



Mountain Needs an Anchor (Men of Cooper Ranch #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Isla Murray is a born carer. After her moms life-changing diagnosis, Isla returns home to the small Alaskan mountain town of Timber Falls to look after the only parent shes ever known. But not before one last night in the city sees her crossing paths with a handsome, intriguing stranger —a chance meeting neither of them can forget.

Months later, Cayson Cooper is living with his brothers at Cooper Ranch to fulfil his grandfathers last wish and planting a Christmas tree farm — a far cry from his old city life. Until the night he walks into a bar and crosses paths with his beautiful stranger again.

How do two people used to carrying the weight of the world learn to share the load while navigating unearthed family secrets, a chronically ill parent, and a matchmaking mountain spirit that cant be ignored?

As long as Isla and Case believe in each other, it should be easy right? Especially if they were destined for each other all along

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Last August

Anchorage, Alaska. One of my hometowns from my childhood. One of the places where I remember life being simpler... less adulty. Less everything .

In the decade since my parents moved back here, my visits have been fleeting. Small snippets of time squeezed in between project deadlines and work demands, and only for the standard holidays and family engagements like Mom's birthday or our parents' wedding anniversary.

This time should be no different, except it feels like I'm on the precipice of something. I just don't know what yet. And for once I'm not back here for any of the normal reasons.

A little while ago, our grandfather passed away at his ranch in Timber Falls, a small mountain town about eight hours east of here. Tomorrow, my three brothers and I will meet with our grandfather's lawyer, John, to hear the reading of his last wishes.

Until then, I've now been left to my own devices having had an early dinner with Will, Jude, and my twin brother Sutton, before going our separate ways.

I'm restless though and at a loss what to do about it. I could try and sleep, but I don't want to. I could always park myself on a stool in the hotel bar and drown my sorrows, but that's just sad. I feel like I need to do something, go somewhere.

My parents' house is out because Mom is visiting our only sister in Nebraska and Cap—our dad—is working on his crab fishing boat in the Bering Sea. Which means that

unless I want to go bug my brothers, I'm on my own.

Ironically, that's usually my preference, but not tonight.

Maybe I'm looking down the barrel of another low period for me, I am in Alaska where the weather is already starting to change.

My moods have always been up and down. Initially, we all thought it was just a "me" thing.

The long hours at college and then at my high-stress tech job in Silicon Valley probably didn't help either—still doesn't, if I'm being honest. Then, five years ago during a particularly down time in my life, Sutton demanded I fly across the country from Northern California to where he was in Boston.

Once I arrived and he saw me for himself, he made me seek professional help.

That was when I was diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder. Since then, I have had weekly online appointments with my therapist and take medication to help regulate the lows.

Unfortunately, it doesn't help on nights like this when I feel like I've got ants in my pants and need to do something.

Decision made, I get dressed and with my phone in my hand and my keycard safely secured in my wallet, I step out of the claustrophobic hotel room and make my way downstairs to the lobby. Just as I step out of the elevator, I catch Sutton in the lobby.

"Where you escapin' to?" he asks, his brow pinching as we move to the side to let other guests pass.

“Just needed some fresh air. Was just goin’ to walk around for a bit,” I reply.

Sutton’s frown deepens. “You’re OK though?”

The thing about being a twin is that you know each other better than anyone else in the world. This means you can’t hide anything, something that’s made worse by the fact my twin is a therapist... a doctor even.

Not only does he know when I’m struggling, but he senses it too.

Damn twin telepathy. The bonus about that is that I don’t have to put on a front for him.

I never have and never will. Sutton is my best friend and closest brother, even though we’ve lived on opposite sides of the country for years now.

Despite that, I know he’s always just a text or call away.

“Yes and no. I’m just—” I shrug. “I don’t know...restless? I want to be alone, but I don’t. And I felt the walls closin’ in on me upstairs so figured I’d walk around for a bit before comin’ back and beddin’ down.”

Sutton’s gaze roams over me before he meets my eyes, staring at me for a spell before nodding. “OK. I get that. We don’t know what’s goin’ to happen tomorrow or what Gramps has in store for us, so it makes sense that you’re a little on edge. Unless it’s somethin’ else? Work, maybe?”

I tilt my head and realize that he must be right. It’s the unknown factor of whatever tomorrow’s will reading will tell us that has me feeling like this. It must be.

“I told you, I turned my work phone off for this trip and they know I’ll be out of

contact until I get back there. This is family business, and no job will ever be more important than that.”

“Good. I haven’t forgotten what you told me about feelin’ stuck and needin’ a change,” he replies. “I won’t keep you though. Can you at least let me know when you get back to your room?”

Rolling my eyes, I smirk. “Yes, Dad .”

Sutt mimics my actions. “Stop that. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, Sutt. I do. And I love you for it. But I’m a big boy. I’m an adult now, don’t you know.”

He reaches over and cups my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Yeah, Case. I’m still a few minutes older than you, so I’m allowed to be a little overprotective.”

“Minutes, Sutt. Minutes ,” I say melodramatically. With a soft shove, he drops his arm and steps back. “Don’t get eaten by a bear or anythin’.”

I snort. “I’ll try not to. More likely to get trampled by a moose anyway. See you at breakfast?”

He nods just as the elevator car arrives with a beep. “Sure will. Stay safe, Case.”

With a final wave, he disappears behind the closing doors. That’s when I turn around and make my way outside, taking the time to stop and suck in a welcome breath of cool Alaskan air.

Now all that’s left to do is find something to do and somewhere to go.

Somewhere turns out to be a small 24-hour diner three blocks over from the hotel and something is ordering a strong black coffee that's over-brewed but surprisingly drinkable paired with a piece of the best pecan pie I've ever tasted. Yep, I'm a real party animal.

What I didn't expect was a stranger sliding onto the stool next to me at the counter and ordering the same thing as me—including the side of cream and ice cream.

I find the coincidence oddly settling.

"Seems I'm not the only smart one in the room," I say before turning my head toward her. That's when I realize I'm screwed because the minute I lay eyes on her, I know I'll never forget her.

Don't ask me how I know but there's just something about her sad, black-rimmed, deep brown eyes that I can't tear myself away from. I may know nothing about this beautiful woman yet I instantly—strangely—feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

That seems too tame of a description though because with one look, I'm compelled to slay all her dragons and shield her from everything causing her trouble. I want to fix anything and everything and make it better. And I don't even know the woman.

We sit there staring at each other for what seems like an eternity, her perfectly curved brows pinching together as she tucks a plump pink lip under her front teeth. Her gaze filled with a myriad of thoughts working behind her curious eyes.

I watch in startled awe as a slow-growing, lop-sided smile plays at her lips. She looks down at my half-eaten pie before lifting to my face again. "So, I made a good choice then?" she says softly, her voice full of a whole lot of somethings, all of them I want to know.

“My thorough testin’ of half a pie says yes,” I reply with a grin matching hers.

Those perfect lips of hers twitch. “And the brew?”

I wrap a hand around my seen-better-days white mug and bring it to my lips, locking eyes with the intriguing stranger as I take a measured sip. She raises a brow as I leave the cup on the counter. “Surprisingly, it’s almost as good as the pie.”

My beautiful stranger tilts her head to study me, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly before crinkling at the sides. “Good to know. Might have to get a gallon-sized cup to take away. I don’t see me sleepin’ easy tonight.”

There’s an opening if ever I heard one.

“I hope you don’t mind me askin’, and feel free to tell me to butt out, but why’s that?”

“Busy mind tonight.” She carefully cuts the tip of her pie slice off with the side of her fork before placing it in her mouth. Her lashes flutter closed as she savors the sweet and nutty dessert and hums her approval. “I think you’re right.”

It’s my turn to arch a brow, my pie all but forgotten which is a feat in itself. “Not often I hear that. Pray tell, what am I right about this time?”

She eyes me skeptically. “The pie. Wait, you don’t get told you’re right? Does that mean you’re always wrong?”

“Not usually. I make a livin’ from gettin’ things right the first time, every time.”

She turns on her stool so she’s facing me and hooks her sneakers on the footrest, now cradling her bowl with the cream, ice cream, and pie. “What do you do? Wait... can I

guess?"

"OK. Have at it. I'll give you three guesses." I lean back against my stool, waiting with amused anticipation at what she might say next.

"You're on!" She straightens so she can get a better look at me, and I swear I feel her gaze as it roams down to the ground and back up again. "Accountant."

A snort escapes my lips while I shake my head. I never expected this to happen when I decided to take a walk. "Nope. Try again," I reply, my lips twitching as she narrows her eyes.

"OK. I've still got two choices, yeah?"

"I'm not an accountant, but I can still count. So yep, two left. Better make them count."

The beautiful stranger is proving herself to be the best distraction a man with an unquiet mind like me could ever need. Especially when she rolls her eyes and hums under her breath while she thinks of her next guess. "I got it! You're a travelin' salesman."

"What do I sell?"

Her brows jump up. "I'm right?"

Silence falls between us and I try to drag out the anticipation for as long as I can. When she starts twitching like she can't stand it any longer, a chuckle escapes me. "Nope, but I'm still interested in what you think I'd be sellin' if I was a salesman."

"Why does it matter if I guessed wrong?"

I shrug. “Call me curious.”

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She smirks. “Since I don’t know your name, I think I will.”

A confused smile tugs at my lips. “What?”

“Call you curious.”

My eyes flash wide then I nod. “Hmm. OK. And what should I call you then?”

She leans closer, the scent of vanilla and rose with a touch of citrus filling the air between us. “What have you been callin’ me in your head?”

My cheeks burn hot, and I decide it’s the perfect time to grab my coffee cup and take a long healthy swig from it. Deflection will work. At least that’ll buy me time to work out why I’m having such a reaction to this beautiful stranger. “You’ve still got one more guess for me, remember?”

Her smile widens and I realize I’ve shown my hand, so to speak.

Her voice drops to a whisper, her addicting eyes locked to mine.

“C’mon, curious. Tell me. It can be our little secret.

” She straightens on her stool and loads her fork up with a mouthful of pie, cream, and ice cream.

“Besides, it’s not like we’re goin’ to see each other again after tonight.

I'm not goin' to be around here after tomorrow and lookin' at those designer clothes of yours, I'm guessin' you won't be either. ”

“Beautiful stranger...” I say quietly, unable to look away from her gorgeous expressive face. The surprised joy that takes over her features makes it worth my while because it takes my breath away.

“Hmm, I like that. Makes me think I need to up my name game and come up with an even better one for you.” Her words don't register straight away because I'm too focused on the way her lips purse around her fork.

“No,” I say a little too quickly. “I've never been called curious before.

Quiet, sure. Invisible, I've definitely felt like it.

Far too busy to see the wood from the trees?

True, unfortunately. Curious? Not once.” My eyes jump wide when I realize how much I just revealed about myself.

“I'm sorry. You don't need me dumpin' my problems on you over pie and coffee. ”

She bites her lip, her big brown eyes soft and gentle as they roam over my face. I spot a dose of her own curiosity shining back at me. Is she just as intrigued by me as I am by her?

“Do you trust me, curious?” she asks.

I stare at her for a moment as the truth sinks in. “Yeah. I think I do.”

“Then maybe we don't have to talk about our problems over coffee and pie.

What about a drink? There's a low-key dive bar about a block west of here.

I passed it earlier. We could find a quiet corner, grab a drink, and just talk.

Only one though because I've got a long drive tomorrow.

No pressure. No expectations. Hell, we don't even know each other's names . ”

I take her in and look for any sign that I'm misreading this—which has been known to happen—or whether I should trust my gut this time.

Because there's nothing I want more than to take her up on her offer.

To find that dark, quiet corner table and just talk about anything and everything.

I don't even care if I just end up listening all night.

If it's my beautiful stranger's voice I'm hearing, I don't think there's anything she could say that I wouldn't want to hear.

That's strange, right? We've only just met. I don't even know her name...

“I have one condition,” I say, catching her by surprise.

“What's that?”

“You make your third guess.”

And wouldn't you know it after I finish my coffee and she finishes her pie, she somehow guesses that I'm 'a tech guy from the Lower 48,' following it with a quick assurance that 'she won't hold it against me.'

So that's exactly what we do. I lead her out of the diner with my hand resting on the small of her back and follow her directions to the bar.

That was the start of the best night of my life.

We sequestered ourselves at the dark corner booth at the back of the bar and nursed one drink each while we talked. The more we shared, the closer I felt to her.

When she put her hand palm up on the leather seat between us and nodded down to it, I slid my fingers between hers.

It was one of the most profound moments of my life.

Maybe the most, if I'm being honest. Because the moment my skin touched hers, it was the first time in my life I felt whole... right... complete.

Then we continued like she hadn't just changed me forever, holding hands the whole time.

We kept it up past last call and kept the connection as we left the bar and made the slow walk back to my hotel.

Once in my room, we didn't do anything other than lie on the bed and face each other.

Talking about everything and nothing. All of it things that are important to us.

Stuff you wouldn't normally confess to a stranger.

Like my depression and my job. How I've let work take over my life and leave me with not much else to speak about, and how her life as she knew it—the one she'd built

herself over many years—was about to change dramatically.

How—just like me—she'd gone for a walk to escape her thoughts. Because that day her mom had finally been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, and she was now committed to moving back to her hometown to help take care of her.

All night we kept sharing, confessing, and thinking out loud. We did it until our voices turned hoarse and our eyes grew heavy just as the sun was coming up. And the whole time, we held hands like we were each other's lifeline.... the anchor we needed.

I drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face, feeling lighter and freer than I'd ever felt before.

Except when I opened my eyes again, my beautiful stranger was gone. All that was left was a note on the nightstand, one that to this day is still folded up and hidden away in my wallet.

Curious,

Thank you for giving me exactly what I needed, exactly when I needed it.

Until we meet again,

Your beautiful stranger.

After meeting with Gramps's lawyer and being told news that we didn't expect, my brothers and I walk right out of the law office and straight through the doors of the bar next door.

All four of us make a beeline to the bar, all of us still in a state of shock.

Ironically, it's the same bar I visited last night.

When the bartender appears, my oldest brother Will hands over his credit card to open a tab, ordering four shots of whisky.

Will turns to our youngest brother Jude, who mirrors his stance next to Sutton, who's next to me.

After each claiming a glass, we all lock eyes before throwing back our shots in unison.

I knock a knuckle on the wood as the barman eyes us all with curiosity and mild concern as he dutifully refills the shot glasses again.

"Anyone goin' to speak?" Will rasps.

As the oldest, he has always been the natural leader of us siblings.

Something that has come in useful in his adult life as head of his own construction company in Chicago.

He's the type to carry a heavy load and never complain about it.

To be honest, I'm surprised he hasn't burned himself out by now.

"Not sure I'm ready to say anythin' just yet," I mutter, swiping over my mouth with the back of my hand. "Think we better switch to beer if we're goin' to have a coherent conversation."

"Good plan," Sutton says with a disbelieving laugh.

Through his last will and testament, Gramps proved he wasn't just astute, worldly, and wise like his lawyer John described, he was sneaky too.

We're all a little lost for words because we're not only the soon-to-be owners of the mountain Gramps lived on for most of his life but the ranch and everything from there down to the town of Timber Falls too.

Yes, we now own a mountain and a ranch. It's a place we know well, where we spent every Summer until our late teens.

If it was just owning it, it would be fine. We never expected Gramps to include a condition that all four of us brothers must live together on the mountain for two years before it officially becomes ours.

Hence the shots.

I bump Will's shoulder with mine when I catch him scrubbing his face. "Hey, it's not that bad, is it?"

He stares at me for a moment with a dumbfounded look on his face. "No. But it is a total mind f--"

"Here are your beers," the barman says. "Let me know if you need somethin' else. Food? A bible? Anythin'." He laughs at his own joke. "Cause, no offense, y'all look like you've just lost everythin' or won everythin'. At least somethin', anyway."

"Not everythin'," Sutton says with a wry laugh.

"Definitely somethin'," Jude adds.

Jude is a bundle of energy. Luckily, Mom and Dad caught on to his ADHD and

dyslexia very early and were able to get him all the help and resources he needed.

He works as a landscape architect in Atlanta, his passion for plants and anything green cultivated during his visits with Gramps now helping him have a successful career. Him living so far away is just one of the many reasons why we don't all see each other that often.

For him to be quieter than usual tells me he's just as shocked by today's news as the rest of us.

"Yeah. A whole mountain of somethin's," I mutter.

Here I am trying to get my mind off my beautiful stranger and our surreal, unexpected night together, and now I'm contemplating uprooting my entire life to live on an Alaskan mountain for a couple of years.

To his credit, the barman looks between the four of us and shakes his head before walking away, mumbling something about crazy city folk under his breath.

"Are we really goin' to do this?" Jude says. "Seriously? We haven't lived together in years ."

"I can't just walk away from my life back home. I have responsibilities," I argue, although I don't really mean it.

I don't have much of a life to speak of. I work, sleep, rinse and repeat. That's pretty much it. So, the idea of switching it up and taking a bit of a break from Silicon Valley isn't as daunting as I thought it would be. Maybe it's exactly what I need...

Sutton shoots me a skeptical look. "Do you though? Because you've been sayin' for months that you're stuck and need a change."

I open my mouth to argue but slam it shut again. Needing to deflect the attention off me, I turn to Jude.

"What about you? You've just started that new job, haven't you?"

"You mean the job I started six months ago?" He stares at me in disbelief before looking at the others. "Jeez, have we all drifted that far apart?"

He's right. We have. Our lives are so busy and we're so spread out that we only get together three times a year. What kind of life is that when you don't have any time to see your family? Your brothers?

"What are we supposed to do? Just pack up our lives and move to Timber Falls?" Will says thinking out loud. His words hang between us for a good long while as we slowly drink our beer in somewhat of a comfortable silence.

"Will?" Sutton says, leaning back to peer over Jude. "Are you happy?"

It's Will's turn to look like a gaping fish this time. Sutton speaks again before Will can answer. "Because I don't think I am. Not truly. Not in a 'look back at my life and feel fulfilled' kind of way."

I tilt my head. "Is that therapist talk, Sutt?"

"No. Just bein' honest, I guess. That's not to say that I'm not nervous as all get out about what could happen if we do this."

Sutton's always been in touch with his emotions. He intuitively picks up on things without having to be told. Out of all four of us, he's the one who always keeps in touch and never lets life get in the way of doing that.

He was diagnosed with anxiety when he was fifteen and has learned how to manage it so effectively that it's easy to forget he even has it. He's smart—life and book smart—and makes sure not to let his mental illness rule his life. Something I've learned a lot from him about.

In many ways, Sutton's the glue that keeps us all together just because of the man he is.

“OK. Do you think we might be able to find whatever fulfillment we're all lookin' for at Cooper Ranch, even if it's in the middle of nowhere?” I ask.

"Don't know," Sutton replies. "But we won't know unless we try. And what's two years? I've lived thirty-three so far and it still feels like somethin's missin' and has been for my entire life."

"If Gramps found his on the mountain, then maybe he thinks— thought— we might too," Jude says. Damn, I never thought of it like that. "What do you think, Will?"

Will looks each of us in the eye. "You all feel that too?"

I turn to Sutton, who looks at Jude, who shifts his gaze to me before we all turn back to Will. And just like that, the decision is made.

"We're really doin' this?" Will presses, as if needing to hear it out loud. "We're goin' to pack up and move to Alaska?"

Jude holds up his beer, Sutton and I following his lead as we all turn to our big brother. "Come on, Will. We're not doin' it unless we drink to it," Jude says.

Will snorts. "Not sure that's a healthy tradition to start."

"OK. Then we can at least clink to it. How 'bout that? Then it doesn't have to be alcohol. It could be coffee, sweet tea, root beer—"

" Or good ol' fashioned liquor," I reply, lifting my bottle in the air and nodding to Will.

"C'mon, big brother. We can't do it without you.

Like literally . Gramps said it's all of us or bust and we all know you're not just the oldest, you're our leader.

So, what say you? Are we doin' this crazy thing? "

Will taps his bottle against mine, before doing the same to Sutton and Jude before a slow growing smile replaces his frown.

"Timber Falls, hold your hats. Cause the Coopers are comin' back."

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ISLA

April

I love my mom. I'd do anything for her—I have done. But ever since I moved back to Timber Falls to look after her, I've been feeling... I can't explain it.

Stuck? No.

I can't imagine not being here for Mom. She has been and always will be the most important person in my life.

Bored? Maybe.

Reflective? Definitely.

In the seven months since I've been back, I've settled into the small mountain town way of life again after years of studying, working, and living in Anchorage.

Maybe I'm just exhausted with life in general. Then again, I do have two jobs. One at the district hospital as a nurse as well as a few shifts a week at Falls Pan and Grill, the only Michelin-starred restaurant in the state.

The extra money from waitressing helps pay for Mom's physical therapy and medication. Anything left over goes into savings to renovate our family home in the future when her symptoms get worse—which, unfortunately, is inevitable.

My continuing to be a nurse is the one thing Mom wouldn't budge on when I told her I was moving in with her again.

Despite being a headstrong independent woman, she knew she couldn't fight me on that issue.

To me, it was never in question whether I'd help her adjust to her new normal following her diagnosis.

But being the woman who raised me, she straight-out refused to let me give up everything I'd 'worked so hard for.'

For the past few months though I've been feeling antsy. Not anxious, more a sense that something is coming. It's not even like it's foreboding, it's more like anticipation.

Then again, maybe it's because my childhood best friend, Birdie, has found her soulmate and is head over heels in love.

And it's with a city boy turned mountain man and new Timber Falls resident, Will Cooper.

He's one of four brothers who moved to town a few months back to take over their grandfather's ranch.

I haven't met all of them, just Will and his youngest brother, Jude. I first met Will when he came into the restaurant one night trying to track Birdie down, and Jude when he had dinner at the Grill with the two of them.

I'm knocked from my thoughts by the sound of my alarm beeping, telling me I really do need to get up if I want to shower, get dressed for work, and make breakfast for

Mom before I leave.

When I walk out into the kitchen, I spot Mom sitting at the dining table, the sound of country music playing softly on the radio.

She looks up with a smile, thankfully looking much brighter today than a few days ago when she was coming off a flare-up. “Hey, Lala. Sleep well?”

“I did, thanks.” I reach for the coffee pot and pour myself a cup. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the room, mixing with the scent of the wildflowers I bought home yesterday. Mom’s whole face lit up when she saw them and now they sit pride of place in a vase on the table.

Mom worked as the town’s florist when I was growing up.

Every morning she would leave at the crack of dawn to pick wildflowers from the mountain to sell in her shop in town.

That meant we always had her beautiful arrangements in the house as well as a thriving flower garden in the backyard.

That’s why the sight and smell of them is comforting to both of us.

When her health started declining, she had to hand over the shop to a manager we hired.

I still try to take her there a few times a week though, not wanting her to feel like her whole world has been upended.

I want to give her everything she wants and needs, and flowers and her business are the second love of her life, me being the first.

As I sip my coffee, Mom's gaze lingers on me for a moment and I know she's thinking about what she wants to say—or whether she should say it.

“Mom?”

“Just thinkin’. You’re so young, and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you.”

“I do... And right now, that means livin’ here with you and bein’ back in Timber Falls. That’s where my life has taken me. I’m OK, Mom, I promise.” I cock my head, my brows bunching together. “Where’s this comin’ from?”

She sighs. “I just worry that you’re missin’ out on things, that’s all.”

I sit down next to her and cover her hand with mine. “I’m not missin’ out on anythin’. Look at me, I’m livin’ rent-free with my favorite person on the planet and doin’ what I was born to do which is take care of you. It’s not a hardship, Mom. It’s just—”

“An adjustment. I know. You keep tellin’ me that. But it’s my job to worry, I am your mother.”

A snort escapes me. “Yep. But my days of makin’ you worry about me are long gone. I’m a big girl now, remember?” I flash her a reassuring smile. “Besides, you need me here. And I need to be here. We’re a team. We can get through anythin’, remember?”

Her gaze softens and she nods, a small smile playing on her lips. “You always know how to make me feel better, Isla.”

“Just returnin’ the favor for all the times you’ve done the same for me,” I reply, giving her one last gentle squeeze.

As I finish my coffee, I glance at the clock. I really need to get ready for work.

Standing up, I plant a kiss on Mom's cheek. "I'll make us some breakfast before I leave."

"Thanks, sweetheart. I'm feelin' a lot better today, but I'm not sure I have the spoons to get up right now."

"It's my pleasure. Besides, I need to fuel myself for a day of bedpans and sponge baths," I add with a wink before turning to the kitchen.

"You do more than that. I know you do."

I grin. "Yeah, but it's more fun than tellin' people about IV lures, takin' medical histories and wound care."

Mom rolls her eyes. "Don't lessen the work you do, Isla. Nurses are just as important as the doctors they stand beside. I won't hear anyone say any different."

"From your mouth to God's ears, Mom." I walk around the counter and start making some oatmeal for both of us.

"Did I tell you I'm goin' to the Lair tomorrow night?"

Betty next door is goin' to check in on you for me.

I'm not plannin' on bein' out late but it's goin' to be a special night for Birdie, so I want to be there. "

Mom's eyes light up. "A special night?"

"Oh yeah. Will came into the restaurant yesterday to ask if I'd meet them there. All he would tell me was that Birdie would want her best friend to be present."

“He sounds like a good man. Betty has been keepin’ me updated with all the news about those Cooper Brothers.”

“Look at you with your finger on the pulse of Timber Falls’ gossip.” I laugh. “You don’t even need me to tell you things. You’ve got your own sources now.”

“Hush, now. I like to know the comin’s and goin’s, that’s all.”

“Mmm hmm...” I say teasingly.

“So,” I say, stirring the pot on the stove. “What have you heard? We should compare sources.”

Mom chuckles. “Your sources are overhearin’ Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Holden when they go to the Grill for their monthly ladies’ lunch.”

“Guilty as charged. I shoot her a grin over my shoulder. “I also get a lot of information straight from the horse’s mouth—or in this case—my best friend. Which means that yes, I can confirm that Will Cooper is a good man. He’s perfect for Birdie.

Protective but not overbearin’, and attentive.

He’s very much in tune with her just as she is with him. He definitely has my seal of approval.”

Mom falls quiet after that, her gaze soft on mine as I finish preparing a bowl for her and place it on the table. “I want that for you, Lala. I just hope you movin’ home to help me doesn’t stop you from findin’ it.”

As I’ve done many times over the past seven months, I think back to that night in Anchorage and the man who surprised me with his selflessness and care. Who didn’t

want anything more from me than I wanted from him. Who was honest and open with me—more open than a stranger would normally be.

The man with the deep intense eyes that I swear saw straight into my soul and whose touch warmed me from the inside out. The man who I only know as Curious . The one I haven't been able to forget, nor would I ever want to.

“Earth to Isla?” Mom muses, snapping me from my thoughts.

“You’re thinkin’ about him again, aren’t you?”

” Yes, Mom knows about him. Birdie does too.

That doesn’t help anyone though because I didn’t get his name and he didn’t get mine.

To him, I was his beautiful stranger and to me, he was simply ‘Curious.’

I stupidly didn’t leave any way for him to contact me on the goodbye note I left before slinking out of his hotel room after he fell asleep. We may have only held hands and talked but that was more intimate, more meaningful than any physical act to me. It was everything I needed that night.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

Mom’s lips tip up into a knowing smile. “You’ll cross paths with him again, Lala. Connections like that aren’t just random. They’re meant to happen.”

I shrug, not wanting to let her know that seeing him again is something I hope for more than she could ever know. I don’t have time to dwell on that now. I have a job to get to and a mom to set up for the day.

“Do you need a coffee top-up before I go?”

Mom stares into my eyes for a spell before thankfully letting it go. “That’d be great, sweetheart. And I better get photos of Birdie’s ring,” she adds.

I whirl around on a gasp. “I didn’t say it was that kind of special night.”

Mom taps her nose. “You didn’t have to. A mother knows these things. A mother knows a lot of things and sees them too. You best remember that.”

“Yes, mom,” I reply with a laugh. Despite everything, Mom does see things. Even the things I don’t want her to see.

And I love her all the more for it.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

CASE

Why did I ever think it was a good idea to plant Christmas trees?

If I didn't already know there was something mystically voodoo about this mountain, this would've proven it.

Especially since I'm not the Cooper with green fingers—that's Jude. Yet somehow, I got it stuck in my mind that I wanted to have my own part of our land to use for a Christmas Tree farm.

Don't get me wrong, I did my research. I knew it was going to be labor intensive to start with, but I have blisters on top of blisters on my hands and baby pine needles in places where they shouldn't be. I'm also more tired than I swear I've ever been in my life.

"Rethinkin' your choice of project, brother?" my landscaper brother muses as he finishes placing another sapling into one of the holes we've spent the week digging. Twice the width of the root spread and no deeper than the root ball, just as we were told to do.

Bending down, my back screams in discomfort as I replace the soil before covering the top with mulch from Gramps's old wheelbarrow that's probably as old as he was.

"Nope," I huff out as I smooth it all out and stand straight again. "This is me givin' back—to all y'all and the mountain. Isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

Jude studies me for a spell before he nods and wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “True. But this is more my lane, not yours.”

I may be exhausted and complaining about my life choices but inside I feel like I’m on top of the world. Because standing in this sheltered, well-drained field that’s blocked from most of the wind, there are now four rows of evenly planted Spruce trees.

Using Jude’s knowledge of all things green to my advantage, we agreed to go with an even mix of White and Black varieties so that we’d not only have choices moving forward, but so we will also be able to see which species are best suited for the mountain’s soil.

We also have more seedlings growing in the greenhouse next to where Jude and Sutton’s work-in-progress gardens are. That is to future-proof the tree farm should anything happen to these first plantings.

Grabbing my water flask, I down half of it in one go before grabbing the barrow and pushing it to the next hole to start the process all over again.

“I may be regrettin’ not hirin’ help with the plantin’ side of things, but I don’t regret startin’ this thing. I’ve already got the mayor on board with it and in a few years when these babies are maturin’, you’ll all be congratulatin’ me on a job well done,” I tell him.

“Hey, I’ve always believed in you. Don’t ever doubt that.

I just didn’t think you’d want to do somethin’ like this .

” He waves over the half-planted field. “I thought for sure you’d want to turn our place into a smart house with all the gadgets you could ever dream of.

Then start modernizin' the town or somethin'."

Our ranch hand Wyatt laughs. "He's already rigged up the radio in the bathroom. Isn't that enough?" Wyatt is eighteen but is already a lifelong rancher, having spent a lot of his life both on the road traveling the rodeo with his dad, Red, and in recent years on their family ranch in Spring Haven.

He's been a god's send since he arrived, helping us get our derelict property back into working order. We may only have two steer bulls—a housewarming gift from Red—and a nomad donkey called Grumps that arrived one day and never left, but we have plans for more animals soon.

We're just taking it all one step at a time. Slow and steady wins the race and all that. Planting the first stage of the tree farm is just one of those things we're ticking off our never-ending To-do list.

"Don't worry, I still plan on bringin' the house into the twenty-first century. I have it all planned out. By the time I'm finished, we'll be able to start the coffee machine from our beds so that it's brewed and poured by the time we step into the kitchen."

Jude laughs, shaking his head. "Yeah, there's the Case I know."

As much as I joke with Jude about my plans for the house, deep down I know that this Christmas tree farm is more than just a project for me. It's a connection to the land, to our family history, and to the wider community of Timber Falls.

Something I didn't think about until Gramps's will was read and my brothers and I had decided to follow his last wishes and commit to living here.

Now that we've been here for a good few months and have discovered more things about Gramps, the land, and the family lore we had no idea about, the two-year time

frame in which we had to stay here no longer applies.

I can't speak for Sutton and Jude, but I can't imagine going back to my old life. I may consult remotely on my old projects and work remotely, but I can honestly say that old Case and 'Timber Falls' Case are like night and day.

Now I wake up with the sun rather than bleary-eyed to my alarm, my brothers and I are closer than we've been in over a decade, and for the first time in a long time I can confidently say that I feel... content.

Besides, I know for a fact that Will is not going anywhere. Not when tonight we're all heading down the mountain to go to the town's only tavern, the Lion's Lair, to surprise his girlfriend Birdie with a night she'll never forget.

"What do you think will happen tonight?" I ask Jude.

He stops mid-turn, his gloved hand holding the trunk of the next sapling to plant as his eyes widen. "Do you honestly think there's a chance in hell she'll say no? This is Birdie we're talkin' about. She'll probably say yes before he's finished askin'."

Wyatt rolls his eyes. "I'm surprised Birdie hasn't asked him yet."

"Ha!" I snort. "Maybe we should be talkin' to the pacin' one over there." I jerk my head in the direction of the gate at the far edge of the field where Will is walking back and forth along the fence line with his phone to his ear.

Jude loosens the cloth bag protecting the roots of the sapling in his hand before shaking them free and nodding my way as we execute another practiced planting exactly like the last one.

"I don't know why he's so nervous, though.

She's his One, the woman chosen for him by the mountain spirit.

He loves her and she loves him. They're practically already married.

This is just one of those milestones to celebrate before movin' onto the next one...

. Marriage," he says at the same time I say, "babies."

"What?" we both say together before locking eyes and laughing, just as a no-longer-pacing Will and Sutton join us.

My twin stands back and crosses his arms in front of him, smirking while he looks between us. "What are y'all cacklin' about?"

"Let's just say it's a chicken vs egg scenario," Wyatt explains, still snickering.

I turn to my identical twin. "Sutt, what comes first, marriage or babies?"

He frowns. "Well, that wasn't what I expected you to say."

"That's not an answer..." Jude says in a sing-song voice.

"Marriage, I guess. Hopefully, anyway. Although I'm not fussed either way, that's just my opinion. Why do you ask?"

"Will?" Jude asks as we all turn to our big brother.

"She's got to say yes first," Will sighs. "But yes, marriage then children. What's so funny about that?"

I shake my head. "No reason. We were just talkin' about how you've got no reason to

be nervous because there's no way Birdie's goin' to say no tonight."

Will opens his mouth to argue but stops and slams it shut again, his shoulders visibly relaxing. "You know what? I think I just needed to hear someone say that out loud."

I arch a brow Sutton's way before shifting my attention back to Will. "You sayin' Mr. Therapist here hasn't been reassurin' you all mornin' while we've been breakin' our backs?"

"Hey, I tried. But do you think our stubborn big brother would listen?" my twin replies.

There's a reason why we have absolutely no doubt that Birdie will say yes and that's because of the mountain's Call—the family lore we discovered after moving here, with the help of some distant cousins we've met along the way.

Long story short, there's a spirit that lives within the mountain range that Cooper Ranch sits on. For centuries now, my family's bloodline and those connected to it have protected her land. To reward them, the spirit has called their soulmates to the mountains.

Most importantly, the mountain has never got it wrong. There are generations upon generations of Coopers that can attest to that.

My brothers and I knew nothing about it until we moved here. Then Will met Birdie. She knew she was his soulmate, but our brother had no idea why he was so immediately drawn to her.

Now, months later, they're so in love it would almost be sickening if it wasn't obvious they were made for one another. That's how we all know tonight is just another stepping stone in the long, happy life Will and Birdie are going to have

together.

What we don't know is which one of us is going to be next, and when it might happen.

Sutton claps a hand on Will's shoulder. "It'll be fine. In a few hours, you and your soon-to-be fiancée will be on cloud nine and we'll be there to congratulate you both."

"Exactly," I add. "But since you're both here, grab some gloves and help us plant this row so we can get cleaned up and get ready for tonight."

With newfound determination and renewed energy that I muster from somewhere , we finish the rest of the planting in record time.

After packing everything away, we make our way to the house for a well-earned beer before washing off the day and getting ready for our night at the Lair.

Whatever tonight brings, at least I know my big brother is guaranteed to be the happiest man in town.

I can only hope that one day the mountain spirit might reward me with my soulmate too. Until then, I have my tree farm, our ranch family, and whatever other little projects around town I can find to entertain myself.

Because one thing is for sure. When my turn does come, I'm not going to let her slip through my fingers like I did with my beautiful stranger in Anchorage all those months ago.

That might just be my biggest regret, and it's one I've promised myself I'll never make again.

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ISLA

Having arrived a good thirty minutes early, I commandeer a stool at the bar and keep Birdie company while she works.

The Lair hasn't changed much over all the years we've been coming here. It still has the same 'home away from home' feel that it's always had.

This is where Birdie and I came to celebrate our twenty-first birthdays—which were thankfully only a week apart. We sat at this very bar and ordered two Cosmopolitans thinking we'd be like the Alaskan versions of the Sex and the City girls.

I still remember us locking eyes and clinking our fancy cocktail glasses before taking that first sip, giggling as the taste tickled our taste buds.

Some nine years later, I feel it's kind of kismet that this is where another important moment in my best friend's life will happen too. Once she says yes, of course...

As if reading my mind, the woman in question slides the exact same cocktail in front of me. Leaning into her hands, she eyes me curiously. "You're not usually a Saturday night girl, Iz. Not anymore, anyway. Everythin' OK? Is your mom better this week?"

I smile. "I'm good, I promise. And Mom's doin' OK too." I add a shrug for good measure. "Can't a girl just want to hang out with her best friend for a night?"

I know I'm laying it on thick, but there's no way I'm going to ruin this night for Birdie. She's one of the most important people in my life and I'm just happy that I

can be here to witness her special moment.

She studies me for a moment before her radiant smile turns full beam.

“Well, good. As long as y’all know that just because I’m livin’ up the mountain at Cooper Ranch now, that doesn’t mean I’m not still here for you and Jessica.

You know you’re just as much a part of my family as Dad—and now the Coopers—are.”

My eyes sting as I reach out and link my pinky finger with hers. “Don’t worry, B. You’re stuck with me and I’m happy to be stuck with you too.”

“Exactly,” she whispers, her voice a little rough. “And you never know, maybe soon it’ll be you tellin’ me all your ooey-gooey love stories. You know, when your turn comes to meet the love of your life. I want that for you more than you could ever know, Iz.”

I know my loved-up, over-the-moon-with-happiness best friend wants that for me just as much as Mom does. The difference between us is that I don’t believe my soulmate is just going to waltz into my life like Will Cooper walked into hers—and in a furniture shop, no less.

“Since you’re here tonight, you’ll get to finally meet Will’s brothers. You always keep missin’ them and Will said they were comin’ down the mountain for some of Margie’s hot wings and Cajun fries after plantin’ all day.”

“Finally,” I say, playing along since Birdie doesn’t know why I’m here. “But I bet they’re not just comin’ here for the food. Especially not Will, anyway.”

“Well, I’d like to think Will prefers me to Margie’s cookin’ but you never know. Her

food is good...”

Remember how I said that my best friend was loved up? It’s whatever the level is above that.

After hearing her gushing about meeting Will at the furniture store, and then about the epic first date/personal tour of town they went on, I was hopeful that my beautiful friend had met a good, honest, hardworking man who would treat her well.

When they went on a road trip to Moose Mountain with two of Will’s brothers, there was an air of certainty around them when they returned. It was like they just knew they were each other’s true love.

As Birdie explained it to me, it turns out her favorite author’s books—which I thought were purely fiction—are a retelling of real-life events. And they’re all tied to the Cooper family’s bloodline in some way or another, which includes Will.

I’m still a little—OK, a lot —skeptical about the whole thing. A mountain spirit bringing two soulmates together in small town, Alaska? What I do believe is that they’re made for one another. One look at Will and Birdie when they’re together, you can’t help but wonder if there’s something to it.

I just don’t think it’s in the cards for me. I’m thirty, living back with my mom in my hometown in the middle of nowhere. It’s highly unlikely that my soulmate is going to hunt me down and just happen to stop in Timber Falls.

“How’s ranch life treatin’ you? Have you found any more clues or treasures from Will’s grandfather?” I ask when she finishes serving another customer and walks back over to my end of the bar.

“Remember how I told you there was an old journal with a note on it for Will to read

it first?” I nod, leaning in closer.

“It turns out that Old Old Man Wilson and Ridley’s granddaddy—I guess he would be Old Old Man Cooper— used to be best friends.

Like you and me, that level of best friends. How crazy is that ?”

Ridley was Will, Case, Sutton, and Jude’s grandfather. He is the reason why the brothers moved to town.

What’s confusing about Birdie’s news is that the Wilsons and the Coopers are enemies. Not rivals, not even foes—I’m talking ‘they hate each other.’ Well, no one has ever worked out exactly why they are generational adversaries, but it sure has made for interesting town gossip over the years.

“That doesn’t make sense. What would cause such a fallin’ out?”

Birdie's eyes light up. “I know !” She dips her head and meets my eyes, her voice dropping to a low whisper. “I’m wonderin’ if somethin’ happened way back then, and that’s why the families butt heads like grumpy mountain goats with a grudge.”

We both straighten again, but I can see her mind racing a mile a minute like mine is.

We weren’t overly invested in the Wilsons vs.

Coopers drama until the current Old Man Wilson–Sully–ran his mouth in front of everyone at the Icebox diner not so long ago.

As Birdie told me, he was spouting nonsense that made no sense.

Since then, we’ve been trying to investigate—with no success, unfortunately.

“Sutton and Jude think there’s some hidden gold or somethin’ that’s worth a lot of money and that’s why the Wilsons hate us.”

My lips twitch as I arch a brow her way. “Us?” Her cheeks blush adorably and there’s no mistaking her wry grin. I decide to spare her our typical good-natured ribbing and press on. “What does Will think?”

“He has been tryin’ to speed read the journal to try and piece it all together.”

“No luck then?”

She sighs. “Nope. Case even offered to write some computer code or whatever it’s called so that the internet can search for answers for us.”

“He can do that?”

“Apparently, you can put some keywords in and let the program run in the background. He was goin’ to search for anythin’ related to Timber Falls, Wilson, and Cooper. And the mountain, of course.”

Now I’m officially intrigued. “What does he do—or what did he do for a job—that means he knows how to do that? Is he a hacker?”

“I don’t know exactly what he used to do, but he was livin’ in tech land in California and working for a company who does computers, projects, security... somethin’ like that, anyway.”

Her words trigger something at the back of my brain. Didn’t Curious say he worked with computers in Northern California? Ugh, here I go again, thinking of my one-night-friendship-stand.

That's how I describe it since we didn't even kiss. Even still, it was the most memorable and intimate night I've ever had with a man. And doesn't that say something?

Thankfully, she keeps talking, distracting me from my thoughts.

"We all decided that scouring the internet might be a little too much. Besides, the truth will come out eventually, if and when it's meant to.

A bit like how Will and I found each other.

It was all part of the plan. We've just got to believe the whole saga will be revealed when the time is right. "

"It has to. Secrets always have a way of comin' out."

"They sure do," she replies. "But other than the guys workin' their butts off diggin' holes and plantin' trees all week, life's been pretty normal up the mountain."

"And livin' with a house full of single city boys isn't too bad?"

She laughs. "Nope. They barely let me do anythin'. I had to do rock, paper, scissors against the twins the other night just so I could do the washin' up after they cooked."

"Oh to have that problem," I muse.

"Believe me, I know. I'm a helper, I want to help. And now I have these four city-boys-turned-mountain-men who won't let me help."

"First world problems, B," I say with a grin. "So, before he gets here and our girl chat is over, tell me all the latest juicy gossip about you and your One."

As if mentioning his name conjures him up, Birdie's attention shifts toward the front of the bar. If I hadn't guessed Will had arrived already, the soft heart eyes she shoots that way would be a dead giveaway.

I guess it's time to meet the rest of the famous Cooper brothers...

Except the moment I turn around to get my first look at them, I freeze in shock. Because staring back at me, nearly tripping over his own feet when his wide eyes meet mine, is the man I never thought I'd see again.

Curious .

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CASE

I'm seeing things. I must be. Because sitting on a barstool chatting with my soon-to-be future-sister-in-law is my one that got away. My beautiful stranger. And she's more breathtaking than I remember.

My feet seem to go out from under me and I almost trip over them. Thankfully, my brothers are all walking ahead of me and don't witness my sudden clumsiness.

She looks just as shocked as I am but quickly recovers, shooting me a half-curious, half-shocked stare before turning back to Birdie.

As for me, I'm already moving on autopilot, following behind my brothers and coming to a stop in front of the women.

"Hey, City Boy," Birdie says, leaning over the bar to meet Will in the middle for a quick hello kiss.

Once she's standing straight again, she looks around the rest of us.

"Case, Sutt, Jude. Fancy seein' you here.

Don't worry, I already pre-warned the kitchen that y'all were comin' and you'd be starvin'."

"We're pretty much here every Saturday, Birdie," Jude teases.

“Indeed.” Will grins as he turns to the other woman. “Hey, Isla. Great to see you again.” Isla. Now I know her name. Wait...

My head jerks to Will. “Again?”

Will’s brows bunch. “ Yeah...” he says slowly. “Isla’s Birdie’s best friend. They’ve been as thick as thieves since they were born. I forget you two kept missin’ each other.”

“He’s been too busy with his baby trees, that’s why,” Jude turns to me. “You haven’t been to the Grill with us when she’s been there,” he explains before lifting his chin Isla’s way. “Nice to see you again, Iz.”

“You too, Jude,” she says warmly, matching the feeling that spreads through my chest just from hearing her voice again.

“Oh yeah. I forgot about that.” Birdie says. “I better introduce y’all. Iz, these are the only two Cooper brothers you haven’t met yet.”

Sutton gasps and clutches his chest, grabbing onto my arm dramatically as if holding himself up. “And here was I thinkin’ we were family now, Birdie. I’m hurt. How ‘bout you, Case? Are you as wounded as I am?”

I open my mouth to answer but close it again, my tongue feeling ten times too big. Instead, I just shake my head.

Birdie rolls her eyes. “Oh shush, you two. Anyway, I’m sure you’ve heard me talk about Iz before. She works at the restaurant with me. She’s the one that told Will to come find me here all those months ago when you made him hunt me down.”

Will smirks. “I wasn’t huntin’. I was simply on a mission to find the woman I knew

was meant to be mine. There's a difference."

"You were pretty determined," Isla adds, her lips twitching and drawing my gaze to them. Get it together, Case.

"Yeah, yeah," Will says, grinning my way. "I also remember a text sayin' somethin' about me bein' hot. Remember that, Iz?"

Her cheeks burn pink as she laughs at my big brother.

I remember that sound. It's been one of the many soundtracks in my dreams for months now.

She winks at him. "I admit nothin'." And there's that spark that drew me in like a moth to a flame.

It's like no one else exists for me and I can't bring myself to tear my gaze away from her in case she's a product of my imagination. I can feel Sutton's frown beside me but still, I don't look away while everyone else chats away.

After kicking myself for not getting her phone number or even an email, the woman who made me feel alive for the first time in years is sitting right in front of me, seemingly been here in Timber Falls all along.

How is this possible?

Birdie's offer to take our drinks order pulls me back to reality,

Unlike me, Isla manages to compose herself and turns her attention back to her best friend to order the same drink she did that night we spent together.

“Case? Drink?” Birdie asks, startling me.

“Oh yeah. Um sure. I?—”

Sutton speaks up. “He’ll have a beer, same as me. Thanks, Birdie.” I’ve never been more thankful to be a twin as I am right now.

Jude seems oblivious to whatever is going on with me and moves to stand on the other side of Isla, chatting to her while Birdie gets our drinks. Will has gone quiet though, his concerned eyes locking with mine. “You good, Case?” I nod but don’t say anything else.

“OK...” he says, not sounding convinced. “How about y’all go grab us a table then?”

Sutton nudges me with his elbow. “You comin’?” I nod, unable to tear my eyes away from my beautiful stranger. Isla . For all I know, I fell over without realizing it and now I’m hallucinating.

“Yeah.”

Then my twin loops his arm with mine and with one last look at my beautiful stranger—for now anyway—before he drags me off in search of a table.

The strange thing is, I feel Isla’s eyes on me as we walk away. And it’s that feeling that finally brings a smile to my face.

“You goin’ to tell me what’s up?” Sutton says as soon as we’re out of earshot.

“It’s her.”

He looks around the table at our brothers before arching a brow my way. “Yes....

She's a her. Though most people would say a woman," he says slowly.

I shake my head. "No, Sutt. It's her . My beautiful stranger. The one from Anchorage."

He frowns. "How? I mean... " He now looks as shocked as I felt when I first laid eyes on her again. "Nope, I was right the first time. How?"

"Are you sure?" Jude looks over my shoulder before turning to Will. "Birdie's a Timber Falls's lifer, right?"

"Sure is. Isla was too before livin' in Anchorage. She moved back home after her mom was diagnosed with MS last year. She works as a nurse at the hospital and as a hostess and server at the restaurant." Will's gaze shifts to meet mine. "Are you sure it was her, Case?"

"As sure as I'm sittin' here next to you. That's her. I didn't..." I shake my head. "I never thought I'd see her again."

"One night stand regret?" Jude asks.

I swear my head has never jerked so fast. "It wasn't a one-night stand!

" I say with a growl, suddenly overwhelmed with the need to defend Isla's honor.

"We spent the night together." His brows lift.

" Talkin' , Jude. Eating at a diner then havin' a drink at a bar, but just talkin' .

When I woke up the next morning, she was gone. "

“But she left a note,” Sutton says.

“Yeah, but it didn’t have any contact information.”

“Not even her name?” Will asks.

I shake my head. “Nope. She called me Curious, and she was my beautiful stranger.”

“Why didn’t she know your name? Why didn’t she make the connection when Birdie was talkin’ about all of us?” Will presses.

“We didn’t share names. Maybe that was why we were so comfortable with one another. Two strangers searchin’ for somethin’ and findin’ it in each other that night.”

“You didn’t do anythin’?” Jude clarifies.

“Other than hold hands, no.”

All three of my brothers sit back in their seats. Will sighs, Jude whistles through his teeth, and Sutton whispers a quiet “wow.”

That’s how Birdie finds us when she delivers our drinks. She hands them out around the table before placing mine down last and shooting me a curious look. "You okay, Case?"

“Yeah.”

“You want to tell me what that was all about over there? I thought it was Sutton who had the anxiety. You’re usually the social, friendly one.”

Will wraps his arm around his girlfriend’s waist and pulls her into him. “I’ll give you

the rundown later, but it appears Isla and Case may have met before.”

Birdie’s eyes widen and snap to mine. “ Really ? How? Where?”

“Anchorage,” I reply, searching for any recognition in her eyes. Is it wrong to hope that Isla talked to her best friend about me?

“Wait...” she starts to say before stopping herself. “Nope. That’s impossible. Iz came back to town in late August, and you didn’t get here till January, right?”

Will chuckles. “Honey, we were in Anchorage at that time for the readin’ of Gramps’s will. ...” He lets that hang there and we all watch as the penny drops.

Her head slowly swivels over to the bar where Isla is watching us before turning back. “No way ,” she whispers. “That means you’re her?—”

I give her a sheepish smile. "Yeah.”

“What are the odds? I mean, it was her last night in Anchorage, and you were there for what, two days? And you just happened to meet and share this big, profound thing that neither one of you have forgotten about since?”

When you think about it like that...

Wait. “She said it was a big, profound thing?” I ask. Birdie’s answer is now my sole reason for being right now.

Will’s soulmate studies me and I don’t miss how there’s a lot working behind her eyes. She goes to open her mouth before slamming it shut, realizing she might’ve revealed too much. “Oh, would you look at the time. Better get back to the bar. Customers to serve, drinks to pour, and all that.”

“Birdie Walker!” I say to her now retreating back. Will chuckles, Jude grins, and Sutt just shakes his head with a giant smirk on his face.

“She’s like Timber Falls’s own little Houdini,” Will muses.

I glare at him. “I have half a mind to go tell her you’re about to propose or somethin’. Just to get her to tell me what she doesn’t want to say.”

“Cayson Cooper, take that back,” Will says, all amusement gone. “I’ve managed to keep it a secret this long. You’re not goin’ to ruin it for me now.”

“Of course not!” I shoot back. “I’m just—” I sigh. “I’m a little thrown right now, that’s all. But no, I’d never ruin tonight for you.”

“Speakin’ of that, when exactly are you poppin’ the question,” Jude asks, waving his phone in front of us. “Because I need to let Wyatt know when to meet me at the back door so I can let everyone else in.”

I put my need for answers about my beautiful stranger— Isla —on the back burner. Tonight’s about Will and Birdie and their future together. My questions can wait. It’s time to celebrate the Call, and my brother finding his One.

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And despite not being able to stop my gaze from seeking out Isla for the rest of the night, I make sure I'm front and center when Will drops to one knee and asks Birdie to be his wife.

And I'm one of the first to pop the champagne as everyone near and dear to us from Timber Falls celebrate the happy couple.

But the whole time, my mind is on Isla. As luck would have it, it seems like what I thought was impossible is, in fact, very probable.

'Till we meet again.' That's what she said in her letter. It looks like that time is now.

With the impromptu engagement party moving back to the bar downstairs, I grab a lime and soda and go back to the rooftop area to get some fresh air, taking some space and time to wrap my head around the fact that Isla is here in Timber Falls.

The woman who left such a lasting impression on me that I couldn't forget her even if I tried and who I never thought I'd see again is here .

This might be the second chance I never thought I'd get. An opportunity to see if the night we shared was a one-off or a connection to explore.

A little part of me wonders if this could be the mountain's doing. The only thing giving me pause is the fact that you're supposed to know the moment you meet your One. If Isla was sent by the mountain spirit, surely there would've been some kind of 'big bang' or something when we met.

That's just one of the things I'm trying to work out. The other is where to go from here.

The metal door at the top of the stairs creaks open behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I freeze when I see Isla walking toward me.

"Hey," I breathe, still a mix of shock, surprise, and awe over the fact that she's here, in the same town as me. And with a connection to our family no less.

"Sorry. I didn't think anyone else would be up here," she says, her voice as soft and calming as I remember it.

I shake my head, a wry smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. "You're welcome to join me, Isla."

Her shoulders drop with relief as she stops beside me. "Guess you know my name now," she muses.

"Guess you know mine now too."

Tilting her head, she meets my eyes and I'm immediately lost in the quiet intensity of her big, brown-eyed gaze.

When we both seem to realize that we're just standing there staring at each other, we break off. I laugh quietly to cover up my awkwardness just as she does the same, a comfortable silence stretching out between us before she speaks again.

"Did you get my note? That mornin', I mean?" she asks.

"Yeah." I still have it tucked away in my wallet, I don't say. Not for the first time tonight, I find myself lost for words. Not because I don't want to speak to her but

because I want it so much I don't know where to start.

"I didn't want to leave," she explains. "I wasn't in a hurry to escape or anythin'."

"The thought never crossed my mind. I figured you had somewhere to be."

"I did. I mean, I had to go back to my apartment, pack as much as I could, then get to the hospital to pick up Mom. The note was the only way I could think of to tell you at least a little of what that night meant to me."

"And I appreciate you leaving it. It was unexpected..." I trail off trying to find the right words. "But it meant a lot to me."

Isla turns her body toward mine and I mimic her pose. "The note or the night?"

"Both."

"Me too." Isla smiles then, a soft, genuine smile that lights up her gorgeous face.

"I know we didn't know much about one another.

" I arch a brow and relish in the touch of pink that blooms on her cheeks.

"No identifyin' details, anyway. I just never imagined I'd see you again.

Not because I didn't want to, but because I thought we'd be thousands of miles apart.

I didn't think a nurse from Anchorage who was movin' to Timber Falls would ever see a tech guy from North California again. "

I chuckle in agreement. She's not wrong. Which makes the fact we're now living in

the same town all that more wild... “Probably didn’t help that I didn’t want to misread anythin’ by askin’ for your number and gettin’ shot down.”

Her smile turns lopsided. “You wouldn’t have been out of line.

I thought about leavin’ my number or an email address.

But then I wondered if it might ruin the memory of our time together if you didn’t call. You gave me everythin’ I needed that night without knowin’ anythin’ about me.

You were kind and attentive, you listened, and you shared.

You were there ,” she says. “We may have been strangers but even still, it felt like we were tethered together somehow. Hell, you didn’t even pressure me for a kiss or nothin’ . ”

“My Mom raised us to be gentlemen, and I wasn’t lookin’ for a hookup. I didn’t even know what I was needin’ until you sat down beside me.”

“What was that?”

“A listenin’ ear and a kind face. Someone who was goin’ through somethin’ of her own and needed someone to talk to as much as I did,” I reply.

Her lips part as she looks at me in disbelief. “There have been so many times when I’ve wondered if I conjured you up in my mind. You seemed too good to be true. Or real.”

“Believe me, I’ve had those thoughts too.” I match her expression, feeling that connection just as strongly now as the first time. “How’s your mom doin’ now?”

Isla's eyes widen with surprise. "You remember?"

"I remember everythin' about that night." About you , I don't say.

Her expression softens. "She's good. Has her bad days and good days, of course. But since her diagnosis, we've been able to get her into physical therapy and on a new meds regime."

"That's good. Real good," I say, my fingers itching to touch her, to experience that same warm comfort I felt whenever we held hands. Something to keep me from floating away on this high I feel—have always felt—when I'm around her. We fall silent again but I don't feel awkward anymore. "So..."

The bell from the bar below rings, signaling last call, and I'm instantly disappointed that our time on the roof is coming to an end.

"Can I see you again?" I ask at the same time she says, "We should have coffee," making us both laugh.

"I'd like that," she replies, leaning in closer as if she feels the same invisible magnetic pull between us that I do.

"Good," is all I have in me to say. I tilt my head toward the door. "I guess we should get back down there."

"I don't have a lot of free time at the moment, because of work and Mom. But I'd really like to see you again, Case." She blushes again. "It's so strange to know your name now."

"Tell me about it, Isla. "

She seems as reluctant to leave as I am. But we have time now , I tell myself.

“We do,” she replies, and I realize I must’ve said that out loud.

Feeling emboldened, I decide to follow my gut. I step back and hold out my hand for hers, sucking in a silent breath when she slides her fingers with mine without hesitation.

Without saying another word, I lead her downstairs so we can rejoin the party, but this time I make sure we don’t part without swapping numbers.

That’s not a mistake I was willing to make again. And definitely not with her.

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ISLA

I found it hard to get to sleep after getting home from the bar. Then again, who wouldn't? The whole night was surreal and great... and confusing, and... hopeful?

By the time morning comes, I wake up feeling worse than if I had been drinking all night.

In desperate need of caffeine and food, I find Mom set up in her recliner in the living room.

It's her favorite spot because from there she can look out the back window toward her flower gardens—what's left of them, anyway.

I try my best to tend to them but when time is scarce, and energy is too, some things do get waylaid... like the backyard.

My thoughts and wonderment about Case being in town fade away at the sad expression I catch her trying to hide from me. Something I know she does far too often lately.

Mom's diagnosis didn't come out of nowhere.

It was after a year of different symptoms slowly appearing.

She kept them to herself in the beginning, easy to do since I was living in Anchorage and not seeing her every day like I do now.

It wasn't until Mom's friend and neighbor, Betty, called to fill me in on her own concerns that I realized how serious the situation was.

Cue me taking leave from work and coming home for a while. First, we met with her doctor at the local hospital, and when it seemed like this could be serious and life-changing for her, I helped make arrangements at the flower shop before I took her back to Anchorage with me.

That was in July last year. A month later, her diagnosis was confirmed the same day I went in search of something and crossed paths with Case "Curious" Cooper.

As if sensing me, Mom turns her head, and I see a look in her eyes I recognize straight away. Today's not a physical pain day, but more an emotional one. Where her body's betrayal is weighing heavy on her mind.

Thankfully, I have today off work and now that I've seen she needs some happiness, I can't think of anything better than spending time with my favorite person in the whole world.

"What do you think about gettin' out and about today? The sun's shinin', the temperature's up a little. I say it's a perfect day for the Murray girls to hit the town."

Her eyes brighten. "I'd love that, sweetheart. What did you have in mind?" She looks down at her slipper-clad feet. "Not sure how much mischief I can get into in these though."

I blow her a raspberry. "None of that talk. There's always trouble to get into if you so desire. I was thinkin' about callin' Birdie and goin' to pick wildflowers on the mountain."

Mom's eyes are glassy as a slow smile takes hold, the expression lighting up her face.

“You’re the best thing I’ve ever made, Lala.”

With a shrug, I grab a couple of travel mugs and turn the coffee pot on. “That’s because I was made and raised with love, Mom. Isn’t that what you’ve always told me.”

“Damn right.”

“Must be true then, ‘cause my Mama ain’t no liar. Now, are you OK gettin’ yourself ready or do you want some help?

” Mom opens her mouth but I beat her to it.

“Before you get all stubborn on me and say no when you mean yes, take a moment to think about it. Wouldn’t you rather use that energy doin’ somethin’ you enjoy?

Like pickin’ your favorite flowers in your secret meadow that only me, you, Birdie, and the late great Riddles Cooper know about? ”

Mom cocks her head with a smirk. “When did you get so smart, Lala?”

“Another thing to blame on my Mama,” I reply, earning the laugh I so love to hear.

“Let me message B and I’ll come to your room in a few minutes, OK?”

“Thanks, sweetheart. I really appreciate it—and you .”

“I know you do. And even if you didn’t, I’d still do it. Now off with you, Mother. I have a best friend to message and keep on task.”

Mom’s brows furrow. “I’d ask what you mean by that, but knowin’ you and Birdie Walker, that could be so many things.”

“How ‘bout I fill you in on the way to the mountain then? Deal?”

Mom’s eyes twinkle. “Deal.”

“He’s here? In Timber Falls?” Mom screeches from the passenger seat as we turn out of our street toward the middle of town.

“Yep. Walked into the Lair and almost tripped over himself when he saw me. Then he was so shocked he couldn’t talk.”

“Please tell me he came out of his haze and did speak to my girl? Because you’re a catch and any man worth your nugget of gold best be the type to talk to you.”

My mouth drops open as I focus on the road instead of staring at my mother. “ My nugget of gold? That’s a new one,” I say, giggling.

Mom sighs. “You know what I mean.”

“We talked...” I say vaguely.

When I don’t elaborate, she huffs. “ And ? This is like pullin’ teeth, I swear.”

“It was nice.”

“Nice is buyin’ a round of drinks. Nice is celebratin’ your best friend’s engagement—somethin’ you haven’t told me about yet,” she continues.

I smile. “It was sweet and romantic. I cried, Birdie cried. Hell, I think the mayor even got a bit misty-eyed.”

“That’s great . That girl has a big heart and deserves all the good things. But now you

can tell me all about Case Cooper aka Mr. Curious.”

“Just curious, Mom.”

“I’m usin’ my manners. He’s Mr . Curious to me.” She smirks and crosses her arms in front of her. “And if you don’t spill, I’ll just ask Birdie when we get to the mountain.”

Now I’m the one sighing. “It was surreal. I wasn’t lyin’ when I said I never thought we’d see each other again.

Like, what are the odds?” I glance over at Mom and see her nodding along, a small smile on her face as she listens intently.

“He was just as surprised as I was, but it wasn’t until later in the night that we got a chance to talk. ”

Mom’s eyes light up. “ And?...”

I feel a warmth spread through my chest at her excitement. “It was... nice. Really nice.”

“There’s that word again, Lala. A man who you met for one night in Anchorage?—”

“That makes it sound more scandalous than it was, Mom.”

She scoffs and pushes on. “How’s this then, the man who made such an impact on you in one night that you haven’t been able to forget him, is now livin’ in the same town as you, and all you can tell me is that seein’ him again was nice .”

I chuckle, grateful for her teasing. “Okay, more than nice. It was like Anchorage was

just yesterday. There was a little awkwardness to begin with, but I guess that's to be expected.

He's just Case, the same guy I felt a connection with last year.

He's got the same depth, the same kind eyes, and comfortin' smile too. And just like when we first met, I felt that same pull to him that was just as impossible to ignore now as it was then." I pause for a moment. "That's strange, right?"

"I don't think so, sweetheart. I think it means what you felt that night was real. Somethin' like that should be cherished. Explored, even..."

I let her words soak in. She's talking like seeing Case again is a sign. "You think Case and I were always meant to see each other again?"

"Can't say for sure. I haven't met the man yet.

But I've always believed that everythin' in life happens for a reason.

Besides, if you learn anythin' from the journey I'm now navigatin', it should be that your health isn't guaranteed and sometimes the best things happen when you take risks and follow your heart. "

I spot Birdie's truck parked on the side of the dirt road ahead of us and slow down to park behind her, spotting two heads in the cab instead of one.

Turning to Mom, I let the weight of her words settle in my chest. She always knows just what to say. Like when I didn't want to leave her and Birdie to go study in Anchorage, she made me realize that it didn't matter where I was because we'd always only be a phone call, a drive, or a flight away.

“What if we get to know each other better and it’s not the same?” I ask.

“Well first, I don’t think you believe that, otherwise you wouldn’t be askin’ me that question.

And second, whatever happens, you’ll always have that night together.

Nothin’ can take that away.” Mom reaches over and rests her hand on my leg, tapping her fingers so that I meet her eyes.

“But instead of thinkin’ negative, how ‘bout you imagine good things? What if it’s even better than before?

You can never answer life’s big ‘what if’ questions unless you take a chance.

And don’t forget, there is a matchmaking mountain spirit around these parts.

Maybe he’s here for a reason.” She looks out the front window and a knowing smile graces her lips.

“And somethin’ tells me, you’re not the only one wanting to take that chance.

Not if he’s the man standin’ next to Birdie right now. ”

My head snaps out the windshield and yep, standing next to the tailgate with my grinning best friend is none other than the man himself.

Mom moves to open her door. “Ready to take that chance, sweetheart? Because I need to know whether to introduce myself as his future mother-in-law?”

Now that gets my attention. “Mom!” I groan, but her laughter is all I hear, mainly

because she's already out of the car.

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CASE

“Look who’s here,” Birdie calls out as Isla and her mom make their way toward us. Isla’s mom wears a smile so wide I swear her face might split in two, while Isla’s expression is a mix of surprise and a little embarrassment. All I can do is stare, still in awe that she’s standing in front of me.

“Hey,” Isla’s mother greets us as they both come to a stop in front of us. “I’m guessin’ you must be the famous Case Cooper.”

I rub the back of my neck with an uncomfortable chuckle, wondering what she’s heard and whether being ‘famous’ is a good thing or a bad thing. I hope it’s the former.

“That’d be me. It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Murray.”

The Murray matriarch grins. “While I appreciate the manners. Please call me Jessica. Mrs. Murray was my mother, may she rest in peace.”

“Jessica,” I say, reaching out for her trembling hand and covering it with my own. “It’s a pleasure.”

She blushes, looking from Birdie then to her daughter. “Handsome and a gentleman. This one’s a keeper, Lala.”

My eyes lift at the nickname, loving the way Isla’s cheeks blush a pretty shade of pink.

“Hi,” I say, letting go of Jessica and taking a step toward Isla, gently resting my hand on her arm before softly kissing her cheek, my heart spiking and her breath catching when there's a zap the moment we touch.

The breathy “hi” I get in response has me biting back a satisfied grin. We both stand there staring at each other, oblivious to anyone and anything around us.

Birdie had thankfully waited until this morning's breakfast to interrogate me about my intentions with her best friend.

That was when I told her my recollection of the night I first met her friend and the connection that was forged.

One that last night proved was still strong.

One that I wanted Birdie's OK to explore—out of respect for her and my brother's relationship as well as her friendship with Isla.

Thankfully she seemed almost more excited about the prospect than I am, and after an excited hug and a quick ‘you hurt her, I'll hurt you’ speech that had me and my brothers laughing, she gave me her blessing.

That was when Isla called asking if she could bring her mom for a visit.

“Case was with me when you called and volunteered to come along,” Birdie says, knocking me out of my haze.

Jessica beams. “Isn't that a fortunate happenstance?”

My darlin' daughter here knows the way to my heart is with flowers and when she saw I was havin' a down day and bein' the wonderful woman she is, she decided to

bring me out here and cheer me up.

” She glances fondly over at Isla. “Even if she is a little transparent. I’m a florist, you see— was one, anyway.

” Her face falls and I’m immediately compelled to lift the mood again.

“Well now,” I reply, looking out toward the meadow in front of us. “I might stick with you then. You’ll be able to tell me all about the different varieties of wildflowers we’ve got. I’m tryin’ to turn my fingers a shade of green myself these days.”

“Good. It’ll give me a chance to learn all about you and why Lala calls you Curious.”

I laugh at the realization that I just unwittingly offered myself up for my second interrogation of the day. “Did you hear that Birdie and my brother got engaged last night?”

Jessica nods. “I did.”

“I was thinkin’ they deserve some expertly picked flowers to commemorate it. And who better to help me than Timber Falls finest.”

“Smooth,” Birdie murmurs under her breath. I sneak a peek at Isla to find her lips twitching with a wry smile and her gaze full of appreciation.

I shrug. “My intentions are pure, I swear.”

“Yeah, yeah. I believe you, Curious. Many wouldn’t,” Isla muses.

I arch a brow which makes her grin widen. The things I’d do to see that smile every day.

“Do you mind? I never meant to intrude on your time together.”

“Do I mind that you’re willingly offerin’ yourself up to be interrogated by my mother?” She shakes her head with a laugh. “Not at all. I think it’s brave. But be warned, she’s harangued social security numbers out of far lesser men before.

Jessica gasps as the best friends giggle. “Isla Murray, you take that back. I have never done anythin’ of the sort. You’ll have this lovely man runnin’ scared.”

“The way I see it, if Case hasn’t either run back up the mountain or hightailed it back to North Cali by the time you’re done with him, then he’ll have proven he’s the same man I remember him to be,” Isla replies.

My gaze jerks toward her way. Suddenly my unintentional offer to go with Jessica morphs into something else entirely.

And it’s a chance I’m not going to let slip away from me.

There isn’t anything more important in the world right now than this ...

here ... and making sure my beautiful stranger knows that I’m in this. All in.

I move next to her mom and hold my arm out to link with hers. “I’m up to the challenge if you are, Jessica.”

“Lead the way, Mr . Curious. Let me tell you about these flowers.”

After opening the gate in front of us, that’s exactly what I do. But not before looking over my shoulder at my smirking future sister-in-law and my soft-eyed beautiful stranger.

The sun shines down on us as we walk through the wildflowers. After quickly picking up on Jessica's physical limitations, I offer to do all the bending in return for her telling me about every plant. It also helps delay her inevitable questioning.

"That purple flower is called Fireweed. Named because it's known to be one of the first plants to reappear after wildfires," she explains.

"It's beautiful," I say, gently cradling the head of the flower in my palm. "The color is amazin'."

"You should see it at sunset. I swear the golden light hitting the meadow will take your breath away."

I look over at her with a smile. "I bet." I squat down to pick some more, not missing her suspicious expression as I straighten.

She cocks her head in a move reminiscent of her daughter. "You mean that, don't you?"

"Of course. I'm not a man who says things I don't mean. It'd be a waste of my time and yours if I was to stand here and give you platitudes."

"Indeed," she muses.

"It turns out I'm very much interested in these flowers and hearin' you talk about them. I've got a project of my own up the mountain that might just include incorporatin' some of these flowers amongst the trees."

"A project?"

"We're plantin' a Christmas Tree Farm further up the slope," I reply. "Though I've

got to tell you, pickin' these flowers is a lot easier than the hard slog of diggin' holes and spreadin' mulch."

"I can imagine." She looks over to another patch of flowers, these ones I recognize. "Can we pick some of those Forget-me-nots? They're the state flower, don't you know."

"I did know that, actually."

She shoots me a curious look as we make our way over to the patch she spotted. "Are you from here?"

"My family is, Gramps—I mean, Ridley—lived here since birth except for a spell down with us in Nebraska."

"I know Ridley. He was a good man. I was sorry to hear of his passin'," she says.

I dip my chin. "Thank you. My brothers and I used to visit every Summer until we were teenagers and Gramps made it his mission to teach us everythin' he could about the land and the wilderness."

"Riddles was good like that," she replies fondly I make sure she's steady before letting her go and picking the Forget-me-nots.

"His passin' was a surprise to all of us.

Fortunately, it led my brothers and I back to the mountain and although I didn't know how things would go with us all livin' here together, I'm glad we did it. "

"Bet seein' my daughter last night was a surprise."

I return her knowing smile. “A very welcome one, believe me. I never thought I’d find her again.”

Jessica’s gaze widens before crinkling at the corners. “You hadn’t forgotten about her either?”

“Even if I hadn’t discovered that she was not only Birdie’s best friend, but had also moved back to town here, there’s no way I could or would forget. She was a breath of fresh air when I didn’t realize I was strugglin’.”

“That’s beautiful, Cayson. I’m glad she could be that for you.

” She looks over her shoulder to where Birdie and Isla have their backs to us, looking down over the valley and the town.

“I don’t think I’m speakin’ out of turn when I tell you that I appreciate you bein’ there for her when she needed a friendly ear and a safe space too.

My diagnosis—although somewhat expected—has been hard on my girl. ”

“Hard for you too,” I acknowledge.

“Yes,” she says, wiping her now glassy eyes. “A mother never stops worryin’ about her child. I hazard a guess that yours still worries about all of you boys even knowin’ you’re here together.”

I smile at that. “You’re not wrong. She calls us every Sunday without fail. I do think she’s happy it’s only one call to reach all of us now though.”

“Now that I can agree with,” she chuckles before her expression morphs back to serious. “I ain’t goin’ to interfere in whatever happens between you and my girl, but I

will say this. When my Isla cares, she does it fiercely, and when she lets you in, it is the best feelin' in the world."

"I realized that when I met her. There's somethin' about her that made me feel safe, even though we'd just met.

There's this calmin' influence about her that a man like me appreciates.

And I promise you, I'm not someone who'd ever take advantage of that or take it for granted.

I just want to explore the connection I have with her, and what she says she feels with me. "

Jessica stares deep into my eyes, studying me. I meet her gaze without any hesitation. She is the most important person in Isla's life, after all.

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“I like you, Case. You’re a good man just as Isla told me you were. And although I sense that you have your own burdens, you comin’ along with us today and not shyin’ away from the proposition of bein’ grilled by me says a lot about your character.”

“Thank you, I think?” I reply slowly, a little unsure what to say to that.

“You’re welcome. You’ve helped lift my spirits, especially now that I’ve got a bunch of pretty blue and purple flowers to put pride of place on my mantle.”

“It’s been fun,” I say honestly. The smile that spreads across her face is genuine and warms my heart more than the hottest sun on a summer day.

“Good. Because now that we’ve had our serious talk, it’s time to have a little fun.

Because I may love my daughter more than anythin’, but that’s not to say I don’t like to keep her on her toes every once and a while.

” She winks and I can’t help but laugh as she turns around and waves Birdie and Isla over.

“Havin’ fun, Mom?” Isla asks looking down at the armful of flowers in my arms. “I see you put Case to work.”

“Sure did. Grilled him too. Asked him everythin’ from birth to now. How old are you again, Cayson?”

“Thirty-three, ma’am.” I try to keep my expression neutral but the look of horror on

her daughter's face is comical and I crack, putting my hands in the air in surrender. "Sorry, Jessica. I tried, but she looks horrified."

"Wait," Isla says, her brows furrowed. "She didn't grill you?"

"Not at all," I laugh.

She lets out a huge sigh. "Oh thank goodness."

Birdie nudges her with her shoulder. "Told you that there was nothin' to worry about."

"This old lady is feelin' a little tired now," Jessica says. "Is it OK if we head back home?"

Isla's eyes soften. "Of course, Mom. Then we can put these beautiful flowers in that big crystal vase of yours."

"Thanks, sweetheart. Sorry to cut this outin' short and all. I don't want to push myself too much."

I hold out my arm for Jessica to take with a warm smile. "We've had fun, and I've learned a lot about—what was it...Fireweed?"

"Yes. Did you know you can eat the stalks like asparagus?"

"Really? Just wait till I tell Jude about that. He'll probably make us all have some for dinner," I reply. "For now though, let's get you back to the car."

Isla looks over at me and mouths a silent 'thank you'.

"You're welcome," I mouth back before I lead the way back to the roadside.

"Well, thank you for a lovely time, Case," Jessica says as she settles into her seat.

"You're welcome to visit anytime. Maybe you can help me decide what wildflowers might like growin' amongst my new Spruce trees."

Her eyes light up at that. "I'll do some research and let you know."

"I'd appreciate any guidance you can give me. My brother Jude is a landscape gardener, but I bet you know more about Alaskan natives than he does."

She laughs. "Now you're just placatin' an old lady. But I'll let you get away with it... this time, anyway."

"Stop flirtin', Mom," Isla jokes as she hugs Birdie goodbye.

Birdie gives me a cheeky grin before bidding them both farewell. "I'll wait for you in the truck, Case." She's not hiding her intentions very well—which I think is the point—but since I appreciate her giving me time with Isla before we leave, I nod and watch her go.

"Thank you for helping Mom," Isla says. "She wasn't wrong about me tryin' to cheer her up. She was sittin' by the window lookin' out at the old flower gardens in our backyard when I woke up. She misses the things she can't do as much anymore. Well, not without help anyway."

"It was my pleasure. Honestly, I had a lot of fun. Even if she does have a wicked streak."

Isla looks back over at her mom before turning back my way. "She does, but her heart

is in the right place.”

“Must be where you get it from.”

Her eyes soften before she reaches for my hand and laces her fingers with mine. Calm and rightness wash over me at her touch. “It was nice seein’ you again, too.”

“Believe me, the feelin’s mutual,” I say, giving her a gentle squeeze. Just being near her again is a heady but comfortable feeling.

After a while of just standing there, she sighs, sounding as reluctant to leave as I am. “I should get Mom home.”

“Let me open your door.” I lead her to the car and help her in, closing her in and waiting while she winds down the window. “Would you like to get together sometime? Maybe we can meet for dinner or somethin’?” I ask.

“Yes, she does and yes, she will,” Jessica says, leaning over and answering for her daughter.

“Mom!” Isla replies with a startled laugh.

“What?” Jessica feigns innocence even though we all know she’s not fooling any of us.

“You’ve got a good man there askin’ you on a date.

You don’t find too many of those in Timber Falls so when you’ve got one on the line that you’re interested in just as much as he is, you don’t waste time tryin’ to be cute and demure.

You jump right in with two feet and see where the road leads, sweetheart. ”

I stand there staring wide-eyed at her while Isla does the same.

It’s not until Jessica laughs that I snap out of it. “Oh my goodness, you should see the look on your faces.” She reaches over and taps her daughter’s leg. “Just say yes, sweetheart. I know—and he knows—that you want to.”

As if in slow motion, Isla swivels her head my way, her expression part mortification and part amused. “For the record, I was goin ’ to say yes even before my Mom answered for me.”

“Knew my girl was smart,” Jessica mutters under her breath and I grin at her antics.

“I’ll message you in a few days, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” my beautiful stranger replies warmly.

I bend down to look across the cab of the car. “Best get those flowers in some water, Jessica. After you’ve got some rest, of course.”

“Will do, Mr. Curious. See you soooon,” she says cheerfully. “And I’ll get back to you about the best varieties for the tree farm”

“I look forward to it. Thanks.”

Isla’s gaze ping pongs between the two of us, her expression reminding me of one of those clowns with wide open mouths you find at the fair.

Her lips twitch up into a smirk, drawing my eyes to her mouth. “You sure you two shouldn’t catch up for dinner?”

“I’m sure. Been waitin’ a long time to share a meal with you again.,” I say, my voice dropping low. That earns me a happy sigh from both Murray women. I lock eyes with Isla, my heart leaping in my chest at the intense pull I feel to the woman. “Drive safe, beautiful.”

Then, with one last smile and a knock of knuckles on the roof, I step back and watch them turn around before driving down the mountain. It’s only once the taillights have disappeared around the bend that I move toward Birdie and the truck.

And I do it with a smile so big I’m surprised I don’t trip over it.

ISLA

“So...” Birdie says slowly as we’re busy finishing up the lunch service and preparing the restaurant for dinner.

It’s been a week and two days since our flower picking adventure with Mom, Birdie, and Case and even though I’ve seen my best friend a few times since then, she’s been surprisingly quiet about me and Case. Until now apparently...

“So?” I repeat, eyeing her cautiously.

“Has he called you yet?”

I snort. “You’ve been dyin’ to ask me about that for days, haven’t you?”

“You have no idea. I promised Will I’d stay out of it but it’s been a week, Iz. I want to know whether he’s called you. Has he asked you out? Are you plannin’ to see him again? Do you like him, like him? Or is it too early to know? Give me somethin’, at least.”

I stare at her wide eyed, waiting for my brain to finish processing all of her rapid-fire words. “You live with the man, B. Don’t you think you could have—I don’t know—asked him?”

She pouts. “Firstly, he’s not my best friend. You are. Secondly, I did ask him and he told me to go bug Will and leave his love life to him.”

My head snaps up at her words. “He said that?”

“What part?”

“His love life.”

“Ha! No,” she says, in a gotcha voice. “But your reaction tells me everythin’ I need to know.”

A resigned sigh escapes me. “I walked myself into that one, didn’t I?”

“Yep.” She pops the p like she would bubble gum.

“But I’ll be nice and wait till we’re done here so you can tell me all about whatever there is not to talk about.

” I frown as I try to wrap my head around her confusing, yet somehow coherent sentence.

A look she reads well. “Yeah, yeah. At least I understand what I’m sayin’.”

I can’t help but snicker. “Mmm hmm.” When she shoulder bumps me with a giggle of her own, I join her.

Thirty minutes later, we clock out and walk out of the restaurant together.

“Want to come with me for some coffee and cake?” Birdie asks, nodding down the street to the Icebox Diner. “You’ve got time before pickin’ up Jessica, don’t you?”

I arch a brow. “I do,” I reply, not hiding my suspicion. “Are you butterin’ me up with promises of cake just so you can grill me about Case?”

“Well, duh . Anyone would think you know me or somethin’,” she replies. “But no. I’m meetin’ Will and as always, you’re welcome to join.”

“OK. Sounds good. Maybe I can grab some of Mack’s meatloaf to have for dinner.”

My best friend beams. “There you go. Two birds, one stone.”

“Does this mean I don’t have to talk about how Case and I haven’t spoken to each other more than sharing a few cursory text messages?”

She sighs. “Dammit. I thought the man had more game than that.”

“It’s OK, B. It’s been nice just havin’ him checkin’ in with me and seein’ how my day was. He knows I’m busy, and he’s been busy with the tree farm too, right?”

“I suppose. The first round of plantin’ is finished now, so he better do somethin’ soon, or else I’m goin’ to kick his a?—”

“Oh look, we’re here already,” I say, smirking at her.

We walk through the door of the diner to find Will waving at us from a booth in the far corner. What makes my smile widen even more is the fact that Case is sitting with him.

I eye Birdie curiously. “My spidey senses are tinglin’, B. Did you arrange a surprise attack?” Not that I mind.

“Me? Nooooo...”

“I am capable of arrangin’ my own dates, you know?” I inform her.

“Oh, this isn’t a date. Let’s call this,” she taps her chin, “a weddin’ plannin’ meetin’.”

My eyes widen. “Already? You only just got engaged like a week ago.”

“Oh, you know me,” she shrugs. “Early bird gets the worm and all that.”

That’s when I remember that I’ve known this woman my entire life. “You’ve already got it planned, haven’t you?”

She blushes. “Not really. Will and I have just been talkin’ hypotheticals.”

“And now it’s just about puttin’ them into action?”

“Exactly!” she replies and there’s no way to miss the excitement in her voice. “Besides, I can’t plan my weddin’ to my One without my Maid of Honor now, can I?”

“Really?” I say, my excitement bubbling over into my voice.

“Well, duh . There’s absolutely nobody else in this world that I want standin’ by my side when I pledge my life to my soulmate.”

Tears spring to my eyes as I pull her into my arms in the middle of the diner, not realizing we’re blocking the entrance until we’re bumped from behind. Pulling apart, we both turn to come face to face with Derrick Wilson.

“Hey, Derrick,” Birdie says, cheerfully.

“Hey,” he replies, looking my way and giving me a chin lift. “Isla.”

“Hi.”

“Everythin’ OK?” he asks, taking in our glassy eyes.

“We’re great . Birdie just asked me to be her Maid of Honor,” I tell him.

“You’re gettin’ married ? Wow. Congratulations,” he replies. “Who’s the lucky man?”

“I am,” Will announces, appearing at Birdie’s back and wrapping an arm around her waist in a tell-tale claiming move. He holds his hand out in front of us. “Will Cooper. Nice to meet you.”

Derrick falters before somewhat reluctantly shaking Will’s hand. “Derrick Wilson,” he says coolly.

To his credit, Will doesn’t miss a beat. Everyone in town knows that there’s history between the Wilsons and the Coopers. Birdie and I have been trying to find out more about it along with Will and his brothers. I didn’t know until the other night, that included Case aka Curious.

“Nice to meet you,” Will says, his voice steady and strong. Something about their handshake shifts something in Derrick, and I don’t miss the way his eyes flash with something akin to surprise before they let each other go.

“Well, now. Don’t let me keep you. I’m just pickin’ up somethin’ for Ma then headin’ back up the mountain. Congratulations again, Birdie. Will…”

Then he steps around us to make a beeline straight for the register as Will takes Birdie’s hand and leads us to the booth where a confused Case is waiting for us.

“I take it that was one of the Wilsons?” Will asks, slipping back into his seat opposite his brother.

“Sure was. One of five siblings, would you believe? Four boys and a girl. He went to school with us,” I reply, looking over at Case.

“Hey,” he says, sliding toward the window to make space for me. “Fancy seein’ you here.”

“Hmm. These surprise meetin’s are becomin’ a habit.”

His laugh gives me butterflies. There’s just something about it that affects me every time I hear it.

That night we met, I soon realized that he was the type who kept their reactions measured. As more time passed, he slowly opened up and let his guard down which just endeared me even more.

“This time I can honestly say—hand on heart—I didn’t know I’d be gettin’ the pleasure of your company. Not that I’m complainin’. It’s nice to see you again. There’s only so much to say over a text message.”

“You’re right about that,” I say, glancing over to find my best friend shooting me a conspiratorial wink.

“I’m starvin’. Should we go to the register and order, City Boy,” Birdie asks Will.

His eyes crinkle at the sides as he looks over at her, his expression all-knowing. “Sure thing, honey.”

“I’ll come with you,” I say, starting to get up.

Birdie shakes her head, already jumping to her feet. “No, no. You stay. Will and I will order for everyone. Won’t we.”

Will snorts. “Yes, dear.”

A snicker from Case confirms that he’s seeing through their ruse as well.

Once they’ve left, I turn toward him, my lips twitching as I bite back a smile. “She’s not very subtle, is she?”

“Nope. Again, not complainin’. I was goin’ to call you tonight. I know we’ve been messagin’ and believe me, I liked that a lot. I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t interested, but at the same time, didn’t want to seem too eager. Not enough to scare you off, anyway.”

I pin him with a questioning stare. “You sayin’ you’re not eager?”

He pales. “What? No. I mean, yes?” he stammers. When I crack a smile his way, he huffs out a relieved breath. “Damn, you almost got me there.”

“Sorry. Not, sorry,” I laugh.

“Just to clarify, so there’s no misunderstanding. Yes, I am eager. I’m very keen on seein’ you and takin’ you out. Let’s just cover off all of the words that mean I’m interested in spendin’ time with you.”

My heart swells. He’s just so refreshingly honest. It’s adorable. “Well, thanks to my best friend and your brother—who I have no doubt is an unwillin’ accomplice in today’s endeavors—you don’t have to call me tonight anymore.”

He shoots me a lopsided grin. “That’s a shame. I was lookin’ forward to it...”

I sigh happily. There’s just something about a good, honest, well-intentioned man just putting himself out there. No games. No hidden motives. Just stating facts.

I'm tempted to pinch myself to make sure this isn't just a good dream that I'm going to wake up from.

"You're still welcome to call. I've been hopin' you would since we left the meadow," I reply. "I've enjoyed us textin' though."

"I know you've got a busy schedule at the moment. I didn't want to interrupt or intrude."

"Case," I say, looking deep into his eyes.

"That's very kind of you, and I appreciate it more than you know."

But I want you to call. If I can reply to a message, then I can take the time to talk to you over the phone.

I like talkin' to you, always have. We seem to be quite good at doin' it too, if I remember rightly. "

The smile he gifts me after that is kind of breathtaking. "I'll take that under consideration then."

"Good," I reply before we fall silent for a bit too long.

"Is it just me or is this a little..."

"Awkward?" I offer.

The corner of his mouth tugs up and he shakes his head. "Not you, not us . Just... the situation." He looks over to the register and when I follow his lead, I see Birdie watching us like a hawk. "I feel like we're on one of those reality datin' shows."

A giggle escapes me. “She’s just doin’ it because she cares.”

“She does. She’s also a little invested. She’s been singin’ your praises ever since the engagement party.”

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I can't help but smile at that. "She's my biggest fan and loudest cheerleader. Has been since we were young."

"Bet you're that for her too."

"Oh yeah. It's always been B and Iz take on the world—well, Timber Falls, anyway."

"It's cool you have someone like that. I've got my brothers and my family. But..."

"But it's always good to have someone that's not obligated to love and support you at your back too. I hear you."

His eyes widen and he stares at me, his gaze filled with what I can only describe as awe. "How is it that you always just get me?"

I shrug, my fingers playing with the napkin on the table in front of me. "I can't explain it. That night at the diner, I think I sensed we were kindred spirits. I instantly felt comfortable with you."

"I felt that way too," he says. "As soon as I looked you in the eyes, I just... knew."

"You don't think..." I shake my head, slamming my mouth shut.

He reaches over and covers my hand with his and just feeling his touch has all of the tension I'm holding disappear like it was never there.

"I don't think what, beautiful," he says quietly, dipping his head. It's like we're the

only people in the room. “You’ve got to know by now that there’s nothin’ you can’t say to me.”

“You don’t think this is all a little crazy?

How we met all those months ago with no way of gettin’ in touch with one another, and here we are today, sittin’ in a diner in my hometown where you just happen to live now too?

You’ve already met my best friend and my mom, and I’ve met your brothers.

It’s like we’ve gone about this whole first date thing a little backward.

” I drop my voice to a whisper. “I mean, we’ve already shared a bed . ”

He laughs and sits back, removing his hand as he does so. I feel the loss like a warm fluffy blanket that has been stolen away. If we hadn’t just found each other again, I’d be tempted to chase his arm just to keep the contact.

“You know what I’ve been thinkin’ a lot about since Sunday?”

“What’s that?”

“Although we’ve gone about this the wrong way round, maybe it was meant to happen like this,” he says, sounding so sure about it that I can’t help but believe him.

“I’m usually not one to believe in coincidences either, but since moving here I’m startin’ to think that this was all part of the plan. ”

Something he said sticks in my mind. “You think we were meant to be in each other’s lives?” I ask, intrigued. There’s a reason I call him Curious. Because he always

makes me want to know more.

He holds out his hand again and without even thinking, I slide my fingers between his, relishing that it is—as it has been all along—a perfect fit.

“When I’m near you, I feel calm. It’s like nothin’ can get close to me if I’m with you.

I’ve never felt that before.” He pauses.

“I felt it the night we met. I could tell that there was somethin’ special about you.

Knowin’ that, feelin’ that, there’s no way I could think that us meetin’ and then seein’ each other again, is anythin’ other than meant to be. ”

The absolute belief in his gaze takes my breath away. Not because I don’t believe him, it’s because I do . The big question now is... where do we go from here?

“I know that’s probably a lot, and I didn’t mean to lay all of that on the table today,” he says, a slight blush coloring his cheeks.

“Guess that’s probably first date material, huh?” I muse, loving the slow growing smile that covers his lips.

He bounces a shoulder and rubs his thumb over my knuckles, making goosebumps cover my skin. “The way I see it, we’ve already proven that we’re doin’ this our own way and in our own time. Why not just run with it? It reminds me of somethin’ my Mom used to say when we were kids.”

“What’s that?” I say, cocking my head.

“There are many roads to Rome. All that matters is that you enjoy the ride.”

A slow, certain smile curves my mouth. "I like that."

"I like you . Knew it that night. Been kickin' myself for not gettin' your number ever since."

"I've been doin' the same for not gettin' yours," I confess.

He looks over my shoulder before his eyes snap back to mine.

"Then let's not waste any more time questionin' the hows and whys.

Let's focus on the here and now. You and me.

I want to get to know you, beautiful. I want to spend time with you.

That's what matters to me. Not us doin' things in some socially acceptable order that it feels like we've skipped past already. "

"Me too," I reply honestly, earning me a smile I feel right in the middle of my chest.

"So what time should I call tonight?" he asks.

"Eight?"

"Eight it is." Then with a wink, he drops our hands beneath the table, as if it's our little secret just in time for Will and Birdie to rejoin us.

"Everythin' OK?" my nosy, lovable best friend asks, brow arched.

"Yep," I say, returning her look. "We've been talkin' about your weddin'."

Her head jerks. “You have?”

“We have?” Case says at the same time, making me groan and Will burst out laughing.

Birdie narrows her eyes. “I still owe you a grillin’, remember?”

“Yes, B. But how ‘bout we table that and focus on what we’re really here for?”

She studies me for a spell before she relents and lets out a sigh. “OK then.”

Case gives my hand a gentle squeeze and I don’t need to look at him to know that he has my back, just as I have his.

The next thing we know, Birdie pulls out a giant scrapbook from her bag and places it on the table in front of us. “Wedding time!”

“Just how long have you been plannin’ this, Birdie?” Case muses.

“I’ve always known that I’d only ever marry the love of my life once, and when I did, that it would be the weddin’ of my dreams.”

“To the man of your dreams,” I add.

Birdie nods. “Exactly! This is a once and done deal, so I want to make sure it’s goin’ to be the most memorable day ever.”

“I will be, honey,” Will says, gazing lovingly into his fiancée’s eyes. “We’ll make sure of it.”

CASE

“Where are you off to?” Sutton asks from the couch, switching his attention away from the hockey game on the TV.

Jude sits in the corner armchair, his nose in one of his books, while Will and Birdie are cuddled close on the other end of the couch from Sutton.

The only person not home tonight is Wy. He’s gone down the mountain to meet up with his dad and stepmother who came to see him and grab some furniture from the town’s store.

“Just goin’ outside to sit in that hangin’ chair of yours. Why? You goin’ to miss me?” I shoot back.

“Hangin’ chair. Also known as the expensive porch swing that Sutt thought would add to the ambiance of the place?” Jude snickers.

“Hey! I’ll have you know, it does give the place a more homely feel. You’ll be eatin’ your words come the end of summer when you’re fightin’ me to sit out there.” Sutton turns his attention to me. “Everythin’ OK?”

“Yeah. I’m good, I swear,” I reply, “I’ve got a call to make and a date to organize.”

“I knew my meddlin’ would get you two together,” Birdie says, puffing her chest out and gazing at Will. “Did I not tell you they were goin’ to hook up?”

I cock my head at her. “There’s been no hookin’ up.” Not yet, anyway. “And we met months ago, remember? Before we even moved to Timber Falls, which was before Will had even met you.”

“Well, yeah ,” she says with a scoff. “Doesn’t mean me suggestin’ you come flower pickin’ on Sunday and gettin’ Will to trick you into comin’ to the diner today didn’t help move things along.”

My future sister-in-law looks so damn hopeful I don’t have it in me to tell her that I don’t plan on letting Isla slip through my fingers a second time. Not now. Not ever.

My beautiful stranger lights me up inside just by being near her. There’s no pressure to be anyone other than myself when we’re together. I don’t have to hide and have no desire to. I just want to be with her. Talk to her.

After today’s talk at the diner when Birdie was trying her hand—albeit unnecessarily—and bringing us together, I’m not worried about our date.

We could do anything, go anywhere, and it wouldn’t matter.

The only important thing is that it’s with her.

That’s not to say I don’t want to come up with something memorable.

Will watches me, his expression as if he’s waiting for something... or for me to say it.

“You don’t think this could be it, do you?” I ask him.

His gaze softens and he glances down at his soulmate cuddled into his side. “Do you think about her all the time?”

“Don’t think I ever stopped. Definitely not since I saw her again.”

He seems surprised by that. “Even though you didn’t know who she was or anythin’? You just knew?”

“Learned everythin’ I needed to know that night we spent together.”

“But didn’t do anythin’, right?” Jude asks, the book in his hand long forgotten as he leans forward in his chair.

“Baby brother, a man and a woman can spend time together without doin’ anythin’.

We just talked. Her about her mom, her job, her life changin’.

Me about my depression, my life... all of it.

One minute I was eatin’ at a random diner in the middle of Anchorage and worried about what the next day would bring.

The next I was gazin’ into the most beautiful brown eyes I’d ever seen and talkin’ about pecan pie. ”

“All of this happened while you were eatin’ pie ? You didn’t even try to pick her up or anythin’?” Jude asks, his voice full of disbelief.

“You might’ve met your One eatin’ pie in a random city on an otherwise inconsequential night,” Sutt says, shaking his head. “Maybe I need to up my game.”

I snort. “Like you have game, Sutt. We all know that when they were handin’ out qualities and dishin’ it out between the two of us, I got all the charm and you got the—”

“Yeah,” Birdie interrupts. “How ‘bout you don’t finish that sentence, Case? Cause I’m sensin’ that this conversation is headin’ toward the gutter.”

All of us Cooper brothers start laughing, Will pulling Birdie into his side and brushing a kiss over her temple. “You’ve already got our number, honey.”

“Like it’s hard,” she scoffs. “You’re all over thirty but when you get goin’, it’s like I’m livin’ with a bunch of teenagers.”

Will’s lips twitch. “You sayin’ I’m young at heart.”

“She’s callin’ us immature,” Sutt replies. “And here I was thinkin’ Jude offended me when he rubbished my chair.”

“ Anyway , back to Case,” Jude says, getting the attention of the room again. “Are you sayin’ you think Isla is your One? ”

Do I? I’ve never felt so connected to anyone before, not even my twin who I shared a womb with. Not my brothers who I know love and support me and have—and always will be—there for me.

What I feel with Isla is a whole new level of something ... and I want to explore it more than anything.

Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I don’t have enough going on in my life right now. There’s the tree farm and the slowly progressing guest cabin renovations, the donkey that claimed us and refuses to leave, and our two cattle steers that came with Wyatt but hate anyone getting close to them.

Even still, I’d let it all fall by the wayside if it meant spending time with my beautiful stranger.

My eyes move to Will and Birdie, knowing they're the only people who know what it feels like. "What does it feel like to know you've found your One?"

The happy couple share a look and if I wasn't invested in Isla and everything she's made me feel since I met her, I'd be cracking jokes and telling them to get a room.

"I thought I was just fallin' in love," Will starts. "But there were signs I didn't put much stock into at first that I look back on now and wonder how I didn't know."

I lift a brow. "Like what?"

"My heart goin' crazy every time I saw her, for one." Tick .

Birdie melts into him. "Mine too. Oh, and the goosebumps, the hairs on my arms standin' on end, the need to just be with him, and touch him." Tick . "Then there was the fact that I've always wanted to find a love like what exists in Aster's book," she continues.

Aster Hollingsworth is a romance author who writes about the Mountain's Call and about the men and women connected to the Cooper bloodline who meet their soulmates thanks to spirits living deep within the mountains.

She also just happens to be married to one of our long-lost cousins who lives at Moose Mountain.

Birdie keeps going. "When I first met Will, there was just somethin' there for me. It was like—"

"Somethin' clicked," I say, finishing her sentence.

Her eyes light up. "Yes! Oh my goodness, you are feelin' it. Aren't you? This is so

excitin’.” She claps her hands and I can’t help but chuckle.

“Now you’ve gone and done it,” Will says, laughing along with me.

“What?” Birdie asks. “Can’t I be over the moon that—by some happenstance—my future brother-in-law is feelin’ it for my best friend? I’m the happiest I’ve ever been and now I get to feel that while watchin’ two people I adore have their own journey toward forever.”

“When you put it like that, I’m kind of jealous,” Sutton says, his gaze sliding over to where I’m standing. “I knew there was somethin’ different about you after the will was read. You were sad, but it wasn’t your normal low. It was—”

“Regret. She’d left me a note but I had no way of findin’ her, or her me.”

“Until you walk into the same bar you’ve visited many times and there she is,” he says quietly, but no less meaningful.

I nod. Trust my twin to take my thoughts and verbalize them.

“It’s almost like it wasn’t your time yet—not back then, anyway,” Jude says, thinking out loud.

“Yes! That’s it,” Birdie says, sitting up straight and pointing my way. “You guys forged a connection when you were both havin’ a hard time, but that was all you could give each other back then. Now, though...” Now I’m not missing out on my chance.

The old grandfather clock chimes from the dining room, signaling eight o’clock. “And that’s my cue.”

“Callin’ Iz?” Birdie says, her smile so contagious I can’t help but grin back at her.

“Somethin’ like that.”

“Wait, are you goin’ to tell her?” Jude asks. “You know, about the Call?”

“Sure,” I scoff. “I’ve only just found her again and hopin’ to organize our first of what will be many dates, and you want me to tell her that there’s a family lore where the mountain spirit rewards us with our soulmates?”

He frowns. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to scare her off,” I reply, and out of habit, my eyes lock with my twin’s.

We stand there staring at one another for what seems like a long while, but in reality, is only a few moments.

“Remember when we were twelve and Gramps took us to the dock on the outskirts of town to go swimmin’?” Sutton says. I nod, wondering where he’s going with this. “I was scared but tryin’ to put on a brave face because I wanted Gramps to think I was strong and confident like him?”

“That’s—”

“You stood beside me, grippin’ my hand like I was the one holdin’ you up when the truth was my legs were shakin’ so bad I swear the wood was vibratin’.

” He smiles at the memory. “You never left my side. You never let me go. You told me we’d be fine, and that whatever happened, we’d always do it together, yeah? ”

“Yeah...”

“Then you counted down from three and just like you said, you were right there with me, jumpin’ off into the water and yahooin’ while doin’ it.

” I grin then, still trying to work out where he’s going with this story.

His eyes crinkle at the sides. “So what makes you think that it would be any different now? You’ve got this, Case.

I’ve never been more confident of anythin’.

When all four of us agreed to move here and take on this ranch—this mountain—I wasn’t worried.

That’s because I knew that whatever happened, we’d all be in it together.

The Call is no different.” He looks over to the couch.

“We were here for Will and Birdie and we’ll be here for you and Isla.

Just like we’ll all stand by when the unlucky lady destined to tame Jude arrives too. ”

“Hey! I’m offended. I’m a catch,” our baby brother says, making me grin.

“You’re not alone anymore, Case. You never were.”

You’re not alone anymore. You never were.

Then it hits me that there’s one person who knows Isla better than anyone. “Do you think I should tell her?” I ask her.

“I think you should follow your heart. Follow your feelings. Don’t worry about a timeline or a journey or whatever might happen in a week, a month, or even a year . The heart doesn’t have a clock and isn’t on a deadline. Not when it’s meant to be.”

“Do you think that? That it’s meant to be?” I’m surprised by the hopefulness in my voice.

Birdie’s lips tip up into a knowing smile. “Oh yeah. There’s just somethin’ about this whole love story that has ‘romance for the ages’ written all over it. All I ask is that you make her happy, and be there for her, even when she says she’s OK.”

“She’s not OK?” I growl.

Birdie’s smile falls a little. “Oh, she is. Don’t get me wrong.

But if anyone deserves to have a good man to have her back and protect her front, it’s my best friend.

She gives so much to everyone else that sometimes she forgets she deserves to be taken care of as well.

You know?” I nod. “Kind of like you, come to think of it. Maybe you are destined to be together. You’re like two peas in a pod. ”

That thought makes me smile. Because if that’s what Isla needs from me, then that’s exactly what I can be for her. Her anchor. Her port in a storm. Because that’s what she was—what she has been—for me.

CASE

“Hey.”

“Hi. It’s Case,” I reply.

She laughs. “Funny that. My phone said it was you.”

“There is that.”

“Sorry,” she snickers. “I couldn’t resist. I promise I’ll behave now.”

“Please don’t on my account.”

“Duly noted,” she replies. “I have permission to be a brat then?”

A chuckle escapes. “I’m not sure about that. ”

“Spoilsport.”

“Why can I imagine you pokin’ your tongue out at me after sayin’ that.”

“Because I was,” she adds without any hesitation. This woman...

“How’s your Mom today?” I ask. “Those flowers still sittin’ pretty on the dinin’ table.”

A sweet sigh fills my ears. “She’s doin’ OK. She has physical therapy on Tuesday afternoons so she’s always tired after that. I went to pick her up after leavin’ the diner and had Mack’s meatloaf for supper.”

Birdie’s advice from earlier springs to mind. “She gives so much that sometimes she forgets she deserves to be taken care of as well.”

“I was wonderin’ where you rushed off to.”

“Yeah. Duty called and all that,” she says. “But she’s good. Currently sittin’ in her chair catchin’ up on her soaps she missed. Usually, I’d be sittin’ there watchin’ them with her but someone made me a better offer.”

“Did they? Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Oh, you know. He’s a little mysterious, but also so ridiculously hot, I just couldn’t resist when he asked if he could call.” I can tell by her tone that she’s probably smiling as stupidly as I am right now.

I swing the hanging chair and sway back and forth, feeling like a teenager with a crush who’s kicking their feet. “Hot, you say? Just how hot are we talkin’ here,”

“I don’t know. How hot is Sutton.”

A startled laugh escapes me. “Damn, you almost had me.”

“I aim to please, curious.” She sounds proud of herself for getting one over me.

“I swear I haven’t smiled as much in my life as I have this week,” I say without thinking.

“Well that’s a damn shame. That smile had the power to make me forget all my troubles. It turned you from a random stranger eatin’ pie to a handsome, kind man who put me at ease and turned what was a bad day into a night that...was not.”

“You tellin’ me it was my smile that reeled you in? Good to know,” I say. “It was your eyes, for me. I was gone for those big brown eyes of yours. You batted your lashes and I was yours.”

“You still gone, Case?” she whispers.

“Maybe even more so, beautiful.” And I think I always will be. I hear her breath catch before the line falls quiet. “So, this ridiculously handsome man you had plans with, does he have anythin’ else goin’ for him?”

“You scopin’ out the competition, curious?”

“Just livin’ up to my name. I’ve got a beautiful stranger to impress.”

“Hmm,” she hums. “Well, I’m hopin’ to get to know him a lot better. So far, all signs are lookin’ good. Mom got along ‘splendidly’ with him by all accounts.”

“He liked your mom too. That’s the rumor, anyway,” I reply.

“Oh, did he? That’s great. Because she won’t stop talkin’ about him. It’s all Case this and Case that. If I didn’t like the man, I’d be sick of his name by now.”

I look out over the dark valley to where the dimly lit town sits and where Isla is right now.

“Beautiful, keep this up and I’m goin’ to get an ego,” I tell her. “And believe me, I haven’t had one of those since I was fifteen and thought I was ten foot tall and

bulletproof.”

“What happened to it?” she asks curiously. “Because I honestly can’t imagine you being a cocky teenager who thought he was God’s gift.”

“It vanished the day Will and Sutton tag-teamed me. One distracted me while the other pantsed me in the middle of the grandstand durin’ the high school football game. When Cap— our dad—asked them why they did it, they said I was gettin’ too big for my boots and needed a ‘come to Jesus’ moment.”

She giggles, then snorts, and by the time she starts cackling, I’m laughing with her. “It obviously worked.”

“It knocked me down a peg or two, that’s for sure. But I’m not complainin’ about hearin’ you say good things about me.”

“You mean strokin’ your ego?”

“That too.” She giggles. “I forgot how good of a storyteller you are. That’s one of the things that stuck with me once I got home, how you’d get so animated and expressive.”

“Really? It wasn’t my kind eyes, sexy smile, my rugged good looks? Or that I was a perfect gentleman that night?”

Her voice drops to a warm whisper. “There was that too, don’t you worry.” She sighs happily. “Anyway, how did the rest of the weddin’ talk go?”

“I’ve realized that we’ve got nothin’ to worry about. Those nuptials have been planned for a long time now. All that’s left to do is figure out the logistics,” I explain. “Maybe you could ask your handsome man to be your date? He is the best man, or so

I've heard."

"He is? Then that would make total sense, wouldn't it? Convenient too. I'll have to think about that," she replies, playing along just like I knew she would.

"The answer's yes. No need to ask."

"That's good. Especially since there's no one else I'd want to go with. Seems I can't get this man off my mind of late."

Now I'm the one smiling so big my face aches. "The feelin's mutual, believe me."

"I still can't believe you're you. Is that weird? It's weird, right?" I honestly could listen to her talk all damn night. I might get frozen to Sutton's porch swing, but that's a risk I'm willing to take.

My brows furrow. "What do you mean?"

"I know you're you, I just can't believe you live here and we never ran into each other. Timber Falls is big for a small town, but everyone still knows everyone— and their business."

"Might've helped if we'd shared our names instead of stickin' to nicknames." Would've made it a lot easier to track her down once I left too.

"I mean... curious still fits you now."

"And you'll always be my beautiful stranger to me," I add.

"It's just... I don't know," she says, as if thinking out loud.

She does it a lot and it's one of my favorite things about her—these unfiltered, raw, honest moments.

“Isn't it funny how you've been here for months and that night, when the world was feelin' heavy on my shoulders again, there you were.”

“I'm startin' to think we were always meant to see each other again. There are just too many signs sayin' otherwise for it not to be true.”

“Like the mountain's call that Birdie believes in?” She asks, making me freeze. I think my heart even stops beating for a moment. “You know about that?”

“Well yeah . Birdie tried to get me to read them years ago but I've never got around to it.

She's told me about them though, and I don't know about a whole concept of a mountain pickin' soulmates out of thin air and bringin' couples together.

That would never happen in real life, even if my best friend believes in it.

” She laughs. “Life is never that perfect. Look at Mom. She had everythin' goin' for her—an amazin' business, friends, perfect health.

She was livin' the empty nester life and lovin' it.

And now...” Her voice drifts off and I can feel her pain like a fist to my chest.

“Now she's livin' with a chronic illness none of y'all could predict, and therefore couldn't prepare for?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “You get it, right?”

“I do, beautiful. But what you forget is that she also has a wonderful, selfless daughter who was willin’ to uproot her entire life and move back home to care for her. Believe me, even with her illness, I bet—no, I know —she still thinks she’s blessed.”

“Case...” her voice cracks, but it’s also soft and sweet, the sound wrapping around me like a cocoon. It’s exactly what I want to be for Isla too.

“It’s OK to be sad, beautiful. I’m sad for you and your mom. I’m sad when I think about Gramps bein’ up the mountain on this ranch all by himself, him knowin’ he was sick and not wantin’ to be a bother. Then him passin’ with only the mayor and Birdie knowin’.

“What else?” she asks, her voice soft and low.

“I know about how your Mom feels—in a way—because of my Seasonal Affective Disorder.”

“I remember you tellin’ me about that.”

“It’s much better now. Better managed and under control. I can still get low for no reason sometimes. Just the weather changin’—not even winter, either. Sometimes it’s just the changin’ seasons. When the dark cloud lifts, I feel ungrateful for not bein’ happy enough with everythin’ I have in life.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“Yeah. Not sayin’ my thoughts always make sense all the time,” I joke. “Like when I woke up in Anchorage that mornin’ and found you’d gone, I was disappointed that I let you go and missed my chance. That’s all I could think about while Gramps’s will was read.”

“Case... I had no idea.”

“How could you?” I reply. “Anyway, then we found out we’d have to move here to get our inheritance and I was relieved.”

“Because the decision was effectively made for you?” she says softly, proving once again that she understands me.

“Yes and no. We all agreed to move to the ranch, I had a choice there. But in doin’ so, it made it easier to leave my life back in Cali and admit that I wasn’t happy there.”

Isla stays silent for a good while and I wonder if I’ve said too much.

“How do you think someone gets over that? The guilt of feelin’ bad about the situation you find yourself in when it’s just part of life ,” she asks. “Wonderin’ if is this what the universe had planned all along, but not likin’ the hand you’ve been dealt. Does that make sense?”

“More than you know, beautiful.” And right now, there has never been another person—other than my twin for obvious reasons—that I’ve felt closer to than her.

“I swear, sometimes it feels like I’ve known you my whole life, not just a few days, over half a year apart. That’s strange, right?” I ask.

“And yet you say the mountain’s Call can’t be real?” I tease, my heart flipping when she snorts in response.

“OK, I guess it could be within the realms of possibility—but only in Aster’s books. Like, c’mon, a tree falling on the road and the heroine is saved by a big, rough, and gruff mountain man who just happens to be her writin’ muse and her soulmate. Yeah right.”

I laugh because little does she know, that did happen. I should know, I've met Aster and Gray personally. "But no, I don't think it's strange. How can I when I feel the exact same way."

A small gasp sounds in my ear. "You do?"

"Yeah, beautiful. There's a reason we met that night in Anchorage. I truly believe that."

A comfortable silence stretches out between us again. "You think there's a reason the universe brought us back together again?" She asks.

Follow your heart, follow your feelings.

"Honestly? Yeah, I do."

"Case?"

"Yeah, beautiful?"

"I know we said we'd already had our first date. But I'd really like to go on another first date with you," she tells me and right then, I feel like the king of the mountain.

"Like a Timber Falls first date?"

"A Timber Falls first date. I like the sound of that. But I have to warn you, my schedule's pretty busy with work, Mom, and her appointments, the house, the restaurant?—"

"Isla, I know . And just so you know, I'm not goin' anywhere.

I've got a Christmas tree farm, a house to renovate, a ranch to get up and runnin', projects I still consult on back in Silicon Valley, and don't forget a Houdini donkey to wrangle.

"I have to stop to suck in a breath because saying all of that out loud makes it sound like a lot when it doesn't feel all that heavy when I'm doin' it in God's country.

"What I don't mind is fittin' all of that around you when it means I get to have a Timber Falls first date with the most beautiful woman in town. OK?"

She sighs and I'd hazard a guess that I said the right thing because it almost sounds like a swoon. "Damn, you're good."

"Nope. Just honest. Blame my weekly therapist appointments. You can thank him for me bein' upfront and honest about everythin'."

"Believe me, I'm not complainin'. It's refreshin'. Noteworthy, even," she says.

"I'll have to write that on my tombstone when I'm old and gray. Here lies Cayson Cooper. Son, brother, city boy turned Alaskan rancher and once described as 'noteworthy'."

"Can we have our date before that happens?" she says playfully.

"Name the time and date and I'll be there ready to date the hell out of you, beautiful."

"Damn, Case. You sure know how to make a girl feel special."

"Good. My plan for you to fall hopelessly in love with me is workin' then?" She laughs at that, and the sound is so free and easy I can't help but grin. "All you have to do is let me know when you've got an afternoon or evenin' free, and it's a done

deal.”

“Just like that, curious?”

The lightest, easiest laugh escapes me, and it feels as natural as breathing. Just like it was the night I first laid eyes on her. “Yes, beautiful. Just like that.”

CASE

“Sutton Cooper. You better get your butt out here,” I call out from my spot on the porch, my eyes glued toward the tree farm.

I was thinking I’d have a slow, easy morning.

The plan was to enjoy my second cup of the day of Wyatt’s Cowboy Brew coffee in the hanging chair before going inside to my makeshift office—aka my bedroom—to answer emails and do some computer work before helping Wyatt and Will in the first guest cabin we’re in the process of renovating.

But instead of doing any of that, I watch in horror as Grumps strolls around my newly planted saplings. The ones that we cultivated, broke our backs putting in the ground, and which are now under threat by our stalker donkey.

Don’t get me wrong, the jackass has grown on me, and he has his moments when he looks as cute as a speckled puppy. Then there are times like now when he has escaped his stall—his favorite pastime—and is wandering among my baby trees.

“Where’s the fire?” Sutt asks, strolling onto the porch like he’s got all the time in the world.

I point to the field I chose, prepped, and painstakingly poured my blood, sweat, and tears into.

I know it’s early days, but it’s mine, And when you’re a twin—identical at that—it’s

rare to get things that are yours and yours alone.

Right now I have my tree farm and Isla. Two things I'm willing to protect with everything I have.

"You need to fix that ."

"Aww look. Grumps went explorin' again. Is that why you called me out?" Sutton asks. "He won't let us near him, but that doesn't stop him goin' wherever he wants."

"How about we don't let him ' explore '—" I use air quotes to get my irritation across, "my tree farm."

"He won't eat the baby trees. They're so little, and he's more into hay and grass not—" Just as he says that, we watch as Grumps brays loudly then dips his head down, and yep... rips the head off the nearest sapling. "Well, damn."

"Sutt ," I growl. "I swear to all that's holy, if you don't get him out of there, we'll be stockin' up the freezer."

My brother scrunches his nose up. "Not sure donkey meat would taste all that good."

"Don't really care about that right now," I spit out as we both launch into action, rushing through the house to the mudroom to grab our boots and jackets before rounding the house and running to the field.

By the time we get there, we have an audience. Will and Birdie watch from the porch swing as Jude runs after us, having heard me grumbling about unclaiming a donkey.

"Where's he gone?" Sutton asks, swinging his body over the top of the wooden gate. I do the same, whereas Jude stops, unhooks the latch, and uses the gate as it's

intended.

“Wait,” he calls out. “You’ll spook him. Then he’ll take off and cause more damage.”

I spot a splash of grey in the distance. “There!” I shout, launching into a sprint.

Grumps stops mid-step, his head snapping up and his ears swiveling like a windsock in a storm. His eyes are popping out of his head so much that I can see the whites of his eyes.

“Sh—,” I say, coming to a sudden stop. Moments later, I’m knocked over when Sutton runs straight into me.

The damn animal starts braying loudly, his tail swishing back and forth. If I knew donkey body language, I’d swear he’s laughing at us right now. “Classic,” Jude says, coming to a stop behind us and holding out an arm to help Sutton get off of me.

When I’m back on my feet, I scowl at my twin. “Did you somehow miss me standin’ in front of you?”

“No.” Sutton looks at me as if to say ‘duh’. “Didn’t expect you to stop suddenly.”

“I had Jude’s voice in my head tellin’ me not to spook the donkey.”

“To be fair, there are far worse things to have in your head than my voice,” Jude helpfully replies.

“Like what?” I ask nonsensically.

Grumps lets out an almighty loud raspberry to get our attention. All three of us snap our heads his way.

“What?” we all say at once.

The donkey snorts and lifts his head before turning around and walking away from us, not looking back.

“What is he doin’?” I ask.

“At least he’s not attackin’ your saplin’s anymore. That’s a bonus,” Jude replies.

“Maybe he wants us to follow him,” Sutton says.

As if understanding my twin’s question, Grumps looks over his shoulder, tilts his head, and drops his ears to the side.

“Wait, I read about this,” Jude says. “I think that’s a mannerism that means he’s happy.”

“Probably because he’s had a good feed of baby Spruce this mornin’,” I mutter.

Jude snorts. “Nah, he trusts us. He’s showin’ us that he’s comfortable.”

“Can he be comfortable away from here? Preferably on the other side of the fence,” I grumble, plotting ways to give the jackass a long time out in the barn.

The animal jerks his head, gesturing for us to follow him. He walks toward a hole in the fence at the far back side of the field, right underneath a tall old tree with a thick trunk covered in rough, dark bark.

We stand there stock still as he slips through the seen-better-days fence and stops on the other side, jerking his head up with a wiffle before launching into a run and disappearing from sight.

“And now he leaves us,” I sigh, looking around to assess the damage.

Sutton keeps walking toward the tree before looking over to where Jude and I stand.

“You guys remember seein’ this tree, right?”

I frown. “Ah, yeah. It was here the other week when we were diggin’, plantin’, and makin’ ourselves feel like we were eighty. Why’s that?”

“I know that .” He rolls his eyes. “I mean, do you remember it bein’ here when we were kids?”

Jude cocks his head. “Didn’t we used to loop a rope over that big branch and use it as a swing?”

“Yep,” I say. “It was nowhere near this big though.”

Sutton frowns, turning back to the trunk and tracing his fingers over the rough surface. “But it was here, right?”

Curiosity piqued, I jerk my head to Jude and we make our way over. “What have you found, Sutt?”

“It might be nothin’,” he says quizzically.

Jude snorts. “Ridley ‘Riddles’ Cooper was here before us and we’ve already discovered our grandfather liked leavin’ hints and clues for us to find. So nothin’ usually means somethin’ on this mountain. What is it?”

“There are initials on the trunk.”

“But how?” I say as Jude and I stop on either side of Sutton. I lean in to get a better

look and sure enough, there's what looks like letters carved into the bark.

HC 4 MW

"Wait. Who's HC?" Jude asks. "Dad and Gramps don't have names startin' with H. None of the rest of the family either."

"What about further back? Maybe a few generations? Were there any H's?" Sutton says, thinking out loud.

"Never met any of them," I joke. Then I remember the first 'treasure' Will found from Gramps under the floorboards. "But I know how we can find out."

After checking on my saplings and discovering that Grumps the donkey didn't cause any damage bar slobbering on that one tree, we make our way back to the house where Will and Birdie are waiting for us.

"So? Do we still have a donkey?"

"For now," I grumble, earning a few laughs.

"Do you know where that Cooper family tree chart is? We found somethin' on a trunk in the farm field and we need to see what our great grandfather's name was," Jude explains.

"Or great great grandfather. We don't know how far back to go yet," I remind him.

Birdie's eyes spark with interest. "Yes. It's in Will's top drawer.

Let me go get it." Then she's off running out of the living room.

She returns moments later with the leather-bound book we found a few months ago when we first moved here.

“This is so excitin’. Iz and I were only talkin’ about this whole mystery a little while ago. ”

Just hearing Isla’s name has my ears perking up. Just like Grumps the Donkey . “You did?”

“Yep,” she replies. “I’ve been curious about this whole Cooper/Wilson rivalry since the old man confronted us at the diner, and just like me, Iz loves a good mystery. Anyway, who are we lookin’ for?”

“We found initials carved onto the trunk of the big ol’ Black Cottonwood tree. HC 4 MW,” Sutton explains, taking the book when Birdie offers it to him and laying it down on the dining table, opening it up.

We all crowd around him as he brings up the big fold-out page with the family tree on it. That's when I notice something strange.

“See there,” I say, pointing near the top of the tree. “Henley Cooper. Died aged twenty-four. Married to—”

Birdie gasps. “No... there’s no way...”

“Marion,” I finish.

“Is there a family name?” Will asks gruffly, sounding as surprised as the rest of us.

“Nope. It just says Marion Abigail.”

“Same name as our sister. Coincidence?” Jude says, arching a brow.

“I think we all know by now that nothin’ happens by chance on this mountain,” Will replies, pulling Birdie into his side and brushing a kiss against her temple.

The room goes silent and it’s as if we’re all thinking the same thing but no one wants to say it.

“W could be for Wilson,” I say with a resigned sigh. “That means there could be a connection between their family and ours.”

“Which means , we might have another clue about why the Wilsons and the Coopers don’t like each other,” Sutton replies before looking up at us. “This is good, right? We’re another step closer toward gettin’ some answers.”

“That we may be,” Will says. “But I’m learnin’ that gettin’ answers when you don’t know the question isn’t always that helpful.”

Birdie gives him a squeeze. “It’s a start though.”

Jude frowns. “What I want to know is how those initials got carved into the wood.”

“And how long it’s been there. Because we’d have remembered findin’ somethin’ like that as kids,” I add.

“We would’ve asked Gramps about it too. We were always pepperin’ him with questions back then,” Will replies with a small smile.

“Yeah,” Sutton laughs. “Probably why he could only handle us for the summer. He needed solitude the rest of the year just to recover.”

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“Especially when Jude came along. The kid wouldn’t shut up,” I say with a chuckle, nudging my younger brother with my arm.

He fakes offense, but his twitching smirk gives him away. “Hey, I wasn’t that bad.”

“Why’d you think I stopped comin’ here with y’all,” Will says. “I needed solitude too.”

That gets all of us laughing.

“OK. So what do we do with this information? Maybe Iz and I can talk to Dad and get a look at the town’s old records?” Birdie suggests. Her dad is the mayor of Timber Falls so if anybody can give us access to the town archives, it would be him.

But as soon as she says it, I get a better idea. “I’ll do it,” I offer.

Birdie cocks her head. “You sure? I don’t mind.”

I shake my head. “I want to. I can also try a few online searches too. See if there are any of those genealogy sites with the Wilsons of Timber Falls on there. That could be a good place to start. Then, with more info, I’ll chat with the Mayor.”

“Maybe you should see if Iz wants to help? It would be a memorable second date,” Birdie says, wagging her brows.

Jude scoffs. “They got to get through the first one before they can think about a second.”

“I have a good feelin’. It’s Case’s turn, I just know it,” she says, talking like I’m not even here. “Iz seems very cheerful whenever I see her now. So it must be the Call.”

“Really?” Sutton replies, rubbing his chin, the family tree discovery pales in comparison to my love life it seems.

I roll my eyes. “I am still here, you know.”

“We know,” Sutton, Jude, and Birdie say in unison.

Will chuckles and rests a hand on my shoulder. “Better get used to everyone bein’ in your business, brother. It’s payback for when all y’all made me go hunt down Birdie. Remember that?”

My gaze narrows and snaps his way. “That was different. You two were dancin’ round each other and either losin’ phone numbers or makin’ the other one wait because he lost the phone number.”

“I didn’t lose it. I washed it. There’s a difference,” Will explains.

“And I wasn’t makin’ him wait. I was busy,” Birdie adds.

“Busy makin’ him wait,” I mutter, earning a playful slap on my arm for my troubles.

“Anyway, don’t think I can’t see what you’re doin’, Cayson Cooper. You’re hopin’ you’ll distract us enough that we forget about you and my best friend.”

I smirk and lift a brow her way. “Did it work?”

“Nope. So spill. When’s the first date? Iz won’t tell me anythin’ so now I have to hound you for all the important information,” she huffs.

I bite back a grin at learning Isla is keeping our nightly phone conversations private. Funnily enough, I have been too. That's because they're ours and I cherish them. Knowing she's doing the same has me feeling some kind of way.

"If you must know, we're seein' each other Thursday afternoon," I tell them.

"As in tomorrow?" Sutton asks, his eyes wide.

"Yep."

"And you were goin' to tell us about this when ?" he pushes, but he's really asking when was I going to tell him .

"I'm tellin' you now." I shrug. "Didn't think it was a big deal to anyone else."

They all stare at me like I've suddenly sprouted two heads. "You didn't think we'd care?" Will asks.

"I just—"

"Of course , we care, Case. I've never seen you like this," Sutton says.

"Like what?"

"Smitten," Jude says, answering for him.

"I think they mean fallin' for a woman," Birdie adds. "Though I must say, you picked very well. Iz is awesome."

She is. But I don't think I picked her. I don't think she picked me. I think someone—or something —played a hand in that.

I open my mouth to dispute that but stop when I spot Birdie's glare. "Don't you dare say you're not fallin' for her because it's written all over your face. Hell, it's written all over hers too. You two have a connection."

I nod. There's no way I'm denying that. "We do. Felt it the moment I met her."

"And you're plannin' to explore that. Right?" she continues, not hiding the hope in her expression.

"Yes..."

I glance my twin's way and stare at him. As he's always been able to do since we were young, he reads me like a book. Understanding fills his gaze.

"You don't want to jinx it. That's it, isn't it?" he says. "You don't want to risk anythin' happenin' or any one of us—yourself included—doin' somethin' to ruin it."

My throat thickens as my heart tries to lodge itself there, pumping so hard I swear it's moving my chest with every pounding beat. All I can do is nod.

"If this is it, if Isla is my One, I'm not lettin' her slip through my fingers again. She makes me feel whole... worthy, like I'm meant to be here on the mountain, in Timber Falls, even if it was just to see her again. To get another chance with her. I—"

"We get it," Will says, his voice soft and low.

"You do belong here, Case, and I don't want to hear you think you don't."

This whole thing—all of us gettin' the place back up to how Gramps had it, how he'd want it—that can only happen because we're all here together.

This is our birthright, our family's legacy. Your legacy. OK?"

I nod, my entire body relaxing as I let Will's words sink in.

"And as for you not wantin' to mess up with Isla, there ain't no way, no how, that you could ever do that.

Wanna know how I know that?" Birdie says, a wry smile playing on her lips.

"Because you care already. You were a friend to her when she was a total stranger and you felt the pull to her—to each other—before you even knew about the Call. You might have a way to go persuadin' Iz that the Call is real, but you Coopers aren't the type to shy away from a challenge.

Especially when it's somethin'—someone—you want.

"She glances up lovingly at Will. "Trust me. When you meet your One, you just know."

"Now they're gettin' all gushy and lovey dovey again. Thanks for that, Case," Jude teases.

I bark out a laugh at that. "You're welcome. Now, if we're finished here, I have work to do."

"Don't we all," Will adds with a snort. "You still up for helpin' us in that cabin after lunch?"

"Sure am. I'll bring the coffee."

"Only if you get Wyatt to make it. That stuff is strong enough to chew, I swear,"

Sutton says, folding up the family tree and shutting the book before handing it back to Birdie.

“Where is he anyway?”

Will grins. “When I heard y’all hollerin’ about Grumps escapin’, I sent him on a mission to the barn to get one of the stalls reinforced, just in case the donkey needed to go into hidin’.”

“I think he’s put himself into hidin’. He took off through the fence and disappeared,” Jude says, shaking his head. “He’ll come back though.”

That’s when we all share a knowing grin. “He always does,” I reply.

CASE

Thursday afternoon takes far too long to arrive. Time drags on when all I want is for it to speed up because today I'm taking Isla out for our first official date.

I pull the truck into her driveway, admiring the quaint house and stunning front garden that looks like it could be straight out of a magazine.

There's a sea of red, blue, yellow, and white flowers of different varieties spread out as far as the eye can see with a small, manicured hedge lining a path of stepping stones leading up to the front porch.

Looking down at the bunch of dried wildflowers in my hand that I picked up at the town's florist, I wonder if Isla will like them, also hoping that she'll be excited about the date I have planned for us today.

Birdie was a great source of information in terms of what Isla might like, but it wasn't until Wyatt told me about a flyer he'd seen in town that I knew where I'd take her.

I'm so distracted by my thoughts as I walk up to the house that I don't hear the door opening, or spot Isla and her beautiful bright smile waiting for me until I lift my head.

"Hi," I say, stopping in front of her and placing a hand on her waist before leaning in to brushing my lips over her cheek. The touch sends a jolt through me, and the sound of her breath catching along with her flushed skin has me wondering if she felt it too.

“You looked deep in thought there,” she says, her brown eyes sparkling in the afternoon sunlight.

“I was.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Care to share?”

“There’s just a lot of things we could do today, and I was hopin’ you’re goin’ to like where we’re goin’,” I confess.

“If I’m doin’ it with you, I know I will.” Her eyes drop down to the flowers I’m still holding. “Are they for me?”

“Oh,” I say, having forgotten all about it. “Yeah. I wanted something that would last, so I asked at the florist shop and they suggested this dried bouquet because it could be hung up and enjoyed for a long time.”

Her smile widens. “I love that.”

“Did I hear that you visited my shop?” Jessica calls from inside.

“Mom, are you eavesdroppin’?” Isla says over her shoulder, turning back to me and winking. “Do you want to come inside for a minute? I’ve just got to grab my purse and then we can go.”

“I’d love to. I can sit with Jessica while you finish up.”

“Yes, come do that,” Jessica says loudly, making my lips twitch and Isla sigh.

She reaches for my hand and squeezes my fingers. Warmth spreads up my arm, my pulse racing as I step inside and close us in.

Isla leads me into the living room where her mom is seated in a recliner with what looks like a game show on TV. She lets go of my hand and points to her mom. “Behave yourself,” she says playfully before turning to me. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“Go, child. I’m just goin’ to grill this handsome young man about his intentions. It’s my parental responsibility, after all.”

I laugh when Isla rolls her eyes before rushing out of the room.

“Hi, Jessica. How are you?”

“I’m great ,” she says with mustered enthusiasm. I arch a brow, earning a smirk. “You’re as perceptive as my Lala. I’m not so great that I could run up the mountain or anythin’, but I woke up happy and I’m havin’ a good day. In my books, that’s great.”

“That’s nice to hear.” I look down at the flowers in my hand. “Do you have somewhere I can put these?”

She nods to the low-rise coffee table in front of us. “Since they’re dried, they’re very easy to look after. You can just put them in that vase if you’d like. Nice choice, by the way. I approve.”

“That’s all that matters then. Your staff member at the shop was very helpful.”

Her eyes brighten and her lips tip up. “I only hire the best. But it’s always good to hear they’re doin’ a good job.”

After doing as asked with the bouquet, I take a seat on the couch next to her chair. “Your gardens out the front are amazin’ too. So colorful and bright.”

“That’s why I chose them. I don’t get out to tend to them too often now, but thankfully Lala inherited my green thumb so she tries to keep them lookin’ good. I like bein’ able to see them from the window, you see.”

“They’re bound to lift any bad mood,” I say.

Jessica studies me. “Yes, they do. And quite often.”

I nod. “My brother Jude is a landscape gardener. He’s the ‘plant guy’ out of all of us. He’s slowly fixin’ up the gardens at the ranch. Then there’s my twin, Sutton, he’s tryin’ his hand at it too. He’s working on a Zen garden next to the greenhouse and vegetable patches.”

Jessica’s gaze widens and she leans forward. “That sounds wonderful. And your Christmas tree farm too. I remember you tellin’ me all about that.”

“You’ve got a good memory.”

“It’s one of the things that I try to keep sharp. I do daily Wordle and Sudoku puzzles. Every little bit helps,” she says. “Or so the medical professionals tell me.”

“My grandfather used to do puzzles. Every time we visited, he’d challenge us to finish a big one thousand piece one before we left at the end of the summer.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t make you solve riddles,” she muses, making me laugh.

“You’d think so since that’s what everyone called him.”

“Indeed.” She glances toward the doorway before her eyes meet mine again, and this time they’re full of mischief. “So, young man, what are your intentions with my daughter?”

I catch Isla's horrified look as she walks back into the room and I shoot Jessica a wink, catching on to her plan.

"I promise I have nothin' but the worst of intentions with your daughter.

If she has rules, we're breakin' them. If she has a curfew," I lean in, dropping my voice to a loud whisper, "she's goin' to be late.

"The answering cackle from Jessica makes it worth it.

"Lala, if you don't keep this one, I will."

"Mom! Keep your hands off. He's mine," Isla muses.

Hearing her call me hers the way I already know she's mine does something to me.

When we lock eyes, that's when I feel it. A thing that's always felt out of place... off kilter... clicking into place. It's all the confirmation I need to know that she's exactly who I thought she was. My One...

Isla Murray is my soulmate. She has to be. She's meant to be mine.

"Case?" she asks, her expression a mix of confusion and concern.

"Yes, beautiful?"

She bends down, resting her hand on my shoulders. "I asked if you were ready to go." Dammit. Totally missed that.

"Sorry, yeah," I reply, standing and turning to look at Jessica. "And as for my intentions, I promise to be respectful and a total gentleman. I was raised right, I

promise.”

“Firstly, I can already tell your Mama made sure you had manners. But goodness me, I hope that was a pile of baloney,” she replies.

“My daughter deserves some disrespectin’ and to go out and have some fun for once, doin’ it without worryin’ about me or her responsibilities for a little while.

Promise me you’ll show her a good time and you’ll have my undyin’ gratitude, Case Cooper. ”

A slow growing smile tugs at my mouth. I think I like Jessica Murray just a smidge less than her daughter. And that’s a whole lot. “I promise I’ll try my best.”

“On that note...” Isla pins her mom with a stare. “We’ll head out now. Betty’s next door and knows you’re here alone, so she’s ready to pop on over if you need her. OK?”

“Yes, Mom,” Jessica says with a sigh. I have to bite back a laugh because she sounds like a teenager being left home for the first time.

Isla's warm eyes crinkle at the sides when they meet mine. “You ready?”

“Sure am. Been waitin’ a long time for you to ask me out.”

Her mouth drops open and I can’t help but chuckle. “Best of intentions,” she scoffs. “I see how it is.”

My hand moves of its own volition, lifting to caress her cheek. “Not yet, beautiful,” I say low and rough. “But if I get my way, I’m hopin’ you will by the end of the night.”

“Go on, love birds. Time’s a wastin’,” Jessica shoos us away, waving her hand in the air as she does it.

Isla laughs, the sound like music to my ears. “OK. OK. We’re leavin’.”

“Good. Oh and Case?” Jessica calls out just as we reach the front door. “Thank you.”

“Any time, Jessica.”

“Knew I liked you for a reason,” she murmurs with a smile.

“Funny that,” Isla murmurs. “I like him too.”

Yeah... she’s definitely my One. Now all that’s left to do is prove it to her.

ISLA

The flowers were gorgeous. Don't get me wrong. But when Case sat with my mom and made her laugh? I could've kissed the man.

I already wanted to—who wouldn't, he's gorgeous inside and out—but seeing that spark in Mom's eyes again meant so much more than anything he could ever give me and whatever he had planned for our date.

If he hadn't already won me over in Anchorage all those months ago, today would've confirmed it. Then again, every single time we see and speak to one another I feel myself falling harder for the man. And all of this before an official first date!

All of the nervous butterflies that were fluttering around in my stomach all day have flown the coop—or more like swarmed.

I have no worries, I'm not anxious or self-conscious.

I'm just excited to spend the afternoon and evening together.

No mom, no best friend, and none of his ranch family. Just us.

Opening the truck door, Case holds out his hand and helps me into my seat, before shooting me a grin and shutting me inside.

Once he has slid behind the steering wheel himself, he starts the engine and hooks his arm behind my seat, giving me a nice view of his bicep as he expertly reverses us out

of the driveway. But instead of turning toward town, he starts driving the opposite way.

“Are we headin’ out of town?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

“We are. Not too far though. I’d gotten some ideas from Birdie and my brothers, but when Wyatt told me about this place, I knew that was where we should go.”

“You’re sayin’ this date was a bit of a group project then?”

“Yeah,” he says, a blush spreading up his cheeks. “I wanted to get it right.”

“I like that.”

His head jerks. “Yeah?”

“Yep. Means you wanted to make it special. Believe me, I appreciate that.”

“I wanted somethin’ different. Memorable, you know? No pressure like a restaurant dinner and no nosy locals watchin’ us like hawks and gettin’ in our business so much that we don’t enjoy ourselves. It’ll just be us and some strangers in a field.”

I reach out and cover his hand, warm tingles bursting under my skin where we touch.

“Wait. Strangers in a field? Is this one of those strange UFO sightin’ tours?”

His expression morphs from confused to curious. “That exists?”

My shoulders bounce. “I don’t know. Never been on one. But I imagine they do. Especially out in the Alaskan wilderness. Where else are the aliens goin’ to visit? Everyone thinks it’s Area 51 but I’m bettin’ on the frozen North.”

A wry smile takes over his lips. "Sorry to disappoint, but we're goin' to an orchard, not a possible UFO landin' site," he replies, making me smirk.

"They had an early harvest of Haskap berries and have opened their gates for some public pickin' and are puttin' on a drive-up movie afterward.

I thought it would be somethin' new for both of us. "

"It will be. Not only have I never done it before, but I'll also be doin' it with you," I say, squeezing his hand and loving the way he grumbles under his breath when I pull it away.

"How's the tree farm doin' after the donkey's antics?" I ask.

He groans. "I swear that animal is goin' to be the death of me."

"I thought he only crumpled some leaves?"

"He did. But a lot of work went into not only gettin' to the plantin' stage but puttin' them in the ground too. It's my contribution to the ranch, so I'm a little protective," he says.

I smile, touched by just how much he cares. "I get that. Luckily you saw it happenin' and were able to stop it."

"True, and it did lead to another clue from Gramps—well, we think so, anyway," he replies quizzically.

"What did you find?"

Case arched a brow. "Did Birdie not tell you?"

“Nope.”

“There were some initials scratched into the bark of the big tree in the field. Since none of us remember seein’ them there before, we had an idea to look up the family tree we found under the floorboards.”

“Now you have to tell me,” I say. “Did you find out who it was?”

A slow-growing smirk tugs at his lips. “Birdie was right,” he murmurs.

I frown. “About what?”

“You like a good mystery.”

“Oh yeah. I read them and if there’s a real life one, I try solvin’ it. I listen to true crime podcasts too.”

His eyes widen before they warm, crinkling at the sides. “I used to do that back home—in San Francisco, I mean. It gave me somethin’ to focus on when I couldn’t sleep.”

“Some of them are wild, right?”

“For sure. Did you know some cases have been cracked wide open because of amateur detectives puttin’ clues together that somehow got missed?” he continues.

“It’s crazy. But also, so good.” Then I realize how that sounds and snort. “Well, not good obviously?—.”

His answering laugh wraps around me like a warm blanket. “I know what you mean, beautiful.”

“Back to your family mystery though...”

“We worked out that HC must be for Henley Cooper, our great great grandfather—Ridley’s grandfather—and the MW we think is a woman called Marion Abigail. There was no family name listed for her though.”

“Marion Wilson used to live on the mountain. She’s Derrick’s sister, the middle child of the five of them. She left town maybe five years ago. Haven’t seen her since, though that’s not surprisin’ since we hardly ever see any of the Wilsons.”

Case’s eyes flash as he quickly glances my way before returning to the road ahead. “We had a feelin’ the W stood for Wilson. Not sure the Marion you’re thinkin’ of is the one whose initials are carved into our tree though.”

“True,” I giggle before leaning forward in my seat and dropping my voice to a whisper. “But it does sound like you’ve discovered a possible Timber Falls scandal?”

Case’s smile is breathtaking. “We might have. It’s still a big maybe though. There’s still a lot we don’t know. But I’m invested now.”

“You and me both, curious.”

He chuckles. “Was hopin’ you’d say that. I might have volunteered to check out the town records to see if they can shed more light on the situation.”

“You want me to help?” I say, not hiding my surprise.

“Of course. Us inquisitive, curious types have to stick together. Besides, a little birdie told me?—”

I snort. “You mean an actual Birdie?”

“Yes,” he muses. “She suggested it might be a good second date.”

Rubbing my chin, I eye him up and down, dragging it out until I see his jaw tick nervously. “You’re already plannin’ our next date? That’s a bit forward, don’t you think?”

“What? No... I mean...” he splutters. My snicker earns narrowed eyes and a sigh of relief. “You had me goin’ there for a minute.”

“Good,” I say, puffing out my chest and grinning widely. “Got to keep you on your toes.”

“Mmm. You definitely do that.”

Fifteen minutes later, Case pulls into a long driveway, the sign on the fence saying, ‘Honeyberry Farm’. Another five minutes down the track, we come to a stop in a makeshift parking lot behind a big white barn.

“Maisie Martin, nice to meet you. Honeyberry Farm is mine—mine and my husband’s, anyway. I’ll be your hostess today.”

“Hey. Nice to meet you,” Case says, shaking the woman’s hand.

“Y’all here for the whole shebang? Or just some pickin’?” the very friendly farmer asks.

Case looks at me with a lopsided grin and a slow arching brow. “You in for the whole shebang , beautiful?”

I can’t help but match his smile. “I think I’d be up for that. Is a first date a first date unless you do the whole shebang?”

“Oh, a first date,” Maisie beams. “I love that. That’s a special event that needs celebratin’. Have you just met?”

A snort escapes me. “Would you believe that we first met eight months ago and didn’t have a way to contact each other?”

I thought I’d never see this handsome man again.

” Maisie’s expression morphs with confusion so I decide to give her the quick version of our story.

“But wouldn’t you know it, my best friend and his big brother are gettin’ married, so thankfully we have been able to reconnect. ”

“Wow. That’s one of those unbelievable slidin’ door romance stories you hear about in magazines.

You know the ones. ‘An alien impregnated me’ or ‘my father’s childhood best friend’s brother’s son is my soulmate’.

Those crazy tales.” My eyes nearly pop out of my head as I stare at Case, completely dumbfounded by the direction of this conversation.

Did she say aliens? What are the chances?

Case smirks and squeezes my hand, a silent ‘I’ve got this’ signal if ever there was one. “I like to think it’ll be a great story to tell our grandkids one day. Don’t you think, beautiful?”

Did he just say what I think he did? Grandkids?

Maisie claps her hands together with a delighted laugh.

“You’ve got a good man here, young lady.

Don’t let me keep you two lovebirds. We’ll be startin’ the movie later once everyone has finished their pickin’.

That’ll give y’all enough time, so grab your aprons, rakes, and buckets and go find you some Haskaps.

If you follow me, we’ll get you kitted up. ”

“Much appreciated, Maisie. Lead the way,” Case says. He releases my hand and steps close, pressing his palm to the small of my back, giving me goosebumps and making those butterflies flutter all over again.

“You OK, beautiful?” he asks quietly, turning his head my way.

“I’m good... great .” My voice cracks a little so I clear my throat, wondering why everything this man does has such an effect on me. That’s for future me to think about—or ask Birdie about—because maybe these Cooper brothers possess some strange voodoo magic tricks that make women swoon.

Until then, we’ve got berries to pick.

“Well, now. Looks like you two had some fun out there,” Maisie says when we trundle back to the barn a few hours later. Her lips twitch as she points to our hands. “Guess you didn’t get the memo about handlin’ the berries with care.”

Case and I look down at our hands and laugh before shrugging back at the farmer. “At least it’s not our mouths.”

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“That is lucky. We give y’all gloves for a reason, you know? But never fear, it’s just because the skin of the berries has a high color pigment. It’ll fade in a few days and be good as new.”

“So we won’t be Edward purple-hands forever then?” I ask, earning a snort from the man beside me.

Maisie grins knowingly. “Nope. And better still,” she says, leaning in a little.

“It won’t transfer onto other things...or people.

” She winks and I have to bite back a startled gasp.

Who knew Maisie had it in her? “Now, why don’t y’all check out the food my husband Marty is cookin’ on the grill.

He can tell you where to move your truck for the drive-up movie.

While you’re doin’ that, I’ll pack up these berries for you to take home.

Just remember the gloves next time. Yeah? ”

Case purses his lips and I can tell he’s trying hard not to laugh.

“Thanks, Maisie. Much appreciated,” I reply.

“Anytime. Maybe you’ll come back for another date in August to pick some of our

apples. They won't stain anythin'."

"We'll keep that in mind. Thanks, again," Case says, pressing his hand to my back again as we head back around the side of the barn, just stepping out of view before we both lose it.

"OK, it's not just me, right? She said her husband was called Marty. So his name is Marty Martin?" I say, wheezing from laughing so much.

"Yep. I'm glad you stepped in because I was totally goin' to give myself away back there."

"I could tell. You're welcome," I say, still sounding breathless.

Case's eyes turn from warm to blazing as we stand there staring at each other. Suddenly, the very last thing on my mind is berries, stained hands, snacks, or movies. There's only one thing I want to do and going by the look on my handsome date's face, he's feeling the same way.

He takes a step closer, his body gently pushing mine against the side of the barn. He slides one of his hands up my arm, giving me more goosies before stopping his exploration on my shoulder, the other hand lifting to cup my cheek.

The air crackles between us the longer we stand there, eyes locked as he brushes the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip.

My breathing labors, all I can see, all I can feel is Case. In that moment, all I want—no, what I need—is to kiss this man.

Decision made, I rise on my toes and lift my chin, my eyes fluttering closed just as our lips are about to touch for the very first time. Then a familiar singsong voice

breaks the moment.

“Hey, you two. Did y’all get lost?”

Case steps back and rubs the back of his neck, his cheeks flushing pink as he looks at the ground with a small grin. “Ah... yeah.”

“Well now, don’t you worry about that,” Maisie says, completely oblivious. “Let me take you to Marty. Follow me.”

“Did we just get kiss-blocked by a woman who talks about aliens?” he says under his breath we follow behind her.

“Yep,” I say, grinning wide and hoping my flustered cheeks are cooling down some.

“Can I get a do-over later?” he whispers next to my ear.

I look up at him, hoping he can read everything I’m trying to tell him in my gaze. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t, curious.” I reach down and lace our fingers together. “Now let’s go meet the famous Marty . We’ve got snacks to get and a movie to watch.”

Steak sandwiches, warm cider, and a Haskap crumble were the ‘snacks’ Marty served up, all packaged together in a brown paper bag for us to enjoy while sitting in a field a little way away from the barn.

Soon enough, there are six trucks and two cars parked in two lines, Case parking us in the left back corner, the tailgate facing a huge inflatable screen the Martins set up.

Proving he’s a man with a plan, he lowers the tailgate to reveal blankets and pillows to keep us comfortable.

After a few minutes of preparation where he wouldn't let me touch a thing, we lean against the back window, side by side, hip to hip, ready to eat and enjoy the movie.

Which ironically, is one I've seen many many times but has taken on a whole new meaning after today—Independence Day.

"I think the universe is havin' fun with us today," Case murmurs when the title credits roll on screen.

"Maybe there are UFOs around these parts," I say with a giggle.

We fall into a comfortable silence as we dig into the food, a moan escaping as I taste the beef and garlic mayo sandwich.

"That good, huh?" Case muses, shooting me a heated look.

I grin, grabbing a napkin to wipe my mouth. "Yup. A great finish to a great date."

"It has been, hasn't it." His eyes drop to my lips. "Even with Maisie's untimely interruption."

I lean in, my entire body overheating. It has nothing to do with the blankets and everything to do with the man sitting next to me. "Maybe the universe was havin' her own fun."

He arches a brow. "You think she's into delayed gratification?"

"Well, I'm usually not," I say quietly as my eyes roam over his handsome face. "But there's somethin' to be said about anticipation."

He dips his head, locking his intense dark eyes with mine.

“You don’t think eight months is long enough to wait to kiss you?”

” There’s a magnetic pull between us that I can no longer fight—not that I ever wanted to.

And the more he speaks, the stronger it gets.

“That mornin’ I woke up and found your note, I’ve never been more disappointed. ”

“Why?” I whisper, our faces so close now I can feel his breath caressing my skin.

“Because I knew there was somethin’ different about us, about our connection. I was scared I’d never get another chance. Never get this chance...” His voice is soft and low now, every word touching my heart,

“And now that you do?” I breathe, hoping that he’ll just take what we both desperately want—and this time, without interruptions.

He leans in, stopping just as he’s about to touch me, a smile gracing his lips before they finally meet in a slow, sweet, savoring kiss that sends sparks of awareness, heat, and need coursing through me.

The world—and the movie—fades away, leaving only the sensation of his lips moving against mine, the warmth of his touch searing...branding. It’s like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Like coming home. Like that first taste of delicious pecan pie.

No. This is finding the thing you felt was missing all along, even before you knew what—or who—it was.

With this one kiss, I know with absolute certainty that Case was meant to be in my life.

When we finally pull away, I can't help but smile as we slowly catch our breath. "Definitely worth the wait."

Case chuckles softly, his eyes meeting mine with a gentle surety that makes my heart flutter and the butterflies settle in for the long haul. "Definitely worth it."

"So...about that second date?" I murmur as he wraps me up and we try to give our attention to the movie. Something I find impossible since my lips are still tingling from our kiss.

He tightens his hold around me before nuzzling that sensitive spot below my ear. "I thought you'd never ask, beautiful."

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CASE

Case: Good morning, Beautiful. I know you're working today but I was thinking about last night and it made me smile. Thought you should know.

Isla: Just on my break and now I'm getting curious looks because I'm grinning like a crazy person. Mom loved the haskaps. And guess what? She went to school with Marty Martin!

Case: That's totally a small town thing. Everyone seems to know everyone in Timber Falls.

Isla: Yep. Why do you think I like mysteries and puzzles so much? When you can't get away with much, you look for secrets...

Case: I already know you and Birdie got up to mischief as teenagers. Will told us all about the lookout on the town limits where everyone goes to 'socialize'.

Isla: Of COURSE she did haha. She led me astray, I swear.

I snort as I lean back in my chair, the work in front of me no longer holding my focus.

Case: Hmmm, somehow I think you corrupted each other.

Isla: I plead the Fifth... How's your day going?

Case: Grumps hasn't gone wandering again since his little tree farm adventure, so that's a bonus. Jude swears something has been nibbling in his garden beds at night though so maybe he's moved to greener pastures—or plants.

Isla: Sounds like you've got another mystery to solve up on the mountain.

Case: As long as it's not a moose. I've heard they can be scary when they want to be.

Isla: Nah. They're harmless unless a bull is in rut or you come across a mama protecting her young. If their hair is standing on end or their ears are back, steer clear.

Case: Good to know.

Isla: I was thinking about the town records thing. I've got time Monday afternoon after my shift at the restaurant if you're still interested.

I'm glad I'm alone in my room because if my brothers saw my grin right now, they'd be merciless.

Case: Are you asking me out on a date, beautiful?

Isla: Sure sounds like it. What do you say?

Case: No need to ask. It'll always be yes when it comes to you.

Isla: Great, now I'm blushing.

Case: I happen to like making you blush.

Isla: Now I know why you do it so much!

Case: Always. I'll let you go and enjoy the rest of your break.

Isla: Talk later?

Case: I like our nightly chats. I look forward to them.

Isla: Me too. Watch out for those moose... or is it mooses?

Case: Isn't Moose both singular and plural?

Isla: Yet another puzzle to solve.

Unfortunately—maybe—for me, I'm still grinning like an idiot when Wyatt knocks on the door frame and wanders in.

"Let me guess. You were either textin' or thinkin' about Isla," he says, leaning against the doorway.

I spin my chair around his way and stretch out my legs. "What makes you say that?"

"The goofy smile. It's a dead giveaway. I saw it enough back home when the rest of them met their Ones."

Other than Will, Wyatt is the only other person here to have seen the Call in action. Not for himself just yet—the kid has only just turned eighteen—but his father and the five other owners of Bull Mountain Ranch.

"Can I ask you a question about it? The Call, I mean?"

Wyatt shrugs. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

“Has there been a situation where the other person doesn’t believe in it?”

His eyes widen before understanding fills his gaze.

“Yep. But it didn’t last long.” He pushes off the doorframe and makes his way over to my bed, taking a seat.

“It was Landry and Starchild. He knew about the Call and had a huge crush on her, but she just thought he was shy. Then she went to visit Bear Mountain with her grandmother and overheard them talkin’ about the Call and the mountain choosin’ a soulmate.

Next thing you know, she’s stormin’ into the town’s bookstore and tellin’ Lan that no mountain would ever tell her who to love. ”

“Damn,” I say slowly. “But they’re together now, right?” he nods. “Did she feel it too? Or did Landry win her over?”

A knowing grin appears on his face. “Bit of both. The thing is, if you are hearin’ the mountain’s call, you’ve got to remember one important thing.”

I lean forward on my chair, my arms steeping on my legs. “What’s that?”

“Out of everyone back home who is now blissfully happy with their soulmates, the thing they all have in common is that—no matter how long it takes—the mountain always gets it right. Once you believe that and trust it, nothin’ can stand in your way.

" His expression turns curious. “Does Isla not believe in the Call? I thought you weren’t goin’ to tell her yet? ”

“I haven’t yet, but she did say she doesn’t believe in it. At least the whole ‘soulmates

bein' called to the mountain' idea part, anyway."

Wyatt frowns. "Not to state the obvious but she wasn't called to the mountain. You were."

My eyes widen. "You're right. It's the same with Will too."

"At the end of the day, I don't think it matters how your paths cross," he continues.

Realization hits me. "Just that they cross at all."

"You got it," he says, pushing up to his feet and making to leave.

"Don't tell me you came in here just to impart some of your mountain lore wisdom on me," I say, shooting him a smirk.

"Nah. Came to tell you I've just made more cowboy brew for your mid-mornin' caffeine fix, and your brothers have called an impromptu meetin' in the cabin and asked me to come find you."

"Sure thing. Let me get a travel mug and I'll meet y'all out there."

"Already done," he grins. "It's on the kitchen counter, along with three others for your brothers. You can help me carry them out there."

I snort, shaking my head as I quickly grab my phone to shoot Isla one last message.

Case: Duty calls. Apparently, there's important ranch business to be conducted in one of the cabins we're fixing up. Have a good day, beautiful.

Putting my phone down, I push up out of the chair to find our ranch hand's lips

twitching. “What?”

“You’re smitten.”

I shrug. “Yep. Not hidin’ it, either. There’s always just been somethin’ about her.”

“And that is the Call. Doesn’t matter if it happens on the mountain or off, it always ends the same.”

I shoot him a confused look. “And how’s that?”

“Just like Will and Birdie. All coupled up and in love . Mark my words, whether Isla believes in the Call or not, she won’t be able to deny your connection or that you were both made for each other.”

“I hope you’re right,” I reply honestly. Now that she’s back in my life, I can’t imagine it without her.

“Watch this space, Case. I give it a month tops. Then you’ll be all googly-eyed and lovey-dovey like everyone else. I’m just glad I don’t have to worry about that any time soon.”

“But you think you will eventually?”

“Oh yeah. I’m hopin’ for it. Willin’ to work the land and do what I love to make sure I’m worthy of the spirit’s appreciation. I saw my parents together, and now Dad with Mags, and all the other couples. It’s inspirin’ and somethin’ I want for myself one day,” he says, his expression softening.

I arch a brow his way. “But not now?”

“Hell no. I’m only eighteen. I’ve got far too much of the world to see.” His smirk tells me it’s not the world he’s talking about.

“You mean the single women of Timber Falls?”

“On that note, we better get goin’,” he says by way of an answer.

Funnily enough, he doesn’t need to confirm it. His dancing eyes as he leaves my room says it for him.

We walk into the cabin ten minutes later, coffee cups in hand.

“You summoned me, your highnesses,” I say as we dish out the drinks.

“Summoned coffee, sure,” Will replies dryly.

I snort. “Some of us still have jobs away from the mountain, brother.”

Sutton and Will share a look. “Why’re you still workin’ for them? You know you don’t have to, right? We’ve got more than enough reserves to tide us over for a while thanks to Gramps, and I—”

“ We ,” my twin adds.

Jude lifts his chin. “Me too.”

Will nods. “OK— we –don’t want you wearin’ yourself out tryin’ to do everythin’ for everyone because you think you’re not pullin’ your weight. I don’t want you to burn out like I did. Believe me, it’s not fun.”

I stare at Sutton who meets my gaze and slowly arches his brow as if challenging me

to argue.

“I think we’re all doin’ great so far,” Will continues. “We have our pet projects. We pitch in and help each other to get the chores done. And if you think back to the state of the ranch when we arrived, we’ve made a lot of progress. “We’ve got a donkey—”

“For now , at least,” I mutter, earning a few chuckles from around the room.

Will smirks. “Leave Grumps alone.”

“I will if he leaves my trees alone,” I grumble.

“ Anyway ...” Will rolls his eyes. “We’ve also got two steers and more on the way. There’s Jude’s garden beds and greenhouse, the Zen Garden is takin’ shape and your tree farm is planted. When you put it all together, it all adds up.”

My brows draw together as something occurs to me. “Is this an intervention?”

Will shakes his head. “More a meetin’ of minds, makin’ sure we’re all still on the same page. It’s important to acknowledge how far we’ve come considerin’ we’re a bunch of city slickers tryin’ to be Alaskan mountain men.”

“OK...” I reply, still confused. “What has this got to do with me still doin’ consultin’ work?”

Jude looks at me with understanding in his eyes. “We’re sayin’ you don’t have to do it anymore.”

My frown deepens. “What if I want to?”

“Do you?” Sutton asks, bouncing the question back to me.

The problem with being a twin is that they know you. Add in the fact that mine is a therapist and then he proves that sometimes he knows me better than I know myself.

“OK. I don’t. But I didn’t want to let them down. It’s not like they had any warnin’ that I was leavin’.”

“They had months, Case. That’s more notice than most employees give,” Will replies.

Sutton cocks his head. “Is it just them?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you didn’t want to let your bosses and coworkers down. I’m askin’ if you’re worried about lettin’ us down too,” Sutton presses.

I nod, choosing to focus on my coffee mug instead of the concerned looks I can almost guarantee they’re giving me.

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“Well, at least you admit it,” Jude replies. “But that’s not somethin’ you’ve got to worry about. You haven’t—and will never—let us down, Case.”

“He’s right, you know. And that’s not somethin’ I get to say that often.” Will smirks at Jude’s indignant gasp. “It’s been months now. It’s time to cut the apron strings—so to speak—and fully commit to the ranch life.”

“Case?” Jude waits to speak until I look over at him. “While it’s honorable and we respect the hell out of you for it, believe me when I say that you don’t need to do everythin’ to prove you’re all in with us. We know . You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. But—”

“You’ve given up just as much as the rest of us. You’re contributin’ just as much as the rest of us,” Will adds. “How ‘bout this? Can you say you still like the work you’re doin’? Do you enjoy it? Does it fill you up? Because if you say yes, we’ll let it drop.”

I don’t have to think about it because I already know the answer. I’ve known it for a long time, from before I went to Anchorage and met my beautiful stranger. Before we were told about needing to move to Timber Falls. I shake my head.

Jude grins. “Then give your damn notice already, Case. Then get back to work on becomin’ an Alaskan mountain man—

“Like the rest of us,” They say in unison, which makes us all laugh.

I hold my hands in the air, my travel mug gripped tight so that I don’t waste a drop.

“OK. OK. I get it. But do I have to start wearin’ flannel? Cause I’m not sure I’m a plaid kind of man.”

They all groan at that.

“Good. Now that that’s out of the way, we need to talk about what comes next. Wyatt?” Will says, looking to the true rancher out of all of us.

“Right. So Will and I were spitballin’ earlier. This cabin will be ready soon, and since we now know what we’re doin’ and how to do it better—”

“And a lot quicker,” Will adds.

“Yeah, that too. All of that means we can start thinkin’ about openin’ the doors to guests sooner than we thought.

” We all nod at that. “With more cattle arrivin’ next month from Bull—thanks to Dad givin’ us a good deal—we’ll soon have chores for people to help us out with in return for free accommodation. ”

“And there’s Jude’s garden plans. If we’re wantin’ to grow our own and potentially grow some vegetables and herbs for sellin’ at the farmers market, we’re goin’ to need help with that too,” Will continues.

“Exactly. So,” Wyatt says, taking a breath. “The plan Will and I wanted to get all of your input on is for us to wait until one more cabin is fitted out, and then you ,” Wyatt nods my way, “can finish buildin’ the website for takin’ inquiries and bookin’s and the like.”

“That’s easy enough,” I reply. Honestly, I could do the coding in my sleep.

“Especially now that you’ll no longer be workin’ remotely. Right?” Sutton says. Now it’s all making sense...

“So y’all ambushed me knowin’ I’d agree, and you already had plans to keep me busy with all my newfound spare time,” I deadpan.

“Dammit, you’re onto us,” Jude says with a laugh.

“There’s also the next field of plantin’ for your tree farm too. The barn to extend...”

“My Zen garden to finish,” Sutton adds. “Somehow, I don’t think we’re goin’ to run out of things for people to do, and if—or when—that happens, I’m sure we’ll find more.”

I shrug and turn to Will. “You’ve already got my vote. You’re the head of this ranch, remember?”

“Be that as it may, I still like knowin’ we’re all on the same page. This is a democracy, not a dictatorship.”

I look around the group and see that we’re all in agreement. “OK. Then yes, let’s do it.”

“Right. Let’s get to the real reason we’re here,” Jude’s almost vibrating on his feet for some reason.

“There’s more ?” I ask.

“Yep,” he says, popping the P, pinning me in place with a pointed look. “You can tell us all about your date last night.”

A snort escapes me as I shake my head. “Y’all are like a bunch of teenagers wantin’ gossip.”

“We care,” Sutton smirks. “But you’re right.

We want to know if the world stopped spinnin’ and you’re the next one to be declared off the market.

I don’t think there’s ever been two Calls being heard at once—not from what I’ve read, anyway—so once you’re done with it, then it’ll be someone else’s turn. ”

“What if I want to respect Isla’s privacy and keep the details to myself?”

Sutton’s eyes narrow. “We could just ask Birdie to ask Isla...”

“You wouldn’t...” My eyes snap to Will who just shrugs. “I’ve been through this too, remember,” is all he says.

Jude shoots me a knowing look. “ Or you could tell us yourself and we’ll leave you alone.”

I release a loud and very resigned sigh. “It was good, OK.”

Will frowns. “Just good?”

“Great. Amazin’. The best date in the history of dates.” I honestly mean that too.

“Well, that’s goin’ a bit overboard. You could’ve just told us you had a good time,” Sutton mutters.

“I did! We did. I’m not lyin’ when I say it was amazin’. We’re seein’ each other

again on Monday afternoon to go to City Hall, just like Birdie suggested,” I tell them.

“Do you think she’s your One?” Will asks sincerely, all eyes firmly locked on me as they wait for my answer.

“I do. When we kissed it was like something shifted. Something big... consequential...” I look to Will. “Do you know what I mean?”

“Oh yeah,” he replies, his gaze full of understanding.

“I just don’t want to go all guns blazin’ and tell her that I’m already fallin’ for her.”

“To be fair, you fell for her months ago, before you even moved here,” Sutton says. See! Having a twin can be annoying!

“Yeah,” I reply honestly. “Doesn’t mean I know what to do.”

“That’s the best part though,” Will says. “You don’t have to think about it. If she’s your One, then the journey has already started.”

Wy nudges my arm. “Just like I said, Case. The mountain is never wrong. Just trust in that and the rest—they say—is history.”

I can do that. Hell, I want to do that. I want to continue to get to know all about my beautiful stranger. To spend time with her. To help her in any way I can. To kiss her again and again. Chase that feeling only she can give me.

She may not believe the Call is real, but that’s OK. I don’t need to convince her. I just need to show her.

“I think this meetin’s over. I’ve got work to do, and you,” Jude says, pointing at me,

“have a resignation letter to write.”

“Yeah, yeah. I said I would.”

“Until then, who’s up for the Lair tonight? Birdie’s workin’ and I’m plannin’ on eatin’ some good food, havin’ a beer, and beatin’ y’all at pool,” Will says, changing the subject.

Sutton smirks. “You just want to make sure none of the regulars steal your girl.”

“She’s got my ring on her finger. That’s all the claim I need.”

After more light-hearted ribbing, Jude and I leave Sutton, Will, and Wyatt to their construction work.

And proving just how well my brothers know me, as soon as I send off the email tendering my official resignation, a huge weight is lifted off my shoulders.

Now I can dedicate my time to the ranch and plan more dates with my beautiful stranger.

The more I think about it, this might just be the best thing they’ve ever told me to do.

ISLA

I'm just finishing up in the back of the restaurant when Birdie appears next to me with a huge grin on her face.

"Your man's waitin' for you outside." There's no ignoring the happy feeling that courses through me hearing Case being called 'my man'.

"Look at that smile, and you're blushin'. Isn't the Call a wonderful thing," she says in a singsong voice.

I tilt my head and stare. "The Call?"

"Yeah. That's why you and Case are so ridiculously cute together." My mouth drops open but my oblivious best friend presses on. "I'd say I miss those lustful early days myself but I'm with my One so every day is like that. Especially now that we're engaged."

"This isn't some magic courtin' spell spun by a fictional mountain being. B. I know you believe in it, and I respect that. But me and Case? That's not us."

"Mmm hmm, whatever you say Iz."

"When did you get here anyway?" I ask.

"Just now. The chef is puttin' together a lunch order for me to take back to Dad. He's knee-deep in city ordinances and letters from residents today, so it's the only way I

can make sure he eats .”

Birdie’s dad is a workaholic and even though she lives up the mountain with Will now, they still go to her old house every Sunday to meal prep for the mayor.

She also works as his secretary so when she’s not working at the restaurant or the bar, she’s orderin’ him around like she’s the boss.

It’s hilarious but I don’t think either of them would have it any other way.

“We’re headin’ to City Hall too.”

She nods. “That’s right. You guys are goin’ to look at the city records.”

“Yep. I know you and I have talked about the Cooper/Wilson rivalry before, but I’m hopin’ that we can find out whether the MW from the tree trunk is one of the Wilsons might help us make a connection between the families other than sharin’ a mountain.”

“One can only hope. There has to be some reason why Ridley left clues for the brothers. They’ve got to mean somethin’ .”

“Let’s hope Case and I find some answers then,” I say just as the chef calls out her order.

I grab my purse and follow her out, spotting Case leaning against his truck.

Stepping close, he slides a hand around my side and guides me in for a soft and disappointingly fleeting kiss.

When he pulls back though, he stares deep into my eyes before he mutters something I can’t quite hear.

Before I can think about it too much, he's kissing me again.

This time it's not soft, and definitely not fleeting.

In fact, by the time I tear my lips from his to suck in some much-needed air, I'm not only breathless, I'm hot all over and thankful he's holding me steady so that I don't melt into a puddle on the pavement.

"What was that?" I breathe, my lips tingling, my heart galloping in my chest. All I can think about is wanting—no needing—to kiss him again.

His slow-growing smirk is filled with heat. "That was hello."

"Damn. Can't wait to see how you say goodbye, Case. Jeez. Warn a girl next time," Birdie says, fanning herself. A giggle escapes while Case laughs right along with me.

"You can't talk, Birdie," he says. "I have to witness your public displays of affection with my brother on a daily basis."

"Well, yeah ..." Birdie replies. "That's in the privacy of our own home. You just made out and claimed Iz in the middle of Restaurant Row. That's goin' to be the talk of the town now."

Case looks deep into my eyes, arching a brow the longer he does it. "Do you feel claimed, beautiful?"

I answer his smile with a bigger one. "Oh yeah. I look forward to bein' claimed again soon."

He growls, his gaze narrowing as I lick my lips.

Obviously needing a distraction, he moves to give Birdie a hug before looking down at the takeout bag in her hand. “Want a ride to City Hall with us? It’ll save you carryin’ all of that.”

“That'd be great.”

Once we’re all bundled inside the truck, Case pulls away from the sidewalk and a few minutes later, parks on the street outside the town’s oldest—and some might say, most important—building.

Case laces his hand with mine, Birdie shooting me a smirk when she sees it before walking ahead and leading us inside.

“Dad?” she calls out as we all walk into the Mayor’s chambers.

“Hey, Little Bird. Did you get me the good stuff?” Mayor Walker asks hopefully as he appears in his office doorway. “Oh hey, Case. Isla. I forgot y’all were comin’. Nice to see you.”

“You too, Pete,” Case says, releasing me so he can shake the mayor’s offered hand.

Birdie’s dad holds his arms out for me, his eyes crinkling at the sides as I step in for the same big bear hug he gives me every time we see each other. “Seems you got yourself a good Cooper man of your own, Iz,” he murmurs for my ears only.

I move back to Case’s side, loving the hum of approval that rumbles in his chest when he wraps his arm around my back again.

“Just one moment,” Pete says, disappearing back into his office before returning with a set of keys in his hand.

“Birdie said you wanted to look through the old town records. We’ve got births, deaths, and marriages as well as land deeds and the like.

I have to say it’s a bit of a mess in there.

Feel free to rummage through and see if there’s anythin’ of interest to y’all in there. I really should put out calls for someone to digitize everythin’.”

Case takes the keys and I catch curiosity in his gaze. “How many records are we talkin’?” he asks. “Because as it so happens, I might have some time on my hands.”

“Case...” Birdie warns, but she does it with an amused look on her face. “You’ve just found yourself more time and you’re already lookin’ for another job?”

He shrugs. “This is different. It would be helpin’ the town. Maybe there’ll be someone else with a family mystery to solve.”

I hide my snort against his shirt, giving up the fight when he flexes his fingers on my back. I meet his dancing eyes. “What?”

“Your brothers talked you into givin’ up your city job to have more time for the ranch.

” When Case told me he’d sent in his resignation letter to his old company, he said that Will, Sutton, Jude, and Wyatt had staged what he felt was an intervention of sorts.

I could tell he wasn’t mad about it though because of the relief in his voice.

If there’s one thing I have learned since we met up again, it’s that he feels deeply.

Especially when it comes to his family and the ranch.

He told me that when he first found out about his grandfather's will, he was approaching a crossroad in his life, struggling with the realization that he had sleep and work and nothing else.

He had confessed as much during our time in that dark corner of the random Anchorage bar.

With the ranch repairs, the tree farm project, and the guest ranch they're restarting very soon, he feels he has a purpose now.

But apparently, he's still looking for ways to give back—this time to the town.

“You sayin’ you might be interested in modernizin’ this office and the way we do things?” Pete says, slipping seamlessly back into his Mayor role.

Case nods. “I think we could brainstorm some ideas if you were interested. I’ve managed a lot of digital projects and tech rollouts over the years. Once we have some direction and I know what the budget might be, we can meet up and talk through it.”

I don’t know what it is, but I’m seeing the same light in his eyes that he gets when he talks about his Christmas tree farm. He’s inspired, invigorated... alive .

Not for the first time, I’m witnessing Case Cooper’s big heart and propensity to help others. And wouldn’t you know it, that’s a big turn-on for me.

“A man with a plan, I like it,” Pete says, looking as happy as a clam. “Two problems solved in one day, I’m on a roll.”

Birdie frowns and cocks her head at her dad. “Two?”

“Yep. My records problem, which is as old as Moses and far from useful in its current state.” As if right on cue, his stomach grumbles. “And my darlin’ daughter deliverin’ lunch to my door.”

“Just in time by the sound of that ,” Birdie nods at his belly.

We all laugh at that before Pete gives us directions to find the records room.

As Case and I walk back down the stairs toward the basement, we come across Derrick Wilson and his dad, Sully, in the lobby.

“Derrick,” I say with a polite smile. His eyes dart to Case and our joined hands.

“Isla Murray, is that you?” Old Man Wilson says, his smile falling and eyes narrowing as he sizes Case up.

“Sure is. It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Wilson,” I reply warmly, although inside my fight or flight instinct is already kicking in.

The last time Mr. Wilson saw the Coopers in town, he caused a scene at the diner in front of everyone.

Birdie told me he was ranting and raving nonsensically until Mack asked him to leave.

“You’re one of those Coopers ,” he spits out, his haggard face twisting with disgust.

“Cayson Cooper.” Case offers his arm to the old man. When he scoffs and grumbles under his breath, Case shifts it Derrick’s way. I breathe a sigh of relief when Derrick shows a hell of a lot more maturity than his father and shakes Case’s hand.

“Damn Coopers, can’t just stay away,” Mr. Wilson growls.

“Dad...” Derrick warns under his breath before shooting me an apologetic look.

“You here on ranch business?” I ask Derrick.

Derrick’s gaze flickers between the two of us before fixing his eyes my way again.

“Yeah. Seein’ Micah. You?”

“We’re off to see the town rec?—”

“We were just visitin’ Birdie and the mayor for lunch,” I say, interrupting Case and fudging the truth a little. I mean we did see them and they were having lunch...

Derrick nods and although I can feel Case’s eyes on me, I somehow manage to stay on task. “Don’t let us keep you. Y’all have a good day.” I plaster on my sweetest, most amenable smile and wave goodbye.

“Why’d you talk to them?” Mr. Wilson mutters under his breath as his son leads him toward Micah the lawyer’s office. “They’re Coopers. They don’t get to have anythin’ good . They lie and cheat and renege. That’s all they do.”

“Dad...” Derrick sighs loudly before they disappear.

Case turns to me just as I look up to him. “I don’t even know where to start with that ,” he says, his brows furrowed.

“To be honest, neither do I,” I say with a sigh.

“He definitely doesn’t like anyone with the name Cooper, even if the family rivalry stems from years ago.”

I shake my head. “Seems that way. I guess that’s why we’re here though, right? To find out why?”

Case grins. “Very true. How ‘bout we don’t think about it and just get this date started.”

I hold my hand on my heart and bat my lashes, making a show of swooning dramatically. “Be still my heart. Me, my man, and the smell of musty old town records. You sure know a way to swoop a girl off her feet, curious.”

He chuckles and pulls me into his side, touching his lips to my temple. “I aim to please, beautiful. I aim to please.”

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CASE

Once we finish up in the records room and return the keys to the Mayor's office, we head back up the mountain to update the family, taking Birdie home with us.

"You're not goin' to tell me anythin' ? she moans from the backseat.

"Nope. You've got to wait just like everyone else," I tease, laughing at her groan.

"Come on, B. You know you love the suspense. That's why we're such mystery buffs, right?" Isla chimes in from the passenger seat, turning to give her friend a playful wink.

Birdie huffs but eventually gives in with a dramatic sigh. "Fine. I suppose the anticipation will just add to the drama of it all. I hope whatever you found out is worth it though. That's all I'm sayin'."

When we pull up to the ranch, the house is lit up on one side. Birdie hops out and goes on ahead of us while I lead Isla toward the steps. I can't help but sneak a quick kiss... which turns into a not-so-quick one, my lips tingling and my body demanding more as she shoots me a knowing look.

"Save it for when you say goodbye, curious," she murmurs against my lips.

Birdie sighs dramatically from the front doorway. "I swear, Will and I have never been this bad. The mountain either likes torturin' the rest of us or you two just have no self-control."

Isla smirks before turning her best friend's way. "Don't know what the mountain has to do with anythin'." Birdie and I share a look. "I blame the pheromones," Isla adds.

Birdie grins. "It's always the pheromones. And believe me, Iz. These Cooper men have them in spades."

"Technically, if we're talkin' about the chemistry of love, there's more than just pheromones at play," Sutton says, appearing next to Birdie.

"There are also the standard hormones—testosterone and estrogen—then there's oxytocin and vasopressin which help with feelings of attachment.

Lastly, you've got all the things that add to attraction."

"OK, Doctor Cooper. Care to tell us what they are since we're gettin' all scientific?" I say, scaling the steps and stopping on the porch.

"Mainly dopamine and serotonin. Then you add—"

"Nope, that's enough of a psychology lesson for today," I reply.

He narrows his eyes my way. "You'll keep, brother. I'm only lettin' you get away with it this time because dinner's bein' served and we all want to know what happened at City Hall."

He hugs Birdie as she walks past, and holds out his arms, giving Isla the choice of a hug—which she accepts.

When it gets to be my turn, he goes to walk off. "Hey! Where's the love, Sutt?"

"Oh, so now you want me to talk?" He playfully slaps my shoulder before shutting

the door behind me. “Rudely interruptin’ my lesson on the science of love .”

“Sounded more like lust to me.”

“You’d know,” he shoots back before cocking his head. “Unless there’s somethin’ you’re not tellin’ me? You have been rather happy of late.”

My gaze drifts over to the direction of the dining room where I can hear Isla and Birdie talking with Will, Jude, and Wyatt. “No point denyin’ it. This is it, Sutt. And it’s like nothin’ I’ve ever felt before. With anyone.”

Sutton’s smile is full of understanding. “Have you told her about the Call yet?”

I shake my head. “I like how things are. The direction we’re headin’ in. I can be me around her and I know she feels the same. It feels natural... right...”

“ It , as you say.”

“Yeah. There’s no rush though. I know we’re headin’ in the direction we were always meant to. Even if there was a big break in between.”

He grips my shoulder, getting my attention. “From what I’ve read in the books, the mountain always has a plan. Maybe yours was meant to take some time.”

“Unlike Will who met his One in the furniture store.”

Sutton smirks. “Somethin’ like that.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

He rolls his eyes. “Case. We shared a womb.” That’s all he says.

“OK. Well, with all the pheromones, hormones, and everythin’, is that why I can’t stop touchin’ her or wantin’ to kiss her? It’s all I can think about. I made out with her on Restaurant Row, in front of Birdie .”

My brother’s eyes flash with amusement and I swear I can see pride there too.

“Nice.” He holds up his closed fist for a knuckle tap.

I stare at his hand then back to his face.

“OK, leave me hangin’. But to answer your question, yes and no.

All of those things are makin’ you feel good, and they can be better than any medication I could ever prescribe.

There’s also the fact that the Call heightens your feelin’s.

Your heart, your soul, and every other part of you knows she’s your soulmate.

It makes sense you’re goin’ to want to be with her. In every way, all the time.”

“You two comin’ or are we movin’ this dinner to the hallway?” Will calls out.

“Guess we’re bein’ missed. But Case, a word of advice?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop overthinkin’ it,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I’m not. That’s what’s throwin’ me. For the first time in a long time, I’m not worried about anythin’, not with Isla,” I tell him.

“Except the fact that you’re not worryin’ about it?”

I sigh. “OK. Point made.”

“Good. And if you want to know more, just steal some more of Birdie’s books. They’re like a manual for the Call. Now let’s go eat. Wyatt made his stepmother’s Corned Beef Hash and I’ve been tortured with the smell of it all afternoon.”

“Are you goin’ to tell us or do we have to torture it out of y’all?”

” Birdie asks from across the table. Isla snorts and I can’t help but nudge her thigh with mine, not missing the smirk playing on her lips.

Our eyes meet and for a moment, I lose myself in her gaze.

It’s not until a throat clears that I snap out of it.

“OK. I guess we can tell you now,” I tease, laughing at my family’s groans.

“We started by lookin’ up anybody with the last name Cooper.

That led us to Henley, who we already knew about.

He was born in Timber Falls in the late 1800s and tragically passed away in a military trainin’ accident at the age of twenty-four. ”

“Wow, a soldier,” Will says, looking around the table. “We should call Mom and Cap. They might be interested in this news too.”

“Hold that thought.” I push my chair back and rush out of the room, returning moments later with my tablet and its stand. Once I’ve set it up at one end of the table,

I get Jude to video call our parents. After a few rings, our father's deep voice fills the air.

"You've got Cap."

"Hey. You've got Cooper Ranch," Will replies with a laugh. "Ever think of answerin' the phone like a normal person and sayin' hello?"

"Now why would I do that?" he jokes. "This is a pleasant surprise. Hey Cooper Ranch. What's happenin'?"

"We're just havin' dinner. Case and Isla were just about to tell us about what they found out at City Hall this afternoon about the mysterious HC and MW, Thought you and Mom might like to hear too," Will tells them.

"Isla? Is that the woman Case can't stop talkin' about? Oh, your mother will be pleased," Cap says while I groan, dropping my chin to stare at my plate and waiting for the ribbing to begin.

Isla drops her arm below the table and rubs her hand over my knee. A glance her way has me locking eyes with her warm ones and that beautiful smile that heats my core every single time I see it.

"How are you not freakin' out about this?" I whisper.

"Were you when you were pickin' wildflowers like a swoony book boyfriend with my mom?" she shoots back. Touché .

"But I like knowin' I'm not the only one. Power in numbers and all that," she whispers for my ears only. Well damn, that feels better than an ice-cold beer on a hot summer's day.

“You’ve made him blush now, Cap,” Sutton muses. I flip him off for his troubles as our father’s deep chuckle fills the room.

“I only speak the truth, you boys know that. Anyway, where are my manners. Hi, Isla. Nice to meet you—well, talk to you—anyway.”

“Hi, Isla,” Mom says in a singsong voice. “I’ve heard so much about you too.”

“I’m right here, Mom,” I add.

“I already know you, Case. You and your brother had me in labor for thirty-one hours. No way I could ever forget that.” I look over at Sutton as we both groan

“We’re all here too, Ma,” Jude adds with a grin. “Remember me, your favorite son?”

“Yes, Yes. Hi, Jude. Is Wy there too?” Mom asks. “Tell me my sons are treatin’ you well.”

“Just the same as Cap did,” Wyatt replies with a shit-eating grin.

Cap barks out a laugh. “Must be workin’ you hard then. Good to know.”

Then Mom’s voice takes over. “It’s nice to hear from all of y’all.

I was startin’ to wonder if you had no coverage up there on the mountain.

But then I remembered that Case lives there and he wouldn’t survive a day without the internet.

No doubt you’ve already installed a satellite dish that would have Riddles rollin’ in his grave. Am I right?”

Sutton rolls his eyes. “We called you last Sunday, Mom.”

“A week is like a lifetime to a mother, Sutt. Believe me,” she says. “And Birdie, we can’t forget you. We must talk about the weddin’ plans soon.”

“Sure thing, Mary-Lou. You name a time and I’ll make sure I’m home to talk,” Will’s fiancée replies.

“And Isla.” Mom’s voice softens when she says her name. “Welcome to the Cooper Family. Was startin’ to think my Cayson would never find the woman of his dreams. I’m glad I was worryin’ about nothin’.”

Birdie grins, Isla’s fingers flex against my jeans, her eyes a little wide with surprise but she doesn’t look terrified by it. She seems.... happy. Just seeing that has all my worries vanishing into thin air.

“Hi, Mary-Lou. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Manners and she’s pretty,” mom whispers. “You did good, Case.”

I can’t help but grin at first my Mom and Dad on the screen, then turn to look at my girl.

“What were you sayin’ about City Hall?” Cap asks.

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Birdie looks our way. “Yeah, you two have kept us waitin’ long enough. Can we get back to the story? Or do you need a bit longer to stare all googly-eyed at each other again?”

Isla giggles, shaking her head before I turn back to the group. “OK, enough teasin’. Now where were we? Right, the initials we found on the tree trunk a while back. Remember those?”

“Yep. HC and MW right?” Mom replies.

“That’s them. Before we called, I’d just told everyone that we confirmed that HC—Henley Cooper, Gramp’s great grandfather—was married to MW aka. Marion Wilson,” I explain. “In the family tree we found, it just had Marion Abigail.”

“Oh wow,” Mom gasps. She’s fully invested in this story, just like I knew she would be.

“The records we found said they got married in the early 1900s in a small church on the outskirts of town. It seems to be around the same location as where the elementary school now sits if that helps.” Isla looks my way and I nod for her to continue.

“Henley and Marion lived here at Cooper Ranch with Henley’s two brothers.

All three of them enlisted in the army which left Marion on the mountain with two young sons.

Unfortunately, Henley tragically died in an accident, makin' Marion a widow. ”

Mom snuffles. “That poor woman. I can't imagine bein' so young and raisin' children on my own like that. She must've been so strong.”

“It seems that she found it hard to manage everythin' because she moved back home—her home—to the Wilson homestead on the other side of the mountain to lean on her own family for support.”

“OK. What has this got to do with Cooper Ranch? Was it left empty?” Sutton asks.

I nod at my twin. “This is where it gets a bit confusin'.

From what we could find with the property records, when Marion moved back to the homestead, she might've given the rights over to her father, Ricky.

Seems he was payin' the taxes and the like on this land for a good fifteen years after Henley's death. ”

“Wait,” Will says. ‘Why would Marion give the ranch to the Wilsons? What happened to Henley's brothers?’”

“He did. Both seem to have not returned from their military training. Their name never came back up in the town records and we couldn't find any marriage certificates, land deeds, or death records with their names attached,” I reply.

Isla shrugs. “We can only assume they didn't come back and settle in town.”

“I'm confused. Why would she give the land to the Wilsons when she had two Cooper sons? The land should've stayed in the family. Coopers have always looked after each other,” Cap says, re-entering the conversation.

“That’s another curious piece of the puzzle,” I say. “The only proof we could find of the ranch movin’ back into Cooper hands was when the taxes were suddenly being paid by one of Henley’s sons. That was—”

“My grandfather,” Cap answers for me.

I look around the table and nod. “Yeah, our great grandfather.”

Isla glances my way. “So there was never actually a Wilson on the deed for the ranch and the land at any time. No Wilson ever owned this land.”

A comfortable silence falls over the room.

“Couldn’t that just mean that Marion kept her married name after Henley’s death?” Mom asks.

“That’s what I think,” I tell her. “We don’t know if the Wilsons actually took over the land or just watched it for a while.”

Wyatt sighs, shaking his head. “Findin’ out this history is all well and good but am I the only one thinkin’ that we’re still no closer to figurin’ out why the Wilsons and the Coopers have beef.”

“Not necessarily,” Will replies. “It could be that because Henley passed, and Marion inherited all of his assets, the Wilsons felt they had a right to our land—or at least some of it. It sounds like Marion handed the ranch down to her sons, as Henley would’ve wanted it.

After that, it has always been in Cooper hands.

Just as Gramps has done by passin’ it on to us. ”

Sutton rubs his chin. “That actually makes sense.”

“ Although ,” Jude says, “if we want to get technical about it. Henley and Marion’s sons were Wilsons too. Which means—”

“We’ve got Wilson blood in us,” Dad announces over the line, screwing up his nose.

Birdie and Isla stare at each other in disbelief.

“We’re related to Old Man Wilson?” I say slowly. “Oh god.”

“Are we sure they don’t have any right to the land?” Will asks after a moment of stunned silence. “Because that would explain the bitterness Sully has toward us.”

He’s simply saying what we’re all thinking. We’ve just moved here and are settling in, having wrapped our heads around the fact that this land, the mountain, and the ranch are ours, and now this ?

“What did he say at the diner?” Jude says. “His family's been waitin' years and would keep waitin' till the universe rights the wrongs of the past.”

Isla gasps and I can see she’s having a lightbulb moment. “I got it! The Wilsons hate the Coopers because they think you stole their land. Even if it wasn’t theirs to have. It was Marion’s because she was Henley’s wife, but it was always meant for their sons, not the Wilsons.”

Birdie leans forward in her chair. “I bet she wanted to give them a piece of their father that they could hold on to forever. That’s so romantic.”

The heads of all the men at the table snap her way. “Romantic?” Will says, brows furrowed. “They had to grow up without a father, honey.”

She sighs. “Oh, I know that . I just meant she must’ve loved him so much that she wanted to continue his legacy on the mountain. I bet they’d heard the mountain’s Call too.”

I don’t miss the way Isla shakes her head and sighs, seemingly resigned to Birdie’s love of our Cooper family lore. If I wasn’t so sure that she was my soulmate and I was hers, I might be worried.

“OK. We might now know why the Wilsons don’t like us Coopers, but where do we go from here?” Cap asks, thinking out loud.

“You sure don’t move off that mountain, that’s for sure,” Mom says, sounding more determined than I’ve ever heard before.

“Not happenin’,” I answer firmly. “This is our home, our legacy. We’re makin’ it ours while hopefully makin’ Gramps proud.”

“I guess all we can do is wait to find more clues from him too. He wouldn’t have called us back to the ranch—to the mountain—without tellin’ us all we needed to know to stay here,” Will says, obviously reflecting on what Isla and I have found out together.

“When I read his journal, it was the story about how he and Grandma met, dated, and married. Maybe there’s been another record somewhere about how his parents met.

That’ll at least get us another generation closer. ”

“Good thinkin’, son,” Mom replies. “Riddles wouldn’t have rested until he’d uncovered the truth so I bet there’ll be more clues hidden around somewhere.

He wouldn’t have rested until he’d left all the answers you needed, and he had time to

do it since none of us knew he was sick.

This is such a Ridley Cooper thing to do. ”

“You’re right, my love,” Cap says, making me smile. “As always.”

Mom giggles. “You better believe it, Cap. OK. We won’t keep you any longer.

Enjoy your family meal and thanks for thinkin’ to include us.

” Mom looks to where Isla and I are sitting, shoulder to shoulder.

“And Isla, I can’t wait to meet you one day and share all of the wonderful things my son has told me about you. ”

“ Mooom... ” I groan while the rest of the family smirk and laugh under their breaths.

“Goodbye, Coopers—and soon-to-be Coopers—oh, and Wyatt too,” she finishes before the call disconnects and we’re all left sitting there in silence wondering what all of our discoveries mean.

“I guess we’ve just got to keep an eye out for more clues,” Sutton announces. “But until then, there’s still Corned Beef Hash left. Who’s up for seconds?”

ISLA

After dinner, Case and I join the others in the living room to watch a TV game show.

That's when I witnessed the true Cooper brother dynamic live in action. When I say they're competitive with a capital C, I'm not joking.

I thought Case and Sutton would team up against Will and Jude, but it ended up being Case and Wyatt versus Sutton and Will, with Jude and Birdie pairing up to take on all of them. I was supposed to be judging, but I was too busy laughing to concentrate on who was winning or losing.

It doesn't help that I'm distracted by what Sutton was saying earlier about the science of lust. Because I've been feeling all of the effects ever since the first time Case and I kissed at the drive-up movie.

It started with me thinking about him all the time—more than before, anyway.

Then I couldn't stop touching him whenever we were together.

After that kiss on Restaurant Row, I knew I was a goner.

The moment his lips touched mine for that second, longer, hotter, toe-curling kiss, I was ready to melt into him until we became one.

I've never felt like this before. Not about anyone.

I want to be with him all the time, even when I know we can't see each other—I do need to work, after all.

When I'm not with him, I think about seeing him.

Or just talking to him. Despite everything else I have to worry about, Case Cooper is all I can think about.

The problem is, I'm wondering if this is because it's all new and exciting. Is this the honeymoon phase? Or is it just because he's Case and it's been him ever since that night we met, and this is truly a sliding doors moment where we simply met before our time.

I can't talk to Birdie about it because she already thinks I'm living a fated mates plot straight out of one of her romance novels.

She's my best friend and I support her in everything—crazy beliefs and all.

Besides, look where her belief in soulmates being called to the mountain got her.

She's now living on the ranch with the love of her life and future husband.

But tellin' her I'm mildly obsessed with Case will only give more credence to her 'Call' theory.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Case asks as he drives down the mountain to take me home.

Just as he says that, I see the turn toward the lookout on the outskirts of town. Since it's Monday night, it'll be quiet, and I'm not quite ready for my time with Case tonight to end.

“Do you want to see somethin’?” I ask. “There’s a lookout down that road on the left. It’s a sight to behold at night when the sky is clear.”

A wry grin curves his lips. “You want to go to the town’s make-out spot with me? I have to tell you, beautiful, I’m not that kind of boy,” he teases.

I snort and shake my head. “That kiss you gave me earlier says differently, curious.”

His chest puffs up at that as he slows down and takes the turn, bringing the truck to a stop at the far end of the lookout a few moments later.

We sit there in comfortable silence, both staring out at the sparkling lights of the town in the distance. The shadow of the mountain range looks foreboding and comforting all at the same time.

Case runs his thumb over the back of my knuckles. “You’ve been quiet since we left the ranch, beautiful. Everythin’ OK?” he asks. “You worried about your Mom bein’ home alone?”

Turning to rest my cheek against the headrest, I take in his handsome profile. “She’s OK. I messaged her when we left City Hall, and then again once we’d finished dinner. She reheated a freezer meal I’d made a while ago and told me she was goin’ to watch a movie and have an early night.”

“That’s good,” he replies quietly.

“Yeah. She has good days and bad ones, and we learned early on that plannin’ ahead was better than tryin’ to play catch up. Because of that, we’ve got a bunch of meals in the freezer for times when I’m workin’ or won’t be home for dinner.”

“That makes sense. It’s always better to prepare for what’s comin’ than be left

chasin' your tail when it all goes to hell." His eyes roam my face. "What's got you so lost in thought then?"

"Lots of things," I say vaguely, then think better of it. "It's nothin'... everythin'... you know, just life. "

Mainly me thinking about how some things happen for a reason. People come, people go. Oh, and wondering why my hormones have been going crazy ever since I saw you again , I do not say.

"If you ever want to share nothin' and everythin'... anythin' , I hope you know I'm here. Been told I can be a good listener when needed."

I give his fingers a reassuring squeeze. The heat of his skin against mine is comforting and distracting. Teasing, too. "Now that I know already. Our talks are my favorite time of each day."

The slow-growing, hot-as-Hades smile he sends my way has me not wanting to think. Or maybe he's just scrambling my brain. "Mine too. It's always just so easy to talk to you. Since that first night. Before that, Sutton was the only one I could tell anythin' to."

"That makes sense. You two have been together your whole lives."

"Except when we were livin' on opposite sides of the country," he replies. "Although even then, we were always in contact. He was the one who realized it was more than just havin' low days. So five years ago, he made me fly to Boston and that's when I got the help I needed."

"Your diagnosis?" Case has been very honest about his Seasonal Affective Disorder, even on that first night we met.

He nods. “I thought it was a weakness at first. But with Sutt’s help—and my therapist I still see online now—I’ve realized that it’s just a part of who I am.

I’ve accepted it and through readin’ and experience, I recognize when a low is comin’ now.

Although they’ve gotten better since movin’ to the mountain. ”

“Really? I wonder why?”

He smiles. “You’d think movin’ to a town with limited daylight for months of the year and bein’ close to the Arctic Circle would make me spiral.

But there’s just somethin’ about bein’ at the ranch, bein’ on the mountain, that has changed things.

Now that I’ve cut all ties with my old life and resigned from my job too, I feel lighter. Freer. More...”

“Exactly where you’re meant to be?” I say, having wondered the same thing about myself lately. “Maybe it’s that mountain spirit Birdie talks about.”

Case’s eyes flash with something unreadable before it’s gone, replaced with a soft gaze. “She definitely has somethin’ to do with it.”

For a moment I swear I’ve misheard him. Was he talkin’ about Birdie, or the mountain spirit? He said ‘she’, right? Before I can ask about it, he continues.

“But seriously, I think it’s about bein’ here in Timber Falls and the mountain.

It’s where Gramps called home and where he wanted us to stay and reacquaint

ourselves with our family roots,” he explains before a wry smile appears.

“There’s also this beautiful stranger who has me thinkin’ about the future and what I want in my life. ”

Now that gets my attention. “Oh yeah? She must be pretty amazin’.”

He squeezes my hand again as he stares deep into my eyes. “She is.”

Suddenly the distance between us is like a chasm, one that’s too big. Undoing my seatbelt, I slide across the seat toward him, our hands still linked.

Case must feel the change in the air because he pulls me closer as if needing to touch me too, wanting me as close as I want to be with him.

Letting my hand go, he slides his onto my thigh, slowly riding it along my leg to my hip, his gaze tracking the move every step of the way.

My whole body vibrates, all of my lust and need for him bubbling to the surface as I trail my hand up his side to caress his shoulder, coming to a stop when the tips of my fingers graze teasingly over the bare skin of his neck.

Slowly lifting my gaze to his, my pulse spikes and my blood heats, my tongue darting out to wet my lips as Case’s eyes drop to my mouth.

“I remember you promisin’ a goodbye. Remember that, curious?” I rasp, my voice a rough whisper that gives me away.

His breath is warm on my skin as he leans in, pressing his lips ever so gently against mine, a tentative touch at belies the raging swirl of desperate need filling me.

I whimper when he pulls back, his dark hooded eyes blazing as they meet mine. We stay there frozen in time before somethin' snaps, an inferno ignites, and we crash together in a passionate kiss.

The world around us fades away. All that exists—all that matters—is the two of us and this unbreakable connection we've had since we met. If this was my last day, last minute, last act on earth, I'd go a happy woman. And all we've done is kiss. Imagine if we—

That thought stutters as Case smooths his hand from my hip, up my body until his palm cradles my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek as he deepens our kiss, groaning into my mouth as I melt against him and just feel .

When the need for oxygen finally tears us apart, I press my forehead to his as we both try to catch our breath. Eyes still locked together, I can see all of the unspoken emotions swirling in Case's eyes. Ones that mirror my own.

I want more, though. I need it more than my next breath.

"I..." I say, my voice barely above a whisper as I search for the right words to even come close to conveying my feelings.

Before I can form a coherent sentence, Case scans my face before crashing his lips to mine in another searing, breathtaking kiss that ramps my need higher and leaves me wanting more than this. More than anything.

A groan against my mouth later, then he's moving, reaching down before shifting his seat back, giving us more room. Then he pulls me into his lap, one hand staying on my jaw while he wraps an arm around my back, holding me close, not letting me go.

As if on instinct my hips roll against his, dragging a low barely heard growl out of his

throat that sets my body on fire. “Please,” I beg against his lips. “Case, I—”

“I got you, beautiful. You’re safe with me,” he murmurs, his hand sliding down to rest on the small of my back.

He slides it lower again, pressing in, rocking our hips together, his hard length trapped between us putting the perfect amount of pressure between my legs.

And all the while, we never stop kissing, tasting, breathing each other in like we’re the only air we need to survive.

Resting my palm over his chest, I marvel at the heavy pounding of his heart against my skin as it beats in sync with mine.

The intensity of the moment and the raw desire between us is palpable. The sounds of our labored breathing, moans and whimpers, groans and growls fill the air. It’s primal, heated, and like it’s no longer in our control.

Case lifts his head, watching me before his eyes drop down to where our hips move together. The fire in his eyes has me biting my lip, my breath catching as the tell-tale ache deep inside of me urges me closer and closer to climax.

Case doesn’t miss it, his gaze turning from hot and heated to blazing, filled with a hunger that rivals my own. Then there’s no holding back as we touch, grind, kiss, and taste. Both chasing that ultimate high.

My body tenses, the coil inside me winding tighter and tighter until I cry his name out into his mouth, my release hitting me like a freight train.

His own high closely follows mine. His body shudders as he buries his face in my neck and peppers my skin with barely-there kisses that slowly bring me back down to

earth right along with him.

We stay like that for a long time, our breaths ragged but slowly calming, our hearts pounding in sync.

I feel his pulse against my lips as I rest my head on his shoulder and press them to his throat.

Not wanting to move, I cling to him, smiling at his knowing chuckle while a wave of contentment washes over me.

Brushing a stray strand of hair away from my face, he locks his eyes with mine and kisses me again. This time it's soft and slow. Lazy. Soothing.

"Wow," he whispers, a small smile playing on his lips. "Definitely amazin'." He peppers my jaw with kisses. "Beautiful." Kiss. "Sexy." Kiss. "The best thing to ever happen to me."

I pull back and arch a brow. "Me or what just happened," I ask with a small smirk.

"Both."

Then it hits me. This is it. That moment a girl always dreams of, when she realizes everything she has ever wanted is right there in front of her.

Case. This. Us. It's everything I've ever dreamed of. A kind, honest, caring man who makes me swoon with a single smile and melt at first touch. Who kisses me like he wants to do it for the rest of his life. What I realize then is that Case isn't the only one who wants that. I do too.

CASE

“And that –” Will says, making a show out of drilling the last screw into a heated towel rail in the cabin bathroom, “is it. Cabin number one is done.”

Me and Wyatt move out into the living space with Will following behind us. We all have huge grins on our faces because we can now officially say that we’ve finished one of the four cabins we’ll be renovating and repairing on the ranch.

Originally, the plan was for Wyatt to move into this cabin and for us to move on to cabin number two which would be for guests.

However, Wyatt has made it clear he’s happy staying in the ranch house with everyone, which means we can open up the gates—so to speak—to at least one ranch-stay guest or a couple.

When we first started the work on this building, we thought that only a complete refit would do. That’s why we took the cabin back to the bare bones built by Gramps decades ago and then methodically put the cabin together again, this time with modern fittings and an adjusted layout.

Part of that was to create an open-plan living space to take up half the floor size. There’s a small lounge area as you walk through the door and a full but compact kitchen at the rear.

There’s also an L-shaped counter, the front part serving double duty as a dining area. On the opposite wall to the kitchen cabinets we split the area in two for a small

pantry/food store as well as a dedicated laundry space that we've hidden behind a sliding door.

Off the main room on the right-hand side is a door leading through to a good-sized master bedroom with windows facing toward the mountain ridge.

The ensuite bathroom with the newly installed towel rail, shower, vanity, basin, and mirror with storage cabinet behind it completes the cabin's amenities.

Our aim was to create accommodations that would cater to everyone and provide everything our future guests might want and need. Looking around the room, I think we've accomplished that.

"You know the only thing that's missin' now?" Wyatt says, looking around the room.

"Furniture," Will and I say together.

Wyatt smirks. "Yep. Think our guests are goin' to love the place, but they might expect a bed... maybe a small couch."

"I've been thinkin' about that." I turn to Will. "Remember all of the things me, Jude, and Sutt left in storage at Mom and Cap's? A lot of it would fit into these cabins once they're all done. I was thinkin' we could take a day or two and head to Anchorage to pick it up and bring it home."

I don't miss the way Will's eyes crinkle at the side when I call the ranch home. "And what we don't have but still need, we can order from the furniture shop in town."

My brother nods. "That's a good idea. Saves buyin' everythin' brand new and reuses old stuff. There's just one problem."

I cock my head with a frown. “What’s that?”

“How were you plannin’ on transportin’ the furniture back here when we don’t have a trailer? There’s only so much you can pack onto a truck bed.”

Wyatt’s eyes light up. “Eagle has a few trailers and not just stock ones. They’ve got a horse float or two, maybe even a furniture mover. We could give Randy a call and ask if we can borrow it. I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

Will nods approvingly. “That’s a real good idea, Wy. You want to call them?”

“Sure, Boss.”

“Will, Wy.”

“Boss sounds better. Rolls off the tongue,” he says, cheekily and I can’t help but smirk.

“Damn kids these days,” I make a show of muttering like a grumpy old man.

“Hey, I’m eighteen, that’s an adult.”

“And yet, while you can vote, join the military, buy and sell a house or a lease, you can’t drink,” I shoot back. “What you can do is call your Dad and see if he’s up for you visitin’ for a few days. We can pass through Spring Haven to drop you off and pick you up on the way back if you want to.”

The kid’s gaze brightens and I know I’ve done good. A side-glance Will’s way shows I have his approval too. “We’re due to get those cattle from your Dad next week anyway. If you’re worried about not workin’, you could always tell them we’ve sent you on ahead to ‘inspect’ the merchandise.”

Wyatt barks out a laugh. “Right. Bet Dad and Rhett would love that.”

“Exactly why I suggested it.” Will winks. “They were comin’ next week anyway. You could hitch a ride to Bull with Case and Sutt, and then just come back with Red and Rhett when they deliver the stock.”

There’s no mistaking how much Wyatt likes that idea. “That’d be OK with you? I don’t want to leave y’all shorthanded.”

Will pins him with a stare. “Wouldn’t have suggested it otherwise, Wy. You’ve been workin’ hard. If Case and Sutt head to Anchorage next week for a few days, that still leaves me, Judd, and Birdie. I’m sure the ranch won’t go to hell if y’all are not here for a few days.”

As expected, Wyatt doesn’t even need time to think about it. “OK. Yes. Thank you. I love it here, don’t get me wrong. But Bull Mountain is—”

“Home. Yeah, Wy. We get it,” I say. “Now go call Randy for us and let us know what he says.”

“On it.” Then he’s gone, heading to the main house to call Eagle Mountain.

Will looks around the cabin. “You think Gramps would like what we’re doin’?”

“He would, because we did it ourselves and I haven’t turned the whole place into a smart house,” I say with a smirk.

“We’re using solar on the roof, so that’s renewable energy, and we tried to reuse and recycle as much as we could while buildin’.

I say Gramps would be impressed. Hell, even my satellite on the side of the ridge

isn't too obtrusive. ”

My brother smirks. “Still think he'd be rollin' in his grave over that .”

I snort. “Me too. But the ranch can't live in the dark ages forever.”

“True. Still funny to think about what he'd say about it.”

“The only problem with the dish is Grumps usin' it as a scratchin' post,” I grumble.

Will's eyes jump wide. “I thought you and Wy put a fence around it to stop him?”

“Didn't make a lick of difference. The internet dropped out this mornin' when you and Wy were finishin' up in here. I went up to investigate and low and behold, guess what I found up the hill?”

“A very happy donkey?”

“Yep. The jackass was smilin' and brayin' at me like he was proud of what he'd done. He was even standin' on the fence just to add insult to injury.”

“That animal,” Will says, shaking his head with a smile, “he sure keeps things interestin' round here.” He falls quiet for a spell and I almost think we've finished our conversation. “Speakin' of smilin'. You and Iz, it's been a few months now. Things still good?”

There's no stoppin' the grin that takes over my face. “Oh yeah. Apart from the fact she's busier than a squirrel preparin' for hibernation, I don't think I've ever been this happy.”

“The Call's good like that.”

I hesitate for a moment and Will doesn't miss it. "What?"

"Isla doesn't believe in the Call."

"Birdie told me about that, but I figured she might've changed her mind. She was by Birdie's side as we were hearin' the Call. How can she dismiss it when she saw it happenin' in real time with us?"

I shake my head. "She supports Birdie thinkin' it's true but doesn't believe that it could happen over and over again. It's like you two are the exception."

Will lets that sink in for a moment. "Interestin'."

"What I feel for her—the way she makes me feel—is not like anythin' I've ever experienced before.

It's like I crave her—bein' near her, kissin' her, touchin' her.

"Will waggles his brows and I jerk my head from side to side.

"No, I don't just mean like that. I wake up smilin' just thinkin' about her and count down the minutes until I can see and talk to her again."

"That doesn't sound like a problem, Case. It's how I think it's meant to be."

"You sayin' it was like this for you?" I ask.

A slow growing smirk takes over his face.

"Oh yeah." His laugh is warm and knowing.

“But remember, it was me who didn’t connect the dots.

It didn’t click until I read the books. Then we went to Moose Mountain and there was no denyin’ it.

I just didn’t know if she was feelin’ it too.

More fool me because Birdie had known all along. ”

“Well, I guess you can say it all worked out since you’re plannin’ a weddin’ and doin’ it with the perfect ‘best man’ standin’ by your side.”

His lips twitch. “Perfect, you say? But I asked you, not Sutton.”

My mouth drops open. “Damn, Will. That hurts.” I feign hurt but my big brother sees right through me.

“Gotta keep you on your toes. By the way, you still haven’t said whether you’re goin’ to talk to Iz about the Call.”

“I don’t know how to. I don’t even know if it will change anythin’ or whether I even need to. Especially when we’re both fallin’ hard already?”

Will’s eyes widen with understanding, when he speaks next his voice is softer. “You should tell her, Case. What about the heart palpitations, the sweaty palms, the hot flushes? All of those physical things that would have us thinkin’ we were gettin’ sick if we didn’t know any better.”

“When you put it like that, it sounds more like menopause than the Call,” I joke.

A startled laugh bubbles out of him. “OK, let me put it another way. What if she’s

thinkin' there's somethin' wrong with her when really, it's just her body, her heart, and her soul recognizin' its true love."

It hits me then that he's right. The last thing I'd ever want is for Isla to question our connection and how good we are together.

"I don't want her to think I'm crazy when I tell her that we were meant to see each other again. She gave me direction when I was feelin' aimless. She gave me?—"

"Hope? A jolt that made you feel more alive than you ever had before? A purpose? Because that's what Birdie gives me every day and you know as well as I do, it's the best damn thing in the world.

Nope, our Ones are the best damn things to ever happen to us.

" He stares at me intently, showing that he's speaking from the heart.

"If she feels the same as you—as deeply as you do—then she won't blink an eye when you tell her you're soulmates. "

"She does feel it. I know she does because she shows me with everythin' she does. Simply by the way we can't stop touchin' each other." Will slowly lifts a single brow, his lips twitching when I roll my eyes.

"Not like that," I muse. "I know we're on this journey together and there's zero doubt in my mind that Isla is my One. She's the only woman I want a future with."

"What if I put it another way? If Isla Murray thinks you're crazy, then she'll have to think the same about me and Birdie."

I cock my head, lips twitching as I do it. "You sure you're not?"

A knowing smirk appears. “From your mouth to God’s ears, brother”

“If Birdie hadn’t made us read Aster’s books, I’m not sure I would believe you either. Maybe there’s somethin’ to be said for promotion’ some light readin’ if you want people to believe...” I ponder out loud.

“You think it gives people hope that their One is out there too?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. It worked for me.”

“Hell, if I’m crazy, then we all are. Generations of Coopers have been rewarded with their Ones, it just happens to be our family tree branch gettin’ their turn this time around.”

I fall quiet, thinking about the pros and cons of telling Isla. “I’ve been more open with her than I’ve ever been with anyone else other than all of you, so not tellin’ her just feels...”

“Wrong?” Will says, finishing my train of thought.

He steps closer and cups my shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I say you should trust your gut.

Only you can know when it is the right time to tell her.

Maybe you should do it before you leave on your trip.

At least that will give her time to think about it and process it without you bein’ here to muddle her brain. ”

“That’s... a good idea,” I reply.

Will snorts. “I have been known to have some of those occasionally.”

“Thanks for listenin’ and lettin’ me talk it out. I really appreciate it.”

“What are big brothers for? Besides, how can you be my best ‘best man’ if you’re too busy thinkin’ about the Call and not plannin’ my bachelor’s party,” he muses.

“Wait... I have to plan that too ?”

He stares at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Case, your responsibilities are to get me to the weddin’ on time, keep the rings safe until the celebrant asks for them, and give my bachelor life the send-off it deserves. It’s pretty easy really.”

“You’re tellin’ me all I have to do is put you to bed early the night before the weddin’ like the old man rancher you now are? Right. Got it.”

Will glares at me half-heartedly before chuckling. “You’ll keep. Just wait till it’s your turn.”

The thing is, I can’t wait until it’s my turn. Because every time I imagine my wedding, all I see is Isla walking down the aisle toward me. As long as that happens, that’s all that matters.

“Ah, now that got you smilin’,” he replies.

I shrug. “The Call’s a powerful thing. It makes you reevaluate what’s important. You know?”

He claps my shoulder. “Oh yeah, brother. Just you wait.”

My head jerks. “What do you mean?”

A wicked grin appears on Will's face. "You'll find out. You think you're obsessed with her now? You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

ISLA

Pulling into my driveway after a long day at the hospital, I'm pleasantly surprised to find Case's truck parked to the side.

Case and I had planned for him to come down the mountain to have dinner with me and Mom since he's leaving for Anchorage in the morning.

But since it's only four, I wasn't expecting him to be here yet. Not that I'm complaining.

I'm met with silence when I walk into the house. That's until I hear Mom's peel of laughter through the open kitchen window.

Following the sound, I step outside, coming to a standstill as I take in the scene.

Mom is sitting in a deck chair with a wine glass filled with iced tea in her hand. On top of her head is a big wide-brimmed hat, making her look like she's a lady of leisure overseeing her very handsome gardener.

Who just happens to be my handsome boyfriend, grinning over his shoulder at Mom from where he's kneeling on the ground and pulling out weeds.

"Oh, Lala. You're home," Mom beams when she sees me. "Look who's here."

I shoot her a smirk. "You corrallin' Cooper men to do your biddin' now, Mom?"

She shrugs. “Just your Cooper man, sweetheart. Case turned up early and offered to spend time with me in the garden. I did tell him he didn’t need to do anythin’.”

My gaze swings to Case who just mimics Mom’s shrug. “I was here and wanted to help. I will say though, you didn’t tell me how particular Jessica is about her plants.”

“Believe me,” I laugh, “had I known you’d be gardenin’, I would’ve warned you.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Mom replies, making Case and I grin at each other.

Brushing his hands on one of Mom’s aprons he seemingly commandeered, he stands and moves toward me. But he doesn’t come empty-handed, a single Forget Me Not stem is pinched between his fingers.

“Hey, beautiful,” he says softly, sliding a hand over my hip before leaning in for a far-too-brief gentle kiss that leaves my lips tingling when he pulls away.

I nod to the flower bed. “You know you didn’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind. Especially if it helps you two out. You’ve been workin’ all day and it’s good seein’ your Mom smile. I also figured you’d get time to relax and get ready for dinner without needin’ to rush.”

I marvel at how this man is real. He’s thoughtful and kind. He turned up early to see Mom and didn’t hesitate to do something to put a smile on her face when he saw she was having a bad day.

Staring into his eyes, it hits me that my thinking has changed. My life is no longer split into before Mom’s diagnosis and after. There’s another important distinction now—before loving Case and now.

My heart stops dead in my chest as the realization hits me. I love him—like to the depth of my soul in love with him. And by the look on his face, his soft and gentle expression that has my very being drawing close to him, the feeling is one hundred percent mutual.

“You OK, Lala?” Mom asks. Her head is cocked to the side, her wine glass with iced tea in it still perched in her hand but now she has her pinky flicked out to the side.

The scene is still so surreal to me, and on top of the other momentous discovery that just rocked my world, I giggle. Then snort, covering my mouth with my hand to stop myself, but to no avail. Soon I’m just laughing for no reason.

Case eyes me curiously, which just makes me snicker all over again. It’s that look that probably made me fall in love with him all those months ago anyway. My curious stranger. I can’t believe I thought he was an accountant!

“I think she’s lost it,” Mom muses with a chuckle of her own.

Wrapping an arm around my waist, Case pulls me into his side and brushes his lips against my temple. “That smile will get you anythin’ and everythin’ from me, beautiful,” he murmurs for my ears only. “Every. single. time.

I tilt my head back to meet his amused eyes. “Anythin’?” I ask, arching a brow before dropping my voice to a low whisper. “Everythin’?”

His devilish grin is all the answer I need. He dips his head and touches his mouth to mine. “Oh yeah.”

Mom sniffs, wiping her eyes. “Seein’ you two together like that, so happy and taken with each other, makes this old mom very happy.”

“Mom!” I say, shaking my head. “You’re not old!”

She waves me off, flipping the brim of her ridiculously pompous hat and raising her glass as if to toast. “You, my child, are—and always will be—my favorite.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m your only child, Mom. I have to be your favorite.”

“Pfft. Not at all. You could be an absolute terror. You never know your luck with kids.” She winks at Case whose answering laugh vibrates from his body to mine in the best possible way. “You two lovebirds go on in and get ready for your date. I’ll tidy up.”

“Aren’t you comin’ to dinner? We weren’t goin’ to be out late.”

A knowing smile curves her lips. “I’ve never liked bein’ a third wheel, sweetheart. So as much as I love y’all, I think I have a date with that TV show about farmers tryin’ to find a wife.”

“You sure, Jessica? We’d love you to join us. You’re always welcome.”

Mom’s eyes crinkle at the sides. “You’re a good man, Case Cooper.”

Case grins, almost preening before glancing down at me. “You heard her, beautiful. Your mom thinks I’m a good man.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “Like you don’t know that already. Sheesh. Mom’s your biggest fan. You took her wildflower pickin’ and weeded her garden. If she believed in arranged marriages, we’d be talkin’ dowries, not dinners.”

Case sneaks a glance Mom’s way. “Dowries you say? What’re we talkin’ here? A few goats? Kitchenware? A servant?”

She points between the two of them like they're negotiating a secret deal. "We'll talk, yeah?" Mom winks. "But don't let me keep y'all. I can clean up out here."

Case clicks his tongue. "Sorry, Jessica. There ain't no way I'm leavin' a mess for my girlfriend's mom to clean up. My mother would be mortified." Girlfriend... swoon . Seriously, is there anything better than a man claiming you in front of your mother ?

"Well, if you insist," Mom replies, sounding just as affected as I am.

"Good," he says, grinning proudly. "Gotta keep the Murray women happy and looked after."

Not for the first time where Case is involved, I swear that hearts shoot from my mother's eyes when he says that. I can't blame her though, mainly because I'm sure I do the same thing every time I look at the man too.

"Did your Mom seem OK to you?" Case asks as he helps me out of the passenger seat of his truck.

I step onto the sidewalk as he closes the door. "What do you mean?"

"When I arrived, she seemed a bit... low. Like how I get. I know the cause of my moods most of the time, but I don't know your mom as well as you do." He laces his fingers with mine. "I just wanted to put a smile back on her face. I hope you didn't mind me?—"

I can't take him being so damn perfect anymore. I lift on my toes and crush my mouth to his, sliding my hands up into his hair, holding on as I pour everything I'm feeling into a far from appropriate kiss outside the diner.

He rubs his hands over my back as we slowly—reluctantly—ease ourselves apart.

“Not that I’m complainin’, but what was that for?”

“You’re too good. Too perfect.”

He nudges my nose with his as he stares deep. “As long as I’m perfect for you, that’s all I care about.”

“Ugh! See!” I throw my hands in the air. “Perfect.”

His gaze is full of amusement as he leans in for another kiss. I almost fall under his swoony, handsome, perfect spell before I manage to step back and narrow my eyes. “If we kiss again, I’m goin’ to get a reputation for neckin’ with my boyfriend on Restaurant Row.”

His lips curve into a smirk. “And?”

“And...” I can’t think of a response to that when he’s standing there looking all... Case-like. “And I’m hungry. I worked all day and haven’t eaten since lunch.”

“Better get my girl fed then,” he says, resting a hand on the small of my back and leading me toward the diner.

The familiar sound of clinking plates and chatter washes over us the moment we step inside.

Mack greets us with a warm smile, gesturing to a booth near the window. “Hey there, you two. Here for dinner?”

“You know I love your food, Mack,” I say as Case takes the offered menus from the man and leads me toward a booth. “Can we start with a couple of root beers?” Mack salutes us by way of an answer.

I slide in first with Case following after me, both of us sitting on the same side which has become our way on our dinner dates.

With work and Mom and the ranch taking up a lot of our time, we've made it a point to carve out moments like this where we can just connect. I like them so much I've found myself looking forward to them just as much as our nightly phone calls.

"So," Case starts after handing me a menu. "Do you know what you want to order tonight?"

I side-eye him. "You make it sound like I'm an Icebox Diner connoisseur."

"Nope. I have noticed you like tryin' somethin' different every time though. You haven't ordered the same meal twice in a row yet."

I cock my head, watching him curiously. "You really do pay attention, don't you?"

He leans over and runs the tip of his finger down the side of my face. "To you? Always. You captivate me, beautiful. Always have."

Melting into him, I tip my head and brush my lips over his, smiling wide while I do it. "No wonder I let you drag me to your hotel room that night. You sure know how to win a girl over, Case Cooper."

His eyes widen and he pulls back, his expression one of amused surprise. "I dragged you, did I?"

Straightening in my seat, I return my attention to the menu. "Yep. Totally."

Case's deep chuckle vibrates through me. "Well, if that's how you remember it," he teases, nudging my shoulder with his.

I glance over at him, the warmth spreading through me having nothing to do with the temperature inside and everything to do with him.

“Best decision I ever made,” he says but I can see in his eyes that there’s something more he wants to say.

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Before I get the chance to ask him about it, our waitress appears with our drinks and takes our order. By the time she leaves again, the moment has passed.

“How was your day?” I ask before sipping on my straw.

“Good. We sat down and worked out exactly what we need for the cabins, and ordered more buildin’ materials we’ll need for the next one. And I started workin’ on the website for farm stay bookin’s.”

“Wow. And you still found time to make Mom’s day,” I reply. “I really appreciate you doin’ that. Sometimes the reality of her disease and what the future holds can get her down.”

“That’s understandable. I can’t imagine livin’ with a degenerative disease like that.

I struggled a lot with my depression when I got diagnosed and I’d been experiencin’ it for years by then.

But as soon as I decided to seek treatment and found a great therapist to see, I felt more in control of things. ”

“Yeah. She tries to put on a brave face but I know her too well not to see through it,” I explain.

“It was hard when she finally admitted that her symptoms were gettin’ worse.

Though once I moved back here, we came to an understandin’.

I wouldn't pry, but I wouldn't ignore things I knew I could help with. ”

“Like takin’ her to the meadow for wildflowers,” he notes.

“Yep. And today, you spendin’ time with her in her garden. That’s another one of her favorite things to do. It always puts a smile on her face.”

He reaches over for my hand and lifts it to kiss my knuckles. “It was my pleasure. She’s a good woman who’s raised a spectacular one that I happen to like a whole damn lot.” My heart swells.

“I like you too. More than a whole damn lot,” I repeat with a wry smile.

His brows arch. “Does that mean it’s a competition now? Who likes who the most?” His eyes drop down to my mouth as his voice turns husky. “Not sure you’re goin’ to win this one.”

I tilt my head and bounce my shoulder. “We might just have to see about that.”

From the look in his eyes, I can tell he’s about to give me one of his world-changing, toe-curling kisses that will leave me breathless and make me forget everything but him.

Unfortunately, that’s when the waitress chooses to deliver our meals to the table—an open hot beef sandwich with mash, green beans, and gravy for Case, and the same for me but with fried chicken.

While we eat, we talk about his trip to Anchorage and the stops he’s planning to make along the way to Kinleyville, where Eagle Mountain Ranch is situated, and Spring Haven, where Wyatt calls home.

Once we're finished, Case excuses himself to take care of the bill. I watch him chat with Mack, making the old man laugh and look over my way. When he comes back to our table to collect me, there's a closed white takeout container in his hand and a knowing smile on his face.

As soon as we're back in the truck, I try to sneak a peek but he thwarts me. "Nuh uh, beautiful. That's dessert."

"Dessert? Did you get us some of Mack's Strawberry, Ginger, and Honey pie?" I ask hopefully.

He starts the truck and checks the road before pulling out from the sidewalk. "I guess you'll just have to wait and see."

"Oh, I will. Will I?"

"Let me have this one, beautiful. I promise you'll like it." His voice is as smooth as gooey caramel and there's no way I can deny him. Something Case knows—and will probably use to his advantage in the future—if his knowing smile and crinkled eyes are anything to go by.

He drives to the end of Restaurant Row and takes a left, heading towards my house. I make a point of checking the time on the dashboard. "Look at you, gettin' me home before curfew. Mom will be pleased."

A laugh escapes him. "Considerin' she told me I didn't have to bring you home tonight on her account, I think she'll be surprised you're comin' home at all."

My head snaps his way. "Tell me she didn't..."

He mimics locking his mouth shut and I groan.

Five minutes later, Case pulls into my driveway and turns off the engine.

I turn in my seat, leaning my back against the door and waggling my brows. “Part of me was hopin’ you’d take me to the lookout again to fool around.”

“Don’t need to take you anywhere to do that, beautiful. Anywhere and everywhere is fine with me,” he says with a slow-growing smile. “But you’ve got an early shift tomorrow and Sutt and I are hittin’ the road at dawn, so I figured we should behave ourselves.”

“How very adult of you,” I tease.

His eyes darken and they drop to my mouth. “Doesn’t mean I’m not now rethinkin’ my decision.”

I reach out for his hand, loving the way his fingers slot perfectly in between mine.

After a spell of perfectly companionable silence, a resigned sigh escapes him. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“You better be plannin’ a memorable kiss goodnight, curious. Enough to tide me over for the next few days you’ll be gone.”

His brow arches. “Don’t I always?”

“Hmm. Yes, you’ve got me there,” I reply, making him laugh. He gives me a quick peck on the cheek before letting me go and getting out. He quickly grabs the pie and a book from the backseat before leading me up the path to the porch.

I nod to his hand when we come to a stop on the doorstep. “Do I finally get to know what you got at the diner for us?”

“First, there’s the pie. Two pieces, enough for you and Jessica,” he says. My heart flips at his thoughtfulness as he hands over the white container.

My eyes move from the dessert to his handsome face. “Thank you. She loves Mack’s pies.”

“I know,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. “She told me.”

I groan then giggle, dropping my head onto his chest as I do it. “That woman, I swear...”

With his spare hand, he rubs my back. “If it puts a smile on her face in the mornin’, it’s worth it.”

Resting a hand over his heart, I stare up at him, my pulse matching the rhythm of his. I love you, I say in my head, the words sitting right there on the tip of my tongue.

“She’ll love it,” I reply instead.

“Happy mom, happy daughter.” He dips his head, brushing his lips over mine before shifting back. Before he can do that, I cup his jaw in both my hands and pull his mouth back to mine, drawing him in for a real goodbye kiss. It’s soft and slow, full of those three words I can’t quite say yet.

I melt against him when he groans into my mouth, his arm around my back tightening, holding me close as our connection sparks a wildfire between us.

By the time we finally tear ourselves away from each other, his heart is pounding and mine is beating so fast I’m starting to feel a little woozy.

He rests his forehead on mine as we both suck in some much-needed air. “Think

that'll keep you goin' till I'm back?"

"Definitely," I breathe.

He steps back and rests a hand on my hip. "I'm goin' to miss you while I'm gone. I hope you know that, beautiful."

I can't help but smile. "The feelin's mutual, believe me." He gives me a gentle squeeze before his expression changes. Suddenly, he seems nervous and unsure. "What is it?"

He stares down at the book in his hand back up to me. "I wanted to give you this to read."

Taking it from him, I stare at the cover, recognizing it as one of Aster Hollingsworth's romance books. "Is this Birdie's copy?"

He nods, worrying his lip between his teeth. What's going on? "Our connection—us meetin' then findin' each other again—it's changed my life, Isla. I want you to know that."

"Mine too," I say, flexing my fingers against his chest. "I can't even imagine a day goin' by without seein' you or at least talkin' to you. I don't want to." I also just realized I love you... so there's that.

His lips tug up on the side and the tension in his shoulders eases. "Me too. It's more than that to me. I truly believe that we were meant to meet again."

I don't try to hide my confusion at the turn in conversation. Why is he tellin' me this? Why now? "Is that why you want me to read it?"

“Yeah. I think—I mean...” He rubs the back of his neck, a move I’ve come to discover is a tell for him when he’s nervous or unsure. “You know how Birdie believes in the mountain’s Call from Aster’s book?”

That’s the last thing I expected him to say.

“Yeah. She loves those books and she’s a hopeless romantic.

I love that about her, always have. Don’t get me wrong I believe in soulmates just as much as the next person but a mountain bringing them together as a reward?

” I shake my head. “Not sure I’ll ever believe that . ”

I don’t expect the amused grin he sends me as he slides his hand into mine again.

“Do you trust me, beautiful?” he asks. Suddenly I’m taken back to the night we met when I posed the same question over pecan pie. “ Do you trust me, curious?”

“Always have.” Always will .

He locks eyes with mine. “Think about the series of events that somehow led us back to each other. Because Isla, I know you’re it for me.

There’s no one else that’s made me feel like this.

Never has been and never will be.” I melt into a puddle of goo on the floor—in my mind, anyway.

“I’d love it if you’d humor me and read this book. It’s helped me a lot.”

“About romance? Believe me, you’re a perfect boyfriend already, curious.”

He shakes his head with a laugh. "I meant it helped me understand the Call."

I frown. "Wait. You've read this book?"

"I've read all of them." He grins. "They're kind of addictive once you get started."

I stare at him with wonder. "And I thought I already knew everythin' about you."

He smiles. "Now you do."

Seeing how open and unshuttered his gaze is, I know I can't deny him. Not when he really seems to want this. "OK. I'll do it. For you. Doesn't mean I believe it's real though."

Case shakes his head. "That's OK, beautiful. But don't just read it for me, read it for you too."

"And then what?" I ask.

He leans in close, rubbing his nose along mine before touching his lips to mine once more.

"Then we'll see if you change your mind and believe in it as much as I do.

" He shifts back so he can look me straight in the eye.

Then he succeeds in leaving me speechless.

"Because you're my One, beautiful. I know it.

The mountain knows it. And soon, I hope you will too. "

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

CASE

The drive to Anchorage has been long but good so far. Sutt and I have been taking turns driving.

Along the way, I've been sending photos and updates of our trip to Isla, wanting to share with her the sights of the trip through my eyes. Most importantly, a photo of the infamous 'Duck Norris' who lives at Bull Mountain Ranch.

Isla: Aww the poor thing. He only has one leg.

Case: He's also cross-eyed. But here's the thing, he's a menace.

Isla: He's far too cute to be causing trouble. Look at him. That duck wouldn't hurt a fly.

Case: He wouldn't hurt it. From what I hear, he'd probably catch and release it just so he could catch it again. Wyatt says he has a reputation for stealing baked goods.

Isla: You're joking! He's a thieving menace duck, too? That's awesome. Maybe you need some birds up the mountain too.

Case: I think Chickens are in our future, not a duck though. Not if it turns out like this one.

Isla: Chickens could be fun. Fresh eggs. Baby chicks. Keep it up and soon you might have a petting zoo and a Christmas tree farm.

Case: Funny you say that. Duck Norris has his own pack of animals forming too. He has a goat, a dog, and a pig so far.

Isla: Why am I imagining that group of misfits and laughing?

Case: Because they're the most unassuming bunch until you hear the stories about their antics.

Isla: Are you disappointed that you only have Grumps the donkey and not your own bunch of misfit animals?

Case: Ah no. Grumps is enough of a handful right now.

Isla: Are you back on the road now?

Case: Yeah. We're an hour or so outside of Anchorage. Just had a pit stop at a gas station off the Glenn Highway and swapped over so Sutt could drive the last stint.

Isla: I bet you can't wait to see your parents in person again.

Case: Cap is out at sea, but Mom's cooking Kodiak Casserole for us.

Isla: Aww she's cooking your favorite home-cooked dinner.

Case: Of course, you remember that. I hope you know that there's nothing you don't know about me now.

She doesn't reply straight away, and I know it'll be because of our conversation on her doorstep about the Call.

Sutt nods down at my phone. "Everythin' OK?"

“I hope so,” I say quizzically.

His brows dip. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“I told Isla about the Call at the end of our date the other night.”

Pride fills my twin’s eyes. “That’s good, Case. I knew you would eventually, but I know you’ve been worried about it.”

“Not worried, per se,” I shoot back, earning a brow arch for my troubles. “OK, maybe a little. I just couldn’t leave town without her knowin’ how I feel about her. How she’s—.”

“Your One?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “A part of me knew there was somethin’ special between us when we met, but since I thought we wouldn’t see each other again, I didn’t let myself feel it.

Then there she was, sittin’ on a stool at the Lair and since then, I’ve felt it more and more.

There’s no doubt in my mind, Sutt. Our paths were meant to cross. ”

“Why are you worried? Did she not take it well?”

“I asked her to read one of Aster’s books.”

His head jerks. “You think that’ll work?”

“Worked for us, didn’t it?” I shoot back. “The thing is, not once have I been scared

about the depth of my feelin's for Isla. In my soul, I know she's mine and I'm hers. I don't even see anyone else anymore. It's just her, always her."

I absentmindedly rub the back of my neck, my muscles tight and sore for some reason. To be honest, they've been that way ever since we left Timber Falls.

Sutton's gaze narrows on my arm before returning to the road. "Do you realize that your last low was before we went to Moose Mountain?"

"You keepin' track, Sutt?" I tease.

"Always have, always will where you're concerned, Case."

"You know you can just ask me how I'm doin', right?"

He chuckles. "Yeah, but I don't want to be that person who's always askin'.

That gets annoyin'. You're a responsible adult and you still have your online therapy sessions.

" He shoots me a side glance before returning his eyes to the road.

"That's not what I was gettin' at. I'm wonderin' whether havin' Isla in your life is turnin' out to be a different form of medication for you.

Since you reconnected, you're happier, optimistic, lookin' forward rather than lookin' back.

I'm not sure if you realized but you just got through the last of Winter here and now Spring, and you seem to be copin' fine with it all. "

“Huh,” I say, slumping back in my seat. “I hadn’t thought about it but you’re right.”

A smirk curls the side of his mouth. “I usually am. I’m the right twin, after all.”

I snort. “Is that your way of sayin’ I’m the wrong one?”

The bastard shrugs. “You said it, not me.”

“Ass.”

“Sometimes,” he replies, laughing now. “Seriously, Case. I’m happy for you.

I just want you to know that.” I nod. “But let’s get back to the original question though.

Do you think she’s goin’ to stop seein’ you because you believe she’s your soulmate?

Anyone can see that you two only have eyes for each other. ”

“She doesn’t believe in the Call, Sutt. She said there’s no way somethin’ that happens in books could ever be real. She believes in soulmates, just not the part about the mountain callin’ them as a reward.”

“Hmm,” he hums before falling quiet. Unnervingly so.

It’s something he’s done for as long as I remember.

He thinks then overthinks, running over every single scenario and option in his head and doing it quietly.

His tell is when his right brow twitches.

Then again, apparently my left one does the same when I'm confused. Or so Mom tells me.

To fill the void of silence, I continue.

"The way I see it, she might read the book and see that what we feel for each other—and all the physical manifestations of the Call—are't just unique to us.

It's a sign that the mountain has chosen us for one another.

" A dull ache starts pounding behind my eyes.

I lean my head back against the seat and shut them to see if it helps while Sutton talks.

"What did she say when you gave her the book?"

"Nothin' at first. She did say she'd read it, though. That's somethin'," I say.

"It's a start, for sure." He nods at my phone. "What did she say in her text messages to worry you then?"

I shake my head, still keeping my eyes closed. "She just went quiet when I said she now knew everythin' about me."

He frowns, something he seems to be doing a lot around me. "And you think she thought you were talkin' about the Call?"

I sigh. "That's the thing. I was ."

"OK. I'm no expert but?—"

“You kind of are, Sutt,” I shoot back, earning a smirk.

“My advice would be to not mention it again. Not until you get back, or until she brings it up. Give her time and thinkin’ space to read the book and process it.

Either she’ll believe you’re soulmates brought together by the mountain—or at least believe that you think that. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I wince. “I could freak her out completely?”

“Not goin’ to happen. You two are meant to be together. Hey, are you OK?” His eyes narrow my way.

“Got a headache. It has come on out of nowhere,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I know. I can feel it too.”

I slowly turn my head his way and open my eyes carefully. “You do?”

“Yep. Thanks for that by the way. Love it when the universe likes to remind us that we’re twins and feel things the same.

” He frowns before rolling his head from side to side as if to ease the tension in his neck.

“Back to Isla, do you really think she’s goin’ to break up with you over this? You said she was it for you.”

“There is and never will be anyone else. She’s the one, Sutt. My One.”

“There you go. You laid your heart out. It’s no wonder you’re all up in your head

about it.

You showed her your soft spot, and you're waitin' to see whether she's goin' to protect it.

That's why you're on edge." He reaches over and taps my leg.

"For what it's worth. Isla is a good woman.

Her mom is great too. You've got to have faith, brother. Just remember one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"You can't change or control it now, especially not while we're away from home.

Whatever happens, happens." I open my mouth to ask if he thinks there'll be things to navigate.

"And before you ask. I don't think it's goin' to be bad.

I think you're hundreds of miles away from your One and you're doubting yourself. "

"I'm sure as hell not doubtin' her, Sutt. She's amazin'."

"Exactly," he says as if I've just had an 'a ha' moment without realizing it. "How about I distract you with some news of my own?"

"What's that?" I ask, my interest piqued.

"Got an email this mornin' offerin' me a job at the hospital."

“Wow. That’s great, Sutt. I didn’t even know you’d applied.” It’s my turn to narrow my eyes at him. “You keepin’ secrets from me now?”

“We said we wanted to do somethin’, remember? Maybe even get a job in town? Besides, I didn’t apply as such. They reached out and asked if I’d be open to workin’ a few days a week. Seems they don’t have many therapists around these parts.”

“That’s great. It can be like your own little Timber Falls project.” I shoot him a grin. I’ve got my tree farm, you’ll have the hospital.”

“Don’t forget my Zen garden.”

I roll my eyes. “Like you’d let us forget that,” I tease.

“I think it’ll be good for me. Don’t get me wrong, I love workin’ at the ranch. It reminds me of all those summers we spent there growin’ up. It feels like—”

“Home,” we say at the same time, grinning at each other.

Sutton’s eyes—the mirror image of mine—crinkle at the sides. “I miss it, you know.”

“The work? Or meetin’ new people. I guess you do need to leave the ranch if you want to meet your One, brother?”

He snorts. “Yep, you’ve got me. It’s got nothin’ to do with usin’ my trainin’ to help others. It’s all about findin’ a wife.” There’s no missing the sarcasm in his voice.

I put my hands up. “Hey, now. I’m not judgin’.” I grin. “A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

“You’re a dork, Case. But I love you anyway.”

Rolling my eyes, my phone vibrates on the seat next to me making my stomach tighten. I'm nervous about what she might have said.

"You goin' to check that or just jump to the worst-case scenario in your head instead?"

I slowly turn his way. "It's annoyin' how well you can read me. You know that, right?"

"That's pretty much all the time, Case."

I point a finger his way. "See, annoyin'."

"Just read the message, Case. No point torturin' yourself over somethin' that's probably nothin'."

Isla: I'm glad the only thing you were holding back was that you believe in fairytales, Case. If you had a secret crochet habit, I'd have been pissed.

Case: How is it that I've gone from worried to smiling, all in the space of one message?

Isla: It's my special talent. Don't be worried, curious. I'm just processing—and reading—just like you asked me to do. Drive safe so you can come back to me.

"Was I right?" Sutton asks.

"Yeah. She's processin' apparently."

"That's good. See," he says, reaching over and playfully shoving my shoulder. "See, nothin' to worry about."

“She said processin’, Sutt. Not acceptin’.”

He snorts. “Aren’t I the twin with anxiety and you’re the one with seasonal affective disorder? Don’t go stealin’ my diagnosis. Stick with your own, buddy.”

I swivel my head his way. “Is this therapist humor, Dr. Cooper?”

“Depends,” he hedges. “Is it distractin’ you from worryin’ about nothin’?”

“Maybe.”

“Then, dear brother, my job is done. I will say the communication between you two is very commendable. Open, honest. Very little filtering. I approve,” he says with a grin before nodding to the glovebox.

“I think you should grab some Tylenol though. Somethin’ tells me we’re goin’ to need it until we’re back home. ”

“Why’s that?” I ask, frowning at him.

“The Call, Case. The Call.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

ISLA

Two days down and I'm missing Case even more than I thought I would. It's not just about not seeing him, it's knowing he's not in town too.

I haven't been sleeping well since he left, along with a niggling headache and a heavy feeling in my bones. I even got one of the doctors at the hospital to check me over yesterday just in case I was getting sick. Apparently not. It seems I'm just missing Case.

We've been texting back and forth the whole time he has been gone, as well as keeping up with our nightly phone calls. That's the only time I've felt normal. It's like his voice is a balm that settles me.

Basically, I'm a hot mess who is pining for her boyfriend even though I know he's coming home soon. Does that mean I'm hopelessly, completely, deliriously in love with him? Apparently so.

He hasn't asked me about my reading and I haven't brought it up again either because then I'd have to admit that I finished it the same night he gave it to me and haven't been able to stop thinking about it since.

The writing was poetic, heartwarming, and soul searching too.

The love Aster Hollingsworth writes about is true, deep, and honest .

There's no doubt in the characters' minds that they've met their soulmate and once

they get there, their belief that the mountain spirit is responsible for bringing them into each other's lives is steadfast.

It has made me ponder whether I could believe in a matchmaking higher being living within the mountain. And if that's true, did she bring Case into my life? My mind is opening up to the idea that our journeys could have crossed for a reason. That's a start, right?

One thing I do know is that the why and the how don't matter to me, not when I'm happy Case is in my life and I want him to stay there.

"You're my One, beautiful. I know it. And soon, you will too."

"Because I know you're it for me, beautiful. There's no one else, never has been and never will be."

"As long as I'm perfect for you, that's all I care about."

All I know is that ever since we met—and then found each other again—Case has been honest about how he feels. When he gave me the book, he made it crystal clear—reassuringly and unmistakably so—that he was all in. Just as much as I am with him. We may not have said the words, but I know .

All I need now is for him to come back home so I can tell him.

To tide me over until then, Birdie has come down the mountain to have dinner with us and has a package to give me.

"Hey," I say, ushering her inside. "You're timin' is impeccable. I've just gotten out of the shower and Mom's just pulled dinner out of the oven."

She hugs me hello before turning toward the kitchen where Mom is standing at the counter.

“And here’s my other daughter. You never visit me anymore,” she teases. “You’re too loved up on that mountain ranch of yours.”

Birdie walks over and hugs her. “Aww, Jessica. I promise I’ll make sure I leave my loved-up bubble more often just to come see you.”

Mom meets my eyes over my best friend’s shoulder and winks at me. “I’d love that, Birdie.”

“Now, what’s for dinner? Cause I’m starvin’ and the house smells amazin’. You know I love your cookin’, Mom number two.”

“Well, if you grab the wine from the fridge and some iced water for me, we can move to the table and get started,” Mom replies.

The whole time they’re talking, I can’t tear my eyes away from the white mailer Birdie has placed on the dinner table. I make a beeline right for it, stopping when she clears her throat and clicks her tongue.

My head snaps to hers and I don’t miss the knowing twinkle in her eyes. “You’re eager, aren’t you?”

“Do you blame me? Why was a package for me sent to you ?” I say, picking it up and turning it over. “Wait. It’s from Woodward Valley?” I frown at her. “Did you order me somethin’ when you were there?”

A sly smile curves her lips. “Nope. It is for you, and I can’t even take credit for it.”

My brows dip deeper as I push Mom's chair in, making sure she's settled and comfortable before. "Was it Case?"

She shakes her head. "Don't think so. Why don't you open it?"

I stare at the package before placing it down on the table beside me. "It can wait until after dinner," I say with all the self-restraint I can muster. "Mom has made us these delicious stuffed pork chops and gravy. The least we can do is enjoy each other's company and the meal first. Yeah?"

I glance over at Mom who seems to approve of my choice.

Birdie and Mom chat excitedly about the wedding plans and the flower arrangements as we eat. I watch them while I sip on my wine, loving how invested they both are in every single detail of the day.

My mind wanders to what I imagine my wedding might look like. Not surprisingly, everything Birdie and Will have talked about so far—the food, the low-key ceremony up on the ranch, the custom-made white lace sundress Birdie plans to wear on her special day—is exactly what I would like.

Is this what happens when you fall in love? Do you start picturing the happy ever after part of your life? Because since meeting Case, I can't imagine planning a future with anyone else.

My eyes drift over to the mysterious package as if it holds the answers to whatever question I still haven't answered.

"What do you think, Lala?" Mom asks, grabbing my attention. I turn back towards them to find all eyes on me.

“Sorry, what?”

Mom arches a brow at Birdie and they exchange a look, one that says ‘see what I’m sayin’.

“You look tired, sweetheart. Everythin’ OK?” Mom asks.

“I’m fine. I’ve just been feelin’ a bit under the weather lately.”

“Lately? Do you mean since Case went to Anchorage?” Birdie asks curiously. “I’ve never been away from Will—well not far enough to feel it, you know.”

“What do you mean ‘feel it’?”

She waves her hand in the air, the universal sign for ‘don’t worry about it.’ Which just leaves me wondering what she meant. Feel what ?

Before I can press her any further, Mom reaches out and covers my hand. “I’m worried that you’re doin’ too much, and it’s all because of me.”

“What do you mean?” This conversation is giving me whiplash.

“You’re lettin’ life pass you by. I was worried about it before you met Case, and now that you have, I can clearly see you’re strugglin’.”

“Mom, I’m OK. I promise,” I say, giving her what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“You’re puttin’ your life on hold and workin’ yourself to the bone to look after me.

Believe me, I appreciate it more than you could ever know.

I love havin' you back home. But you've got Case to think about now.

I don't want you lettin' life pass you by or bein' too tired to enjoy it just because you're busy worryin' and lookin' after me. "

"Mom..." I lean over and hug her. "You will never be too much trouble for me. You gave up so much while I was growin' up. It's my turn to give it all back to you. Yeah?" My voice wavers and she nods against my shoulder.

"Guys, you're makin' me cry. I love your love, but if y'all are huggin' and cryin', then you have to let me in on this hug too.

Otherwise, I'm just sittin' here blubberin' all by myself," Birdie says, making me laugh and Mom snicker.

I stand and with one arm still around Mom, I hold the other one out for Birdie to join in.

Once we've all got it out of our systems, we pull apart and take our seats again.

"I don't want you worryin' about me, Mom. Seriously."

She shakes her head. "It's not just that.

All the medication and the PT, they're workin' well now.

We know I'll never be cured, but everythin' you've done to help me has already improved my quality of life," she says with a sniffle.

"None of it would've been possible without you.

I was lost before and now that we've got a team of specialists and helpers in place, I'm not so scared about what the future holds.

I'm havin' more better days than bad ones now too. "

"I'd do it all again in a heartbeat, Mom. You know that."

"I do," she says. "That's why the next thing we have to talk about is Case."

I jerk back. "Case and I are fine, Mom. Honestly. We're good, I promise."

"Yeah, but for how long?" she fires back.

"What do you mean?"

"You're so focused on me, always thinkin' about what I need and workin' two jobs to pay for everythin'. Don't think it's escaped my notice that you haven't once slept over at the ranch."

"Mom!" I gasp, my cheeks heating.

She scoffs, waving away my embarrassment. "You're thirty years old and in a relationship with a very handsome Cooper man. You should be out there havin' fun—and sleepovers—without havin' to worry about bein' home to look after your Mom."

"You've got a chronic illness, Mom. Case understands that."

"I know he does. That man is a godsend. He's so thoughtful and helpful." She turns to Birdie. "Did you know he came over early the other day and took me out into the back garden? Then he set me up with a chair and a glass of iced tea before weedin'

my flower beds?”

“He told us. You should’ve heard Will and the rest of them tease him about it,” my best friend tells her.

“I bet,” I giggle. “Seriously, Mom. I’m OK. Case understands I have a responsibility to you as your caregiver.”

“Seriously, Jessica. Case loves that Isla wants to be here to help you. He’s not mad that there haven’t been any ‘sleepovers’.” Her twitching lips give away just how amusing she thinks this is.

“I just don’t want you findin’ yourself in a holdin’ pattern because you’re too busy workin’ or lookin’ after me “

“Mom...” I whisper.

“Somethin’ I’ve learned since my diagnosis is that sometimes you’ve got to let someone else take care of you. And news flash, Lala, you’ve got a handsome, wonderful man who thinks you light up the stars and hung the moon, and who wants to do exactly that.”

I roll my eyes. “Like you let me take care of you?”

“Yep. Exactly. That’s probably where you get it from.” She smirks. “The man is totally gone for you.”

“He truly is,” Birdie adds.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

“And we all know that you’ve fallen hard right along with him. I can see it in your eyes, sweetheart. You love that boy. I can see it whenever you’re together.”

I nod, a wry smile curving my lips. “Of all the places he could walk into—all the towns he could move to—he came here. I never thought I’d find him again.”

Birdie lifts his glass to make a toast. “Cheers for Riddles calling his grandsons to Timber Falls.”

“He hasn’t wavered ever since we reconnected, not once.

It’s surreal. What are the chances that you meet a man and just talk all night, then when he walks back into your life and he’s exactly the man you thought he was?

No games. No ulterior motives. Just an honest-to-goodness gentleman who wants me for me.”

“He’s a good one, that’s for sure,” Mom says, holding up her water to clink with our wine glasses.

“A great one. A perfect one,” I whisper.

“The perfect one for you , Iz,” Birdie adds, nudging me with her shoulder.

“Can we at least agree that you need to take more time for yourself ? I’ve got Betty next door, and there are always those in-home care nurses we looked into. I want you to have a life , Lala. And that includes sleepovers with your boyfriend. OK?” Mom

says.

“OK,” I reply, feeling something settle within me.

“Good. Because you’ve had me worried the last few days. You seem exhausted.”
Yeah, because I can’t sleep and have been binge reading romance books about the Mountain’s Call!

“You do look a bit pale,” Birdie says, her brows pinched. “Did Case give you one of my Aster books to read?”

“He did. And I might’ve read it that first night.” Her smile widens. “I might’ve also downloaded the rest of the series.” Birdie’s lips twitch and I narrow my eyes at her. “Don’t even start with me, B. I know you’ve been at me to read them for years. And before you say it, yes you were right.”

She makes a show of cupping her hand around her ear. “I’m sorry, can you repeat that? I’m not sure I heard you. Did you just say I was right ?” she gasps melodramatically, making Mom and I both snort.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“I plan to,” she replies. “Back to the books though. Aren’t they amazin’?”

“I’ve read three books in two days now, B. What does that tell you?”

Birdie squeals and claps her hands. I swear if she could bounce in her seat, she’d be doing that too. “But you still don’t believe it, do you?”

I shrug and I don’t miss the way she squares her shoulders before nodding at the package. “I think it’s time you open it.”

Reaching for the mailer, I slide my chair back to give me more room. “I thought you didn’t know what it was, Birdie Walker?”

“I don’t. I just have an inklin’. And if I’m right, whatever she has sent you is bound to be helpful.”

That’s not cryptic at all.

I rip the mailer open, reaching inside before pulling out a paperback. Turning it over, I take in the yellow-tinted cover with a lush mountain forest background, noting a label on the top corner of the cover stating it’s a special review copy.

“That must be a new one,” Birdie says. “I don’t think it’s been released yet.”

My head snaps her way. “Are you sure it’s for me?”

She arches her brow. “Unless I forgot that I’m Miss Isla Murray, I don’t think so. I know I’m in weddin’ plannin’ mode and all of that but nope, I’m definitely Birdie Walker—soon to be Cooper.”

Mom leans forward, grabbing the empty packaging and looking inside. “Is there a note inside or anythin’?”

Opening the front cover, I find an ornate piece of paper covered in mountains and swirls, with AHG written in silver foil script in the top corner. “I think this is a letter.”

Both Mom and Birdie are leaning toward me now. “Well? Are you goin’ to read it or just stare at it for a while?” Birdie teases.

Isla,

I suspect you're wondering why I've sent this package to you. Before I explain that, I want to say that you've been my most intriguing heroine to write about so far.

You have a heart the same size if not bigger than Birdie's.

Whereas she loves to help people, you were born with the need to care for people—your mom, patients at the hospital, Birdie and her dad, as well as your neighbors and co-workers.

Then there's Cayson—a layered, loyal, genuine man who feels deep and puts everything he has into everything he does.

By now I suspect—OK, hope—you've been given one of my stories to read. I hope that has gone some way to assuage your curiosity about the Cooper family lore and the mountain's Call.

If it hasn't and you're still wondering how people can think the Call is real, that's OK. I think I might respect that even more.

I want to tell you that it's OK not to believe something just because your best friend does.

Same as with that handsome stranger you met over pecan pie in a non-descript Anchorage diner.

The man who became your world for a night when you needed him to be.

The same one who returned to his family's hometown after decades away, who spent months worrying that he'd missed his chance at love, only to find out you were there in Timber Falls all along.

You don't have to believe that you and Case have been brought together by a mountain spirit that loves love and relishes in rewarding the keepers of her land with their soulmates.

All you have to do is trust your feelings and who you're feeling them for. Trust in what you can see and what he's told you. His actions, his words. The most important thing is to believe in yourself.

Listen to your heart, listen to your soul.

Those butterflies that flutter when you just look at him? That's a sign. The way your pulse spikes when you're near him and when you touch? That's another one. The way you've been feeling 'off', unable to sleep, itchy, achy, and not settled since he left town? Yes, you got it. It's another sign.

But if you still don't believe that you could be his reward—and that he is yours—read this book.

I don't think I've ever written a book so fast—and I've penned a lot of these love stories now. Then again, it's kind of inevitable when I'm constantly inspired by real-life, real-time events that deserve to be memorialized in words. I blame my husband for being my forever muse.

I have one last request. Ask yourself this—if you believe that everything in life happens for a reason, could it also be true that there could be one person put on this earth that's destined for you?

And if so, what are the chances that you met them when you both needed each other the most, then months later—he literally becomes the man that walks into a bar?

I believe in you, Isla. All that's left for you to do is believe in it.

Love, Aster.

I stare at the letter in silence, giving my brain a chance to catch up with my heart before I fold it carefully and slide it back into the mailer. All the while, I feel two sets of eyes watching me closely.

“Do you believe in soulmates?” I ask Mom, part of me hoping she’ll tell me no. I mean, my birth father never stuck around. How could she still believe in true love after that?

“After seein’ you and Case together, there’s no way I couldn’t .

Do I think there’s a mountain spirit rewardin’ the Coopers with women?

I’m not sure I’d be much of a feminist if I said yes, but again—I do believe that there have never been two people more meant to be than you and that man.

You’re two halves of a whole. Your soul and his. ”

“I feel that too. I think I always have. I just didn’t let myself see it until I saw him again.”

Birdie sniffs, waving me off when I catch her glassy gaze. “Don’t mind me. I just love , you know? And knowin’ I’ve found it and now you’ve found it. I’m happy. These are happy tears.”

Mom leans forward, holding out her upturned palms and curling her fingers around my hands when I slide them into hers.

“Don’t question it, sweetheart. You love him and we all know he loves you.

If you're lookin' for a reason not to believe that the universe, a mountain spirit, or some voodoo magic made your paths cross again, you're not goin' to find one.

My question is, do you need to believe in the mountain's Call to love Case? "

And there it is, Mom slapping me in the face with a proverbial wet fish.

"No," I answer.

"There's my bestie," Birdie murmurs before adding her hands into the mix on top of ours. "This calls for a toast."

That's when I get an idea. "We definitely need more wine," I say as I carefully extricate my hands from the pile and move to my feet. "Because I've got a date/sleepover/and love declaration to plan. And I'm goin' to need your help."

Mom's lips twitch. "I'll help with everythin' but the sleepover bit. We had that talk years ago, Lala. If you don't know what happens by now, you never will." She says with a wink. "But don't worry. One look at Case and there's no doubt in my mind that you're in good hands."

My eyes pop out of my head. "Mom!"

Birdie—of course—just sits there and giggles. "She's not wrong. I was here for that talk too, remember."

"I'm gettin' the wine. You two—" I point between them, "behave yourselves."

It's not until later that night when I'm wrapped up in bed and waiting for Case to call that I flip open the book Aster sent me.

That's when I laugh because if I didn't believe in the Call, or the mountain spirit, or of there being some kind of higher being, there's no way I can deny it when I see the title page.

“Mountain Needs an Anchor: Case and Isla”

And yes, I did start reading it, and yes, I was unable to stop until I got to Chapter 20. That's when the story suddenly stopped, ending with just three words.

“To be continued...”

CASE

As soon as we arrived back in Timber Falls this morning, I began to feel normal again. That was after days of body pain, headaches, night sweats, and heart palpitations that would've had me worried if Sutton hadn't reminded me about the Call reminding you when you're away from your One.

Before ending our call last night, Isla and I arranged that she'd come up to the ranch and we'd all go to the Lair for a family dinner. Just knowing I'd be seeing her had me rushing to unload the furniture and building supplies we'd brought back from our trip.

Wyatt has told us he's happy to stay in the ranch house with all of us.

Because of that, we'll be able to open up the doors to guests sooner rather than later.

A 'soft launch' as Will puts it. That will show us what we're doing right and what we need to work on.

But first, we want another cabin finished as a backup option.

Standing back, I take in the finished—and furnished—cabin, which looks more like a home away from home compared to the derelict shack it resembled when we first arrived.

"Maybe we've got a future career in interior design," I quip, waggling my brows.

"Or we should just stick to what we know and leave all of this stuff," Will says,

waving his arm over the room, “to the experts.”

“I guess the good thing now is that we know what to do and how to do it,” Wyatt adds. “No more missteps, miscuts, or Case’s caulkin’ disasters.

I spear him with a glare. “Hey! That was one time.”

Jude snickers. “Yeah. But it was funny as hell. You were covered from head to toe. You looked like a kindergartner playin’ with clay for the first time.”

“Like you haven’t had any mishaps. The far cabinet is a quarter inch off square,” I shoot back, challenging him to argue.

Jude holds his hands up. “I’m a gardener, not a carpenter. I did the best I could.”

“We all did,” Sutton says, looking around at all of us. “And we did a damn fine job considerin’ Will’s the only one who has done this before. How ‘bout we pat ourselves on the back and celebrate?”

I clap my twin on the shoulder. “That is the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

“You just want to see Isla.”

“No point denyin’ it. I’ve missed her somethin’ fierce. I just need to lay eyes on her. Then I know everythin’ will be OK,” I reply honestly.

Will nods and we all make our way out of the cabin toward the ranch house. “Birdie says Iz read the book. That’s a good start, right?”

“Yeah. She told me last night she’d been readin’. I don’t know any more than that. She said we’d talk tonight.” Jude and Wyatt groan. “What?” I ask.

“Isn’t ‘we need to talk’ the death knell when it comes to relationships?”

I shake my head. “Nah. It’s called communication, children. That’s what adults do.”

Jude sighs and Wyatt smirks. “Well now, maybe that’s why we’re both single,” he says to my youngest brother. “We don’t talk to women.”

“I haven’t even thought about datin’ since we moved here,” Jude says, opening the back door to the house before we all file into the mudroom to clean up. “I figure my turn will come around eventually. If it goes in birth order, I’ve still got time. Sutt’s up next, anyway.”

“You sure about that?” Wyatt replies. “We couldn’t pick the order of the Call when it happened at Bull. Landry heard it before Toby and Colt heard it before everyone.”

“There goes that plan, eh Jude,” I tease, nudging him with my shoulder.

He perks up, appearing newly energized. “I better get prepared then.” He rubs his hands together.

“Maybe I’ll meet my One at the Lair tonight.

I’m first in the shower.” Then he’s gone in the blink of an eye, Wyatt and Sutton following after him, leaving me and Will standing at the double-wide sink, washing our hands.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’ve got anythin’ to worry about. Birdie had dinner with Iz and Jessica the other night. She didn’t seem worried, so you shouldn’t either. These things have a way of sortin’ themselves out. And if it’s meant to be—”

I groan. “Please don’t say anythin’ poetic about fate and the mountain never gettin’ it

wrong. I know that.”

“OK. Does that mean you’re not worried about whatever Iz wants to talk about tonight?”

“Nope,” I say, feeling a lot more confident than when I was on the road. There’s something about being back in town and closer to Isla that has me trusting my gut instinct.

Isla Murray is my One, the love of my life.

All those months ago I promised myself that I wasn’t going to let a woman like her slip through my fingers again.

I was lucky enough to get another chance with my beautiful stranger, and whether she believes in the Call or not, as long as she believes in us—in me —then that’s all that matters.

I trusted the mountain and I’m going to repay her generosity by trusting in Isla too.

Checking my watch, I realize she’s due to arrive soon.

“Damn you’ve got it bad, brother,” Will says. “I’m happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too.”

“Still think movin’ here was for the best?” he asks curiously.

“I had a bit of time to ponder that while we were in Anchorage. Mom even asked me the same thing. I’ll tell you the same thing I told her,” I reply. “I think that Gramps knew somethin’ we didn’t. It’s like he somehow knew we were all drownin’ and

needed a change—or a push to change, anyway.”

“You’re right. I just wish we’d have gotten a chance to thank him. This place is not the same without him but at the same time—”

“We’re makin’ it our own, Will, and doin’ it to keep his memory alive. Apart from the satellite dish, I think he’d be proud of what we’ve done so far...”

“Yeah. I think you’re right.”

I scoff and shoot him a knowing look. “Of course, I am. When am I not?”

Everyone claims the shower before I can. That means I’m still not ready by the time Isla arrives.

“It’s OK, we’ll just catch up with everyone,” she says, nonchalantly. So much so, I’m a little suspicious and the tiny bit of worry I still have about her ‘we need to talk’ comment earlier starts prickling my skin.

“Sounds like a plan,” Birdie says, grinning at Will. “We’ll drive down and you can meet us there later. I bet you two want to ‘catch up’ anyway.” She stares at Isla and I swear they share a look like the ones Sutton and I do when we’re having a silent conversation. Weird .

Not long after, everyone says goodbye, leaving just the two of us in the empty house. You bet my mind is full of all the things that could happen now that we’re finally alone.

Isla’s eyes twinkle as she looks me over, my thoughts mirrored in her expression. “Weren’t you goin’ to have a shower, curious?”

“Yeah. I was,” I say, moving toward her and not stopping until my arms are wrapped around her back and her body is flush with mine. I slide my hand up to cradle the back of her head. “Hey.”

Her hooded eyes drop to my mouth. “Hi.”

“Long time no see.”

Her lips curve up into a soft all-knowing smile. “We talked every day, curious.”

“Not the same as seein’ you,” I say, roaming a hand up and down her back. “Or touchin’ you. I’ve realized that just bein’ near you makes me feel...”

“Calm?”

“At peace.” I smile against her lips as I steal a gentle kiss. “I better get cleaned up or else we’ll never leave.”

“OK,” she drags out, I catch something in her eyes but don’t press her on it. Knowing her as well as I do, I’m not worried. Not now that I’ve seen her. Whatever she wants to tell me, she’ll do it when she’s ready. “I’ll wait here for you.”

“Sounds good, beautiful.” I kiss her once more before reluctantly letting her go and making my way to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, I quickly get dressed and walk into the living room. I find Isla in the kitchen pulling something out of the oven, the smell of lasagna filling the air.

I take in the room and see she’s been busy.

The lights are dipped low and there are LED candles spread all along the window

frames.

The dining table has two settings that weren't there before, along with a bottle of red wine and two glasses.

The low hum of soul music playing in the background is setting the scene for a romantic night in, not a night out at the Lair.

"Hi," she says, looking up at me with a wry smile. She carries the steaming hot serving dish to the table before taking off her oven mitts and turning to face me. "So, I may have done a thing..."

My lips twitch. "A thing? That thing looks and smells amazin'." I cock my head, taking her in. "I take it we're not leavin' anytime soon?"

"I just—I figured we haven't seen each other in four days, and I wanted us to have a night together," she rushes out. "The others helped me, and they've promised they'll stay out until last call. That means—"

"We've got the house to ourselves."

If I had any doubts about Isla being my One, they'd be gone now. This whole scene proves that I haven't read it all wrong—read her wrong—even if we do need to talk about the whole mountain's Call thing again.

Closing the distance between us, I reach out for her hand and press a soft kiss over her knuckles. "I'll have to thank them later."

I catch a twinkle in her eyes. "Just them?"

"Oh no, beautiful. If I have my way, I'll be thankin' you for the rest of my life." I

figure, go big or go home. I have no secrets now; I don't need any.

"We should eat before it gets cold," she whispers, her eyes locked on mine.

After pushing her chair in once she sits down, I take the seat opposite and pour us a glass of wine each while she dishes out the pasta.

We both take a sip of our wine, the rich flavor washing over my tongue as our eyes lock over the table. The warmth in her eyes sends a shiver down my spine and the same feeling of rightness I always feel when I'm around her settles deep in my chest.

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We talk about everything but the mountain-sized elephant in the room as we eat. She tells me about her shifts at the hospital, and about the latest town gossip she learned from eavesdropping at the restaurant while Old Lady Harrison and Old Lady Holden had lunch.

I fill her in on our time away and how Mom was all nostalgic about us ‘leavin’ home’—even if we’ve all been gone for over a decade now.

There’s no missing the tension building between us, and it’s not just my growing need to be as close as I possibly can with her. It’s knowing about the conversation we need to have— should have.

“So...” I say, holding my glass in my hand. “We should toast to somethin’? What should we toast to?”

“Us? The ranch? The Call?” she says, not looking away from me. My lips part in surprise before I settle on something even more important than the mountain spirit’s antics.

“You,” I say. Her gaze widens before softening.

Isla lifts her glass, a smile playing on her lips. “To me?”

“To you. The woman who changed my life in ways I never thought possible. Who I never imagined seein’ again but desperately hoped that somehow, the universe would lead us to cross paths again.

The only one who makes my pulse race, my soul happy, and my body burn.

I love you, Isla Murray. You are and always will be the greatest love of my life. ”

Tears shimmer in her eyes. “Case...” she says. “I love you too. So much.”

I get up and move around the table, bending down to cradle her cheeks in my hands. I kiss her soft and slow, making sure I pour everything into our connection so she can feel the truth in my words.

By the time we pull apart, our breathing is labored and I sense her reluctance to move away is as strong as my own.

I step back and hold my hand out for hers. When I try to lead her over to the sofa so we can talk, she surprises me and tugs my arm toward the hallway.

“We need to talk,” I say weakly, every single cell in my body completely under her control.

Her lips curve to the side. “There are many ways to communicate, curious.”

Once we cross over the threshold of my bedroom door, I shut us in and lean back against it, letting my eyes roam over her from head to toe. My pulse is racing, and my brain is focused on her and only her.

This could be the moment I make her mine, when we’ll complete the Call and be bonded forever. But something gives me pause. The need to know whether she believes in the family lore winning out over my lust for a second.

“Beautiful, I?—”

“Case...” Her voice is low and rough as she presses her body to mine. “I have somethin’ to tell you.”

“Anythin’,” I say, anchoring my hands on her hips. Her gaze bores into mine, and despite being able to read her, this time there’s too much there. It’s the same look I caught earlier. “Whatever it is, it’s OK.”

Her breath catches as she glides her hands up to rest over my racing heart. “I know that. I think I always have. Wanna know how?

Something about her soft, gentle, almost playful expression has my lips twitching. “How?”

“I have always felt safe with you, Case Cooper, and I know I always will be.” Damn, that feels good to hear. Before I can answer, she continues. “And I’ve also read our book.”

“Our book?” I ask, jerking my head against the door.

A slow-growing smile curves her lips. “Yeah.” She lifts a finger to trace the furrowed lines of my forehead, running it down between my brows and along my nose.

“I read the book you gave me while you were away, and two more after that. I probably would’ve kept on with that series—the one with a cop and a pet bear—but I had to work.

” I nod, my throat suddenly so dry I can’t speak.

Everything is pointing to good things— very good things judging by the way she’s melding her body to mine. I need more though. “OK...”

“Then I had dinner with Mom and B, and she’d brought a package with her that was delivered to the ranch addressed to me.”

I ask the first question that comes to my mind. “What was in it?”

“A book, and a letter. And wouldn’t you know it,” she drags her finger down to my mouth and trails the outline of my top lip.

It’s taking every ounce of control I have not to flip her around and switch our positions.

As it stands, I’m already hardening against her stomach.

There’s no way she can’t feel what she’s doing to me.

“Hmm?” I hum as I struggle to focus on her words and not on the way her body fits perfectly to mine. That’s because she belongs there.

She taps against my chin, grabbing my attention. “You’ll want to hear this, Case.” Her eyes are hooded and full of amusement. They’re also full of heat which makes it even harder to concentrate.

My hands roam of their own accord, exploring everywhere I can reach, memorizing her body. “Might be easier if I didn’t have the woman I love,” I tilt my head and brush my lips against the hinge of her jaw, “distractin’ me.”

When she speaks again, she does it with a breathy moan. “Case...”

“I’m right here, beautiful.”

“The letter...” I drag my mouth down to the silky-smooth skin of her throat, “was

from Aster.”

I freeze just as I'm about to kiss the sensitive spot just below her ear. Slowly I straighten so we're eye to eye. “What?”

“She wanted me to read her next story— our story. What she'd written so far, anyway.

And Case?” She cradles my jaw in her hands.

“Our journey has been beautiful, honest, real . But most of all,” her voice cracks and her eyes shimmer with emotion, “it has proven to me that I was always meant to be yours and that you were destined to come back to the mountain. For me .”

My lips slowly rise. “I've known that for a while, beautiful.”

She rolls her eyes as a small laugh escapes her. “Some of us don't believe in fairytales so easily. Not when life proves that they don't always come true.”

I snake my hand up between us until my palm is resting on her cheek. “I didn't till I met you.”

“And I wouldn't believe in the Call if it wasn't for you,” she whispers. “I want to keep writin' our story, Case. Together,” she says, and I realize my heart is racing so fast I fear it might explode.”

“You are my reward, Isla Murray,” I say, leaning my forehead against hers and breathing her in, wondering if there could ever be a more important, more pivotal, more fulfilling moment than this one right here, right now.

“Funny, because I was about to say I think you're mine.”

I snort. “Well, you’re wrong. But that’s OK. I’ll let you—”

She slams her mouth to mine, swallowing whatever else I was going to say. I don’t remember what because the minute she kisses me again, my mind is wiped of everything but her.

My beautiful stranger. My anchor. My One.

As it was always meant to be.

ISLA

Case uses his hips to guide me back toward the bed. My body is a whirlwind of lust and need. Knowing he wants this as much as I do makes it hard not to just tackle him down onto the mattress.

“Let me see you, beautiful,” he says, peppering kisses over my skin as he slowly undresses me.

Deciding that two can play this game, I move my hands to rest on his chest as I press my lips to his Adam’s apple, sliding up over his jaw until I can kiss him deep, drawing out a guttural groan that I feel as well as hear.

Tearing his lips from mine, he moves his attention to my neck while his fingers release the button of my jeans and he oh so slowly lowers the zipper, pushing them to the ground with some help from me.

As much as I love the feel of him touching me and revealing my body to him, it’s all too slow.

It’s driving me wild and making me feel like I’m crawling out of my skin.

I want to feel him against me. I want to touch him.

I want him to touch me. I want to explore and taste.

I want him to do that too. I want it all.

I mean, we do have the house to ourselves for a reason, right?

“My turn,” I say, making quick work of removing his shirt before slipping it off his shoulders, watching as it flutters to the ground by his feet.

“Next time,” I pant while kissing his chest. “You’re only allowed to wear things with Velcro.” That earns me a startled laugh. “Or grey sweatpants.” Come to think of it, Case Cooper in a black tank and grey sweats... mmm.

He chuckles. “Happy to wear whatever you want, beautiful. As long as I get to have you like this. Feel you like this.”

I pop his jeans open and slide my palm inside, my breath catching as I rub over the hard bulge that’s been tempting me since he had me pressed up against the door.

Case’s head drops forward as he buries his face in my neck, his low rumbling groan vibrating against my skin and sending a delicious shiver through me.

"I love you," I whisper, the dam well and truly broken when it comes to those three little words.

“Love you too, beautiful. So damn much.”

I continue long slow strokes over his boxers, my other hand tracing the lines of his muscles, committing every inch of him to memory.

His breath hitches as he arches into my touch. Before I know it, his arms are wrapped around my back and he pushes me forward, controlling my fall as we back onto the bed.

Not one to miss an opportunity, I reach around to cup one of his cotton-covered butt

cheeks, flexing my fingers for good measure. “You're still wearin’ too many clothes,” I murmur.

He smiles against my lips. “You are too. Fair’s fair.”

“You might have to get off me if you want me naked, curious.”

In the blink of an eye, he flips onto his back next to me and whips off his underwear. Then he’s all business, helping me strip down until we’re both naked and wanting.

The very second I’m done, he stills. His hungry eyes take me in from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and back again. His dark heated expression washes over me like a teasing caress that just leaves me wanting more.

I’m not sure who moves first but we meet somewhere in the middle, our lips crashing together as he rolls over me, covering me as he devours my mouth. The kiss is as urgent as it is desperate, my body and soul taking over.

My hips roll up against him of their own volition as his hard length pulses against me.

Case loves me. I love him. And I’m going to spend the rest of my life by his side, supporting and cherishing him, making each other happy as we build a family together.

But right now, I need him more than anything I’ve ever needed or wanted before. And going by the wild look in his gaze as he braces himself over me, I’m not alone in the feeling.

His eyes crinkle at the side as he dips his head to kiss me again, softer but no less intimate, his hands roaming my skin with a gentle reverence as if memorizing every curve and line.

"Are you sure about this?" he whispers against my lips, the pounding of his heart matching the rhythm of mine.

I lift my chin, locking my eyes with his. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life," I say as I run my fingers through his hair. "I want you, Case. All of you."

"Forever, beautiful. This is forever." He kisses me gently. "You and me." His kiss is firmer this time. "My love. My life. You're everythin'."

I reach a hand up to press against his cheek. "You're everythin' for me too."

A slow smile spreads across his face, and he leans down to kiss me again. But this time, it's not soft and gentle. It's hungry .

"Will you let me take care of you? See to you?" he says, nipping my skin as he drags his body down the bed against mine.

I nod, my heightened emotions rendering me speechless.

Case's curiosity isn't just for the outside world, it's a part of him and everything he does. Something that becomes all the more obvious as he starts a torturously slow exploration of my body with this mouth, licking and sucking his way down my chest.

He presses a barely there but no less meaningful kiss over my heart before turning his head and moving his attention to my breasts, making me whimper as pleasure courses through me.

Taking one of the stiff peaks between his lips, I arch off the bed, pressing up into him as he lavishes that side before moving to the other. His hands gently cup me and I writhe beneath him, wanting more... wanting it all. My body is craving everything the man I love wants to give me.

When he pulls away, I can't stop the moan that escapes me. "Impatient, are we?" he teases, a smirk playing on his lips.

"For you, always," I whisper. "Please, I need?—"

His eyes flash before he gets right back to driving me crazy and making sure to take his time doing it. It's as if each part of me is a new discovery, a landscape to be revered and cherished.

His hands follow the path of his mouth, tracing lines of fire along my skin as he moves down over the curve of my stomach, dipping into the hollow of my hips. His breath is warm and tantalizing as he hovers just above the place I want him most... need him most.

Bracing himself between my spread legs, he lifts his hooded eyes to mine, sending me a wicked half-grin while arching a brow, silently asking me for permission.

I nod, and the rumbling growl I receive in return sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

The moment he lowers his head and swipes his tongue against me for the first time, I'm lost. Gone. The world could end right now and I'd go a happy woman. The happiest, most satisfied woman that ever lived.

His big, calloused hands spread my thighs wide as he devours me. Licking, exploring, teasing, tasting, and savoring .

Whatever semblance of control I had left disappears, leaving me with undeniable, undeterred raw lust. All I can think about is the feel of him, the way he's murmuring praise while pleasuring me.

Resting my palm on the back of his head, I rub my hand over his head and roll my hips as he slowly eases a finger inside of me, stroking me, stoking the fire he's built since the moment we met, driving me higher and higher.

The moment he moves his mouth back onto me, I crash headfirst into an orgasm that feels like it's going to shatter me into oblivion.

My body takes on a mind of its own, rocking and swaying against him.

I cry out his name as wave after wave of ecstasy courses through me, leaving me a breathless, boneless, melted mess on the mattress.

Case doesn't let up, not stopping as he slowly brings me back down to earth, drawing every last whimper and moan past my lips until I collapse back against the mattress in a boneless, sated mess beneath him.

He chuckles and gently kisses his way back up my body, his skin glistening with a light sheen of sweat, his eyes dark with unspent desire. Leaning his weight against me, I instinctively wrap my legs around his hips, aligning our bodies so that he's right where I want him to be.

His breath is ragged as he touches his lips to mine.

"Already loved you a hell of a lot before that, beautiful. But watching you fall apart for me..." His eyes blaze.

"That was spectacular." His praise causes something to snap inside of me.

Suddenly, I want more of him, and I need it more than I need my next breath.

"Please, Case," I whimper, lifting my hips to rub against him. It's like I can't get

close enough even though we're plastered together from head to toe.

His eyes flutter closed, a low groan escaping as he reaches down between us and notches himself at my entrance. Then, with our eyes locked and the most powerful, intense, all-encompassing love between us, he slides his way home at the same time he takes my lips in a hot, hard, deep kiss.

If I didn't believe it before, that would've been the moment that I no longer had any doubts. Case Cooper was always meant to be mine.

Only him. My curious man. My anchor.

And unequivocally... My One. My only.

CASE

“I want more mornings like this...” she says as we laze in my bed, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking.

A smirk tugs at my mouth as my hand roams over her. Skimming her sides, I caress her hip and the curve of her abdomen, her smooth skin as addictive as her kisses.

Whatever has come before now is incomparable to the feeling of having her in my arms, knowing that we love each other, and this is going to be my life for the rest of my days. She's mine and I'm hers. Forever.

“Just to clarify,” I say. “Are we talkin’ about lazy naked mornin’s without interruptions or...” I waggle my brows, earning the blush I was hoping for.

“That too,” she says with a giggle, “I was more thinkin’ about spendin’ time together—meaningful time just bein’ us. I loved bein’ with you last night. But my life is...”

I brace myself on one arm and look down at her. “Complicated?”

“Just a bit,” she replies. “Busy too. I live with Mom and that can’t and won’t change anytime soon. She needs me.”

“I know, beautiful.”

She nods. “And then there’s you. You live in a house full of brothers, Birdie, and Wy.

How are we supposed to plan a future if—”

“Beautiful,” I say, tilting her face with my hand. “You’ve read the book. You know our story. This is our happily ever after. There is—and never will be—anyone else. You are the love of my life. Where you go, I go.”

She turns her body into mine. “To be fair, Aster didn’t write much past me realizin’ I was in love with you and that I was your One.

I have absolutely no doubt in my mind, my heart, or my soul about that.

” Damn, that feels good to hear. “But I’m thinkin’ logistically.

How are we supposed to see each other— be with each other?

It felt like my heart was beating out of my chest while you were away, Case.

It was like a huge part of me was missin’.

I couldn’t sleep, Mom kept askin’ if I was feelin’ OK. It was hard.”

My eyes roam over her beautiful face. “Do you trust me, beautiful?” She shoots me a “duh” look that makes my lips twitch.

“OK. Let me put it another way. Do you promise not to freak out on me if I tell you my brothers and I have already talked and we’re goin’ to draw up plans to expand the ranch house and add private wings?

That will mean we can all still have our own spaces but also stay livin’ together at the same time. ”

She sits up suddenly, almost knocking her head against mine before she leans back against the headboard, clutching the sheet to her chest. “Nooo !” There’s no missing the hope in her voice.

“You don’t promise?” I tease.

Her head bobs up and down furiously. “No, I can't promise not to freak out because that sounds amazin’!”

I chuckle at her excitement before her brows bunch and her smile falls, confusion marring her expression. “Does this mean? Wait... what does that mean?”

I mirror her position before reaching over to hook a stray curl away from her gorgeous face.

“I’m hopin’ it means you’ll consider movin’ in with me when the time comes that I get down on one knee and ask you to make an honest man out of me.

” She melts and tips her chin up, meeting me in the middle before I kiss her long and deep.

She moves her hands to my shoulders and gently pushes me back. “But what about Mom?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I already asked Jessica and she agreed to us buildin’ her a small cottage in her favorite meadow. It’s where she’s happy and it already feels like it should belong to her anyway. She was so happy that she tackle-hugged me. Can you believe that?”

Isla’s head sags and she stares straight ahead, her eyes glistening in the morning light.

“Beautiful?”

“When did you ask her this?”

“Before I went away when I spent the afternoon in the garden with her.”

She gasps. “Oh my god. That was before you gave me the book. Before you told me that I was it for you and that there would be no one else.”

“Yeah,” I say with a smile.

“You were all in before you even took that chance to tell me about the Call.”

“Oh yeah...”

“Case...” she whispers, her gaze searching my face. I let her look. She’ll never find any doubts because there aren’t any. Isla Murray will be my wife and—if we’re so blessed—the future mother of my children.

Then I have to lock my body because she launches herself into my arms with so much excitement I almost topple over the side of the bed. “I love you,” she states emphatically between kisses. “So.” Kiss. “Damn.” Kiss. “Much. It’s almost too big to comprehend.”

“Can I say ditto just so I can kiss you some more without interruptions?”

She pulls back and cocks her head, rubbing her chin for a moment as if to think about it. “Kiss me like you wanted to that first night we met, Case.”

I don’t even hesitate. Why would I? “With pleasure, beautiful.”

So that's exactly what I do.

ISLA

A few weeks and a lot more sleepovers later—this time in my bed too—we all pile into two trucks and make our way down to the Lair. Wyatt comes along too with Birdie making him promise that nothing but soda and good food will pass his lips.

Lucky for us, Wyatt's a good kid and never gives us any trouble. Even better for him, Margie has a soft spot for the kid and loves to spoil him with her cooking.

After parking outside the tavern, we all file out and follow Jude and Wyatt through the front doors.

Birdie kisses Will goodbye and waves to the rest of us, promising to send drinks our way as soon as she can.

Then she makes a beeline to the bar to clock in.

While she does that, the rest of us move over to the same corner we always claim near the pool tables.

"I swear this place is gettin' more popular. We'll be fightin' for a table soon if this keeps up," Jude says looking around the large and bustling room.

Will nudges Jude with his arm. "Wasn't it you that said just yesterday that you love how quiet it is up the mountain?"

"I do. Doesn't mean I don't like lettin' loose at Lair now and then," he replies. "And

more people means more chances to meet my One.”

“Here, here,” Sutton cheers. “Besides, it’s line dancin’ night. That means we get to impress the locals with all our moooves .”

Case steeples his hands between us as if begging me. “Please don’t let them change your mind.”

“About?”

“Me. Us. You bein’ the love of my life.”

A snort escapes me. “One, there ain’t nothin’ and no one that could ever change my mind, heart, or soul when it comes to you. And two , even if I wanted to, the mountain chose me for you and you for me. We’re stuck with each other until our end of days.”

Case’s gaze drops to my lips. He smells good and looks even better. My body heats, my skin tingles, and all I can think about is touching him again—as is always the way when I’m near him.

As if sensing the effect he’s having on me, he leans in and rubs his nose against mine. “OK, beautiful. Good point, well made and all that.”

I slide my hands over his shirt. “I’m glad you said that, curious. Because right now, I’m thinkin’ I’d like to get up on that dance floor with you and move real close like?—”

“We’re still here you know,” Jude whines. “Poor Wyatt will be corrupted in no time if he keeps findin’ himself surrounded by loved-up couples.”

“You corrupted yet, Wy,” Case asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me and my chair in close.

Wyatt scoffs, shaking his head as he does it. “This ain’t my first Call rodeo and it won’t be the last. Besides, who says I’m not already corrupted?”

That earns him heckles and jeers from everyone at our table as well as a barrage of items being thrown his way like balled-up napkins, and even a laminated bar snacks menu thanks to Jude.

Wyatt ducks and laughs, swatting away the projectiles. “Alright, alright! I surrender!” he says, holding his hands up in mock defeat. The laughter around the table is only just calming down when Birdie delivers our drinks.

“Here you go, guys,” she says, distributing our drinks with a smile. “And for you, Wyatt, a special Shirley Temple.” She winks as she sets the glass down before leaning against Will’s chair. “You know y’all are signed up for the line dancin’ lesson tonight, yeah?”

Every head at the table turns so fast I’m sure we do a 360 spin. Will’s eyes narrow on his fiancée. “I didn’t sign?—”

“Nope, you didn’t,” my best friend replies, popping the p while puffing out her chest. She looks like a cat that got the cream as she takes in our shocked expressions. “I did. Put all y’all’s names down.”

Birdie claps her hands together at our shocked expressions. A mischievous grin appears on her face. “Come on! It’ll be fun! Think of it this way—it’ll be good practice for the weddin’.”

Will groans but I don’t miss the sparkle in his eye. “You just want to see us make

fools of ourselves.”

Birdie laughs, leaning down to give him a quick kiss. "Maybe just a little. But mostly, I just wanted to dance with my man and have a good time with the family.”

Case squeezes my shoulder, pulling me closer. "What do you say, beautiful? Want to show them how it's done?"

I grin, my heart fluttering with excitement and nerves. "Only if you promise to catch me if I trip over my own feet."

He winks, his gaze full of affection and a little mischief. “As long as it’s my feet you’re trippin’ over, then that’s fine by me. I promise I’ll always catch you, the same way you caught my heart.”

“Oh god,” Jude groans. “Case, that was bad .”

“So bad,” Sutton adds.

Wyatt smirks. “Even I have better lines than that , and I’m not even tryin’ to date right now.”

I giggle, but at least I do it with my face buried against Case’s shoulder. His arm tightens around me as he laughs too.

“Hey, I can’t help it that I’m in love.”

“We will soon though,” Jude says, swapping looks with Sutton. “One of us is next remember.”

“Heaven help the women of Timber Falls,” Will teases.

“To be fair, the next soulmate may not be from town. They could be passin’ through. Or movin’ here. No one Call is the same,” Wyatt tells us. “Not from what I’ve seen, anyway.”

“But the outcome is always the same,” Case replies, turning his head so our eyes meet.

“Case, I say this with the deepest respect, but please—for the love of the mountain—remember that we’re twins and sometimes we can sense the same feelin’s and thoughts...” Sutton arches a pointed brow his brother’s way and I watch a blush cover my boyfriend’s cheeks.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Will adds, getting us back on track. “We’ve still got a weddin’ to celebrate in a few months, and if Birdie thinks line dancin’ will help give her the day of her dreams, then we’re doin’ it.”

Before any of us can argue, the jukebox is turned down and a loud squeak from a microphone cuts through the air.

Birdie grins my way. “Oh, goodie. Right on time.” She’s seriously enjoying this.

Case's arm tightens. “Ready to make some memories, beautiful?” His breath on my skin sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

I nod, a wide smile spreading across my face. “Yep. Ready to make a fool of myself in the name of makin’ my best friend happy.”

His eyes drop to my lips before slowly sliding back to mine. “OK. Let’s go.” Something tells me dancing is the last thing on his mind right now.

With the microphone in her hand, the line dancing instructor introduces herself as

Hattie.

She's a vibrant woman. The kind that has enthusiasm and excitement oozing from her pores.

Then there's the cowboy hat, fringed brown suede top, denim shorts that barely graze her thighs, and matching leather boots to finish off the look.

She looks like a blast and proves to all of us that she's a whirlwind of energy as she gets the lesson started.

She claps her hands and calls out instructions like a drill sergeant but does it with a zest that's infectious.

Soon enough, Sutton and Jude line up in front of me and Case, with Will and Wyatt taking their positions behind us along with a bunch of other laughing bar patrons.

Hattie starts with the basics, walking us through the steps of a popular line dance. The guys look a mix of amused and terrified. I hold Case's hand and struggle to hold back my laughter because Birdie and I have done many a lesson with Hattie before in this very bar, and I know what's coming.

A quick glance at the bar confirms my suspicions. Birdie stands there with her eyes pinned to our group, a wicked smile on her lips, and a camera in her hand.

The music starts, a lively country tune that fills the air with a contagious rhythm. Hattie counts out the beats, demonstrating the steps with an ease that comes from years of practice.

We all follow along, some more gracefully than others. Case stumbles on the first few steps but catches on quickly. Sutton does the same, but Jude struggles. Soon it's

obvious to all and sundry that the poor man has two left feet despite all of his best intentions.

I look behind me to where Will and Wyatt are. Wy is a pro, no doubt from his years with his dad traveling with the rodeo but Will though—bless his heart—is moving slowly and methodically, trying hard, his eyes darting to where Birdie is urging him on with a huge smile.

When the music restarts and Hattie directs us to start again, I turn back to the front.

"You're doing great, curious," I say, laughing as he picks me up and spins me around with a playful grin. Dropping me back to my feet, he steals a quick kiss before we return to the dance routine.

"I think you might need to use those fancy feet of yours to help Jude. He's a lost cause."

I wince. "He's not that bad."

Case quirks a brow. "He got asked to leave a ballet class when he was five because he kept trippin' up himself and everyone else."

"I was five . How was I to know I had left-right disorientation?" Jude calls out from in front of us.

"You got this, Jude," Wyatt hollers from the back. "Just slow it down and focus on one move at a time."

Hattie chimes in with a laugh before stepping off the stage and walking over to stand next to Jude.

“Don't worry, honey! We'll have you dancin' like a pro in no time.

" She claps her hands together, drawing everyone's attention back to her.

"Alright, let's try it with some faster music this time! Remember, it's all about havin' fun and feelin' the rhythm. Right, Jude?"

“Right!”

The music starts up again and this time, we all jump in with more enthusiasm.

Case twirls me around, his hands steady on my waist as we move in time with the beat.

I can't help but laugh as Jude stumbles again, nearly taking out Sutton and Hattie in the process.

Sure enough though, after a few more tries, I see the moment it all clicks for him.

And just seeing the huge grin on his face was worth the wait— and trodden on toes.

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When we're all done with dancing, we return to our table to find Birdie waiting with drinks for everyone.

"That was..." she wheezes through her laughter, "the best thing I've ever seen. Jude, promise me a dance at our weddin'. It can be your present to everyone."

"Hey, I got better," he says, sounding a little disgruntled.

"Yes, you did." She pats his head. "So much so, it won't just be your present to me, but my present to you. I'll happily take the floor with you for a dance anytime."

His shoulders lift and I can't help but grin. "OK. You're on. Add me to your dance card."

After some more teasing of everyone by everyone, I catch Derrick Wilson making his way toward us.

Will and Case straighten, drawing their shoulders back as if preparing for whatever this Wilson is going to throw at us.

"Derrick," I say looking up to greet him when he comes to a stop at our table.

"Hey, Isla. Case." He lifts his chin and looks around the rest of the group, his eyes lingering on Will for a moment before he takes a deep breath. "Listen, I know this might not be the best time, but I wanted to talk to y'all without any of my family members around."

Will leans back in his chair. "What's on your mind, Derrick?"

"I wanted to apologize for my Dad's behavior toward you.

He's been... well, he's held a grudge against anyone with the last name Cooper for a long time now.

Hell, my granddaddy and his dad before that held it too.

I thought it would go away but it's startin' to become an issue now that you Coopers are back on the mountain. "

I tilt my head, curious. "What do you mean? Our grandfather was there for years before we arrived."

"He was away for a while too, remember. Things were fine when it was just Wilsons up there. Now you Coopers are back, Dad's not takin' it well.

" He sighs, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"Look, I know our families have had their differences in the past and I know a bit about it, and I'm guessin' y'all do too? " The guys all nod.

"We know some," Will replies.

"And slowly discoverin' more and more as time goes on," Sutton finishes.

Case leans forward, his brows furrowing. "What's the issue, Derrick? Why is he so stuck on this? Isn't it all in the past? It all stems from at least three generations ago."

"It's definitely before all of our time, that's for sure," Jude adds.

" I don't know all the details. I just know what I've been told. Seems like there was some kind of gentlemen's agreement between our great-grandfathers.

After Henley died—that was his name, right?

" We all nod. "After he passed, the land was given to my great-great granddaddy Ricky to look after on behalf of Henley's sons since their mother was grief-stricken for years until her death.

But then somethin' happened, and Henley's brothers turned up and refused to leave, effectively renegin' on the deal.

I don't know what it was about, but I understand that was the start of the bad blood between the Wilsons and the Coopers."

"I'm confused now. So you're sayin' Henley's brothers—who we haven't been able to find a record of anywhere—squatted on their own family land until Henley's sons' took it over."

"That would've been Ridley, yeah?" Will concludes.

"Yep." Derrick frowns. "And Dad was Henley's nephew—Ricky's grandson."

"So you're sayin' Sully is hell-bent on rightin' the perceived wrongs of the past?" I ask him.

"I think he's just villainizin' anyone remotely related to the Coopers, whether it's deserved or not," Derrick replies.

"What are we supposed to do about it?" Will asks. "Henley bein' married to Marion, and their son bein' our grandfather, means the Wilsons and the Coopers are distant

cousins.”

“That means Ridley and Sully were second cousins?” Wyatt suggests.

Derrick’s eyes widen. “I hadn’t really thought of that till now. Wow.”

Jude snorts. “That was our reaction when we worked it out too. But hey, welcome to the family and all that,” he says with a grin.

Silence falls around the table.

“So, this gentlemen’s agreement. Does that mean the Wilsons—” Derrick opens his mouth to say something but Will continues before he can, “and I mean, back then , not now, they think they have or had a claim to Cooper Ranch?”

“That’s the thing about gentlemen's agreements,” Derrick says. “They’re bound by a handshake and the word of the men who make it.”

“And there’s no way to ever find out what was said or promised,” Sutton adds.

“Not necessarily. There has to be somethin’ about it somewhere .” Derrick’s gaze rounds the group again. “All I’m sayin’ is that instead of standin’ by and lettin’ Dad run y’all back to the city, my brothers and I and all y’all can start lookin’ at ways to set the wrongs of the past right somehow.”

“Or prove there were no wrongs to set right to begin with,” Case adds.

Will’s brows furrow. “We’re not leavin’ though. Ain’t nobody goin’ to be runnin’ us back to the city. We’re here to stay.”

“Glad to hear it.” Derrick’s gaze is full of respect. “But you don’t know Dad. He’s as

stubborn as a mule and dedicated to gettin' what he thinks is owed to our family."

Now I'm really confused. "What does he think is owed to the Wilsons?"

"He thinks our generation—me and my siblings—are cursed."

"How?" I ask.

"Why?" Birdie tags on.

"Because we're all single and unmarried. None of us have found our soulmates."

"And Sully thinks that's a curse?" Jude asks, genuinely confused if his expression is anything to go by.

"That's why he wants what he thinks should be ours." Derrick looks around the group before dropping the bomb none of us saw coming. "He wants the mountain. The land. The Call. He wants all of it."

CASE

TWO MONTHS LATER

Sometimes I can't sleep. No matter how hard I try or how much I need to, I just can't get my brain to switch off.

According to Mom and Cap, it's been a problem since I was a kid. They'd hear a noise in the night and get up to investigate, only to find me in bed reading a book or just staring at the ceiling and counting all the little holes I could find in the panels.

They soon realized that it was just something I did—or couldn't do. After that, I never ran out of books to read or puzzles to do. Word searches were my favorite, followed by crosswords, then comic books.

Even now, at thirty-three and lying next to the love of my life in my bed, I can't sleep. But instead of reading books or doing puzzles, I'm perfectly content to just watch her and marvel at how different my life is compared to when we first met.

The reason I can't sleep this time is not because of anything bad. It's because I can't imagine my life being any better than it is right now.

Except for one thing...

A glance at the alarm clock beside the bed says it's just before dawn. Soon the sun will rise and the ranch will slowly come to life for another day, and Isla will open her beautiful brown eyes and smile at me. That's all it takes these days for any worries I

have to fade away. A look. A smile. A touch. A kiss.

My therapist has told me that Isla hasn't magically cured my depression disorder—even though I truly believe she has—it's more that our connection and the way she makes me feel is acting like a buffer against the usual challenges of my mental illness.

They also praised me for recognizing the positive impact that being loved—and in love—has had on both my life and my mindset. Then they made sure I knew to keep relying on my own developed strategies for managing my moods.

Isla has also spoken to my therapist, asking for help so she can look out for the signs when a low time is coming and be there for me when it does inevitably happen.

That was yesterday afternoon. That was also when I knew that I couldn't wait another day to have my ring on her finger. I'm hers and I know she's mine, so it's time the world knew that too.

Carefully lifting my arms away from her, I roll over and slowly open the nightstand drawer, pulling out the black velvet box that's been stowed away in there ever since Sutton and I came back from our Anchorage trip. Even more precious though is the piece of paper wrapped around the box.

When I turn back, I meet Isla's sleepy gaze, a soft smile curving her lips.

"Mornin', beautiful," I whisper, brushing a gentle kiss against her forehead. She stretches languidly as the soft light of dawn filters through the window, casting a warm dim glow over her face.

"You're awake early," she murmurs, snuggling closer to me. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her in, feeling the steady rhythm of her heart against mine. "Can't sleep

again?"

I shake my head. "Too much on my mind."

She props herself up on one elbow while her eyes search mine. "Everythin' OK?"

"More than OK. Was just thinkin' about us. About how much you mean to me..."

Her expression softens as she reaches out to trace the line of my jaw with her fingertips. "Case..."

I take a deep breath, my voice steady despite the nerves thrumming through me.

"I never knew what would happen when I moved to the mountain. I knew I'd have my brothers and that whatever came our way, we'd have each other.

But the night before the will was read, my life changed forever," I say, staring deep into her eyes... her soul.

"See, there was this brown-eyed, beautiful stranger who turned my existence upside down that night." Her lips tip up and her gaze shines with tears.

"Then I woke up ready to ask if we could explore our connection and instead of my beautiful stranger, I found a note. One that I've cherished ever since.

" I hold out my hand to show the paper-covered ring box.

"That piece of paper has been carefully tucked away in my wallet ever since."

Her lips part but I press on, my voice shaking as I do. "When I saw you again, I knew the universe was givin' me a second chance with the woman who changed my life in

one night and who I just knew I couldn't—wouldn't—let slip through my fingers again."

"Case..." she whispers, a smile playing on her lips.

"You make me want to be a better man, Isla. And I can't imagine a future without you by my side." Happy tears fall onto her cheeks as she listens to my words, her hand coming to rest on my chest.

"Beautiful," I begin, my voice barely above a whisper. "I love you more than words can express. You are my everythin', my soulmate, my anchor. And I plan on spendin' the rest of my life showin' you just how much you mean to me."

With trembling hands, I unwrap the note and carefully place it down safely before opening the box to reveal the ring nestled inside. The diamonds catch the morning light and cast a sparkle that reflects off the walls.

"Will you marry me, Isla Murray?"

She takes in the ring, her tears flowing freely now, and I'm not ashamed to admit that she's not the only one crying.

She looks from the ring to me, her expression full of absolute, unwavering love. "Case," she whispers, her voice choked with emotion. "It's beautiful."

I take the ring out of the box and hold it up.

"It reminded me of you. Bright, sparkling, and full of life.

"I reach for her hand, holding it gently in mine. "I want to wake up every mornin' to your smile and laughter. I want to build a life with you, right here on this mountain.

Be mine forever, beautiful. Marry me.”

She takes a deep breath, her eyes never leaving mine. "Yes! Yes!" she yells before her gaze jumps wide and she covers her mouth. "You had me when you told me you weren't the only smart one in the room."

A laugh bubbles out of me as I slowly glide the ring down her finger to rest at the base before leaning down and pressing my lips on top of it.

Isla's eyes blaze brighter than the diamonds on her finger. In the blink of an eye, she throws her arms around my neck and tackles me to the bed, peppering everywhere she can touch with kisses.

"I love you, Case," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. "I love you so much."

I hold her close, feeling her heart beating against mine.

When she finally pulls back, she's glowing. "We're getting' married," she says, a wide grin spreading across her face.

"We are," I reply. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

She looks down at the ring before she meets my eyes again, her cheeks flushing pink. "Do you think I woke up the whole house?"

"I." kiss. "don't." kiss. "care," I say before rolling her over and covering her body with mine.

Then there's no more talking, but there is a hell of a lot of celebrating.

"Oh my God !" Birdie screeches the minute she sees the ring on Isla's finger over

breakfast.

My fiancée's smile is so big, her cheeks still flushed and her lips pink from our morning celebrations. Reaching out, I grab her other hand so that she can't get stolen away from me. Hey, I'm feeling a little possessive. I blame the Call.

"I know it's been quick but it's also... not ," Sutton says, moving on from Isla to hug me from behind.

I turn to look up at him over my shoulder. "When you know, you know."

His eyes roam over my face before he locks them on mine. "Yeah, I can see that you do. Have done for a while, too."

"You could be next, brother."

He snorts and shakes his head. "I just hope I don't end up clueless like Will was or havin' to wait a long time like you did."

Feeling the warmth of Isla's palm in mine and still riding the afterglow of our early morning together, I realize I wouldn't have had it any other way. "I'd have waited forever to call her mine."

Sutton's brows lift before a slow-growing grin appears on his face. "Now that , little brother, is what I like to hear."

I shake my head. "Minutes, Sutt. Minutes!"

"I'm still older, Case. Remember that."

Once everyone has returned to their seats, I catch Will and Birdie looking at each

other having a silent conversation like the ones Sutton and I have. The same ones that everyone tells us off about.

“Hey! If Sutt and I aren’t allowed to have our secret talks, you two can’t either,” I tell Will, drawing everyone’s attention.

Birdie smirks before turning her head to whisper something in Will’s ear. She pulls back and stares at him. He arches a brow and she nods enthusiastically. He grins and shakes his head at her before wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her into his side.

“You two goin’ to let us in on the secret?” Jude calls out from his end of the table.

“Will and I have a proposal of our own for you,” Birdie begins, looking between the two of us.

“What is it?” my fiancée says. I don’t think I’m ever going to get tired of saying that. Not until the day I start calling her my wife, anyway.

“I’ll preface this by saying that you can say no, and I’ll still love you and will stand by your side whenever you two decide you want to do it,” Birdie says, rambling puzzlingly.

Isla giggles. “B, you’re doin’ that thing again where you know what you’re sayin’ but nobody else does.” That gets all of us laughing.

Will gazes over at her. “Just hit them with it, honey.”

“OK,” Birdie says, taking a deep breath. “I—”

“We ...” Will corrects her.

“OK, we were wonderin’ if you’d like... I mean... “

“What my beautiful, generous, big-hearted bride-to-be is askin’ is whether y’all want to get married with us.”

I still, my whole body turning to concrete as Isla’s does the same. I stare wide-eyed at my brother before slowly looking at the woman at my side.

Everyone else in the room fades away, all that matters is my One and those big hopeful eyes of hers. That’s when I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding because I can tell Isla wants this as much as I do.

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I stroke my thumb over her cheek, brushing it over the corner of her mouth. “I love you and would marry you today if I could. So this decision isn’t mine to make, it’s yours.” Dipping my head, I touch my lips to hers before turning back to Will.

“That’s a generous offer,” I say, my eyes boring into my big brother’s relaxed ones.

“It’s not a hard one. Birdie and Isla do everythin’ together.

They always have and they always will,” he states.

“The way I see it, there ain’t anythin’ in the world that would make my One happier on what will be one of the most important days of our lives, than to have her other soulmate by her side, pledgin’ her troth to my brother at the same time. ”

The room goes deathly quiet until a snort from the other end of the table breaks the silence. “Troth, Will? Really?” Sutton laughs.

“Who says troth these days?” Wyatt muses.

“Will does, that’s who,” Jude adds.

Birdie laughs, tipping her chin up towards Will. “I love that you say troth, City Boy.”

She reaches for Isla’s hand and closes her fingers around it.

“Ever since we were little girls cuttin’ pictures from old magazines in the florist shop, we said we’d get married together.

We had it all planned out. We would get married together, live next door to one another, and somehow have our babies at the same time too.

We even said that if our husbands didn't like it, then we'd make them marry each other.

"That gets a snort out of Isla and a unified chuckle from everyone else.

"It's just our luck that the mountain chose brothers to fall in love with.

But since my Cooper man is an amazin' person, I didn't even have to suggest that we all do it together." I frown, my head jerking toward Will.

"This was your doin'?" I ask.

He jerks his chin up. "Why wait, Case? You two have waited long enough. Besides, why drag Mom and Cap out for our weddin' and yours later on, when we can have a big mountain party and have a double weddin'."

Birdie grins. "Two brides, two grooms, two best men, and Wy can be the flower boy or somethin'."

My throat grows thick and I find myself blinking back my own emotion. Isla leans toward me, tears shimmering in her eyes and a soft smile gracing her lips. "I can't imagine a more perfect way to start our life together, curious. Surrounded by our family, friends, and a whole lot of love."

"I want you to have your dream day, beautiful," I whisper. "My dream is you. You are what matters to me."

"Damn, he's good," Sutton murmurs.

“Might have to copy that one for when it’s my turn,” Jude replies.

I block them both out, my focus on the woman in front of me. I can see in her eyes just how much she wants this.

"Then it's settled," I say, turning back to Will and Birdie. "Looks like Cooper Ranch is havin' itself a double weddin'."

Birdie lets out a squeal of excitement, jumping out of her chair at the same time Isla does before they throw their arms around each other. Will shoots me a proud smile while the room fills with chatter and laughter.

It’s then that a notification pings on my phone. It takes me a few seconds to realize what that means.

“We’ve got a bookin’!” I announce as I quickly read over the reservation details.

“Already?” Will says. "That was quick."

My eyes snap up to where everyone is staring at me expectantly from the dining room table.

“What is it?” Sutton asks.

“The website only went live yesterday,” I say, not hiding my surprise. “I haven’t even posted our link on any of the farm stay websites. I thought for sure we would have to tweak the AdWords and work on the SEO for a while but—”

“Case?” Wy says.

“Yeah?”

“Nobody but you knows about AdWords and SEO," he quips.

“You do, apparently. Because nobody says SEO unless they know what it is," I shoot back. The kid shrugs, an all-knowing grin playing on his lips.

“OK. Me too. That makes two of us.”

“What’s SEO?” Jude asks.

“Search engine optimization,” Wyatt and I say at the same time.

Will rolls his eyes. “Let’s stay on topic, guys. We’ve got all the time in the world to learn Case and Wy’s tech speak. Who’s the bookin’ from?”

I focus back on the screen and scroll down to the guest details, frowning when I get to the comments section. My head darts up to Sutton who looks confused.

“It’s a doctor. It says here that she’s comin’ to town for six months to work at the hospital and she needs somewhere ‘like home’ to stay.”

“A doctor?” Sutton looks to Isla as if hoping she’ll have the answer. "I haven't heard of anyone new coming on board."

“ Oh ,” she gasps. “There's an attendin’ at the hospital who is takin’ long service leave. My boss’s boss told me they were gettin’ a hotshot specialist in to cover and trial some new services at the same time.”

“What’s their name?” I ask.

“My boss’s boss or the attendin’?” Isla replies.

“Either one will do.”

She frowns. “George is the attendin’. My boss’s boss is called Tabitha. She’s a real gossip. She gives the old ladies at the Grill a run for their money, I tell ya!”

“Beautiful, what’s George’s family name?”

“Oh, George Littlefoot.”

Will chuckles. “Your boss’s boss’s name is Mr. Littlefoot?”

Isla sighs. “Well, doctor . But yeah.”

“This bookin’ is for a Ms. Blair Littlefoot,” I tell them all before it hits me. This could be it. I look over at Sutton. “You know what this means don’t you?”

“That nepotism is alive and well in the mountains of Alaska?” Sutton deadpans.

I roll my eyes. “Nope. Well, maybe. But that’s not what I was meanin’.”

“Care to explain then?” he retorts. I stare at him, waiting for him to clue in. It takes him less than a second more. “It doesn’t mean anythin’, Case.”

I shrug. “It might though.”

“It won’t,” he shoots back.

“But it could ...”

Sutton rolls his eyes. “Might not even be for me. Could be Jude’s turn.”

Jude's head stills after bouncing back and forth between me and Sutton, looking more than a little lost. "My turn for what?"

"The Call , silly," Birdie pipes up. "A new doctor is comin' to Timber Falls, and she's goin' to be stayin' with us on the mountain. She could be someone's soulmate." She claps her hands excitedly. "She sure isn't wastin' any time, is she?"

Now I'm confused. "The doctor?" I ask.

"I think she means the mountain spirit," Isla tells me.

"Can we get back to the fact that we have our first guest comin'?" Will asks. "This is great ."

Birdie grins at him. "Well, yeah. There's that too. Congrats, City Boy."

"Congrats to all of us," Wyatt adds. "This is what we've all been workin' toward. This will be our trial run for when the other cabins are ready."

"Why would a hotshot specialist doctor want to stay on a ranch when she could stay at the town's motel," Sutton asks.

That's when Birdie shoots my twin an all-knowing grin. "Guess we'll all find out when Doctor Blair Littlefoot comes to stay."

Five Years Later

“Mom?” I call out as I let myself into the meadow cottage as we all now call it.

Mom and Betty both live here on the mountain now.

After spending most of their lives living next door to one another, it only took six months of Mom living in the cottage before they both admitted that they didn’t like having more than a fence between them. That’s when Case and I suggested that Betty and Mom become roommates.

It means Mom has a live-in caregiver on the days when she struggles to move without the help of her walker, and Betty has companionship and a purpose—her words, not mine. Her husband passed away many years ago and her children live in the Lower 48 so we’ve all adopted her as another Grandma.

It also means that Mom can spend more time with our three-year-old daughter and her namesake, Jessie-Lynn, and she has Betty there to help out. It's not surprising that Betty is just as tightly wrapped around Jessie’s finger as the rest of us.

Not finding Mom, Betty, or my rambunctious daughter in the house, I go searching, finding them all outside at the far end of the garden we planted for her and which we all take turns maintaining.

“Mama!” Jessie squeals, spotting me immediately and jumping up to run to me. Crouching down, I hold my arms open for her, closing them around her as she buries her cherubic face in my chest. “I missed you.”

My heart melts. “I missed you too, baby. Have you had a good time with Grandma and Nanny Betty?”

“Yup. They’re making me a wreath of flowers. I’m gonna be a princess, Mama,” she states emphatically with her adorable lisp.

I tickle her, loving the sound of her giggle. “Daddy says you’re already his princess.”

She swings from side to side, her knee-length tulle tutu moving with her. She’s also wearing pink cowboy boots which are near impossible to get off her feet at bedtime.

She’s the perfect mix of a girly girl and a strong, very independent mini-rancher in training. Believe me, life is never boring with our girl around, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

She was a very much wanted surprise that came a little sooner than we’d expected. Now I can’t imagine a life without her chocolate eyes and matching brown curls waking me up every morning.

“Where’s Daddy?” she asks, a frown scrunching her brows. “Gramma said Papa was comin’ to fix her sat—sat—” She stomps her foot, getting frustrated at herself.

I wait patiently, knowing she’ll work out what she wants to say. Years of working with patients of all ages at the hospital have definitely come in handy. They have given me the patience and empathy needed to be a mom.

Her eyes light up. “The dish! Grumpy headbudded it and it went splat!” She even reenacts it by going stiff as a board and falling over onto the grass.

“Jessie-Lynn Cooper, my goodness. Why are you rollin’ around the grass?” Mom says, her voice laced with amusement as she joins us. “Hey, sweetheart. How are you

feelin'?"

I slowly stand straight again, my six-month-round baby belly threatening to tip me too far forward. "I'm OK. Just tired. Birdie and I were jokin' that these second pregnancies seem so much harder than the first."

Mom's eyes dance. "I have no experience with that. I got it perfect my first time out and decided not to mess with fate," she says with a wink. "But feel free to send our princess down the mountain anytime you want a break. I love havin' her around. Especially out in the garden."

"I heard you were makin' her a wreath?"

"Oh yes. She woke up thinkin' she was going to be a future Queen. We compromised on Princess."

"Hence the wreath," I add.

"Exactly."

Jessie runs off after a butterfly, following it through the path winding through the wildflowers that none of us could bear to clear when we were building the cabin.

Mom's gaze drifts over to my daughter. "She's just like you, you know?"

"Cheeky?" I tease.

Mom meets my eyes. "Energetic, smart, beautiful... perfect."

"Now you're just flatterin' me," I joke, but it's just to mask the lump in my throat and the tears stinging my eyes. Damn pregnancy hormones. That's my excuse anyway

and I'm sticking to it.

"No. I'm tellin' you that I'm damn proud of you. You're my biggest achievement and one of the people I cherish most."

My lips quirk up. "After Jessie-Lynn of course."

Mom shakes her head, her own eyes glassy.

"There's no her without you and Case. I hate my disease but at least one good thing came out of it.

You met the love of your life, and now you have your own perfect image of yourself and another on the way.

"Leaning forward, she rests her head on the side of my stomach, getting a hearty kick for her troubles.

"Maybe we've got a mini-Cayson in there this time? "

I narrow my eyes her way. "You know we're not findin' out this time. We want to be surprised."

"I know," she sighs. "Can't blame an old lady for tryin'."

"You're not old, Mom. You're just experienced ."

She hugs me, resting her cheek on my shoulder while we laugh at Jessie trying to pounce on the poor butterfly, who thwarts her attempts but keeps fluttering in and out of reach.

“Are you happy, Lala?”

“Didn’t think I could be this happy. Every day I wonder how life could get any better. Then I wake up with my husband next to me and my daughter smilin’ at me and realize that it’s not that the days get better, it’s that I see and appreciate everythin’ more.”

“I’m glad. That’s all I wanted for you—the same happiness you’ve brought me since the day you were born.”

“Mom, stop! You’re goin’ to make me cry for real.”

“Oh well. You’ve been doin’ that since you were born too,” she says with a laugh.

“I love you, Mom. Don’t ever forget it.”

“I won’t, sweetheart. How can I when you prove it to me every single day.”

“That’s it. You’ve done it now,” I say, smiling as a tear drops onto my cheek.

She looks over at me and grins, leaning up to wipe it away. “Don’t worry. We’ll just tell your husband it’s pregnancy hormones.”

“You’ll tell me what?” The man in question says, coming up behind me and kissing my temple.

“Mom made me cry,” I say, tattling on her.

“Jessica,” he says, sounding like a growly father. “Why are you makin’ my wife cry?”

“She started it. She wouldn’t tell me the baby’s gender,” Mom argues.

Case's eyes are dancing when they meet mine. “Should we tell her?” I shrug, playing along.

“What? You said you didn’t know!” she exclaims.

We both go quiet, waiting until Mom’s eyes narrow to slits before a snicker escapes me, followed by a snort from Cade. Then we’re both laughing as Mom realizes she’s been duped.

“You’ll keep. Just you wait.”

Case cradles my stomach from behind, pressing another soft kiss to the back of my neck. “Yeah, we’re all waitin’, remember?”

“Jessie-Lynn, I’m comin’ to play with you. Your mommy and daddy are bein’ mean to Grandma.”

Unfortunately for Mom, that’s when my daughter spots her father, and like every day for the past three and a half years, everyone else is forgotten. We all become invisible when Case is around.

With hearts in her eyes, all we hear is a screeched “Papa” as my two favorite people run to each other.

The thing is, I don’t even mind. Who would when I get to fall deeper in love with my husband—my One—while watching him fall deeper in love with our beautiful daughter every single day.

And I won’t mind when it happens all over again with our son either.

But shh, that can be our little secret.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:17 am

“Where are we goin’?” my wife asks for the third time as we drive deeper into the mountain range.

It’s our tenth anniversary and since the traditional gift is tin or aluminum, I decided to get her a tin hat. Literally .

“Curious, you know how much I love you?”

“Of course, beautiful,” I reply.

“And you know how I pledged my troth to you all those years ago, carried and gave birth to your two adorable children, and continue to warm your bed every night?”

I’m more than a little suspicious of her intentions, especially since she’s blindfolded and I can’t read her eyes. “Mmm?”

“Surely that has earned me at least a little clue about where we’re goin’ for the night?”

I run my hand up and down her jean-clad leg, her body even more sexy and tantalizing to me now than she was ten years ago. “Beautiful?”

“Yeah,” she says, a smile curving her lips that tells me she thinks I’m giving in.

“You can wait,” I deadpan, chuckling under my breath when she growls at me.

“You’ll keep, Mr . Cooper.”

I grab her hand and lift it to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “As long as you keep me, that’s all that matters, Mrs. Cooper.”

“Ugh,” she grumbles. “Can you not be sweet when I’m grumpy.”

“You’re not grumpy. You’re excited and anxious and desperate to know where I’m whiskin’ you away to. Besides, don’t you know by now? I’ll take you grumpy, happy, anxious, excited. All of them, all the time.”

“Now you’re bein’ swoony,” she says, less annoyed this time.

“Mmm hmm.” I lower our joined hands to the seat between us and stroke the back of her hand as we drive closer to our destination.

Twenty minutes later, I turn into a driveway I last visited ten years ago.

A slightly older but no less friendly Maisie and her husband, Marty Martin, standing there there to greet me as I exit the truck and round the hood to help Isla.

“It’s nice to see y’all again,” she says just as I open the passenger door.

“I know that voice,” Isla says, turning her head my way, her blindfold still firmly in place.

Maisie grins. “Well, look at that. I knew you two would make it. Especially after I caught y’all canoodlin’ like teenagers behind my barn.”

“Don’t forget our stained fingers. They were purple for a good few days after our date here,” Isla replies, her smile soft and warm.

“I guess you worked it out, beautiful,” I say as I slide the blindfold up and over her head and meet her melty chocolate eyes that she shared with our gorgeous eight-year-

old daughter.

“This was our first date,” she whispers, turning to greet our hosts. “Maisie and Marty, long time no see.”

“Over ten years, in fact,” I muse. “Today is our tenth weddin’ anniversary.”

“Well, congratulations,” Marty says, holding out his hand for us to take turns shaking. “Is that why you booked our new experience?”

“Sure is.”

Isla’s brows bunch in confusion. “You mean we’re not here to pick berries and watch a movie again?”

“Oh no, lovely. Your husband here has organized somethin’ even more excitin’ than that,” Maisie tells her. “Y’all are stayin’ in our glass-roofed glamping tent. You’ll be our first customers.”

My wife cocks her head my way. “Are we seein’ the Borealis?”

I waggle my brows. “Even better than that, beautiful. We’re goin’ UFO spottin’.”

Her eyes bug out of her head before she grins so wide I’m surprised her face doesn’t split open. Then she’s diving my way, her mouth finding mine as she kisses me long and deep, showing me just how much she approves of our plans.

Pulling back her head, her bright eyes meet my hooded ones. I have my beautiful wife in my arms and she just kissed me stupid. Can you blame me? “Can we watch Independence Day while UFO spottin’?”

I laugh, planting one last hard and fast kiss on her lips. “We can do whatever you

want, beautiful. It's our night. No children crawlin' into our bed in the night, no animals makin' my hair turn grey. It's just you and me."

"And a tin hat," Maisie says. She and Marty hold out not one but two homemade "tin" hats made out of aluminum foil. "Happy anniversary, lovebirds."

I look at them and then the hats before turning back to my wife who's struggling to hold back her laughter even more than I am.

We take the hats off their hands and after giving us an information pack along with a map showing us where to find the tent.

Then they bid us farewell, leaving us alone again.

Isla hops down and rests her hands on my hips, leaning her body against mine. "We're not goin' to forget this date in a hurry."

I reach up and cradle her jaw. "I've never forgotten a single moment of our lives together so far, and don't plan on startin' now. I love you, Isla Cooper. That's somethin' I don't ever want you to forget."

"How can I? Buyin' that pecan pie was the best damn decision I ever made."

"The best?" I ask, quirking a brow.

"Well, the best was marryin' you. Anythin' else is just a bonus."

For the record, we did not see any UFOs during our stay at Honeyberry Farms that night. Then again, once we got inside the tent, that was the very last thing on our minds.