normal circumstances, it would have sounded wonderful.

"You should go," Noah said, watching my reaction carefully.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I hedged. "Large crowds, public setting..."

"I'll be with you," he countered. "And every officer in Hope Peak will be on duty—except me, ironically, since Callahan ordered me to take the day off. It's actually one of the safest places you could be."

I bit my lip, considering. The thought of missing the celebration—of letting fear keep me locked away while life continued without me—left a bitter taste in my mouth. Wasn't that why I'd fled to the mountains in the first place? Not just to hide, but to reclaim some semblance of normalcy?

"Plus," Noah added, a mischievous glint in his eye, "I've been told I clean up pretty well for celebrations. I even own a shirt without a single hole in it."

That startled a laugh out of me. "The mountain man in his formal attire? Now that I have to see."

"It's a rare sight," he assured me with mock seriousness. "Like spotting Bigfoot, but slightly better dressed."

"Well, consider me convinced," I said, making my decision. "Okay. Fourth of July celebration it is."

Noah's smile was worth any lingering anxiety. "Good. It wouldn't be the same without you."

The simple statement affected me more deeply than it should have. In only a few short days, Noah Sterling had become someone whose opinion mattered to me, whose smile I craved, whose presence made me feel both sheltered and exhilarated.

We spent the next hour discussing practical matters—when to speak with Callahan, what security measures to implement, how to maintain vigilance without succumbing to paranoia. Noah addressed each topic thoughtfully, never dismissing my concerns but never feeding my fears either.

"You're good at this," I observed as he made a list of supplies needed for my cabin's security upgrades.

"It's my job," he replied simply.

"No, I mean the balance. Taking it seriously without making me feel helpless or hysterical. You'd be surprised how many people can't manage that."

He looked up from his notes, blue eyes steady on mine. "You're neither helpless nor hysterical, Didi. You're a woman dealing with a difficult situation with remarkable grace."

His words washed over me like a balm. For months, I'd carried not just the fear of my stalker but the weight of others' reactions—the station manager's barely concealed implication that my "provocative" on-air personality had invited this attention, the police officer who'd suggested I "tone down" my social media presence, even Jamie's well-intentioned but sometimes smothering concern.

Noah saw me differently—not as a victim to be pitied or protected, not as someone who'd brought this on herself, but as a capable person facing a challenge. The distinction meant more than I could express.

By mid-morning, we'd formulated a plan. Noah would speak with Callahan while I returned to my cabin to work. We'd meet for lunch, after which Noah would help install additional security measures. Simple, practical steps that made me feel proactive rather than paranoid.

"I should get dressed," I said, reluctantly standing from the couch. "I have a radio show to prep for tonight."

Noah rose with me, his hand finding the small of my back in a touch that was becoming familiar. "I'll drive you back to your cabin."

"It's a five-minute walk," I pointed out.

"Humor me," he said, the slight tension in his jaw betraying his concern.

I relented, touched by his protectiveness even as I reminded myself not to become dependent on it. "Okay, but I'm borrowing your shower first."

His eyes darkened. "Need any help in there?"

The heat in his gaze momentarily banished all thoughts of stalkers and security measures. "Absolutely," I replied, taking his hand and leading him toward the bathroom. "I might need a very thorough washing."

We were nearly an hour late leaving his cabin.

Back in my own space, with Noah's promise to return with security equipment from the station, I tried to focus on work. My makeshift studio was exactly as I'd left it, but sitting before the microphone felt different now. I wasn't just going through the motions.

I recorded segments for both my radio show and the podcast side project, my professional voice returning with surprising ease—that particular cadence and tone that had become my trademark.

The words flowed naturally, my thoughts clearer than they'd been in weeks.

Perhaps unburdening myself to Noah had lifted a weight I hadn't fully recognized.

After finalizing the audio files and sending them to Jamie, I stood at my kitchen window, gazing out at the lake.

The water sparkled under the midday sun, boats dotting the surface as tourists enjoyed the perfect summer day.

It was exactly the peaceful scene I'd envisioned when planning my retreat to Hope Peak.

Except now, that peace felt threatened. Not just by the possibility that Preston Barrett might find me, but by the complicated emotions Noah Sterling had awakened.

I'd come to Hope Peak to hide, to lick my wounds, to rebuild my sense of safety.

I hadn't planned on meeting someone who made me feel alive again, who made me want things I'd convinced myself I didn't need.

What would happen when this was over? When Preston was caught, when my sabbatical ended, when I had to return to Chicago and my real life? Noah was rooted here—his job, his home, his entire identity bound up in Hope Peak and its community. I had a career in Chicago, a life I'd built over years.

And yet.

The thought of saying goodbye to Noah, of reducing what we'd shared to a vacation fling or a pleasant memory, created an ache in my chest I wasn't prepared for. Three days of connection that felt more genuine than three years with my ex-fiancé.

I was falling for him. The realization settled over me like a familiar blanket, as if I'd known it all along but only now allowed myself to acknowledge it.

Beyond the physical attraction, beyond the protection he offered, I was falling for Noah Sterling—his quiet strength, his dry humor, the way he looked at me as if truly seeing me.

"This wasn't the plan," I whispered to the empty cabin.

But it was better than any plan I could have made. Finding Noah was what I needed, not just to feel safe again, but to remember how it felt to be truly alive.

With that thought warming me from within, I turned from the window and began preparing for his return. For the first time since ChicagoNightOwl's first unsettling message, I wasn't just hiding. I was beginning to find myself again.

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“Professional Distance”

Noah

Sheriff Callahan leaned back in his creaking office chair, reading through the incident report I'd just filed. Outside his window, Hope Peak was already buzzing with pre-holiday activity, tourists streaming in for the Fourth of July festivities.

"A stalker," he said, tapping the report. "This is serious."

"Her real name's Deirdre Danielle Lawson, goes by Didi," I explained. "She hosts a late-night radio show in Chicago called 'Late Night with Didi.' The stalker's been identified as Preston Barrett, marketing executive, mid-thirties. Chicago PD has been monitoring him, but he's gone off-grid."

Callahan nodded, his weathered face serious. "And there's reason to believe he might be headed here? To Hope Peak?"

"Her producer called this morning with news. Barrett mentioned Montana and mountain lakes in his online posts." I kept my voice professional despite the churning in my gut. "He seems to have tracked her location somehow."

"I'll contact Chicago PD immediately," Callahan said, already reaching for his phone. "We'll coordinate monitoring efforts and have officers keep an eye on the resort area without alarming guests." He paused, giving me a pointed look. "You're still off duty tomorrow. Sheriff's orders."

"Sir—"

"This isn't negotiable, Sterling. You can handle security precautions for Ms. Lawson today, but I want you to enjoy the Fourth as a civilian." His expression softened slightly. "Just remember your training. Don't let emotions cloud your judgment."

I nodded stiffly. "Understood."

"And Noah?" He waited until I met his gaze. "Be careful."

I knew what he meant. Callahan had watched me rebuild my life after loss too many times. The warning was personal, not professional.

The July heat hit me like a physical wall as I stepped outside. Record temperatures continued to bake the mountains, the air shimmering above the asphalt. My thoughts turned to Didi, alone at her cabin with only the flimsy locks and windows between her and potential danger.

I detoured to the department's storage room, signing out motion sensors, stronger door hardware, and a security camera system that I'd referenced earlier when we'd discussed improving her cabin's security.

It wasn't department standard procedure, but Callahan had looked the other way when I'd mentioned reinforcing Didi's cabin.

By the time I pulled up to our neighboring cabins, sweat dampened my uniform shirt. Didi was waiting on her porch, a glass of iced tea in hand, relief washing over her face when she saw me.

"Did you talk to the sheriff?" she asked as I unloaded the equipment.

"He's coordinating with Chicago PD." I carried the supplies onto her porch. "We'll have additional patrols during the celebration tomorrow, but they'll be discreet. No need to alarm other guests."

"Thank you." She stepped closer, her floral scent mingling with the pine-scented air. "I know this puts you in an awkward position. By the way, the resort maintenance fixed my AC while you were gone. At least one problem solved today."

"That's good news," I replied, glad she wouldn't have to endure another night in the stifling heat. "Let's secure your cabin, then I want to show you something."

An hour later, we'd installed new deadbolts, window locks, motion-detecting lights, and a basic security camera system. I'd walked her through basic safety protocols—keeping curtains drawn at night, varying her routine, maintaining awareness of her surroundings.

"One more thing," I said, leading her to the small clearing behind her cabin. "You should know how to defend yourself."

Didi raised an eyebrow. "You think I can fight off a stalker?"

"Self-defense isn't about winning a fight. It's about creating enough space to escape." I positioned myself in front of her. "I want to teach you a few basic moves. Just in case."

She nodded, determination replacing skepticism. "Show me."

I guided her through simple techniques—how to break a grip on her wrist, where to strike for maximum effect with minimum force, how to create distance between

herself and an attacker.

Her skin warmed beneath my hands as I positioned her arms, adjusted her stance, demonstrated the proper pressure behind each movement.

"Like this?" She practiced a palm strike against my chest, the impact controlled but firm.

"Good. Remember, aim for the nose, throat, or solar plexus—vulnerable areas." I caught her hand before she could pull away. "And always be aware of escape routes. Don't stay to fight if you can run."

Our bodies were close now, my hand still holding hers against my chest. I could feel her heartbeat quickening to match mine. The air between us seemed to crackle with unspoken tension.

"What about this grip?" she asked softly, her free hand sliding up my arm to my shoulder. "How would I break free from this?"

My training vanished like morning mist on the lake. "You wouldn't need to," I murmured, voice rough. "I'd already let you go."

"What if I didn't want you to?"

Her green eyes locked with mine, challenging, wanting. Three days of knowing this woman, and already she'd dismantled defenses I'd spent years building.

"Didi," I began, uncertain what I even wanted to say. Warning her? Warning myself?

"You're scared," she observed, her insight cutting through my hesitation. "Not of Preston. Of this—of us."

I stepped back, needing distance to think clearly. "I'm not good at this."

"At what? Teaching self-defense?" Her attempt at lightness faded when she saw my expression. "Or letting someone get close?"

The question hit too close to home. "The last woman I let myself care about packed her bags and left with her executive boyfriend.

Said Hope Peak was too quiet, too predictable.

"I turned toward the mountains that had always been my anchor.

"Before that, my parents were taken without warning.

One patch of black ice, and suddenly they were gone. "

Her hand touched my back, gentle but grounding. "Noah, I'm sorry."

"Everyone leaves eventually," I said quietly. "That's just how it goes."

"Not everyone." Her voice was soft as she moved around to face me again. "Some people stay."

I laughed, the sound hollow even to my own ears. "You? You have a career in Chicago, a life a thousand miles from here. Even without the stalker situation, you'd be gone by August."

"Maybe." She didn't deny it. "Or maybe not. The world is changing, Noah. Remote work, digital connections—distance doesn't mean what it used to."

Hope flickered in my chest, dangerous and warm. I tamped it down, too aware of how

quickly it could turn to disappointment. "We barely know each other."

"I know enough," she countered. "I know you wake before dawn to swim in the lake. I know you renovated your grandfather's cabin with your own hands. I know you watch out for everyone in this town, even summer tourists who can't operate a boat properly."

Her words warmed something that had been cold for too long. "Didi—"

"I know you taste like the lake and whiskey," she continued, stepping closer. "I know your hands are calloused but incredibly gentle. I know when you look at me like you're doing right now, I forget every reason I had for keeping people at arm's length."

I couldn't resist any longer. I drew her against me, one hand tangling in her hair as our mouths met. Unlike our encounter in the lake—all urgency and heat—this was something deeper, slower, more deliberate. A choice rather than an impulse.

I backed her against the cabin wall, lifting her slightly as her legs wrapped around my waist. My hands slid beneath her thin t-shirt, finding warm skin and the lace edge of her bra. She made a soft sound against my mouth, her fingers working the buttons of my uniform shirt.

"Inside," she murmured against my lips. "Now."

I carried her through the back door, not breaking our connection. The cool air of the cabin was a relief against overheated skin as we made our way to her bedroom. I laid her on the bed, taking a moment to simply look at her—flushed skin, tousled blonde hair, lips swollen from our kisses.

"You're beautiful," I said, the inadequate words all I could manage.

Her smile was radiant as she reached for me. "So are you."

We undressed each other slowly, each newly revealed inch of skin explored with reverent touches and heated kisses.

When I finally entered her, the sensation overwhelmed me—not just physically, but emotionally.

The way she looked up at me, completely present and trusting, broke open something inside me that I'd thought permanently sealed.

"Stay with me," she whispered as we moved together. "Right here, right now. Don't think about tomorrow."

I pressed my forehead to hers, our breath mingling. "I'm here. Only here."

We found our rhythm together, building toward release with whispered encouragements and breathless pleas.

When she came, her body tightening around mine, her eyes never left my face—as if what she saw there was as important as the physical sensation.

I followed moments later, her name on my lips like a prayer.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, her head on my chest, my fingers tracing idle patterns on her back.

The afternoon sun filtered through the curtains, casting golden light across the rumpled sheets.

For the first time in years, I felt no urge to retreat, to rebuild the walls that usually

protected me from vulnerability.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, looking up at me.

"That I've never been good at temporary," I told her, the confession easier than expected. "Truth is, I'm an all-or-nothing kind of man."

She propped herself up on one elbow. "Is that what you think this is? Temporary?"

Before I could answer, my phone vibrated on the nightstand. I considered ignoring it, but years of law enforcement training made that impossible. "Sterling," I answered.

"Noah, it's Mike." Callahan's voice was tight with urgency. "Chicago PD just called. They've confirmed Barrett used a credit card at a gas station in Billings yesterday. He's definitely in Montana, heading west."

My body tensed. Billings was only a few hours' drive from Hope Peak.

"Do they have visual confirmation?" I asked, sitting up. Didi watched me with growing concern.

"Gas station security camera. It's him alright. I've alerted state patrol, but with the holiday traffic..." He didn't need to finish the thought. Law enforcement would be stretched thin with Fourth of July celebrations across the state.

"I understand. Thanks for the update." I ended the call, turning to Didi. "Preston Barrett was spotted in Billings yesterday. He's in Montana."

Fear flashed across her face before determination replaced it. "What do we do?"

"We stay vigilant. Security's in place. The department is aware." I cupped her face

gently. "And we don't let him steal tomorrow from us. The Fourth of July at Hope Peak is something special."

"You still want to go to the celebration?" she asked, surprised.

"More than ever," I confirmed. "Every officer in town will be there. It's actually the safest place you could be." I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Plus, I was promised a day off to remember what it's like to be a civilian. I'd like to spend it with you."

She smiled, though tension still lingered in her eyes. "A date with a mountain man under the fireworks? How could I resist?"

I embraced her again, breathing in her scent, memorizing the feel of her in my arms. Professional distance be damned. Whatever came next—whether Preston Barrett or the complications of our different lives—I knew one thing with absolute certainty: Didi Lawson was worth the risk.

And for the first time since Jessica walked out, I was willing to take it.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am

“Independence Day”

Didi

I woke before dawn on the Fourth of July, instinctively reaching for Noah before remembering I was back in my own cabin.

After Callahan's call about Preston being in Montana, Noah had insisted on checking the security measures one more time before reluctantly returning to his place, both of us agreeing that a good night's sleep would serve us better than exhausted vigilance.

Sleep, however, had proven elusive. I'd spent hours staring at the ceiling, listening to every creak and rustle outside, imagination transforming innocent woodland sounds into footsteps, car doors, threats.

Now, as the first hint of daylight filtered through my curtains, I made a decision: I would not spend Independence Day cowering in fear. I hadn't fled Chicago to hide in a different prison.

My phone buzzed with a text from Noah: Morning. Coffee and breakfast at my place when you're ready.

I smiled, warmth spreading through me. A week ago, I'd never heard of Noah Sterling, Hope Peak PD. Now he was the first person I thought of when I woke up and the last before I fell asleep.

The thought should have terrified me—this rapid acceleration from attraction to

something more. Instead, it felt like finding solid ground after months of waves of uncertainty.

After a quick shower, I dressed in a blue sundress patterned with tiny white stars—festive without being garish—and made my way to Noah's cabin. The morning was already warm, promising another scorching day.

He opened the door before I could knock, as if he'd been watching for me. The smile that spread across his face made my heart stutter.

"Happy Fourth," he said, looking unfairly handsome in worn jeans and a faded navy t-shirt that accentuated his broad shoulders and blue eyes.

"Happy Fourth," I replied, stepping into his arms for a kiss that quickly deepened before he reluctantly pulled away.

"Breakfast first," he murmured against my lips. "We'll need our strength for today."

Over coffee and blueberry waffles on his deck, Noah outlined the day's plans—and security measures—with characteristic thoroughness.

"Callahan's stationed plainclothes officers throughout the resort area. Kyle's volunteered to keep an eye on our cabins." He poured more coffee into my mug. "The main celebration starts at noon—live music, food stalls, games. Fireworks at dusk over the lake."

I nodded, appreciating that he was sharing information without smothering me with protection. "What about Preston? Any updates?"

"Nothing since Billings." Noah's expression tightened slightly. "If he's heading here, he might already be in the area. But Hope Peak will be packed today—everyone in

the county turns out for the Fourth. The chances of him finding you in that crowd are slim."

"Unless he saw my rental car. Or someone mentioned the blonde from Chicago staying in Cabin 7." The possibilities for security breaches were endless.

Noah reached across the table to take my hand. "Didi, if you want to stay here today, I'll stay with you. Honestly, whatever makes you feel safest."

I considered it briefly—the temptation of remaining in this bubble with Noah, doors locked, hunkered down. Safe, yes. But also letting Preston dictate my choices yet again.

"No," I said firmly. "I want to go. I want to see what Independence Day by the lake is all about. I want to eat funnel cake and watch fireworks and pretend—just for today—that I'm just a regular tourist enjoying summer with a handsome local."

Relief and admiration mingled in Noah's eyes. "Okay, then. One normal holiday, coming up."

He rose, moving around the table to pull me to my feet and into his arms. "For the record," he said, his voice dropping to that rumble that sent shivers down my spine, "there's nothing 'regular' about you, Didi Lawson."

His kiss tasted of coffee and sweet maple syrup, and I let myself sink into it, into him, anchoring myself in the present moment rather than worrying about what might come.

"So," I asked when we finally broke apart, "do I get the insider tour of Hope Peak's celebration?"

Noah grinned. "Complete with all the local secrets. Ready?"

"Absolutely."

By mid-afternoon, the heat had reached sweltering levels, but the festive atmosphere of Hope Peak more than compensated.

The resort's main beach and surrounding grounds had been transformed into a celebration straight out of a small-town America postcard—red, white, and blue bunting draped from every possible surface, the scent of barbecue and fried foods perfuming the air, children with painted faces racing between game booths.

Noah stayed close without hovering, one hand occasionally brushing the small of my back as he guided me through the crowds.

I caught the way his eyes still swept the area with professional thoroughness, even as he smiled and nodded at what seemed like every third person we passed.

It was strange seeing him so deeply embedded in this community he protected—watching him shift between alert detective and hometown local with easy familiarity.

"Noah Sterling, as I live and breathe!" A woman's voice called from a nearby food tent. "You actually took a day off!"

Ruth Anderson emerged wiping her hands on an apron, her silver hair pulled back at the nape of her neck. She beamed at us as she approached.

"Didi! Wonderful to see you again," she said warmly. "Enjoying our little

celebration?"

"It's amazing," I replied with genuine enthusiasm. "Everything is so beautiful."

"Been doing it forty years," she said proudly, then turned to Noah. "This young man here hasn't attended a single one properly since he joined the department. Always working, this one."

"Not by choice," Noah protested good-naturedly. "Sheriff's orders today."

Ruth snorted. "Orders I'm sure you'd have ignored if not for certain... incentives." Her glance at me was meaningful enough to bring heat to my cheeks.

This glimpse into Noah's history, the depth of his connection to Hope Peak, touched something in me. In Chicago, I had colleagues and a small circle of friends. But nothing like this tapestry of relationships that stretched back generations.

We wandered through the celebration, Noah stopping to introduce me to what felt like half the town.

Each time, he referred to me as "Didi" with no explanation or qualification—not "my neighbor" or "my friend"—and each time, I noticed the raised eyebrows and knowing smiles.

Everyone seemed to understand that my presence at Noah's side was significant.

By late afternoon, we'd sampled nearly every food stall (with the church ladies' strawberry shortcake winning top honors), cheered for the children's sack races, and listened to a local band's surprisingly good covers of summer classics.

Despite keeping watch for Preston, I found myself enjoying the day, almost forgetting

why I'd come to Hope Peak in the first place.

"Want to watch the fireworks from the water?" Noah asked as the sun began its slow descent. "We'd have a better view from the lake, away from the crowds."

The idea appealed to me immediately. "That sounds perfect."

We made our way to the marina, weaving through families staking out spots for the display. Noah led me down one of the long docks, past boats of various sizes until he stopped beside a familiar craft.

"Your rescue vessel," I said with a wry smile as he helped me aboard. "At least this time I'm not drifting toward Miller's Rocks."

Noah's mouth quirked up at one corner as he started the engine. "And I'm not having to chase you down." His hands moved over the controls with easy confidence, guiding us away from the increasingly crowded marina.

In the boat, Noah's hands moved over the controls with practiced confidence, guiding us away from shore. When he glanced at me, his eyes held the same intensity I'd noticed during that first rescue, except now it carried warmth instead of caution.

He navigated to a spot near the center of the lake, far from the fleet of boats gathering near shore.

As he cut the engine, silence settled around us, broken only by water lapping against the hull.

The sky had deepened to indigo, with stars beginning to appear overhead.

Around the lake, lights from the celebration created a glowing ring against the

mountains.

Noah settled beside me, his arm finding its way around my shoulders like it belonged there.

"Thank you for today," I said, leaning into him. "It's been perfect."

"Even with fan recognition and the heat?" he asked, his fingers tracing patterns on my bare shoulder.

"Especially those parts," I smiled. "It felt normal. Like I was just a woman enjoying a holiday with..." I hesitated, unsure how to define us.

"With her mountain man?" Noah supplied, his voice teasing but his eyes serious.

"Yes," I agreed, meeting his gaze. "With her mountain man."

His lips met mine with the quiet intensity I was coming to associate with everything Noah did, his strong hand cradling my face with surprising tenderness. When we broke apart, the first firework exploded overhead, sending cascades of red and gold across the night sky.

We watched in comfortable silence, my head resting against his shoulder, his fingers entwined with mine. Each burst of color reflected on the lake's surface, creating the illusion that we were suspended between twin displays of light and sound.

It was during a particularly dramatic burst of blue and silver that I noticed Noah tense beside me. His hand reached slowly for his phone, which had vibrated in his pocket.

"Everything okay?" I asked, immediately alert.

I caught the flicker of hesitation before Noah spoke. "Didi, I think we should head back."

Fear knotted in my stomach. "Is it Preston?"

"Security might have spotted someone matching his description near the resort docks," Noah admitted, already moving to restart the engine. "Probably nothing, but—"

"But we should be careful," I finished, cold dread replacing the warmth of moments before.

Noah navigated swiftly back toward the marina, his eyes constantly scanning the increasingly crowded shoreline.

Boats of all sizes had gathered for the fireworks, making our return slower than our departure.

Overhead, the display continued, but its magic had dissolved into a cacophony that now seemed to mirror my fraying nerves.

As we approached the docks, I studied the crowd milling about on shore, searching for a familiar face in the mass of strangers. That's when I saw him—standing slightly apart from the crowd, staring directly at our approaching boat.

Preston Barrett stood exactly as I'd seen him in the photos Jamie had sent—medium height, thinning brown hair, unremarkable except for the unsettling focus in his eyes as he watched our approaching boat.

"Noah," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the fireworks and engine. "He's here. By the bait shop. Watching us."

Noah followed my gaze, his body instantly coiled with tension. "Stay in the boat," he instructed, reaching for his phone to alert Callahan. "I'll handle this."

But as we drew closer to the dock, Preston began moving toward us, his determined stride pushing through the holiday crowd, his face illuminated in flashes of red and gold from the sky above.

In that moment, the distance between us seemed both impossibly vast and terrifyingly small—just yards of water and wood separating me from the man who had haunted my nightmares for months.

"He's coming," I said, my fingers gripping Noah's arm. "Noah, he's coming right for us."

The final chord of "The Star-Spangled Banner" played over the resort's speakers as the fireworks reached their crescendo, the sky erupting in a blinding finale of light and sound—but I barely noticed.

All I could see was Preston Barrett's face, his expression a disturbing mixture of anticipation and triumph as he reached the edge of the dock, waiting for our boat to complete its inevitable approach.

"At last," I heard him say, the words somehow carrying over the chaos of sound. "I've found you, my Midnight Star."

“Summer’s Promise”

Noah

The world shrank to the space between Barrett and us as I guided the boat toward the dock. He stood waiting, his unremarkable appearance masking the threat he posed. Nothing about him suggested danger—except for the hungry fixation in his eyes as he watched Didi.

"Stay behind me," I said quietly as we approached. "When we dock, wait in the boat until I say it's clear."

Didi nodded, her face pale but resolute. I'd already texted Callahan our location, but with the holiday crowds, backup would take precious minutes to arrive. My hand instinctively moved toward my hip before I remembered I wasn't carrying.

As the boat bumped against the dock, Preston stepped forward. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he called.

I secured the boat with a quick knot and positioned myself between him and Didi. "Mr. Barrett," I said evenly, despite my racing pulse. "I'm Detective Sterling with the Hope Peak Sheriff's Department. I need you to step back."

Surprise flickered across his face before his expression hardened. "This doesn't concern you. Didi and I have a connection. She understands."

From the boat, I heard Didi's sharp intake of breath. The fireworks finale continued

overhead, bathing us in alternating flashes of light and shadow.

"She's made it clear she doesn't want contact with you," I said, maintaining eye contact with Barrett. His pupils were dilated, his breathing shallow—signs of agitation I'd observed in countless confrontations. "You need to leave now."

His expression hardened. "You don't understand. She speaks to me every night on her show. Special messages just for me. It's our secret." He leaned sideways, trying to see around me to Didi. "Tell him. Tell him how you always answer my questions first."

"That's her job, Barrett," I replied, shifting to block his view. "She does that for all her listeners."

"No!" The vehemence in his voice made several nearby holidaymakers turn and stare. "It's different with me. She knows it's different. We have something special."

I sensed movement behind me—Didi standing in the boat. Every instinct screamed at me to push her back down, to shield her completely, but I recognized the determination in her stance. This was her fight too.

"You're wrong," she said, her voice steady despite the slight tremor I detected. "You and I don't have a relationship. I've never met you before today."

Barrett's face twisted. "That's not true! You know exactly who I am. I've sent you gifts. Notes. I've watched over you, protected you." His voice dropped. "I knew that finance guy was cheating on you before you did. I tried to warn you."

A chill ran through me at the implication. How long had he been watching her before making contact?

"That doesn't mean we have a relationship," Didi continued, her voice growing stronger. "What you've been doing is stalking, and it needs to stop."

Barrett's expression shifted between confusion and anger. "But you left clues in your broadcasts. You kept talking about needing to 'escape the noise.' About how being in nature brings you peace. You were telling me where to find you."

"Those were general statements about my own life," Didi replied. "Not messages to you or anyone else."

I caught movement at the edge of my vision—Callahan and two deputies approaching through the crowd. Relief surged through me, but I kept my focus on Barrett.

"It's over, Preston," I said firmly. "The Chicago PD has been looking for you. They know you've crossed state lines to follow Ms. Lawson. That's federal now."

"No!" Barrett's hand plunged into his jacket pocket.

I reacted instantly, lunging forward to grab his wrist before he could withdraw whatever he was reaching for. We grappled briefly before I forced his arm behind his back, driving him to his knees on the dock. From his pocket fell not a weapon but a small velvet ring box.

"I was going to propose," he gasped as Callahan reached us, handcuffs already out. "Tonight. During the fireworks. It was going to be perfect."

"Jesus," Callahan muttered, securing the cuffs while I maintained my hold.

"You have the right to remain silent," I began mechanically, years of training taking over as Barrett was pulled to his feet. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

As the deputies led Barrett away, his expression crumpled into something between confusion and despair. "But I love her," he said, looking back at Didi. "I've always loved her."

"I know you believe that," I replied quietly. "But that's not how love works."

Callahan clapped my shoulder. "Good work, Sterling." He glanced at Didi, who had finally stepped onto the dock. "Ms. Lawson, we'll need a statement, but it can wait until tomorrow if you'd prefer."

"Tomorrow would be better," she agreed, her voice steady though I could see the tension in her shoulders.

"I'll keep him locked down tight," Callahan assured her. "Chicago PD is sending someone to transport him back. Federal charges on top of the state ones—he won't be bothering anyone for a long time."

After Callahan left to join his deputies, a strange quiet settled around us despite the continued celebration nearby. The last of the fireworks faded, leaving only the colored lanterns along the shore reflecting on the water.

"Are you okay?" I asked, finally allowing myself to reach for Didi.

She stepped into my arms without hesitation, her body trembling slightly against mine. "I think so. It's just... seeing him in person after all these months of him being this shadowy threat. He seemed so..."

"Ordinary," I finished for her. "They usually are."

She pulled back enough to look at me. "You weren't scared at all."

"I was terrified," I corrected, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Not of him. Of what might happen to you."

Around us, families were packing up blankets and chairs, the holiday winding down. No one seemed to have noticed the drama that had just unfolded—another reminder of how personal crises often played out invisibly amid crowds.

"Let's go home," I said, realizing too late the presumption in my words.

But Didi just nodded, slipping her hand into mine. "Home sounds good."

Back at my cabin, we sat on the deck, iced tea glasses sweating in our hands as the night remained stubbornly warm.

Neither of us could sleep, still processing the confrontation at the dock.

Tomorrow would bring statements, paperwork, and the legal machinery that would keep Barrett contained, but tonight was just for us.

"What happens now?" I asked, voicing the question that had been hanging between us since Barrett's arrest.

Didi gazed out at the lake, her profile gilded by the early light. "I don't know. The station expects me back next week. My life is in Chicago."

The words landed like stones in my chest. I'd known this was temporary—known from the moment I learned who she was—but somewhere between teaching her to fish and holding her in the lake, I'd started to imagine otherwise.

"But?" I prompted, hearing the hesitation in her voice.

She turned to me, those green eyes searching mine. "But I'm not ready to leave here. To leave you."

Hope rose in my chest, sharp and bright. "Long-distance relationships aren't easy."

"So are stalkers and nosy small-town detectives," she replied with a half-smile. "I seem to have experience with both now."

I set my coffee down and took her hands in mine. "Didi, I know this has happened fast. But I've truthfully never felt this way before. I don't want this to end."

"You haven't even heard my show," she pointed out, her thumb tracing circles on my palm. "What if you hate it?"

"Impossible," I said with absolute certainty. "Besides, I've heard you talk. I've heard how you listen. I've seen how you connect with people. Your show must be amazing."

She smiled, the first real smile since Barrett's appearance. "What if we tried something? I could broadcast remotely part of the time. Split my weeks between here and Chicago."

The idea landed like a revelation. "You could do that?"

"The technology's all portable," she confirmed. "I've been doing it here already. My producer would need to coordinate some things on her end, but it's doable."

"And I could visit Chicago," I added, the possibilities unfurling. "I have vacation time saved up. Lots of it, actually."

"You in Chicago?" Didi laughed. "Mountain Man meets the Windy City?"

"I can adapt," I assured her. "I might even own a tie somewhere."

Her laughter faded into something more serious. "It won't be easy. There would be a lot of goodbyes, a lot of travel."

"But a lot of hellos too," I pointed out. "And I'm willing to try if you are."

The moonlight caught in her hair as she nodded. "I am."

I pulled her close, her body fitting against mine in a way that felt both new and familiar. "Then we'll figure it out." I pressed my lips to her temple. "One day at a time."

"One lake at a time," she corrected, arms sliding around my neck. "One mountain, one city block, one sunset..."

"One kiss," I murmured against her mouth.

Under the starlit sky, I held the woman who'd crashed into my life and somehow changed everything. I didn't know exactly what the future would bring, but for the first time in years, I had hope.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:41 am

“On Air and in Love”

Didi

One month later

"And that's it for tonight's advice hour, night owls. Remember, sometimes the bravest thing you can do is let someone see exactly who you are. This is Didi, signing off until tomorrow."

I yanked off my headphones and shut down my equipment, still riding the post-show high. One month after Preston's arrest, and my ratings had never been better. A radio host who actually followed her own relationship advice made for good radio—who knew?

Outside the window of Noah's cabin—which I'd started thinking of as ours—the lake mirrored the night sky. I stepped onto the deck where the evening air still held the day's heat. The scent of pine and water had become as familiar to me now as exhaust fumes and hot dogs in Chicago.

The arrangement wasn't perfect. Three days in Montana, four in Chicago meant living out of suitcases and racing through airports.

Noah had visited twice, sticking out like a lumberjack at a fashion show, but attacking deep-dish pizza and architecture tours with the same focus he brought to detective work.

Jamie was thrilled with the " Mountain Man Wisdom " segment we'd added to the show, featuring Noah's perspective on listener dilemmas.

His straightforward, no-nonsense approach balanced my more empathetic style perfectly.

The station manager who'd once suggested my "provocative" persona had invited unwanted attention now couldn't stop talking about our "dynamic chemistry. "

I heard the door open behind me, then Noah's familiar footsteps crossing the deck.

"Another good show?" he asked, wrapping his arms around me.

"Mmm," I confirmed, leaning back against him. "Your fishing advice was a hit. 'Sometimes you have to let the line go slack to land the big one.'"

He laughed, the sound vibrating against my back. "My grandfather would be proud. He spent thirty years trying to teach me that."

We stood quietly together, watching stars reflect on the water. A loon called from somewhere across the lake, its cry echoing in the night.

"I received a text from Kyle while you were on air," Noah said. "The Petersons invited us for a pontoon sunset cruise tomorrow."

"Perfect," I smiled. "Martha promised to tell me all about Howard's college years."

"God help me," Noah groaned, but I felt his smile against my hair.

Tomorrow I'd pack for my return to Chicago. In three days, Noah would join me for the weekend. Then back to Montana, back to the lake, back to this deck where everything had started.

My gaze drifted to the spot where I'd nearly crashed into Miller's Rocks that first night, where Noah had appeared to rescue me. Who would have thought that running away would lead me right where I needed to be?

"What are you thinking about?" Noah asked, his voice a deep rumble against my back.

I turned in his arms, looking up at his face in the dim light.

"What?" he asked, catching my expression.

"Just thinking that my producer would kill for this as a promo," I said. "City girl flees stalker, finds hot mountain man detective, ratings soar."

Noah laughed. "Is that what happened?"

"Something like that," I said, rising on my toes to kiss him. "Though the ratings are just a bonus."