



My Devoted Mountain Man (Summer in the Pines #11)

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Category: Romance

Description: The silver fox in the mountains thinks he can hide from me...

That man is everything I shouldn't want—a brooding ex-soldier with a past he's clearly not keen to share. But I'm not one to back down, especially when his art has been a lifeline for my gallery. Lately, though, his deliveries have stopped, and I'm desperate to know why. So, I do something reckless. I go up his mountain to confront him.

Only, I get lost along the way and end up injured. Now, I'm at his mercy. The last thing I want is to be stuck in his remote cabin with a man who looks like he could chew me up and spit me out. But that doesn't stop me from wanting him. And if I'm going to be here, I might as well make the most of it—starting with seducing the stubborn mountain man who thinks I'm nothing more than a distraction.

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Prologue

Erika

I 'm in a frenzy as I put the final touches on my best artwork yet. The best part? I'm getting paid handsomely for it. I stand back and look at the finished product. I smile to myself, knowing this beauty will hang in a prominent place in a business building downtown.

I can't help but do a little dance around my apartment. This is a big deal for me. I've still got six months of art school and maybe an internship if I'm lucky. Having a portfolio of artwork I've sold could be the one thing that gets my career going.

Looking inside the fridge, I take out one of the little champagne bottles I've got so I can celebrate when I finish a piece. I take it out, pop it, and drink it right from the bottle. I can't help it. I'm giddy and want to experience this feeling for as long as possible.

The door to the apartment opens, and my body tenses. I've been living with my boyfriend Devlin for a year now, but he's not the most supportive person when it comes to my art.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

"I finished my piece. I'm celebrating."

"I see."

He probably doesn't, but I won't be bothered by it. I wonder for the millionth time if I should end things with him, but it's relatively comfortable, and I hate conflict. I realize he's been silent for a minute, and that doesn't bode well for me.

"What are you going to do with it? We've got no more space in this apartment to store your paintings."

"I'm selling it."

"This? You're going to sell this? No one will buy it, Erika. This is garbage."

A chill goes through me, and I stand up next to him in front of the painting.

"This is my best work, Devlin."

"I can't believe after three and a half years of art school you're still producing subpar work like this."

"You're not an art major, what do you know?"

My words have fire in them, but inside I'm breaking into a million little pieces. I thought...

"I've got to go. Do you want me to toss this in the trash for you?"

"No, I've got it."

As soon as he's out the door, I start to destroy my canvas. Hours and hours of work are wasted. I'm just not talented enough to make a living at this. With tears in my eyes, I promise myself never to try to sell my art again.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Erika

It's been a month, and Fletcher the silver fox, mountain man who has made my little art gallery famous, hasn't come in with any new pieces for me to sell.

I have never gone up the mountain here at Hunter's Peak, but I won't let my fear keep me from finding out what's wrong with the man I can't stop thinking about.

I stop at the grocery store and ask Cassie for directions up the mountain. Things can be rugged up there, and I'm scared I might get lost.

She's kind, and I take notes in my planner as she chats away.

After we gossip for a while, I decide it's time to tackle the mountain. I get into my Mini Cooper and give myself a pep talk. I can do this. I know I can. Following the instructions, I take a 'shortcut' that Cassie uses often.

The road out here is rough, and the undercarriage of my car is too close to the ground, so I feel every bump I drive over. Mostly gravel, but I'm worried about what it's doing to my baby. It took me a long time to save up for this car, and I don't want anything to happen to it.

Then I hear it, a loud bang underneath my car, and it immediately stalls.

"No, no, no, no, no."

I get out and try to see what I ran over that caused this mess. I'm no mechanic, so I

can't figure it out. When I look around me, I realize I'm in the middle of nowhere. I reach for my purse to get my phone, and of course, there are no bars. There's no reception out here. Damn it.

I start cursing like a sailor, which is something I do when I'm really upset. It won't change my situation, but it makes me feel better, and that's something I need at the moment.

Not knowing how far or close I am to Fletcher's cabin, I decide to keep going on foot. I'm not wearing the best shoes for a hike, but what's a girl to do? After a while, I realize I'm no longer on a road and I start to panic.

That's when the heel of my shoe breaks and I limp awkwardly while trying to find something I recognize that can get me back to my car.

I'm tired, so I sit down on a fallen log and try to make sense of it all.

Clearly, I'm lost. I consider myself a smart, resourceful woman, but this is too much for me right now. Damn Fletcher and this mountain. I try to remind myself that I, too, found Hunter's Peak a wonderful refuge from the world.

After sulking for a few minutes, I realize that I need to move before it gets dark. So I get up, dust myself off, and start walking. I still don't recognize anything that could lead me back to the road or my car, and I start to panic.

I'm also getting tired and seem to stumble more and more on the uneven terrain. As I maneuver myself through the woods, I suddenly catch my foot on something. I fall down and due to the steep incline of the mountain, I start to roll down at an incredible speed.

It seems like hours not seconds pass until finally I hit something that stops my

movement but also hurts like a son of a bitch. I don't even try to move because my whole body is in pain, so I just lie there for a bit. I do a self-check on my current status.

I've lost my shoes, I've hit my head, and I have a large bump to go with it, and something seems to be pinning me to the ground. I lift my head to see that there's a big splotch of red on my side, and there's a branch sticking out of me. Shit.

This. This is how I die. Now I let the tears flow freely and resign myself to my fate—dying alone on the side of a mountain.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Fletcher

I 've been obsessively working on my art for the past month. I need to do something, or I'll go crazy up here on this mountain. I came to Hunter's Peak so many years ago as a broken man, having experienced the worst of humankind in the military.

I have so many finished pieces in my workshop that it's starting to get crowded in here. I try to focus on what I'm working on—a deer with two fawns caught as they drink from the creek that is not far from here. As I carve the detail on the piece, I wonder why it reminds me so much of her.

Her. Erika White. Young, vibrant, and the woman of my dreams. Except I know she'll never have an old broken man like me, so I've been trying to stay away. It's been harder than I thought it would be. In the first few weeks, I had to keep myself from driving into town to deliver my artwork.

We have a verbal agreement about me making pieces for her to sell in her gallery, but there's no written contract.

A fact I'm using as an excuse not to go to her.

It's just that my feelings for her are now overwhelming, and I know that if I see her, I'm going to kiss her and claim her, no matter where we are when that happens.

When she approached me so that she could show my work in her gallery, I was immediately taken by her.

Getting to know her with each encounter we've had has been life-changing for me.

At first, I didn't believe that she could sell art from her tiny gallery here in Hunter's Peak, but she proved me wrong time and time again.

Now my mind is filled with images of her smiling and showing me support for my art. I thought I could make a few dollars with my hobby, but she's made thousands in sales for me, completely surprising me. That's who she is, though. A surprising individual with a heart of gold.

I continue working on my piece until my phone rings. I set down my carving tools and reach for it.

"Hello?"

"Fletcher, this is Dean from the search and rescue team. We need a few volunteers to help us look for a missing person who seems to be lost in the mountains. Are you available?"

"Yes, I can help. Where do I meet you?"

"I'm sending you the location where we've found her car. She's been missing for a day and a half."

"Damn. Okay. I'll see you in a few."

I close the connection and put away my tools. The SAR team here at Hunter's Peak often calls on my help due to my military experience. These mountains can be treacherous to those who don't know how to navigate them.

The place where I'm meeting Dean is relatively close to my cabin, and a chill races

through my body when I get closer and see the car that's been left on the side of the road.

It's her car.

Now I'm close to hyperventilating.

It can't be. She can't be missing for a day and a half. What if she's hurt? The thoughts in my head are going a mile a minute as I park my car and rush to meet Dean.

"This is Erika White's car, Dean. Is she the one missing?"

"Hi, Fletcher. Yes, I'm afraid so. You work with her, right?"

"I do. Put me to work."

We are divided into groups and assigned different grids of the mountain. I am utterly and completely devastated by the fact that this delicate, young girl has been out here on her own for so long.

The search goes slowly, and with every minute that passes, I grow more concerned for Erika. It's summer, but I try to remember what the temperature was last night. What tears me up inside is how frightened she must be.

I push myself harder and harder because I want to be the one to find her. I swear to myself that I'll pull her into my arms and never let go of her again. I'll confess my love to her and we'll live happily ever after, like in the fairytales.

But this is no fairytale, and it becomes a nightmare when I catch a glimpse of something down the mountain. Whatever it is, it's not moving.

"Over here."

I shout for the others as I make my way down to where a figure is lying inert on the hard forest ground. The closer I get, the scarier things become until I kneel down before a pale and unconscious Erika.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Fletcher

My heart wants to leave my chest when I see that Erika is pinned to a branch.

The red stain that has spread across her shirt tells me she's been bleeding for quite some time.

That's why she's so pale. I hear someone behind me giving coordinates so that the field doctor, Brock Masters, can make his way to our location.

"Erika. Come back to me, sweetheart."

She frowns as if she can hear me, but her eyes stay closed, making daggers shoot through my heart. I pull out my handkerchief and pat the sweat that covers her brow. I'm at a complete loss for what to do before the doctor gets here.

So I just start telling her how strong she is and how she's going to be okay after we get her to the clinic. After a while, I begin telling her how much I admire her and that I've got a little crush on her. She probably won't remember any of this, so it doesn't matter what I say.

All I desperately need is for her to know that she is no longer alone and that help is on the way.

It seems like it's been talking forever when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you the doctor?"

"Call me Brock."

"She's very important to me, Brock. Please take good care of her."

"I understand, but you need to let me get near her so I can do my job."

I realize that I've been blocking everyone from reaching Erika, and I begrudgingly get up and move to the side. Brock checks her and tells us she's lost a lot of blood. First, the team needs to cut the branch that's holding her down so that they can transport her to the hospital.

They've got procedures in place for this kind of thing, but I'm panicking. There are so many people around her that they keep pushing me back. I know I'm only in the way, but I want to be close to her when she wakes—because she will wake up and be okay. She has to.

Even though Erika is still unconscious, I hear Brock say out loud everything he's doing as the team works on cutting the branch. I try to see her face, and find that she's frowning even in her sleep. Brock needs to move back to let the team work, and I see him approach me.

"The puncture has only affected her side, but no organs have been pierced. It's only the fact that she's lost so much blood that she hasn't woken up yet. Once we're at the clinic, I'll operate and get the branch out."

I don't really know what to say, so I stay silent as I watch him go back and help the team move Erika to the gurney they brought in. They strap her down and make sure she can be safely transported to the town's clinic.

Following after the team like a lost puppy makes me feel useless, but I need to be close to her. When we get back on the road, I see transportation is already there. I beg

them to let me ride with her, and they reluctantly allow it.

Throughout the ride, I hold her small hand in mine and keep sending prayers to God and the universe to keep her safe until I can tell her how much she means to me. Once we arrive at the clinic, things move fast around us, and I'm left in the waiting area until she comes out of surgery.

I must look pretty bad because Dean approaches me to talk.

"I didn't know you were so close to Ms. White."

"She sells my artwork at her gallery. She's an amazing woman."

"I'm sorry, Fletch, but this looks like more than that."

"Yeah. I'm utterly and completely in love with her. But I've been trying to keep my distance. She's so young, and my time serving messed me up. I don't deserve a woman like her."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself and should let her make that choice."

We continue talking for a few more minutes when Brock comes out to join us.

"She's going to be okay. I told a little white lie, and they think you're her fiancé, so they'll let you in to see her."

"Thank you so much, Brock. I owe you."

I immediately ask for directions to where she's recuperating, and a nice nurse leads me there. When I walk into the room, I'm shocked by how frail and pale Erika looks, and I rush to sit down beside her. I once again take her hand into mine.

Leaning forward, I place a kiss on her forehead and then sit back. She's hooked to some IV bags, and the beeping of the machines seems like bad elevator music. It feels like I wait for hours until, at last, she starts coming to.

"Hey there, beautiful. Welcome back."

She opens and closes her eyes with difficulty, finally trying to focus on my face.

"Fletcher?"

"It's me, sweetheart."

"I feel like a truck ran over me. Where am I?"

"You're at the Hunter's Peak Clinic. They're taking good care of you."

Her gaze finally steady, she looks deep into my eyes, her own blue ones showing how vulnerable she is right now.

"I've missed you, Fletcher."

A pang of guilt goes through me. I've been doing my best to avoid her, which is probably why she decided to brave the mountain in her little car, just to see me.

"I've been a coward, sweetheart."

"A little birdie told me you have a crush on me."

"You heard that?"

"I was mostly in and out when you guys found me. Your voice was very distinct from

the others. Thank you for being by my side."

"There's nowhere else where I would be, Erika."

"Can you get me some water?"

I hurry to pour some water into the small cup they have for her and bring it to her lips. She drinks a few sips and then leans back against the pillow.

"Will you stay with me, Fletcher?"

"I'll be here."

Apparently, saying those words made her feel secure enough to fall back asleep, so I spent the rest of the day and night watching over her. The next day, Brock makes an appearance, which surprises me.

"Hey Erika, I'm Brock. I was with the team that found you and brought you back. How are you feeling today?"

"A little run down to be honest. Everything hurts. I did fall down a mountain, after all."

"That explains a lot of your bruises. Let me check the wound to see if everything is progressing as it should."

Brock's bedside manner is amazing, and both Erika and I relax while he examines her. When he's done, he looks serious, and I start to worry.

"Can I go home soon, Brock?"

"I'm not sure. You just had surgery, and I think you're going to need help. If you can find someone to help you, I can let you go tomorrow. If not, I'd rather you stay a few days here at the clinic."

"I'll help her."

The words just jump out of my mouth without me realizing what I'm offering. How am I going to take care of her and keep a cool head? I suddenly realize that I'd do anything for her and for her well-being. Excitement fills me because I'll have her all to myself up on the mountain.

"Are you sure, Fletcher? I won't get in the way of your work?"

"It'll be an adventure."

"Then that's settled. I'll come by tomorrow and sign the discharge papers."

"Thank you, Brock."

When the doctor leaves, I reach for her hand again and kiss the back of it. It's an intimate gesture that shows how in awe I am of her, but I've stopped caring. I'm ready to confess my feelings, I just need to find the right time.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Erika

When Fletcher told me he'd take care of me, I thought it would be at my home, but he's got other ideas.

After I'm discharged from the clinic, he takes me home to pack a bag.

My motion is limited because of my injury, so I have to go through the embarrassment of him going through my underwear drawer.

I'm a little withdrawn during our ride up the mountain, but then I remember my car.

"Fletcher, what happened to my car?"

"I had it towed, and it's at the mechanic's shop right now."

"Oh, thanks. I owe you so much already."

"Don't think of it like that. I care about you and I want to help you as much as possible."

"No more hiding, huh?"

I don't know why I say that, and I expect him to pull back, but he just smiles.

"I won't hide from you anymore, sweetheart. You're going to see so much of me you'll be trying to escape my evil clutches."

"There's not one evil bone in your body, Fletcher Connors."

"You don't know me that well."

"Then I'm glad we'll be spending this time together so I can get to know all about you."

He reaches over the console and gives my hand a gentle squeeze, and just that tiny show of affection makes my heart start beating faster. For the rest of the drive, I look at his handsome and rugged face: his salt and pepper beard and beautiful brown eyes.

I must acknowledge that, after working with this man for the past six months, I've developed feelings for him. It's why it hurt so much when he stopped coming to the gallery. Now there's this certainty that we should spend this time of healing together.

I'm glad he's not going to hide from me any longer, but I wish he'd open up about why he did that. He only hurt us, not that there is an us right now. When we get to his cabin, I realize it's not really the tiny, worn-down shack I imagined when I thought of his home.

I don't know why I had such a poor picture of what his home would be like, but this looks like a mansion to me.

"Fletcher, your house is amazing."

"You haven't even seen the inside yet. You'll love it. I had a ton of fun building it."

"You built this yourself?"

"I had help, but I did most of the work."

I go to open the truck's door, but he signals me to wait. He gets out of the car and goes to my side, opening the door for me. Before I know it, I'm being carried like a bride toward what will be my home for the next few days.

Once we're inside, I see how every single inch of the place has Fletcher's touch.

There are carvings on the walls, and some of his wooden pieces of art are in each room.

There's a masculine feel to the place, but a thought goes through me that I can easily put some feminine touches to this beautiful house, making it a home.

I chide myself. I'm not his bride, moving in after our wedding. He's just helping me out. Knowing I'll see him every day still gives me a thrill, though.

"Do you want me to put you to bed or set you down here in the living room?"

The mention of a bed makes me flustered, and I hide my face in his neck.

"Living room is fine. I'm tired of being in bed."

He gently sets me down on a recliner and stands in front of me. He looks like a beautiful giant looking down at me like that.

"I'm here to serve you, sweetheart. Whatever your heart desires, I'll give you."

The words make me shiver. They are somehow more personal than just him helping me out while I recuperate. They make me feel vulnerable.

"I'd like some water, and if you could bring me my work bag, I'd be set. I won't bother you for a bit."

"Let's get this straight. Nothing you say or do will be a bother to me."

His tone is sincere, and I lean back into the recliner, basking in his presence. These next few days are going to be harder than I can imagine.

The afternoon passes quickly as I message numerous customers about my situation and the delays it will cause.

There is one event at the end of the month that I can't postpone, and I'll need Fletcher's help to pull it off.

My mind, however, is still on the delicious mountain man that's somewhere in this house.

I close my laptop and put it on the coffee table in front of me. I try to get up from the recliner, but there's a twinge of pain when I try, and I cry out. Fletcher is immediately beside me, and I don't know where he came from.

"I was going to go look for you."

"What do you need, sweetheart?"

My brain immediately responds I need you , but thankfully, I don't blurt it out. This is not the time for such confessions.

"Let me move you to the kitchen, and you can watch as I fix dinner for us."

I gasp when he picks me up as easily as if I were a doll. There's no pain, though, so I take it as a win.

"You cook?"

"I know a few things. This time will be easy, though, only a chicken salad. I might have some canned soup I can heat. See, nothing too difficult."

"I'll be the judge of that."

His kitchen is huge and he sits me on one of the stools in front of a big island where he's already set out vegetables for the salad.

"I've never asked you, how long have you lived here in Hunter's Peak?"

"I've been here for a while. Fifteen years. I came after I left the military. I was a bit lost back then, and the peace and quiet the mountain gave was very attractive. It's the best decision I've ever made."

"Where did you learn how to work with wood?"

He looks at me with a smile on his face. It's surprising, but after working together for the past six months to sell his art, I've never questioned him about his background. I felt like it would have been intrusive, and I wanted him to trust me.

"My grandfather taught me when I was growing up. I helped him at his workshop, building furniture and other pieces that people commissioned from him."

"Sounds like you have some good memories there."

"I do. My grandfather was a great man. I miss him."

I watch him intently as he chops up vegetables and mixes them into a salad bowl. He adds yummy things like chicken, bacon, and grated cheese, and by the end of it, I'm drooling. After the soup is heated, he serves us and takes a seat beside me.

Wishing he had sat in front of me so that I could take in his rugged beauty, I shift in my seat uncomfortably.

"Do you want a more comfortable seat? We can do this in the dining room."

"Let's try that."

"Stay right there."

He takes our food away and then comes back to get me. I'm surprised how I'm not in any pain when he picks me up to transport me, but when I try to do it myself, I get pain as a result.

The dining room is majestic, and the table, which I assume he built himself, is magnificent. The attention to detail is astonishing, and as we sit across from each other, I'm thankful that this man was brought into my life.

"Is that better?"

"Much, thank you."

For a few minutes, I just pick at my food because I want to know more about this man, and I don't know how to approach him. All we used to talk about before was business. This feels more personal, more intimate.

"Fletcher, thank you so much for offering to help me with my recovery."

"I would do anything for you."

I blush profusely, but I don't stay quiet.

"You say such things. Do you mean them?"

"Of course I do, sweetheart. I know I was being a coward by not coming down to see you at the gallery, but it was an internal battle." He continues. "You're so young and smart and beautiful. I'm an old, broken man who doesn't deserve you."

I reach over the table to grab his hand. Mine is small and soft against his large and calloused one, proving how much of a hard worker he is.

"Don't talk about yourself like that, Fletcher. I won't have it."

"Is the food okay?"

"Don't change the subject. I get to decide who I want in my life, and you are certainly someone that I value and care enough to have in my life."

"Why did you open the gallery?"

I'm startled at another attempt to change the conversation, and let it go this time. We'll have plenty of time to discuss the deeper feelings we have for one another.

"I was an art major in college. I had all these big dreams, but when they were shattered, I walked away from art. It didn't take long for me to realize that I couldn't stay away. I needed the jolt of creativity that came from seeing what other artists had created."

"I haven't seen any of your work in the gallery."

"I don't sell my work."

"Why not?"

"Can we talk about something else?"

"What kind of art do you make?"

I give out an exasperated huff and put my fork down.

"Watercolors right now. It used to be acrylics. I like to try different things out."

"I'd love to see some of your work. I didn't see anything like that at your house."

"There's a workshop in the back of the house where everything is."

I cringe at the thought of how I've hidden my work from the public. I just don't trust that my art is worthy of being seen by others. I'm just glad I keep doing it. Otherwise, something might have died deep inside me.

"Will you show me someday?" he asks.

"I...um. I don't know."

"Your art is a special part of you and what makes you unique in this world. I understand if you don't want to share it with me just yet. I'll keep trying. It will give me an inside look at who you really are."

I stay silent and pick up my fork to continue eating. Am I ready to be that vulnerable with a man that I have feelings toward? Will he understand my need to keep my work a secret? I decide to focus on the food in front of me and set aside all these turbulent feelings that have arisen in me.

"What was the military like?"

"Intense. Made a lot of friends. Lost a lot of friends. I'm glad I left when I did. I felt like I was being suffocated and needed to escape from it all."

From the look on his face, I realize he was really hurt by the loss he experienced. I like how vulnerable he lets himself be around me, and I give him a smile to reassure him that I'm on his side and that he's okay now.

"Let me clear these dishes up. Do you want dessert? I've got some rocky road ice cream."

"I'm more of a strawberry kind of girl."

"I've got that too."

He serves us ice cream, and we sit in companionable silence while we eat. It feels so right to be here, sitting next to him. There's like one inch between us, but I can feel the heat emanating from his body. It's like he's a living furnace, and I wonder if he touched me, if I'd be branded for life.

"Ready for bed?" he asks.

"I am."

He helps me to my room and watches over me as I slowly but surely get ready for bed. I'm embarrassed when he stays on the other side of the bathroom door just in case I need him. If he only knew how much I already need him.

When I'm under the covers, he kisses my forehead and wishes me goodnight. I wish I had an excuse to make him stay with me tonight and every other night after, but I don't. As I close my eyes, my hope is that I dream of him so that we can spend more time together.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Fletcher

I wake up happier than I've ever been. Having Erika here in my house is exciting, and I'm looking forward to taking good care of her.

I get ready for the day and then go to the kitchen to start making breakfast. While I'm in the middle of it, I see her step out of her room and come toward the kitchen.

"You know, all you need to do is call, and I can come get you."

"I didn't want to bother you."

"Erika, sweetheart. I love taking care of you. Carrying you around like you are my bride is just a bonus."

Her cheeks go pink, and she lowers her lashes, but there's a smile on her face.

"Sit. I'm almost done with breakfast."

"You know, I could get used to this. You're spoiling me."

"And loving every minute of it."

"Stop. What are your plans for today?"

"I'm going to do some work in the shop."

"Can I watch?" she asks with a smile.

"I'd love your company. Just know that it's only exciting for me, not for others."

"I'll be the judge of that."

My heart warms that she wants to spend time with me. My workshop is my sanctuary, but I would never deny her entrance to it. Once we're done with breakfast, I carry her to my workshop. There's a rocking chair there that I use when I'm waiting for inspiration to strike, and I set her down in it.

"This is a beautiful chair."

"This is my thinking chair, and I'm only letting you borrow it because you are the honored guest."

I see her glancing around my shop, and I wonder what it all looks like from her perspective.

I try to maintain an organized space so that everything is neat and tidy.

There's a corner of the shop that has all the work I've been obsessively crafting while trying to stay away from her, and I get flustered when she spots it.

"Tell me I can sell those pieces."

"They're yours to do as you please, sweetheart."

Most of the pieces are carvings of wood animals caught in their natural habitat. A squirrel, a raccoon, and even a bear I saw once from afar. That's why this mountain has made the perfect home for me, because it fills me with inspiration everywhere I

look.

For the next two hours, Erika watches me work with wood as I shuffle around my shop. I keep trying to concentrate on the work I'm doing, but knowing she's there with her full attention on me makes me want to kiss her badly.

When I look up to see how she's faring, I catch a heated look on her face. Is it real, or am I imagining it? I walk over to where she's sitting and squat in front of her. She's so beautiful with that luminous blonde hair and ocean blue eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"I love watching you work. It's like you get lost in that world, and when you come out, you've made something beautiful."

"I don't know. I've been distracted by your presence."

"You hid it well. Fletcher, I..."

"I think you are my muse, Erika White, and I cherish every moment of your company."

She licks her lips and my dick twitches in response. I want her, but it needs to be on her terms. A kiss, however, could be just the beginning for us. I lean forward, pick up her hand, and place a kiss on the back of it.

Everything around us seems to stop, and the tension between us grows. She puts her other hand on my cheek and teases my beard with her slender fingers. It tickles, and I give her a smile. She's not smiling, though, and I catch her intent when she leans forward in order to reach me.

Hovering just above me, I check her face to see how much she wants this. Her gaze is hungry, her eyes a turbulent ocean of desire. When our lips touch, I feel a zap of electricity pass through us and almost pull back, but she's put her hand behind my neck and is pulling me toward her.

I meant it to be a gentle, tender kiss. It's not.

It's heat and passion and everything in between.

I'm caught in a whirlwind of emotions as our lips and tongues play with each other.

I grow harder with every second that our kiss goes on, and I need to remind myself that Erika is recovering from an injury.

It doesn't stop the kiss. I'm about to pick her up from the chair and take her somewhere more comfortable when I hear a voice coming from the front of the house. I reluctantly pull back from the kiss and get up to see who is at my door.

I exit through the workshop door and see a truck parked in my driveway. I take a few steps and find the field doctor, Brock, waiting on my doorstep.

"Hey, we're back in my workshop. Come on in."

He follows me and smiles at Erika when he enters the workshop.

"Hi Erika. I wanted to check on you to see if your healing is coming along properly."

"Thanks, doctor."

"Brock, please."

"Brock, it is."

He takes off the bandage that covers Erika's side, and I cringe at the bruising all around the wound. I need to be more careful when I move her around. She's probably in a lot of pain.

"Everything looks good, Erika."

"Can I walk now? Fletcher seems to think he has to carry me everywhere."

"You can, but why not let him be a gentleman and do that for a little bit longer?"

She rolls her eyes at him, but lets him put the bandage back on. We invite Brock for dinner and get to know him a little better. I, however, can't stop thinking about our kiss. What would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted?

When I put Erika to bed, I give her a kiss on the forehead as if nothing has happened between us, because I need to think of her and her well-being first.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Erika

That kiss between Fletcher and me was everything. I lost myself completely in it and can't stop thinking about it. It was like we started a fire between us, and the flames were consuming us while it was happening. It was so intense, and I'm sad it got interrupted.

The problem right now is that Fletcher has turned cold and distant, and now I don't know where we stand in this 'relationship' we have. Do we even have one? He's still attentive, but more often than not, I find him trapped in his own thoughts.

Meanwhile, it's been a week since the doctor came to visit, and we invited him for a barbecue this weekend. At the time, I was ecstatic because it meant we were doing things as a couple. Now I'm not so certain. It's killing me that Fletcher's pulling back from that intensity between us.

A part of me realizes that he might be keeping his distance because we can't really be physical right now. I'm much better this week, and I hardly feel a twinge coming from the wound. But it's like Fletcher has shut down on me.

Fletcher got everything we needed for the barbecue, and I'm just making sure everything is ready for when Brock comes. I might want to pick his brain about my situation with Fletcher.

"Hey, what are you doing? You need to rest."

"I'm tired of resting, Fletcher. I want to help."

"Yeah, okay. Maybe cover the potatoes in foil so we can put them on the grill. And prep the corn too."

I'm not really certain what it means to prep the corn, so I just take it out of the plastic it comes in and wash it. I love having baked potatoes with all the toppings, so I made sure Fletcher got bacon, cheese, and sour cream.

My appetite has come back as well, and I worry. I'm a curvy woman, and it doesn't help that I'm tiny as well, so every bit of food I eat goes to my hips. That's the one thing I have going for me, though. Fletcher keeps sending me heated looks.

The contradiction of those looks and his cold demeanor toward me confuses me completely, and I'm about ready to scream about it.

I decide to make a pitcher of sangria and get distracted while doing that.

Before I know it, Brock is knocking on our door, and I've already had two glasses of the fruity wine.

"Brock, it's so good to see you."

"How's my favorite patient?"

"I'm doing quite well, actually."

"I'll be the judge of that."

I walk him to my room and he checks the wound.

"You're right, everything seems to be healing properly. But you don't look very happy."

I sit on the edge of the bed and think about whether I want to share my issues with him. The possibility that he might know Fletcher better or have insights into his behavior makes my tongue loosen up.

"How well do you know Fletcher?"

"Just in passing. I'm on the SAR team here full time, but he's only a volunteer, so we haven't interacted much until now."

"Oh, okay."

"What's going on?"

I take a deep breath and make a decision.

"When we got back here from the clinic, he was very warm and attentive. He's still attentive, but after we kissed last week, he's gone cold, and I don't know if I've done something wrong to push him away."

"Listen, I don't think you could ever do something like that.

I know you have feelings for him. I've seen how you look at him, but you have to understand that Fletcher is a complicated man with tons of baggage.

His stint in the military, from what I hear, was spent in dangerous war zones during turbulent times. "

Brock hesitated and continued, "What I'm trying to say is that you need to give him a little time. He's been here on his own for quite a few years up here in this mountain and not used to having someone to share thoughts and feelings with."

"So you think I'm overreacting?"

"Actually, I think you need to talk to him. Trying to guess what's going on in his mind is not going to help you break that wall he's built around himself."

"Okay, I'll do that, Brock. Thanks."

We spend the rest of the afternoon eating and drinking.

Fletcher is a little warmer with Brock around, and I take advantage of it, lightly flirting with him whenever I can.

He seems flustered by it and blushes slightly.

I take that to heart and realize that maybe he's got his own reasons for pulling away.

Either way, he's in for a disappointment, because I want this space between us gone. Completely. Brock helps us clean up before leaving, and that just leaves me and Fletcher hanging around the kitchen together.

He fixes me some tea, and I sit on one of the stools to find an opening for an honest talk. He hands me the tea—peppermint, which he knows I love—and I blow on it for a few moments before taking a sip..

"Fletcher."

"I'm really tired. I think I'm going to turn in early."

"Fletcher, we need to talk."

"Sweetheart—" he starts.

"Don't sweetheart me. You've been acting cold towards me since we kissed last week, and I want to know why."

"Erika. I..."

I get up from the chair and stand before him. He is tense, but his eyes tell me he's not as cold as I thought. I put my hand on the side of his face, feeling the bristles of his beard tickle my fingers. He's so damn gorgeous.

"I want to pick up where we left off last week."

"I don't want to hurt you, Erika."

All of a sudden, he picks me up and walks me to the couch with him. He sits down with me on his lap, and I put my arms around his neck. He looks vulnerable right now, and I wonder if this is my chance to finally be with him intimately.

"Why have you closed yourself to me? Did I do something wrong?"

"Never. You could never do anything wrong."

"Let's not go that far. Just tell me."

"I want you so badly, it's burning me from the inside out. I needed some time to cool off, otherwise I'd have ravished you like a feral animal."

"I don't believe that, Fletcher. You are not like that."

"I am when it comes to you, sweetheart."

"I'm much better now. I won't break."

He looks scared, and I place kisses on his face. His breathing is ragged, and his hold on me tightens.

"I want to be with you so badly, Erika, but your well-being comes first. I don't want to do anything to risk that."

"So we'll be careful."

I move out of his embrace and straddle him. His eyes are a beautiful chocolate color that makes me drool, and the sincerity coming from them warms my heart. I can feel him grow hard against my pussy and the heat that is starting between us makes me feel shaky.

"What if I lose my head?"

"Let's take it one step at a time, Fletcher."

As I say the words, I start to unbutton his plaid shirt.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Fletcher

Staying away from Erika has been the toughest thing I've had to do since going into a war zone during my military days. Brock told me to be careful with her as if he knew that in the depths of my soul, I want her more than anything.

She's now turned into a seductress, and I don't know if I can turn her away. My biggest fear is hurting her body and her heart. As she unbuttons my shirt and places small kisses on my chest, the fire starts growing between us. I'm already hard and am fighting the need to grind against her.

I'm scared it's too soon for her to be undertaking any strenuous activity like having sex. I can't deny that I want her. Badly. When she's got me all unbuttoned, I help her take my shirt off. Her hands caress my chest, and her eyes light up with mischief.

I am the luckiest bastard on this damn mountain—having this beautiful woman all to myself. I just can't believe it.

When she goes to undo my belt, I stop her hands.

"We have all the time in the world, sweetheart."

"I want you inside me so badly, Fletcher."

I help her take her shirt off and flinch at the bandage that's covering her wound. It's a reminder that no matter how badly we both want this, I need to make sure she's okay. I unhook her bra, and my breath practically flees when I see her gorgeous breasts.

They're a handful and a half, and those rosy nipples are calling to me. I cover them with my hands and gently squeeze. Erika lets her head go back and pushes her chest against me. I kiss the crook of her neck and take in her sweet peach and vanilla scent.

I start tugging at her shorts, needing her naked against me more than ever. At this, she pushes herself off me and lets me pull them and her underwear off. She steps out of the clothes and comes back to her position, straddling me.

She's a goddess. I pull her hair out of her ponytail, and her curls fall all over her back in a cascade of gold. I place kisses from her neck down her shoulders and then I start worshipping her beautiful tits. I flick the nipples with my tongue, moving from one side to the other.

I hear Erika moan and whimper, and that tells me I'm on the right track with my attention. Then I realize she's looking at me with so much hunger in her eyes. It's impossible to miss. So I let my hand wander between her legs and find her little nub of pleasure.

Her gasp is immediate as I rub her clit in a circular motion and she starts moving against me. I delve a little deeper and realize she's drenched with her juices.

"God, sweetheart, you're so wet for me."

"I want you so much, Fletcher. Stop teasing and fuck me already."

"Such a dirty mouth for such a sweet thing."

"You'll grow to love my dirty mouth, especially when I get to stuff your cock down my throat and make you spill your cum."

"Erika!"

"I'll make sure I swallow every single drop, Fletcher."

Her words make my heart beat faster and create an urgency in me.

I swear to myself I won't let my wild side take over, but I can't take it anymore and I push two fingers inside her hot, wet pussy.

They slide right in, and she makes these whimpering sounds as I start thrusting in and out with my hand.

The smell of sex surrounds us making my cock harder than it's ever been in my life. When Erika's moans begin to grow louder and louder, I know I'm the one who is going to make her explode into a million little pieces.

"Fletcher, I'm so close."

"That's it, sweetheart. Ride my hand. Take your pleasure from me."

She looks so beautiful like this, hovering over me, face distorted with pleasure. All I want is to make this woman happy. So when I finally get to see her orgasm face, I am delighted. She screams my name and melts in my arms.

I don't stop fingerfucking her until she's trembling in my arms and I feel a light pulse around my fingers as if asking me for more.

"Fletcher, I need more."

"Did you know you look beautiful when you fall apart in my arms?"

Her head is in the crook of my neck, and I feel her smiling against me.

"Don't you want to be inside me?"

"More than anything, sweetheart."

I grab onto her and lift us up from the couch.

I have a destination in mind, and nothing is going to keep me from getting there.

When I place Erika in my bed, I see her cheeks are pink and her chest is heaving.

I look her straight in the eyes as I pull my belt off just like those guys on social media do.

She chuckles at my theatrics and puts a hand on her chest near her heart. I pull down my jeans and boxers and she gasps when my hard cock jumps out ready for action. My cock immediately starts leaking precum and I see her lick her lips.

Greedy little vixen.

I crawl in between her legs and push them open as far as I can get them. Her glistening pussy is daring me to take her and I vow I'll become her slave for the rest of our lives. I open her up with my fingers and place an open-mouthed kiss on her clit.

Her hips immediately come up, wanting more of the sensation. I flick the beautiful bud with my tongue and hear the lovely sounds that she makes in response to it. She's so responsive to my touch, making me love her so much more.

And I do. I love her. I think I did from the first moment I met her—when she started ordering me around.

Now that I've got her attention, I tease her slit with my tongue going up and down from her entrance to her clit. I do this over and over again until she's squirming against me.

Am I too greedy for wanting to give her as many orgasms as I can? The thought is ripped from my head as soon as I hear her beg for me to take her. I can't say no to that. I start a trail of kisses up from her pussy to her stomach to her magnificent breasts.

When I get to her lips and kiss her passionately, I know I need to utter some words of warning.

"If I take you now, sweetheart, you belong to me. Do you understand that?"

She nods vigorously, but that's not enough for me.

"Use your words, sweetheart."

"I understand, Fletcher. I want us to be together."

Her words are all I need to position the head of my cock at her entrance and enter her just an inch. Her eyes go wide in shock or desire, I'm not sure which.

"More, please."

I go in another inch. Sweat is beading my forehead with the control I'm exerting right now. It's just that I want to savor this moment—the moment when I claim the woman I love. So I go in another inch and keep myself hovering over her, making sure I don't hurt her wound.

Her tiny, delicate hands start roaming down my back and drop to my ass. The vixen

squeezes my butt and tries to pull me to her.

"I'm the one in control here, sweetheart."

"I want to be filled by you, Fletcher."

Her voice is husky and full of want, and I realize I can't wait another moment to make her mine. So I pull back until I'm almost out and then plunge deep inside her. Her cry of pleasure is my reward and encourages me to start thrusting in and out of her in a slow rhythm.

Her walls surround my cock like a vise and I have to get a hold of myself before I come like a fucking teenager in heat.

"Let go, Fletcher. I want all of you."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

Her eyes are full of trust in me, and it humbles me. She knows I'll protect her no matter what. So I pick up my pace, plunging in and out of her with a desperation that we both feel. The sounds and smells of sex fill the room, and I finally let myself go.

I lower my head to kiss her, and she gives herself to me fully. Our kiss is as heated as our fucking and my body itches to fill her with my cum. I need her to let go as well so I reach down between us and start teasing her clit.

The added stimulation is welcome, and I'm sure she would cry out if my mouth weren't devouring hers at this moment. That's when I feel her pussy clamp around me over and over again and I swallow her moan as she comes beneath me.

I ride out her orgasm, feeling her unravel below me. I pull out of our kiss and watch her with her eyes almost closed in bliss. I place my forehead against hers as I allow myself to reach for my own release. It doesn't take long because I can still feel her tight channel squeezing me.

Then I'm filling her with cum and wondering if I've gotten her pregnant. A rush goes through me at the thought of Erika, big with our child inside her. Once she's squeezed out every last drop out of me, I fight the urge to collapse on top of her.

I flop down beside her and pull her into my arms as if she's the most valuable treasure on this earth. Which she is.

"Fletcher, that was amazing."

"You are the one who is amazing, sweetheart."

"Now I might never want to leave this place."

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I do need to get more stuff from my house soon."

"I'll take you tomorrow."

At this moment, I'm the happiest man in the world, and I want to give this petite, curvy woman everything she wants or needs.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Erika

Being with Fletcher was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I keep trying to say those three words that I'm sure he'd love to hear, but I can't seem to get them out. I don't know what's keeping me from saying them.

I already knew I loved him when I came looking for him up on the mountain here at Hunter's Peak. But being the recipient of his full attention has been an eye-opening surprise. He goes out of his way to do things for me and make sure I'm happy.

I've never had someone take care of me as well as he does, and it just seems to come naturally for him. Now he's willing to take me to work every day. I feel that's too much, but my car isn't back from the mechanic just yet.

Today we're going down the mountain to my house so I can pick up some clothes and make sure everything is in order. I managed to convince him to give me a few of his new pieces to sell in the gallery, and I'm ecstatic.

When we get to my house, I'm shocked to realize I haven't missed the place one bit. Well, except for my studio, but maybe that part of me is supposed to stay in the past—with all the crushed dreams and aspirations.

I open the door, and Fletcher follows me around until we reach my bedroom.

"This is a nice place you have here."

"Thanks. It's become sort of a refuge, you know."

I start throwing things into a bag as Fletcher looks around. I wonder what impression he's getting. I'm a bit messy, and there's the whole locked studio thing. I hesitate and then look at him.

"How much stuff do you think I need?"

"Depends on how long you want to stay. If it were up to me, you'd be moving in."

A thrill goes through me at his words, but even I know it's too soon to be making such a commitment.

"Will you give me a minute?"

"Sure thing."

Fletcher leaves me, and I sit down on the bed to think. There are parts of me that I've been keeping from him—that shame of not being good enough to sell my art. The heaviness of needing to produce that art, even though I know it'll never be good enough.

When I finish packing, I go look for him, and to my utter horror, he's standing in the middle of my studio, inspecting all my hidden pieces of art.

"What are you doing here?"

"Erika, these are magnificent. Why are you not showing them in your gallery?"

"We should go."

"These would sell like hotcakes, sweetheart."

"Can we just go?"

So far, he's been looking at my artwork, but now he takes a good look at me and realizes that tears are flowing down my face. I can't seem to stop them.

"Erika, what's wrong?"

"Please, let's just leave."

He puts down the painting he's been inspecting and pulls me into his arms.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I'm right here with you."

More tears come out, and then I'm ruining his shirt with them. I try to pull back from his embrace, but he won't let me.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"No one would ever buy my art, Fletcher. It's not good enough."

He cups my face in his hand and makes me look up at him.

"What are you talking about? Every piece here is sales-worthy. There are thousands of dollars of artwork here in this little room. Why would you think they're not good enough?"

"Someone told me I could never sell my art," I say, sobbing.

"And you believed them."

It was a statement, more than anything else, and I nod in agreement.

"Would you help me destroy them?"

"What? Never. What we are going to do is frame them and put up an exhibition in your gallery."

I start to panic. What if people see my art and hate it? Worse even, tell me to my face I'm no good. I don't think I could stand it. So I approach the first work of art and start destroying it.

"Erika, stop!"

My whole body is shaking as I tear the paper into tiny little pieces, and as I finish with that one, I start with the next. I need to shred them all into pieces.

I don't know how many works of art I destroy, but I'm exhausted when I collapse into Fletcher's arms.

Now I'm full of shame for having acted this way in front of him.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Erika. It tore at my heart to see you destroy those beautiful pieces. What can I do to convince you that your art is worth sharing with the world?"

"I don't know that I'll ever believe that again."

"Then we've got a lot of work to do, because your work matters. You matter. I won't let you believe otherwise."

I look at him and realize he's truly serious about this, and maybe, just maybe, I could get some help for this, because deep inside me, there's still this pull to make art.

Now I start crying for all the pieces I destroyed, knowing I need to heal so that one day I can proudly show the new ones I create.

We go back home, and I have to lie down and sleep for a while. Fletcher lies right beside me, letting me be the little spoon.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"I think I'm going to get some help."

"You mean that?"

"Yes, it's time."

"I'm so proud of you, and I'll be right here by your side. You are the love of my life, Erika."

"I love you, too, Fletcher."

We kiss and we make love all night long. I feel cared for and protected with Fletcher by my side. All I know is I've got a long road ahead of me, but I won't be doing it alone.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

Erika

I t's been a year since I started the work to heal, and I'm getting frustrated. I still can't pick up a brush, even though a thousand ideas are swirling in my mind. Fletcher has been completely supportive during this time.

I've moved in with him, and he drives me every day to the gallery. He has a small workshop in the back, where he can work on his own art while I arrange for his pieces and those of other local artists to be sold.

Later today, I have a session with my therapist, and I'm dreading it. She wants to dig deeper into why I'm not painting, and I'm not sure I have an answer for her. Not one that I can say out loud, anyway.

It's mid-morning, and Fletcher comes in with an iced coffee to help me cool down from the heat of summer.

I recall how last year I braved the mountain and went to find my man.

I still have the scar on my side to prove it.

I joke that it is a mark of valor, but it really is.

I wouldn't be with the love of my life right now if I hadn't done it.

The day goes by faster than I want, and then I'm talking to my therapist, and she asks me the dreaded question.

Why do you think you're not working on your art, Erika?

How do I answer that? How do I tell her that if I paint one canvas after the other, it will break my heart when I have to destroy them all over again?

Because deep inside, I still do not believe that I'm worthy. All of a sudden, the words come tumbling out of my mouth. How I'm terrified I have no talent, how I feel I'll never be good enough to sell my pieces, how all these fears and worries consume me.

Fat salty tears roll down my face, and it's as if the floodgates have been opened. My therapist is right there with me, challenging those beliefs and guiding me into the truth. I need to be courageous and embrace my destiny as an artist.

I've been letting this fear consume me, and it's only been causing this deep rot inside me. We end the session with some energy work, which helps me calm down, but when Fletcher comes into my office afterwards, I start crying all over again.

"Hey, what's going on? Did the session not go well?"

"I think it went a little too well for my taste," I say, sobbing all over his shirt.

"I'm right here for you, Erika. No matter what."

"Do you think I've been a coward?"

"I think you have a terrible inner battle, and right now it seems to be getting the better of you. What can I do to support you?"

I hold him tightly and take deep breaths to calm myself. His woodsy, masculine scent comforts me, and I decide I'm ready to share where I'm at right now.

"I think I have an idea for a new collection of work, based on the mountains here at Hunter's Peak."

"The mountains where you got lost?"

"The mountains where I found love."

"I'm so proud of you, Erika."

"Even if I've been a coward all this time?"

"Don't talk about yourself like that. You know better."

"I've been so scared, Fletcher. I'm done with that, though, and I'm ready to get back to my one true calling."

"Then it's time for the surprise I have for you," he says.

"You're ready to tell me what the secret room is about? I know you want kids, so it's probably a nursery."

"It's something even better. Let's go home."

We go up the mountain, and I'm finally able to see the true beauty of the landscape that surrounds me. The trees, the flowers, and the mountain itself. My hands are itching to pick up a brush, and suddenly I want to ask him to drive me back to my house so I can start painting.

He's so happy about his surprise, though, so I keep enjoying the view, anxious to see what he's done.

When we get to our home, we go inside, and he takes me to the side of the house that has been covered in plastic for the past few months so that our cabin wouldn't be flooded by the dirt and grime that all construction work seems to bring.

"I made this for you, for this exact moment, sweetheart. I've always believed in you even when you haven't been able to believe in yourself."

We go through a layer of plastic, and when he opens the door, I gasp in surprise. He's built me my own studio in our home. The space is perfect, with natural light coming in through a skylight and several large windows.

He's already stocked up every single art supply I could ever want, and as I walk around the space, I can't believe he did this for me. But of course, he did this for me. Fletcher is that kind of man. He's my devoted mountain man.

I reach for the paint tubes and the brushes, and pretty soon I'm in a frenzy of creation. I barely feel when he kisses my forehead, urging me on, and leaves the room. Finally, I'm free, and my heart fills with joy at the realization.

Much later, even though I'm exhausted, we make love, and I realize how lucky I am. My life is perfect, and the future that once was dark is now bright and shiny. As I lay in Fletcher's arms, I dream of all the good things that lie ahead.

"Thank you, Fletcher. It was an amazing gift. I love you."

"I'd do anything for you, my love."

And I believe him.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

One Year Later - New York

Erika

All of them say great things about my art, and their comments move me. Fletcher walks up to me holding two champagne glasses. He hands me one and stands there with a smug grin on his face.

"Let's toast to a successful evening."

"We should go to see what's going on with your work."

His work is showing on the other side of the gallery. We're both being featured tonight, but for some reason, Fletcher thinks I'm the star of the show. He clinks his glass with mine and takes a sip of the bubbly liquid.

"We're right where we need to be, sweetheart."

The gallery owner, Elena, comes to update us on the sales being made. She looks so happy she might burst any minute now.

"Erika! We've just sold the last of the paintings. You're a total success. This is amazing."

I can't believe that all fifty paintings sold so quickly and at a premium price point. Fletcher puts his hand on my back just in time to anchor me as I sway on my feet. Every single one of my paintings has been sold.

"That is amazing. Thank you so much, Elena. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Stop doing that, Erika. Your art is gorgeous. You did all this by yourself."

"Thanks."

I press myself against Fletcher, and he puts an arm around me. This is unreal. More patrons approach me and give me their congratulations. Fletcher doesn't move from my side, knowing that I need him now more than ever.

When the night starts to wind down, he turns to me and holds my hands in his.

"You are a very talented artist, and the sales tonight have confirmed that. How does that make you feel?"

"I don't think it's real."

"It absolutely is. Ready to celebrate?"

"I don't know that I want to go anywhere but back to the hotel."

"That's exactly where we're going to celebrate."

He waggles his eyebrows at me, and I let out a laugh because I just realized what kind of celebration he wants to have. I love those, and now I look forward to getting back there.

"Thank you for encouraging me to do this."

"It's what we've been working on for the past year. I love how well your work has been received."

"Let's get out of here."

"We'll say goodbye to Elena and then leave."

I nod in agreement and let him guide me through the few patrons still enjoying the food and drink that is being offered. Elena has a car for us, and the driver ushers us inside.

I just sold a hundred thousand dollars' worth of paintings. I am not ready for that or for what comes after.

My mind starts fretting about how people will expect more from me and the work I'll have to produce. My body tenses up next to Fletcher, and he puts a hand on top of mine and gently squeezes.

"It's going to be okay. Stop overthinking things."

"How do you know that's what I'm doing?"

"I know you, Erika. That wonderful brain of yours can be a gift or a curse."

Before I know it, we're at the hotel. I still feel like I'm walking on a cloud, or even better, rolling over a bunch of money. When he opens the door to the suite, I see roses, food, and champagne all laid out for us. Fletcher went all out tonight.

These constant actions show his devotion to me and our relationship. It's part of why I love him so much. I walk up to the table and gently touch one of the long-stemmed roses. It's beautiful in its perfection, and I get a sudden flash of what my next collection will be about.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when I feel Fletcher next to me, but he's kneeling. And

he has a velvet box with a ring in it!

"Fletcher, what..."

"Erika. The first time I saw you at your gallery, I was completely smitten. My feelings grew every time I saw you until I couldn't stand to be in front of you without kissing you. That's when I hid away in my mountain, but you went after me and found me.

"The past years, by your side, have been the best years of my life. Watching you grow and battle your demons has been an honor, and it's made me admire you and love you even more than I already did.

"There is no one that I would rather have at my side for the rest of my life than you. So today, after you've shown the world how utterly talented you are, I want to ask you, will you be my wife?"

Tears are flowing down my face, and I'm shaking with all the feelings his words have stirred up inside me. It has been a long battle for me to get to this point, and Fletcher's been by my side every step of the way.

"I'll be honored to be your wife, Fletcher Connors."

I offer him my hand, and he slides the ring on my finger. I see the beautiful diamond in an old-fashioned setting, and I love it. I know Fletcher has had it custom-made for me, and there's only one like it in the world.

"It's beautiful, baby."

He stands up and takes me into his arms. This is the place where I feel safe and whole—in his arms. He lowers his lips to mine and kisses the crap out of me. There's

hunger and passion in that kiss. Our tongues battle with each other for dominance, and I'm not afraid to let him win.

We stand like that for what seems like forever until we're both out of breath. I smile up at him when he stops kissing me and notice that the hunger from the kiss is reflected in his gaze.

"I need to be inside you so badly, sweetheart."

His voice is husky and makes me shiver all over. I turn around and let him lower the zipper of my dress. He does it slowly, using the opportunity to kiss every inch of skin he discovers. He pulls my dress off me, and I step away from it.

I chose some sexy underwear to wear tonight, and I can practically see him drooling with how turned on he is right now.

"You did this for me?"

"I wanted to look special for you tonight."

"You always look special, but right now you look good enough to eat."

He reaches for the clasp of my bra and tosses it down on the floor, on top of the dress, once he's gotten it off me.

He carefully unhooks the garters and slides the stockings down each leg.

His touch is heated like a brand on my skin, which has me trembling all over and feeling my juices start to drip between my legs.

When he lowers my panties, I swear I'm ready to beg him to take me, but Fletcher

likes getting his way during our sexy times. His hands start to roam my body from head to toe. He lifts my foot and kisses the tip of my toes, then lets it down.

He slowly places kisses up my inner thigh, getting closer and closer to where I need him to be right now. When he gets to my pussy he inhales deeply as if it's the best scent in the world, and perhaps it is for him. I start to open my legs for him, but he stands up.

"Lie on your back on the bed and open your legs as wide as you can."

I love how the tone of his voice changes when he's being bossy, and I hurry to do his bidding.

"Reach down and touch yourself."

I slide two fingers up and down my slit feeling how slick my pussy is with my arousal.

"Open yourself up to me. Show me where you want me."

Right now I need to be filled, but I know he won't be hurried. So, I open my folds so that he can see me all pink and glistening for him.

"Do you want my cock? Do you think you're ready for it, or do I need to prepare you?"

"I can take you."

"That's not what I asked."

I feel the bed give when he starts crawling toward me. He gets awfully close to my

core and my pussy pulses with need. He does nothing, though. Just looks at me like I'm the most delicious dish he has ever been tempted by.

And I want him to eat this dish so badly, but I know better.

"Use your fingers to fuck yourself. Show me how well you're going to take me."

I reach down and slide two fingers inside me. It's comfortable, and I know he's going to protest, but that's part of the fun of our little game.

"More, sweetheart. Two fingers are not enough. I'm much thicker than that, and you know it."

I decide to brave it and insert two more fingers inside. It hurts a bit, but experience says that his cock will definitely slide in better if I do this. I start thrusting in and out, and I hear moans and whimpers echoing in the room.

"That's it, Erika. You're going to be mine. I'll fuck you often and I'll fuck you well."

"I need you, Fletcher."

"How much?"

I'm fucking myself roughly and feel that little tingling starting to come closer, but I need his big fat cock to be deep inside me now.

"Fletcher!"

The look on his face tells me everything. It's happening now. He opens his trousers and lets himself out. Fuck he's still in his suit and looks so goddamn hot I can't take it. I love how vulnerable I am when I'm naked like this, and he is fully clothed.

Our gazes meet, and I see the satisfaction in his eyes once he slides deep inside me. It's like we're connected now. Exactly how I like it. His thrusts are slow and measured because, of course, he likes to torture me.

The tingling increases, and it's like an invitation to the promised land. He pulls my legs up to his shoulders and starts moving faster and faster inside me.

"You are the most precious thing I have, Erika."

I grab onto his jacket to pull him closer, but he stays still, hovering above me.

"Your pussy was made for me. It feels so perfectly tight around me, and it's driving me crazy. I could blow any second now."

"Do it. Fill me with your cum."

"When I'm ready, sweetheart," he drawls.

I roll my eyes at him, and he laughs out loud. He keeps pumping in and out of me, and now I can almost reach it—it's so close.

"Damn it, Fletcher, I'm almost there."

"Oh yeah? Let's do something about that."

He reaches down to my clit and starts circling it with his thumb. The intense sensation helps me start to unravel and I feel myself begin to clench around his hard cock. It's like I'm strangling his delicious cock, but I can't help myself. Not that he's going to complain about it.

I scream a bunch of obscenities when the orgasm hits me, and I both hear and feel

when Fletcher finally lets go and floods my womb with his thick cream. At last, he collapses on top of me, not caring that he's suffocating me. He knows I can take it.

A few moments later, he moves to lie beside me and pulls me into his arms. The fabric of his suit is scratchy against my sensitive skin, and I pinch his side.

"What's that for?"

"You're wearing too many clothes."

His laugh does something to me deep down, and I just grab him tighter so he can't move.

"Do you think we made a baby?" I ask.

"Maybe. Why are you so eager to cut our alone time? You know our lives will change completely after we start having children."

I start to panic and try to pull out of his embrace, but he won't let me.

"Slow down. I want them as much as you do. I just really enjoy our time together. I'm in no hurry to be a father."

"You scared me."

"I just asked you to marry me. I'm in this for the long haul, sweetheart."

His hand goes up and down my arm in a soothing motion, and I start to relax back into his embrace. We fall asleep like that, and it's not until the middle of the night that I feel him shift in bed, now fully naked and with naughty intentions.

I'm all for continuing our celebration and realize that he's right. Our future children can wait. This is our time, and I wouldn't have it any other way. After another round of hot sex, we say soft words to one another.

"I love you, Fletcher."

"I love you, too. Erika."

It's exactly as it should be.

Page 12

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Erika

I 'm lying on a daybed that Fletcher put out in our back yard so that I could laze about during the day as if that was possible with three children and one on the way. The summer breeze touches my face as if it's laying a kiss on my cheek.

Fletcher comes out of the house with some lemonade for us and sets the tray on the table next to me. I scooch over so that he can lie down beside me. He immediately takes up my invitation and takes me into his arms.

One strong arm is behind me, and the other he lays on top of my huge belly. His hand travels across my pregnant stomach. I'm due any day now, which is why the kids are staying with friends. Suddenly, the baby moves, and Fletcher's hand follows him or her.

"I think it's going to be a boy," he says.

"Oh yeah? What makes you say that?"

"He's been so active. Always moving, always kicking. I think we've got a football star on our hands."

"Tired of being surrounded by the female population?"

"I love my girls." He huffs out.

"But you want a boy to play catch with."

"They all play catch with me already."

"I know our girls can be too much sometimes."

"They are perfect."

"Isn't it weird that the baby hasn't come yet? All the others came before the time was up."

"Joey really surprised us."

"I wish you hadn't given them all boys' names."

"Joey, Charlie, and Alex are perfectly good girl names."

"They're going to be so bullied at school. It's on you. I get dibs on this one, though."

"What? When was that decided?"

"Just now."

He's rubbing my belly absentmindedly, and I smile at how happy he is about our life and our children. He pours me a glass of lemonade, and I take a sip of the tart yet sweet liquid. It goes down my throat, cooling me in the process.

"Should we stop after this one?"

"Only if you want to."

"I'm conflicted about it. As it is, you're going to be in your seventies when this one leaves for college."

"Sorry, you married an old man?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Never. You are my soulmate, Fletcher Connors."

The sun starts to make me sweat, and that means I'm uncomfortable and can't stand to be outside anymore. Fletcher knows how it is for me when I'm pregnant, so he takes me inside and helps me shower. He still carries me around whenever he gets the opportunity, and now is no different.

I let him take over in the shower, and he lathers me up. I can almost hear a low growl coming from him. He gets really horny when I'm about to burst like this.

"You think we should try what the doctor said to start things along?" I ask.

His eyes brighten with the possibility, and I work hard to hide my smile. My sexy mountain man has always had a high libido, and it takes very little for him to agree to ravish me even when I'm this far along. I can see my words have made an impact when his cock is ready to burst out of his jeans.

He rinses me quickly and then starts drying me with a fluffy white towel. He's gentle and caring as he does this chore for me that he has done hundreds of times before, and it makes me feel all the love and devotion he has for me.

We walk to the bed, and his hand goes to my face.

His thumb brushes my lower lip, and I let my tongue slip out to lick him and entice him.

He doesn't let me distract him from his mission, though, and his hand opens the towel and starts going down my body, caressing my neck, then my breasts, and down to my huge belly.

He places a kiss on my stomach, which gives me goosebumps.

"Lie down, sweetheart. Let's get this baby out of you."

I giggle like a schoolgirl because he makes me giddy with the love he has for me. I lie down in the center of the bed and wait for him to join me. To my great disappointment, he doesn't take his jeans off when he gets into bed with me.

"Aren't you wearing too many clothes?"

"Trust me. I won't be able to control myself unless I have my chastity belt on."

"You know, we've never tried that."

"Focus, sweetheart."

I just smile at him and let him roam my body with his strong, calloused hands. The way his hands work my body makes me a bit sleepy, so I close my eyes and let myself enjoy this moment in time. When he starts whispering dirty words in my ears I feel my pussy throb with excitement.

He goes on to tell me in exact detail how he's going to ravish me, and I feel my body responding to his naughty promise. Then he kisses me in that fiery, passionate way only he knows how to do, and I'm lost to all the sensation going through my body.

Pretty soon, I feel like I've shattered into a million little pieces, and my smug husband pulls me practically on top of him – or as much as he can with my big belly.

"Tell me when you're ready for more."

"Um, I don't think we'll have time for that."

"Why not?"

"My water just broke."

"Oh god, I knew I needed to keep my jeans on."

A quick shower later, and we're on our way to the Hunter's Peak Clinic. Brock is already waiting for us there. We were super prepared this time. My bag has been in the back of the truck for over two weeks, and Brock's loving wife is taking care of the children.

I am so ready for this baby to come. Also, I have a secret. Fletcher is going to get his wish for a boy this time, and I couldn't be more excited for him. I grin and bear it while they are setting me up in the room and beg Fletcher not to leave my side.

Only two hours later, and they are putting our little boy into my arms. Fletcher and I are smiling like loons, and Brock congratulates me on a job well done. He also asks me if I want my tubes tied, but I say no. One more can't hurt, right?

A little bit later, I'm back in my room and we're waiting for the nurse to bring our baby to us.

"So, do you have a name?" Fletcher asks.

"I do, but you're not going to like it."

His eyes widen, and I know he's going to make me spill the beans, but we're interrupted by a nurse who brings in a bassinet with our baby boy inside. He's all bundled up in a blue blanket and seems to be off in dreamland.

The nurse hands my husband the baby, and I see his face transform with all the love he already has for this tiny little human that has come into our lives.

"Here is our beautiful son. Will you introduce him to me?"

"Fletcher Connors, meet your son Robin Connors."

He groans, but he named the last three. He's lucky I didn't name him something worse. I know, our children will all be bullied. We'll make it up to them with a good shrink later on. I'm brought back from my musings by a kiss on my forehead.

"Thank you for my son. I love you so much."

"I love you too, Fletcher."

Later on, Brock and his wife bring our girls to meet their baby brother. They don't stay long but I see their joy at having a new sibling to play with.

I never knew that being married to Fletcher would bring me this much happiness, but I shouldn't be surprised. He's my soulmate, after all.