



My Obsessive Mountain Man (Summer in the Pines #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: He knew me before we even met.

I thought selling my grandmothers cabin would be simple until I met Paul Mullins. Rugged, imposing, and fifteen years my senior, this mountain man has been watching over my inheritance with a devotion that borders on obsession.

The way he stands so close behind me as he reveals hidden family treasures makes my legs tremble. His powerful presence fills every corner of the manor, his eyes darkening whenever I mention leaving Fox Ridge.

When a summer storm traps us together, the heat between us becomes undeniable.

Could this fiercely protective mountain mans obsession be exactly what my life has been missing all along?

Come join your favorite authors for a collection of steamy summer romances, where the mountain air is cool, and the nights are scorching. These rugged men can handle the wild—but love is the one thing theyll never see coming!

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The road narrows as I climb higher into the mountains, my little rental car struggling against the incline. Three hours from the airport, and Fox Ridge feels like another planet compared to Chicago—all towering pines, jagged peaks, and a silence so complete it has texture.

I round a bend and catch my first glimpse of the lake glittering in the distance, the afternoon sun turning it into hammered gold. My grandmother's stories didn't do it justice.

"Final destination in one mile," my GPS announces, the robotic voice jarring against the natural quiet.

I grip the steering wheel tighter. The sooner I can get this over with, the better.

Appraise the cabin, meet with the real estate agent tomorrow, sign whatever needs signing, and be back in Chicago by the weekend.

Clean, efficient, painless. That's how I handle everything in my life, especially the emotional landmines.

My phone buzzes with a text. I ignore it until I pull onto the gravel drive that winds through a copse of aspens. When I park, I check the message.

Storm coming in faster than expected. Need to reschedule for after the weekend. So sorry for the inconvenience. - Janet Webber, Fox Ridge Realty

"Perfect," I mutter, dropping my phone into my bag. A wasted trip. I should have

checked the weather forecast more carefully.

I step out of the car, my boots crunching on gravel, and take in my grandmother's—no, my—cabin for the first time.

It's larger than I expected, with a wide covered porch wrapping around what I can see of the front and right side.

The logs are weathered to a rich honey color, with green trim around the windows and doors.

Despite its obvious age, it looks... maintained.

Not at all the neglected property I'd prepared myself for after three years of emptiness.

Movement on the porch catches my eye, and my heart lurches into my throat.

A man straightens from where he's been working on the railing, hammer in hand.

He's enormous—tall and broad-shouldered, with the solid build of someone who works with his body rather than behind a desk.

Dark hair peppered with silver at the temples frames a face that's all angles and weathered planes.

He's older than me, perhaps mid-forties, with eyes the color of the lake I just passed—deep, cold blue that somehow burns.

Those eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

"You're here," he says, his voice a low rumble that carries across the yard. Not a question. A confirmation, like he's been waiting.

I freeze halfway up the path, suddenly aware of how isolated we are. No neighbors in sight. No passing traffic. Just mountains and forest and this stranger who doesn't look surprised to see me.

"Who are you?" I ask, keeping my distance. My keys are still in my hand, and I subtly position them between my fingers—a self-defense trick I learned from mom.

The man sets down his hammer and wipes his palms on worn jeans. "Paul Mullins." He doesn't move toward me, seeming to understand my caution. "I've been looking after the place since Martha passed."

My grandmother's name in his mouth sends a shiver through me. "You knew my grandmother?"

A small smile softens his harsh features, transforming him from intimidating to merely imposing. "Everyone knew Martha." He studies me for a beat too long. "You look just like her photos. The ones on the mantel."

I don't know which unsettles me more—that this stranger has been inside the cabin, or that he's apparently studied my grandmother's pictures of me. Yet something about his calm certainty disarms my suspicion.

"I'm Violet Carson," I say, climbing the remaining steps but maintaining distance. "This cabin belongs to me now."

"I know who you are." Again, that direct gaze that seems to see through my carefully constructed facade. "Martha talked about you all the time."

Guilt hits me. Three years since her funeral, and this is my first visit. I'd always meant to come see her more, but work always seemed to get in the way. Another appraisal, another auction, another acquisition for the gallery.

"The real estate agent canceled," I say, changing the subject. "There's apparently a storm coming."

Paul nods, looking toward the western sky where dark clouds are gathering over the peaks.

"It'll be here by nightfall. Big one, from the feel of it."

"He moves toward the door with the easy confidence of someone who belongs there."

"You should come inside. I just finished fixing that loose railing."

Your grandmother always worried someone would lean on it and take a tumble. "

I hesitate, but curiosity wins out. I follow him, noting the breadth of his shoulders beneath his shirt, the way the fabric stretches across his back as he moves.

He's rolled his sleeves to the elbows, revealing tanned forearms corded with muscle and marked with a few faded scars.

Everything about him speaks of physical capability and brute strength.

The door opens with a familiar creak, and I'm hit with the scent of pine and cinnamon—exactly how I remember it from childhood summers. The main room is clean, almost pristine. A fire is laid in the stone hearth, ready to be lit. The wooden floors gleam with polish.

"You've been maintaining the interior too?" I ask, unable to hide my surprise.

Paul shrugs, the gesture somehow both casual and deliberate. "Seemed right. Martha was good to me." He moves to the kitchen, filling a kettle and placing it on the stove.

"You drink tea, right? Earl Grey with a splash of milk, no sugar."

I stare at him. "How do you know that?"

His eyes meet mine, and something in them makes my breath catch—an intensity that should frighten me but somehow doesn't. "Martha mentioned it. Said you'd sit at her table and drink tea for hours, talking about art."

It's true. Those are some of my fondest memories of her.

"I stocked the fridge yesterday when I heard you were coming," he continues, opening a cabinet to reveal tea boxes and other essentials. "Guest room is made up too. You'll be comfortable."

I should be alarmed by this level of preparation from a stranger, but instead, I find myself oddly touched. "You've been expecting me."

"For three years." The simple honesty in those words catches me off guard.

Lightning flashes outside, followed by a distant rumble of thunder. The mountains have disappeared behind a wall of gray.

"Your real estate agent won't make it back until after the storm passes," Paul says, watching me carefully. "Roads get dangerous here when it rains. You should stay until it blows over."

"I have a hotel booked in town."

"Town's thirty minutes in good weather. Longer in this." He nods toward the window where rain has started to patter against the glass. "You're safer here."

I should argue, should insist on keeping to my plan, maintaining the professional distance I always do. But something about this place—about him—makes me hesitate.

"I suppose one night wouldn't hurt," I concede. "I need to look through some things anyway."

Paul nods, satisfied, and turns back to the stove as the kettle whistles. There's something fascinating about watching his large hands perform the delicate task of preparing tea—measured, precise movements that speak of care and attention to detail.

"I didn't expect to find anyone here," I say as he hands me a steaming mug, the tea prepared exactly as I like it without my having to ask. "Let alone someone who seems to know so much about me."

Paul leans against the counter, his large frame somehow making the spacious kitchen feel smaller.

"Your grandmother kept this place alive with stories about you," he says. "The art prodigy who could identify painters by their brushstrokes when she was twelve. The woman who turned her eye for beauty into a career."

"She exaggerated. Grandmothers do that." Heat rises to my cheeks.

"I don't think she did," Paul replies, his gaze steady, appraising in a way that makes me feel both exposed and seen. "You have her way of looking at things—really seeing them."

I take a sip of tea to hide my reaction, surprised to find it perfectly brewed.

"And what exactly do you see, Mr. Mullins?" I ask.

His eyes crinkle slightly at the corners, not quite a smile.

"I see Martha's granddaughter, finally home," he says simply.

"I'm only here to sell the place, you know?" I remind him, and perhaps myself.

"Are you?" he asks quietly, and the simple question feels like a challenge I'm not prepared to answer.

The power flickers as another crash of thunder shakes the windows. Paul moves to the fireplace and strikes a match, setting it to the kindling. The fire catches immediately, casting his profile in gold and shadow.

"I should get my bags," I say, needing a moment to collect myself.

"I'll get them. Storm's picking up." He rises to his full height, and I'm again struck by his sheer presence. He doesn't wait for my response, just strides past me and out the door.

I watch from the window as rain plasters his shirt to his back. He retrieves my suitcase and laptop bag from the car with efficient movements, seemingly unbothered by the downpour. Something about his protective certainty makes my chest tight.

The power flickers again and goes out completely, leaving only the glow of the fire. Paul returns, setting my bags down, water dripping from his hair.

"Power lines are fragile up here," he says, running a hand through his wet hair. "But

the generator will kick in soon for the essentials. We've got the fire for warmth."

"We?" I ask softly.

He looks at me, firelight dancing across his face, and in his eyes I see something that should send me running back into the storm—a certainty, a possession, a claim that has no right to exist between strangers.

"I'm not leaving you alone in a storm, Violet," he says simply, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. As if he's been waiting all this time just to keep me safe.

And standing there in the doorway, watching him move through the shadows of my grandmother's cabin—my cabin—with the comfortable familiarity of belonging, I feel something shift inside me. This wasn't supposed to be anything more than a transaction, a quick stop on my way back to real life.

But as the storm closes in around us, I can't shake the feeling that I've stepped into something I don't understand.

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Three years I've waited. Three years I've kept this place ready.

She stands near the fireplace now, the flames I lit earlier casting a golden glow across her features. Her fingers are wrapped around the mug of tea I made her before the electricity failed. Outside, the storm has only intensified, rain lashing against the windows in sheets.

"The generator should have kicked in automatically," I explain, moving to the kitchen. "The storm must have affected the switch. I'll check it in the morning, but we're fine with the fire tonight."

She turns, and I catch the slight wariness in her expression.

"I should have called the hotel to cancel," she says with a frown.

"No signal during storms like this," I explain. "Landline works, though." I nod toward the old rotary phone mounted on the kitchen wall. "Your grandmother refused to get rid of it. Said it was more reliable than those 'newfangled cell phones.'"

A smile touches Violet's lips—the first real one I've seen—and it transforms her face, softening the professional mask she wears. "That sounds exactly like her."

I light a couple of oil lamps I keep ready for outages, their warm glow complementing the firelight. "Hope you're hungry. I caught fresh trout this morning."

"You fish?" She moves closer, the lamplight catching in her auburn hair.

"Hunt, fish, forage." I shrug, reaching for a cast iron pan. "Mountain living."

"And what exactly do you do up here on this mountain, Mr. Mullins?" Her voice carries a hint of challenge.

"Paul," I correct her. "And I do a bit of everything. Custom woodworking mostly. Some guide work for hikers and hunters when the season's right. Been in these mountains fifteen years now."

"After the military?" she asks.

I glance up, meeting her gaze. "Two tours in Afghanistan. One in Iraq." I don't elaborate. Most people don't really want the details, just the outline. "How'd you know?"

"The way you move," she says simply. "My father was Marine Corps. You never quite lose the bearing."

Something warms in my chest at this evidence that she's been watching me too.

"Your grandmother mentioned your dad was military," I say, setting the pan on the rack I've positioned over the fire. "She was proud of him. Proud of you too."

Violet looks away, and I catch the flash of grief before she masks it. "We weren't as close as we should have been, these last few years." Her voice drops. "I kept meaning to visit, but work always seemed more pressing."

"She understood." I move with deliberate care, not wanting to spook her with sudden movements. "Said you were building something important. That your eye for beauty was a gift."

"My eye for monetary value, you mean," she says with a self-deprecating laugh. "I appraise art for auction houses and private collectors. It's hardly a creative pursuit."

"You see what others miss," I counter, seasoning the fish with herbs I'd picked that morning. "That's its own kind of gift."

Lightning flashes, followed immediately by a crack of thunder that shakes the cabin. Violet flinches, wrapping her arms around herself. I notice the slight tremble in her shoulders. Without the heating system, the cabin holds the mountain chill even in the summer.

"Here." I shrug out of my flannel overshirt, leaving me in my henley, and move behind her to drape it over her shoulders. My fingers brush against the soft skin of her neck, and I feel her small shiver.

"Thank you," she murmurs, pulling it closer around herself.

I move to the hearth with deliberate purpose, balancing the cast iron skillet in one hand.

I position the heavy skillet at the edge of the flames where the heat is most controlled, then lay the ruby-fleshed trout into the pan.

It sizzles immediately, the skin crisping as the rich scent of fresh fish and herbs fills the cabin.

"Cooking this way takes patience," I explain, kneeling to add the foraged chanterelles and fingerling potatoes I'd set aside earlier. "My grandmother taught me. Said food tastes different when it's kissed by real fire."

The mushrooms release their earthy perfume as they brown, mixing with the fragrant

thyme and wild garlic I'd rubbed into the fish.

With practiced movements, I flip the trout, revealing perfectly crisped skin. Violet watches from where she stands, my flannel still draped over her shoulders, her eyes reflecting the dancing flames.

When everything is done, I plate our meal on Martha's old blue stoneware—plates I've washed and kept dust-free for three years. The colors are striking: golden-brown fish, caramelized mushrooms, and herbs snipped from the garden just this morning.

We settle at the small oak table I've pulled close to the hearth.

The firelight casts long shadows across the worn wood, highlighting the grain patterns that tell stories of decades of family meals.

Here, in this circle of warmth and light, with the smell of good food between us, the chaos beyond our walls only makes this moment feel more intimate, more protected.

Like we're the only two people left in the world.

"This is delicious," Violet says, surprise evident in her voice.

"Not what you expected from a strange man?" I ask, watching her over the rim of my water glass.

She smiles, more relaxed now. "I think I've stopped expecting anything when it comes to you, Paul."

The way she says my name sends heat through my veins. I set down my glass carefully.

"Your grandmother worried about what would happen to this place," I say, deciding it's time for some truth. "When she got sick, she asked me to look after it until you came."

Violet's fork pauses halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean, 'until I came'? She left it to me in her will. She knew I'd handle the estate."

I choose my words carefully. "Martha believed you'd come back someday. Not just to sell it, but to see it. To remember."

"You make it sound like she expected me to keep it." Violet sets down her fork, her brow furrowing.

"I think she hoped you might." I meet her gaze steadily. "This place meant everything to her. And you meant everything to her."

Violet looks away, emotion flickering across her face. "I can't keep a cabin in the mountains. My life is in Chicago."

"Is it?" I ask quietly.

Outside, the wind howls through the pines.

"There are things you should see," I say finally, standing. "Things she wanted preserved."

Violet watches me with wary curiosity as I move to the far corner of the main room, near the old oak bookcase. I push aside the handwoven rug to reveal the faint outline of a trapdoor set into the floorboards.

"What is this?" she asks, moving to stand beside me.

"Your grandmother's secret," I explain, lifting the hidden door to reveal a cedar-lined compartment beneath. "She called it her treasure chest."

Inside lies a collection of carefully preserved items: leather-bound journals, old photographs in silver frames, small wooden boxes, and an antique jewelry case.

Violet kneels beside the opening, her expression stunned. "I had no idea this was here."

"She added to it over the years," I explain, watching her closely. "Said some things were too precious to risk being overlooked in an estate sale."

Carefully, reverently, Violet lifts out a framed photograph—herself as a child, sitting on the cabin's porch steps with paint-smudged hands and a serious expression as she works on a watercolor.

"I remember this day," she whispers. "I was trying to capture the exact color of the lake at sunset. I was so frustrated because I couldn't get it right."

"Did you ever manage it?" I ask.

She shakes her head, a sad smile touching her lips. "No. Some beauty defies capture."

Thunder crashes directly overhead, making her jump. Without thinking, I place my hand on her shoulder to steady her. She doesn't pull away.

"There's more," I tell her, reaching past to lift out one of the wooden boxes. "Your early sketches. She kept everything you ever sent her."

Violet opens the box with trembling fingers, revealing dozens of drawings—landscapes, still lifes, portraits—spanning what must be years of her

development as an artist.

"I thought these were lost," she says, her voice thick with emotion. "I didn't know she kept them."

"She treasured them," I say simply. "She treasured you."

A single tear slips down Violet's cheek before she can catch it. The professional mask is cracking, revealing the woman beneath—the one who remembers this place, who belongs here more than she knows.

"I'm sorry," she says, brushing the tear away quickly. "It's been a long day. The storm, this place..."

"Me?" I suggest, only half-joking.

Her eyes meet mine, and in the firelight, I see something shift in them—wariness giving way to something warmer, more curious.

"Yes," she admits quietly. "You too. You're..." She searches for words. "Not what I expected to find here."

"What did you expect to find?" I ask, still kneeling beside her, close enough to catch the faint scent of her perfume—something floral and clean.

"An empty cabin," she says. "Dusty furniture. Faded memories." Her gaze travels over my face, lingering. "Not someone who seems to know me better than I know myself."

"I don't know you," I correct her gently. "I know about you. It's not the same thing."

"And yet you've been waiting for me," she says. It's not a question.

I don't deny it. There's no point in pretending this is normal, that my dedication to this place—to her—is simply neighborly kindness.

"Yes," I admit. "I have."

The fire pops and shifts, sending sparks up the chimney. In the golden light, Violet looks like she belongs here, surrounded by the memories her grandmother preserved, wrapped in my shirt, her defenses lowering by the minute.

"Why?" she asks, the single word heavy with genuine confusion.

I could give her the simple answer—that I promised Martha.

"Because some things are meant to be protected," I say instead. "Some connections don't end just because someone's gone."

Violet's gaze drops to my mouth for a fleeting second before returning to my eyes. The air between us thickens, charged with something neither of us is ready to name.

"It's getting late," she says finally, carefully returning the sketches to their box. "I should probably turn in."

I nod, standing and offering my hand to help her up. She takes it, her fingers small and cool against my palm. When she rises, we're standing closer than necessary, her face tilted up to mine, my shirt still draped around her shoulders.

"I'll be on the couch if you need anything," I tell her, reluctantly releasing her hand. "Bathroom's stocked with everything you might need. Extra blankets in the chest at the foot of the bed."

"You've thought of everything," she says, a question in her tone.

"That's my job," I answer simply. What I don't say is that I've thought of her, specifically, in every detail—imagined what would make her comfortable, what would make her feel at home.

"Goodnight, Paul," she says softly, gathering the precious box of sketches to take with her.

"Goodnight, Violet."

I watch her walk down the hallway to the bedroom, my shirt still around her shoulders, her silhouette outlined by the firelight. When she closes the door behind her, I return to the fire, adding another log to keep the cabin warm through the night.

She may have come here to sell this place, to shed her past and return to Chicago. But now that she's here, now that I've seen the way she looks at her grandmother's treasures, the way she fits so perfectly in this space I've kept for her—I know the truth.

Violet Carson belongs here. With her memories. With this cabin.

With me.

She just doesn't know it yet.

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Sunlight filters through faded lace curtains, casting delicate patterns across the quilt covering me. For a moment, I'm disoriented—the bed unfamiliar, the silence too complete. Then it rushes back: the summer storm, the cabin, Paul.

I breathe in deeply, expecting mustiness from a long-unused room, but find only the faint scent of cedar and clean mountain air mingled with the unmistakable aroma of fresh coffee. My body feels heavy.

A rhythmic thudding sound from outside draws me to the window. I push aside the curtain, and my breath catches.

Paul is in the yard, shirtless in the morning light, swinging an axe with controlled precision.

Fallen branches from last night's storm are scattered across the clearing, and he's methodically cutting them for firewood.

His back is a landscape of muscle and scars, skin golden in the morning sunlight, his movements fluid and certain.

A thin sheen of sweat makes his shoulders gleam.

I should step away from the window. I shouldn't be watching him like this, with this strange, hungry feeling building in my chest. But I can't look away.

He pauses, wiping his brow with his forearm, then glances toward the cabin—toward my window. I duck back instinctively, heart racing like I've been caught doing

something illicit. When I dare to peek again, he's returned to his work, but there's the ghost of a smile on his lips.

He knows I was watching.

I dress quickly in jeans and a soft t-shirt, run my fingers through my hair in a futile attempt to tame it, and splash cold water on my face. I look different somehow, even to myself—my eyes brighter, cheeks flushed with more than just sleep. I barely recognize the woman in the mirror.

The main room is warm now that the weather has cleared. Two mugs sit on the counter beside a French press full of coffee. On the table is a plate of what appears to be homemade bread, a jar of honey, and a bowl of wild berries. All waiting, as if he knew exactly when I'd wake.

I pour myself coffee, the rich aroma making my stomach growl, and carry it to the porch. The morning air is crisp and clean after the storm, the world washed new. Droplets of water cling to pine needles and sparkle in the sunlight like thousands of tiny prisms.

"Morning," Paul calls, setting down his axe and reaching for a worn t-shirt hanging on the porch railing. I feel an irrational pang of disappointment as he pulls it over his head, covering that expanse of skin and muscle. "Sleep well?"

"Better than I have in months," I admit, surprising myself with the truth of it. "No city noise. No notifications. Just... peace."

He climbs the steps to join me, and I'm suddenly aware of how small the porch feels with him on it.

"Breakfast is inside," he says, moving past me to retrieve his own mug of coffee. His

arm brushes mine, and even that fleeting contact sends electricity skittering across my skin. "Nothing fancy. Just sourdough I baked yesterday and berries I picked at dawn."

"You bake?" I follow him inside, cradling my mug like a shield.

He shrugs, the simple movement rippling through his shoulders. "Living alone, you learn to make what you want."

"And what do you want, Paul?" The question slips out before I can catch it, weighted with more meaning than I intended.

His eyes lock onto mine, blue and clear and unflinching. "Things that last," he says simply.

We eat at the small table, sunshine pouring through the windows, the only sounds our forks against plates and the occasional call of a bird outside. The bread is crusty and perfect, the honey wild and complex, the berries sun-warmed and sweet.

"Your grandmother's diaries are in the chest," Paul says after a comfortable silence. "She'd want you to read them."

I glance toward the hidden compartment we explored last night. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"You don't have to read them alone." He takes our empty plates to the sink. "Sometimes it helps to share the weight."

Twenty minutes later, we're sitting on the porch swing, the weathered wood smooth beneath my thighs. Paul has positioned himself at one end, giving me space, but our bodies still align from shoulder to knee. In my lap rests a leather-bound journal, its pages soft with age and handling.

"This one's from the summer you turned twelve," he explains. "She talked about that summer a lot."

My fingers trace the date written in my grandmother's flowing script. I remember that summer—the first time I stayed at the cabin alone with her, after my parents' divorce. I'd been angry, closed off, hurting. She never pushed, just let me be, giving me paints and space and quiet understanding.

I begin to read aloud, my voice catching on my grandmother's words:

"Violet arrived today, all soft edges and silence. So much like her father in her stubbornness, so much like me in her heart. She doesn't know it yet, but this summer will save her, the way this mountain saved me when I was lost. Some souls need wilderness to find their center again."

My throat tightens. I hadn't known she saw me so clearly.

"Keep going," Paul encourages softly, his arm resting behind me on the swing's back, not quite touching but present.

I turn pages, finding entries about our daily rituals—morning walks to the lake, afternoons spent with me painting while she gardened, evenings reading by the fire.

In her words, I see myself through her eyes—not the awkward, angry child I remember being, but a girl with "an old soul and keen eyes that miss nothing. "

"Today Violet painted the sunrise," I read, my voice steadier now.

"Not the postcard version, but the true one—all messy oranges bleeding into purple, the light breaking through in unexpected places.

She sees the world as it is, not as others tell her it should be.

This gift will carry her through life, though it may sometimes feel like a burden. "

I close the journal, overcome. "She understood me better than I understood myself."

"She saw you," Paul says quietly. He reaches out, brushing away a tear I didn't realize had fallen. His fingertip is calloused but gentle against my cheek. "Just as you are."

Birds call from the trees. A breeze carries the scent of pine and warming earth. I should feel trapped here, anxious to get back to my real life in Chicago. Instead, I feel something dangerously close to peace.

"There's something else I want to show you," Paul says finally, standing and offering his hand.

I take it without hesitation, his palm warm and solid against mine. He leads me around the back of the cabin, along a narrow path through blooming wildflowers, to a small shed I hadn't noticed before. Unlike the rustic cabin, this structure is newer, with a sturdy padlock on the door.

"Your grandmother called this her treasure room," Paul explains, producing a key from his pocket. "After the break-in attempt five years ago, we built this together, fireproof and secure."

"Break-in?" I ask, alarmed.

He nods grimly. "Some locals knew Martha had a collection. Nothing came of it—I happened to be nearby." The set of his jaw suggests there's more to that story than he's telling. "After that, we moved everything valuable out here."

The door swings open, and Paul steps aside to let me enter first. Sunlight streams through small, high windows, illuminating what can only be described as a private museum.

Glass display cabinets line the walls, filled with antiques: Tiffany lamps, delicate porcelain, vintage jewelry, and art pieces I immediately recognize as valuable.

In the center stands a magnificent roll-top desk that my professional eye places in the late 1800s, immaculately preserved.

"Oh my God," I breathe, my appraiser's mind automatically calculating values that quickly soar into six figures. "I had no idea she had all this."

"Most of it came with the cabin when she bought it in the sixties," Paul explains, watching me closely. "The original owner was a collector who fell on hard times. Your grandmother kept everything, added to it over the years."

I move slowly through the space, stunned by the quality and condition of each piece. Everything has been meticulously cared for—the silver polished, the wood oiled, the glass gleaming.

"You did this," I say, not a question. "You've been maintaining all of it."

Paul shrugs, but I see the pride in his eyes. "Seemed important to preserve it properly. For when you came."

"For when I came," I repeat softly, the weight of his dedication settling around me like a physical thing. For three years, he's been here, protecting not just a cabin but a legacy. My legacy. Waiting for me with a patience that seems impossible in today's disposable world.

In the corner, a small table holds what appears to be a jewelry box. I approach it, drawn by the intricate inlay of mother-of-pearl and exotic woods.

"This is Swiss," I say, professional interest momentarily overriding emotion. "Late 19th century. The craftsmanship is extraordinary."

"It was her favorite," Paul says, moving to stand beside me. His presence is solid, grounding. "It plays music, but the mechanism is delicate. Here—"

He reaches around me, his chest pressing lightly against my back, his arms encircling but not trapping me as he demonstrates. "You have to lift this hidden latch first, then turn the key twice, not three times, or the spring winds too tight."

His breath is warm against my hair. My own breathing has gone shallow, my body hyper-aware of his proximity. His fingers guide mine to the latch, and the touch sends heat spiraling through me. Together, we open the box, wind the key.

The first notes of a melody I vaguely recognize float into the air between us—something classical and bittersweet. I turn within the circle of his arms to face him, and find his eyes already on mine, intense and waiting.

"Why did you stay?" I whisper. "All this time, maintaining everything, waiting... why?"

"Because from the moment I saw your picture on Martha's mantel, I knew," he says, his voice low and certain. One hand comes up to cradle my face, his thumb brushing across my cheekbone. "Some things you just know, Violet."

The music box plays on, delicate and persistent. Outside, birds call. Sunlight catches dust motes floating between us, turning them to gold. Time seems to slow, crystallize around this moment.

I should be afraid of this intensity, this certainty. I should step back, make excuses, maintain the emotional distance I've perfected over the years. Instead, I find myself rising onto my toes, drawn to him like iron to a magnet.

"What do you know?" My voice is barely audible, even to myself.

His other hand slides to my waist, warm and steady. "That you were meant to come back here. That this place has been waiting for you." His gaze drops to my mouth. "That I've been waiting for you."

When our lips finally meet, it's not tentative or questioning.

It's recognition. His mouth is firm and warm against mine, confident but not demanding.

My hands find their way to his chest, feeling the solid beat of his heart beneath my palm.

He tastes like coffee and honey, and I'm suddenly starving for it.

The kiss deepens, his arms tightening around me, lifting me slightly so I'm pressed fully against him. My fingers tangle in his hair, drawing him closer still. There's no hesitation, no awkwardness—just heat and certainty and a bone-deep rightness that terrifies and thrills me.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, he keeps me close, his forehead resting against mine. The music box has gone silent, but I can still feel its melody resonating in my blood.

"I've known you were mine since I saw that picture," he murmurs against my lips, his words vibrating through me. "I just needed you to know it too."

Yesterday, these words would have sent me running. Now, with his taste still on my tongue and the solid warmth of him against me, all I can think is: Yes. This. Here.

For the first time in my adult life, I don't want to escape. I don't want to analyze or appraise or put a value on what's happening. I just want to surrender to it, to him, to the strange certainty that's been building since I first saw him on the porch.

I've stopped running, and it feels like coming home.

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Sunlight pours through the windows like honey, turning dust motes to gold as they dance in the air.

The storm has passed, leaving behind that particular mountain clarity—air so clean it almost hurts to breathe it, colors so vivid they seem unreal.

I'm sweeping the porch, a mundane task I've done a thousand times, but today everything is different.

Because Violet is here.

She sits in the old rocking chair, one of her grandmother's journals open in her lap, but she isn't reading.

Her gaze is fixed on the distant mountains, lost in thought.

The kiss we shared in the treasure room hangs between us—not awkward, but weighty with possibility.

Neither of us has mentioned it, but I feel it in every glance, every careful movement as we navigate the cabin's close quarters.

I pause in my sweeping, allowing myself to really look at her.

Sunlight catches in her auburn hair, setting it ablaze with copper and gold.

She's kicked off her shoes, and her bare feet are tucked beneath her, showing painted

toenails.

Her body fills the chair perfectly, soft and curved—full breasts rising and falling with each breath, the generous curve of her hip where it meets the chair's arm, thighs pressed together beneath her jeans.

I want to hold onto her. I want to sink my fingers into the give of her flesh, bury my face in the crook of her neck, breathe her in until she's the only air in my lungs.

"You're staring," she says without looking at me, a small smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"Can't help it," I admit, not bothering to deny it. There's no point in pretenses between us anymore.

She turns then, meeting my gaze directly. The sunlight catches her eyes, turning them to amber. "What are you thinking when you look at me like that?"

The question is bold, direct. I consider softening my answer, but something tells me Violet Carson doesn't want soft half-truths.

"I'm thinking you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in these mountains," I tell her, my voice low and rough with honesty. "And that chair's never held anyone it suited better."

Color rises in her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. "You have a way of saying things that makes it impossible to doubt you."

"That's because I don't say things I don't mean."

She nods slowly, accepting this. Then she closes the journal and stands, stretching in

a way that makes her t-shirt ride up, revealing a glimpse of soft, pale skin at her waist. My mouth goes dry.

"I should call the real estate agent," she says, moving toward the door. "See if she can come out tomorrow, now that the roads are clear."

The words hit me by surprise. I knew this was coming—of course I did—but hearing her say it still feels like ice water in my veins. I resume sweeping, my movements more forceful than necessary.

"Roads might still have debris," I say, keeping my tone neutral with effort. "And the creek crossing floods for days after a storm like that."

She pauses in the doorway, watching me with those perceptive eyes. "Paul."

Just my name, but it holds a question. I stop sweeping and face her directly.

"I have a life in Chicago," she says gently. "A job, an apartment, responsibilities. I can't just... stay."

"Can't? Or won't?" The words come out sharper than I intended.

Her eyes narrow slightly. "Is there a difference?"

I set the broom aside and close the distance between us in three long strides. Not touching her, but close enough that I can smell the faint floral scent of her hair, see the individual freckles scattered across her nose.

"Yes," I say simply. "There's all the difference in the world."

She doesn't back away, though I tower over her. That quiet courage, the

unwillingness to be intimidated—it's one of the things I admire most about her.

"This was only ever meant to be a quick trip," she says, but there's a note of uncertainty in her voice that wasn't there yesterday. "Appraise the cabin, meet with the real estate agent, sign the papers, go home. That was the plan."

"Plans change."

"Not mine," she insists, but her eyes flick away, and I know she's lying—to me, to herself.

I step back, giving her space. "Come with me."

She hesitates, then follows as I lead her through the cabin to the spare bedroom—the one I've been using as a workspace when I stay over. I open the door, letting her see what I've kept hidden until now.

Inside, bathed in afternoon light, stands a writing desk.

Not just any desk—one I've built with my own hands over the past year, crafted from cherry wood I milled myself, sanded to a silken finish.

It's sized perfectly for her—the height, the drawers, the angle of the surface where she would write or draw.

"I don't understand," she says, moving into the room to run her fingers over the smooth wood.

"It's yours," I tell her simply. "I built it for you."

She turns to me, confusion clear on her face. "But... how did you know I would—"

"Your grandmother told me you always wanted a proper desk for your art. Something that wasn't just for work, but for creating." I step closer, watching her fingers trace the grain of the wood. "There's more."

I open the closest drawer, revealing a set of artist's pencils, arranged by hardness. Another drawer holds watercolor paper, cut to size. A third contains a leather-bound sketchbook, its pages blank and waiting.

"You did all this... for me?" Her voice is barely above a whisper. "Before you even met me?"

"I knew you," I say simply. "Through Martha's stories, through her letters, through the way she loved you. I knew."

Violet shakes her head slowly, backing away from the desk. "This is... a lot, Paul. You have to see that this is intense."

"I know what it looks like," I admit, making no excuses. "But ask yourself this—does it feel wrong? Does it feel threatening? Or does it feel like something you've been waiting for without knowing it?"

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. I can see the conflict in her eyes—the rational part of her that says this is too much, too fast, too intense, battling with something deeper that recognizes the truth.

"Your apartment in Chicago doesn't allow dogs," I say quietly.

"But you've always wanted one. A big one, something sturdy that could hike with you.

You hate the winters there—the slush, the dirty snow.

You miss seeing stars at night. You work eighty-hour weeks appraising other people's treasures, but you haven't picked up a paintbrush for yourself in years. "

Her eyes widen. "How could you possibly—"

"Martha kept every letter, Violet. Every phone call, she made notes afterward—what you said, what you didn't say. She worried about you. Said you were burying yourself alive in that city."

"That's... that's private," she says, but there's no real anger in her voice. Just shock, and something else—relief, maybe, at being seen so completely.

"It is," I agree. "And I would apologize for knowing these things, except I can't be sorry for understanding you. For seeing what you need."

"And what do I need, Paul?" she challenges, taking a step toward me. "Since you seem to have it all figured out."

I meet her gaze steadily. "You need this mountain. This air. This space to breathe and create and be exactly who you are." I pause, my heart hammering against my ribs. "And you need someone who sees you—all of you—and stays anyway."

Her breath catches. "That's... that's crazy. You're—"

"Obsessed?" I supply the word she's too polite to say. "Maybe. Or maybe I just recognize what belongs to me when I see it."

Her eyes flash. "I don't belong to anyone."

"Not yet," I agree, and watch the color rise in her cheeks. "But you belong here, Violet. In this cabin. On this mountain." I step closer, until I can feel the heat

radiating from her body. "And you know it. That's what scares you—not me. The fact that this feels right when it shouldn't."

"You don't know what I feel," she says, but her voice has lost its conviction.

"I know you felt it when we kissed," I say, my voice dropping lower. "I know your body recognized mine. I know you've been watching me all day, thinking about it happening again."

She swallows hard, her eyes darting to my mouth before meeting my gaze again. "You're very sure of yourself."

"No," I correct her. "I'm sure of you. Of us. There's a difference."

She shakes her head and turns away, moving quickly back into the main room of the cabin. I follow, giving her space but unwilling to let this conversation end.

"This is insane," she says, pacing the worn floorboards. "We met yesterday. Yesterday, Paul. And you've built me furniture? Stocked art supplies? Read private letters from my grandmother?" She runs a hand through her hair, mussing the copper strands. "In what world is that normal?"

"Nothing about this is normal," I agree, leaning against the doorframe. "But that doesn't make it wrong."

She stops pacing and faces me, her chest rising and falling with quick, agitated breaths. The sunlight streaming through the windows catches her from the side, illuminating the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lower lip, the soft swell of her breast beneath her sweater.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she says, but the words sound hollow even to my ears. "This

was... a nice interlude. A pleasant surprise. But it's not real life."

Something in me snaps—not in anger, but in fierce determination. I push off from the doorframe and close the distance between us in three long strides.

"This is the most real thing you've ever felt," I say, my voice low and certain. "And you know it."

I don't touch her, though every cell in my body strains toward her. I just stand there, close enough to feel the heat of her, to catch the scent of her skin, to see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat.

"You're afraid," I continue, softer now. "Not of me. Of how right this feels. Of what it means to want something this much, this fast."

"Stop," she whispers, but she doesn't step away.

"Tell me I'm wrong," I challenge her gently. "Tell me you don't feel this pull between us. Tell me you can walk away tomorrow and forget the way we fit together."

Instead of answering, she reaches up, her fingers hesitating just shy of my face.

Then, with a small sound that might be surrender or might be determination, she lays her palm against my cheek.

Her touch is cool and soft, and I fight the urge to turn my face into it, to kiss her palm, her wrist, to taste the delicate skin there.

"I don't know what this is," she admits, her voice barely audible. "I don't know how to make sense of it."

"Then stop trying," I tell her, covering her hand with mine, holding it against my face. "Some things aren't meant to be analyzed. Just felt."

I see the moment she lets go—something shifting in her eyes, a tension releasing in her shoulders. She steps closer, her body now flush against mine, her face tilted up to hold my gaze.

"This is crazy," she says again, but this time the words hold wonder rather than denial.

"Yes," I agree, sliding my free hand to the small of her back, feeling the warm give of her body through her sweater. "It is."

When she rises on her toes to kiss me, I'm ready. This kiss is different from our first—not discovery but confirmation. Her mouth is soft but insistent against mine, and I respond in kind, letting her set the pace while my body hums with the effort of restraint.

Her arms wind around my neck, pulling me down to her, eliminating the height difference between us. I slide both hands to her waist, fingers spreading to span the softness there, to feel the lush curve where her waist flares to hip.

She makes a small sound against my mouth, and something primal in me answers, deepening the kiss, my tongue sliding against hers in a rhythm that mimics what my body craves.

Her body is pliant against mine, her breasts pressed to my chest, her hips aligned with mine. I can feel every soft curve, every place where she yields. The contrast of her softness against my hardness sends heat spiraling through me.

I walk her backward until she meets the wall, never breaking the kiss. Her fingers

tangle in my hair, tugging slightly in a way that makes me growl against her mouth. I press closer, letting her feel what she does to me, what she's been doing since the moment I saw her step out of that car.

"Paul," she gasps when I finally release her mouth to trail kisses down her neck.

"I've thought about this," I murmur against her skin, tasting the salt-sweet flavor of her. "Every night for months. The way you'd feel in my arms. The sounds you'd make."

Her head falls back against the wall, giving me better access to the column of her throat. I take advantage, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the tender skin there, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips.

"Tell me to stop," I say against her collarbone, even as my hands slide lower, cupping the full curves of her ass, pulling her more firmly against me. "If this isn't what you want, tell me now."

Her answer is to arch against me, her body seeking more contact, more pressure. Her hands slip beneath my shirt, her fingers cool against the heated skin of my back, tracing the ridges of old scars without hesitation or disgust.

"I don't want you to stop," she whispers, her voice hitching as I find a sensitive spot just below her ear. "I just want—"

"What?" I ask, pulling back just enough to see her face, flushed and beautiful in the afternoon light. "Tell me what you want, Violet."

Her eyes meet mine, amber and gold in the sunlight, pupils dilated with desire. There's still wonder there, still disbelief, but the wariness is gone.

"You," she says simply. "I want you. Even though it makes no sense. Even though we barely know each other." She takes a shaky breath. "I've never wanted anything the way I want this."

The confession ignites something in me—possessive, primal, protective. I lift her easily, her soft thighs wrapping around my waist as if we've done this a hundred times before. Her weight in my arms feels right, perfect.

"You have me," I tell her, carrying her toward the bedroom—not the spare room with the desk, but the master bedroom where she slept last night. "You've had me since before we met."

She laughs softly against my neck, the sound vibrating through me. "That's still the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"I know," I agree, laying her gently on the bed, following her down until I'm braced above her, drinking in the sight of her spread beneath me, hair fanned out on the quilt, eyes bright with desire and something deeper. "But it's true all the same."

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Paul's hands move with reverent hunger across my body—sliding beneath my t-shirt to trace the soft curve of my waist, his calloused fingers creating shivers wherever they touch.

His mouth finds the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, and I let my head fall back with a soft gasp.

The contrast between his gentle exploration and the barely restrained power in his frame makes my heart race.

He lifts me with surprising ease, strong hands cupping my thighs as I wrap my legs around his waist. The hardness of him presses against me through our clothes, making me acutely aware of where this is heading.

When my back meets the quilted bedspread, Paul follows me down, his body a welcome weight above mine. I run my hands over the broad expanse of his shoulders, feeling the muscles flex and shift beneath my fingertips.

"I need to see you," I whisper, tugging at the hem of his shirt. "All of you."

A slow smile spreads across his face—not cocky, but deeply pleased. He sits back on his heels between my thighs and pulls his shirt over his head in one fluid motion.

The sight of him steals my breath. Afternoon sunlight streams through the curtains, bathing his torso in golden light that highlights every ridge of muscle, every plane and hollow.

His chest and arms speak of years of physical labor, powerful and defined without the artificial perfection of a gym-sculpted body.

But it's the scars that draw my eye—a constellation of stories written across his skin. A long, silvery line runs from his left collarbone down across his pectoral muscle. Smaller marks pepper his right side. A puckered circle mars his left shoulder.

I push myself up onto my elbows and press my lips to the longest scar, feeling the slight ridge of it against my mouth. His sharp intake of breath encourages me. I follow the line with my tongue, tasting salt and skin. His hand comes up to cradle the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair.

"Your turn," he says after a moment, his voice even deeper than before. "Let me see you, Violet."

A flutter of nervousness passes through me.

My body is nothing like the toned, athletic women I imagine someone like Paul would normally desire.

I'm soft where they would be firm, rounded where they would be lean.

Years of desk work and comfort food have left me with generous curves and a fullness to my belly that no amount of dieting has ever quite erased.

But the hunger in Paul's eyes as his fingers find the hem of my shirt leaves no room for doubt. This man wants me—specifically, exactly as I am.

I lift my arms, allowing him to pull the garment over my head. Cool air kisses my skin, drawing goosebumps across my flesh. Paul's gaze is almost reverent as it travels over the black lace of my bra, the fullness of my breasts spilling over the cups, the

soft curve of my waist.

"Beautiful," he breathes, one hand reaching out to trace the lace edge where it meets my skin.

"You have no idea how many nights I've lain awake thinking about you—about this—not even knowing what you looked like.

Just knowing you'd be perfect." His finger trails down between my breasts, following the centerline of my body to the waistband of my jeans.

When his fingers find the clasp of my bra at my back, I arch to give him better access. The bra falls away, and I resist the instinctive urge to cover myself. Instead, I watch his face as he looks at me, savoring the naked desire I see there.

"Gosh," he murmurs, cupping the weight of one breast in his large hand. The contrast of his tanned, work-roughened skin against my paleness sends a shiver through me. His thumb circles my nipple, which tightens immediately at his touch. "So responsive."

He lowers his head, replacing his thumb with his mouth, and the wet heat of it draws a sound from me I barely recognize as my own—part gasp, part moan.

His tongue circles the sensitive peak while his other hand kneads my neglected breast, thumb teasing until both nipples are hard and aching.

Each pull of his mouth sends a corresponding tug of pleasure straight between my thighs.

"I love how sensitive you are," he says against my skin, his breath cooling the dampness left by his mouth.

"Love watching your reactions." He switches to my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention while his now-free hand slides down to the button of my jeans.

He pauses there, looking up at me. "May I? "

The gentleness of the question, the care taken despite his obvious desire, makes my heart swell. "Yes," I whisper, lifting my hips slightly in invitation. "Please."

He unbuttons my jeans with careful precision, drawing down the zipper tooth by tooth, the sound loud in the quiet room.

Then his hands are at my hips, thumbs hooking into both denim and the waistband of my underwear, a question in his eyes.

I nod, and he slides both garments down my legs in one smooth motion.

And then I'm naked beneath him, completely exposed to his gaze. A flush spreads across my skin—not just from desire, but from the vulnerability of the moment.

Paul sits back again, his eyes traveling slowly over every inch of me, lingering on the fullness of my hips, the soft roundness of my belly, the plush curves of my thighs.

"God, look at you," he says, his voice hushed with something like awe.

"All these beautiful curves." His hands follow his gaze, exploring the topography of my body with careful attention—the dip of my waist, the flare of my hip, the softness of my inner thigh.

His fingers trace the silvery stretch marks on my hips and stomach, marks I've always tried to hide.

He leans down to press a kiss to my belly, his beard tickling sensitive skin. "I could spend days just looking at you," he murmurs against me. "Touching you." Another kiss, lower, near my hip bone. "Tasting every inch of you."

My breath catches as his intent becomes clear. His broad shoulders nudge my thighs wider as he settles between them, his warm breath teasing against my most intimate place.

"Paul," I whisper, uncertain and wanting in equal measure.

He looks up the length of my body, his blue eyes dark with desire, his expression serious. "I've dreamed about how you'd taste," he says, his voice rough. "Let me have this, Violet. Let me taste you."

The idea that this powerful man has fantasized about this specific act—about me—sends a fresh wave of heat through my body. I nod, unable to form words, my fingers finding purchase in the quilt beneath me.

He starts with a gentle kiss against my inner thigh, then the other, working his way inward with deliberate patience. When his mouth finally makes contact with my center, it's with a reverence that makes my heart stutter.

His first touches are exploratory—learning the geography of my pleasure, noting what makes my breath hitch, what makes my thighs tremble against his shoulders.

His strong hands grip my hips, thumbs spreading me open to his gaze and mouth. The exposure is intense, almost too much, but the look of concentration on his face, the obvious enjoyment he takes in my responses, transforms vulnerability into power. He's at my mercy as much as I am at his.

"You taste even better than I imagined," he murmurs, the vibration of his words

adding another layer of sensation. Then his tongue finds the bundle of nerves at my center, circling it with deliberate pressure, and coherent thought dissolves.

The dual sensation of his hot mouth and rough stubble against my sensitive skin is overwhelming.

Pleasure builds steadily, coiling tighter with each skilled movement of his tongue.

My hands find his hair, fingers tangling in the thick strands—not guiding, just needing something to anchor me as sensation threatens to sweep me away.

"That's it," he encourages against me, his breath hot and intimate. "Let go for me, beautiful. I want to feel you come on my tongue."

His words, combined with a particularly clever motion, send me tumbling over the edge. My back arches off the bed as pleasure radiates outward from where his mouth is still working, drawing out every tremor, every aftershock.

His name falls from my lips like a mantra, a prayer, a plea.

Before I can fully recover, he's moving up my body, his jeans rough against my oversensitized skin. His mouth finds mine, and I taste myself on his lips—tangy, intimate, slightly sweet. His kisses are hungry now, less controlled, and I respond in kind, my hands fumbling with his belt buckle.

"Let me," he says, standing to remove his remaining clothes. When he straightens, I'm treated to my first full view of him, and my mouth goes dry.

He's magnificent—all lean muscle and sinew, his skin tanned except for a paler band at his hips. His arousal juts proudly from a nest of dark hair, thick and ready. A soldier's body, hardened by necessity and physical work, marred by scars but all the

more beautiful for them.

"Now who's staring?" he asks, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"Can't help it," I reply, deliberately echoing his words from earlier. I hold out my hand to him. "Come here."

He rejoins me on the bed, settling his weight between my thighs, the hot length of him pressing against my center without entering. We both groan at the contact. His forearms bracket my head as he leans down to kiss me again, this time with achingly tender care.

"I've never wanted anyone the way I want you," he confesses, his voice rough with emotion and need. "It's like you've been carved into my bones since before we met."

In any other context, with any other man, these words might frighten me. But here, with Paul's body covering mine, with the taste of desire still on my tongue, they feel like the most natural thing in the world—a truth I've somehow always known.

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His eyes hold mine as he reaches between us, positioning himself at my entrance.

The blunt pressure of him there makes my breath catch in anticipation.

Slowly, with careful attention to my reactions, he begins to push inside.

The stretch is delicious—a burning fullness that makes me gasp and clutch at his shoulders.

"You feel incredible," he groans, his jaw clenched with the effort of restraint. "So tight. So perfect."

He advances by careful degrees, giving my body time to adjust to his size, watching my face for any sign of discomfort. When he's fully seated within me, he stills, letting us both acclimatize to the sensation of being so completely joined.

"Are you okay?" he asks, brushing damp hair from my forehead with gentle fingers, his eyes searching mine.

The tenderness of the gesture, juxtaposed with the intensity of our physical connection, makes my heart swell. I nod, unable to find words for how much more than okay this feels.

My body has never felt so perfectly filled, so completely claimed. I roll my hips experimentally, and the friction draws groans from both of us.

"Move," I urge, wrapping my legs around his waist, drawing him even deeper.

"Please, Paul. I need you to move."

He withdraws almost completely before driving back in with a controlled thrust that has me gasping.

He sets a rhythm that's neither too fast nor too slow—deliberate, focused, each movement designed to bring maximum pleasure.

His eyes never leave mine, watching every flicker of sensation, every parting of my lips.

"You're so beautiful like this," he murmurs, dipping his head to capture my mouth in another kiss. "Taking me so perfectly. Like you were made for me."

His praise washes over me, stoking the fire rebuilding in my core. One of his hands slides beneath me, angling my hips slightly upward, and suddenly he's hitting a spot inside me that makes stars burst behind my eyelids.

"There," he says with satisfaction, feeling my reaction. "Right there."

He maintains the angle, his thrusts becoming more forceful, more deliberate. The headboard knocks rhythmically against the wall, a counterpoint to our shared breaths and increasingly urgent sounds. Sweat glistens on his chest, catching the late afternoon light that streams through the windows.

I feel myself climbing toward another peak, faster this time, the pleasure sharper and more focused. Paul seems to sense it, his movements becoming more targeted, one hand sliding between our bodies to circle the sensitive bundle of nerves at my center.

"Come for me again," he urges, his voice strained with his own approaching release. "I want to feel you come around me, Violet. Need to feel you grip me when you let

go."

The combination of his words, the perfect pressure of his fingers, and the relentless rhythm of his thrusts sends me hurtling over the edge again. This orgasm is more intense than the first, radiating outward from deep within my core.

My body clenches around his length, my nails digging into the hard muscle of his back as wave after wave of pleasure washes through me.

Paul follows immediately, his rhythm faltering as he drives deep one final time. I feel the hot pulse of his release, hear my name torn from his throat in a sound that's half growl, half reverence. His arms shake with the effort of holding himself above me, not wanting to crush me with his weight.

After a moment, he rolls to the side, taking me with him so I'm sprawled across his chest, our bodies still joined. His heartbeat thunders beneath my ear, gradually slowing to a steadier rhythm. His fingers trace lazy patterns on my back, raising goosebumps in their wake.

Outside, birds call to each other, the world continuing its ordinary rhythms while something extraordinary has happened in this bed.

I feel him stirring beneath me again, impossibly ready for more. I lift my head to meet his gaze, finding heat rekindling in his blue eyes.

"Already?" I ask with a smile, shifting my hips to feel him hardening inside me.

His hands cup my face, thumbs stroking my cheekbones with tender reverence. "I told you," he says softly. "I've been waiting for you for years. We have a lot of lost time to make up for."

He rolls us again, this time with me on top, straddling his hips. The new position seats him even deeper within me, drawing gasps from us both. His hands find my waist, supporting me as I begin to move.

"Show me how you like it," he encourages, his eyes drinking in the sight of me above him, my hair falling around my shoulders, my breasts swaying with each movement.

I experiment, finding an angle and rhythm that sends pleasure spiraling through me. His hands roam my body, cupping my breasts, thumbs teasing my nipples, before sliding down to grip my hips, helping me maintain the pace.

"You're so beautiful like this," he says, his voice rough with desire. "Taking your pleasure. Using me."

His words embolden me. I move faster, chasing the building sensation. Paul watches me with hooded eyes, his jaw tight with restraint as he lets me set the pace.

When his thumb finds my clit again, circling in perfect counterpoint to my movements, I feel myself approaching the edge once more.

This orgasm builds slower than the others, but crashes over me with even greater force.

I cry out, my body bowing backward, trembling with the intensity of it.

Paul sits up suddenly, wrapping one arm around my waist to hold me in place while his other hand tangles in my hair, pulling my mouth to his.

He kisses me deeply as he takes control, thrusting up into me with powerful movements that prolong my pleasure. His release follows soon after, his body shuddering beneath mine, my name a hoarse cry against my lips.

We collapse together, a tangle of limbs and damp skin, breathing hard. Paul's arms encircle me, holding me close as if afraid I might disappear. I press my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent.

"Stay," he whispers against my hair, echoing his earlier plea. "Stay with me."

In this moment, sated and warm in his arms, I can't imagine being anywhere else. Chicago seems like a distant dream, a life that belongs to someone else. This—his body against mine, the cabin around us, the mountains beyond the windows—this feels real in a way nothing has before.

I lift my head to look at him, finding his eyes soft with something that looks dangerously like love. It should terrify me, this intensity, this certainty after so little time. Instead, it feels like coming home after a long journey I didn't even know I was on.

"I'm here," I whisper, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips.

He tucks me closer against his chest, his heartbeat strong and steady beneath my ear. His fingers trace lazy patterns on my bare shoulder as the late afternoon sun paints the room in amber and gold.

"You're home now," he murmurs, and the rightness of those words settles in my bones.

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I wipe the grease from my hands with an old rag as the generator finally sputters to life, the low mechanical hum a welcome sound after hours of silence. The cabin lights flicker once, twice, then steady as electricity flows through the old wiring again.

"Got it," I call through the open door, slipping my tools back into their canvas roll. "Just a clogged fuel line."

She fits here. That's the thought that keeps circling through my mind as I step back inside and see Violet moving around the kitchen, barefoot and wearing nothing but my flannel shirt.

The hem reaches mid-thigh, revealing glimpses of soft skin with each movement.

Her hair is tousled from my hands, her lips slightly swollen from my kisses.

I can't stop looking at her.

"Perfect timing," she says, opening the refrigerator now that the power's restored. "I was worried about all this food going bad."

"Crisis averted," I reply, washing my hands at the sink. "What are you in the mood for?"

She considers the refrigerator's contents, then looks up with a smile. "How do you feel about breakfast for dinner? I make a mean omelet."

"Sounds perfect," I say, reaching past her to pull out eggs, cheese, and the wild

mushrooms I'd collected earlier in the week. "There's fresh herbs in the garden if you want them."

She turns, leaning against the counter, her eyes meeting mine with a warmth that makes my chest tighten. "Is there anything you don't do?"

"Can't bake a decent pie to save my life," I admit, moving closer to her, drawn by some invisible force I've stopped trying to resist. "Your grandmother tried to teach me. Said I had 'heavy hands.'"

Violet laughs, the sound light and free. "She used to say the same thing to me. 'Violet Carson, you can't rush pastry. It knows when you're impatient.'"

I reach her, unable to maintain even this small distance. My hands find her waist, feeling the soft curves beneath the flannel. "You sound just like her when you do that."

"Do what?" she asks, looking up at me with those amber eyes.

"Say your full name like it's both a scold and an endearment."

She smiles, her hands coming to rest on my chest. "Paul Mullins," she says deliberately, drawing out each syllable. "You are remarkably distracting when I'm trying to cook dinner."

I lower my head, brushing my lips against hers. "We could always eat later."

Her stomach growls in protest, and she laughs against my mouth. "Food first. Then...whatever else you have in mind."

Reluctantly, I step back, but not far. Never far.

I can't seem to stop touching her—a hand at the small of her back as she chops vegetables, my fingers brushing hers as I pass her a plate, my lips against her temple as I reach around her for the salt. Each small contact feels necessary, like breathing.

We work together in the kitchen as if we've done it a hundred times before.

There's an ease between us that defies our short acquaintance.

She anticipates my movements; I intuit her needs.

When she reaches for something on a high shelf, I'm already there, lifting it down for her.

When I search for a serving spoon, she points to the exact drawer without looking up from the pan she's stirring.

"How does this feel so natural?" she asks quietly, echoing my thoughts as she plates our simple meal.

"Because it is," I answer simply, carrying the plates to the small table near the hearth. I've set it with candles, their flickering light turning the ordinary space into something intimate and warm. "Some things just are, Violet. No explanation needed."

She follows with glasses of water, the ice clinking softly. "My whole life is built around explanations," she says, settling into the chair I hold out for her. "Cataloging, categorizing, assigning value. Nothing exists without context."

I take the seat across from her, close enough that our knees touch beneath the small table. "And this? What context does this fit into?"

She looks at me, her expression thoughtful. "That's just it. It doesn't fit anywhere. It

simply...is."

We eat in comfortable silence for a while, exchanging glances that say more than words could.

The food is simple but good—fresh and honest, like everything in this place.

Occasionally our fingers brush as we reach for the salt or pass the water pitcher, and each time, I feel that same electric current between us.

"Tell me about your life in Chicago," I say eventually, genuinely curious about the world she comes from. "What does a typical day look like for you?"

She describes a life of gallery showings and auction houses, of valuing other people's treasures and negotiating their worth.

As she speaks, I watch her face carefully, noting how little light enters her eyes when discussing her work.

There's pride there, certainly—she's good at what she does—but no passion, no fire.

"And you?" she asks. "What does Paul Mullins do on a typical mountain day?"

I tell her about my woodworking, the custom furniture I build in the workshop behind my cabin. About foraging and fishing, about the quiet rhythms of mountain life. About the veterans' group I lead twice a month in town, teaching wilderness skills as a way to find peace after combat.

"I'd like to see more of your work," she says, reaching across the table to touch my hand. "Your furniture."

"I'd like to show you," I reply, turning my palm up to capture her fingers.

She opens her mouth to respond when her phone rings, the harsh electronic sound jarring in the peaceful cabin. She startles, then reaches for where it sits on the counter, charging from one of the solar batteries.

"It's the real estate agent," she says, glancing at the screen. Her eyes meet mine, a question in them.

I say nothing, just watch her with steady calm. This is her choice to make. I won't pressure her, won't beg or plead. What's between us is either real enough to withstand this test, or it isn't.

She answers the call, putting it on speaker. "Hello, Janet."

"Violet! Thank goodness I got through. Cell service is spotty after these storms." The woman's voice is bright, enthusiastic.

"I've got great news. I've already had three inquiries about the property, sight unseen.

One buyer is willing to go ten percent above asking if we can close quickly.

The market for mountain retreats is red hot right now. "

I remain perfectly still, my face neutral. Violet's eyes haven't left mine.

"That sounds promising," she says, her voice revealing nothing.

"It's more than promising, it's fantastic! I can be out there tomorrow morning, paperwork ready. We could have an offer accepted by noon, and you'd be on your way back to Chicago by dinner time. How does that sound?"

Violet's expression softens as she looks at me, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Actually, Janet, there's been a change of plans."

I feel my heart speed up, but I keep my breathing steady.

"Oh?" The agent sounds confused.

"I've decided to keep the cabin," Violet says, her voice gaining confidence with each word. "I'm not selling."

There's a pause, then a disappointed, "Are you sure? This is a seller's market, and—"

"I'm sure," Violet interrupts gently but firmly. "This place has been in my family for decades. It needs to stay that way."

After a few more attempts at persuasion, the call ends. Violet sets the phone down and looks at me, something soft and vulnerable in her expression.

I stand and move around the table, reaching for her hand. She takes it, rising to meet me.

"I knew you'd feel it too," I say simply, my hand finding the small of her back, drawing her closer.

"Feel what?" she asks, though I think she knows.

"That this is where you belong. That this mountain gets in your blood. That some places claim you as much as you claim them."

She nods, her hands sliding up my chest to link behind my neck. "I felt it the moment I stepped out of the car. And then I saw you, and..." She shakes her head slightly. "It

was like some part of me had been waiting, without even knowing what for."

I kiss her then, gently, reverently, trying to pour everything I feel into the connection of our lips. She responds in kind, her body melting against mine with that same perfect fit that still amazes me.

Later, we sit on the porch swing, Violet curled against my side, my arm around her shoulders.

The night is clear, stars scattered across the black velvet sky like diamonds on jeweler's cloth.

The air is cool and sweet with pine, the only sounds the creaking of the swing and the chorus of night insects.

Her head rests on my shoulder, her breathing deep and even. Not asleep, but peaceful. Content. Home.

I press a kiss to her hair, inhaling the scent that's already as familiar to me as my own. Two days ago, I stood on this porch waiting, hoping, believing. Now I sit here knowing, holding, complete.

The mountain air wraps around us like a blessing, and the cabin at our backs stands solid and true—a testament to things built to last, to legacies preserved, to love that finds its way home even through the longest night.

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Three Years Later

The late summer breeze carries the scent of pine and wildflowers across the porch, rustling the pages of my book. I've read the same paragraph three times now, distracted by the flutter of movement inside my belly—tiny feet or elbows or knees, I can't be sure which, pressing against my ribs.

I rest my hand over the spot, feeling the contours of our daughter through the stretched fabric of my sundress.

"Settle down in there, little one," I murmur. "Your mama's trying to read."

The porch swing creaks gently as I shift, seeking a more comfortable position.

At eight months pregnant, comfort is relative—a moving target that changes hourly.

Still, I wouldn't trade this fullness, this rounded heaviness, for anything in the world.

My body feels powerful, purposeful, exactly as it should be.

The cabin spreads out behind me, no longer just grandma Martha's place or even just mine—but ours.

Paul and I have spent the past three years breathing new life into these old logs, expanding rooms, adding skylights, turning the treasure room into a shared office where I run my appraisal business and Paul designs his custom furniture.

From my seat on the porch, I can see the workshop he built last summer, its doors wide open to catch the mountain air as he works.

My laptop sits closed on the table beside me, next to a half-empty mug of peppermint tea.

Three client emails answered, two valuations completed, one auction house consulted—all before lunch.

The Carson-Mullins Appraisal and Design logo glows faintly on the lid—a simple emblem of how seamlessly our separate lives have intertwined.

The screen door creaks, and I look up to see Paul emerging from the cabin, carefully maneuvering something large and covered with a sheet. His movements are deliberate, almost reverent, as he navigates the doorway.

Even after all these years, the sight of him still makes my heart skip—those broad shoulders, strong hands, the way his dark hair curls slightly at his neck where it needs cutting.

"Close your eyes," he instructs, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Paul Mullins, what have you done now?" I ask, but I comply, letting my eyelids fall shut. I hear the soft thud of something being set down on the porch boards, then the warmth of his presence as he kneels beside the swing.

"Okay," he says. "Look."

I open my eyes to find him watching my face, eager for my reaction. My gaze shifts to what he's brought out—and my breath catches.

It's a cradle, the sheet now pulled away to reveal gleaming wood polished to a soft

luster.

But calling it merely a cradle feels inadequate.

It's a work of art—cherry wood carved with intricate mountain landscapes that flow seamlessly around its curved edges.

The rockers underneath are perfectly proportioned, and I can already imagine the gentle motion they'll provide.

Small forest creatures—a fox, a bear cub, a family of deer—are carved into the headboard, watching over the space where our daughter will sleep.

"Paul," I whisper, reaching out to trace the polished wood with my fingertips. "It's exquisite."

"Three different types of wood," he explains, his voice carrying that quiet pride I've come to recognize. "Cherry for the frame, maple for the inlays, walnut for the darker accents. I've been working on it for months, whenever you were busy with clients."

"That's why you've been locking the workshop?" I ask, understanding dawning.

He nods, moving to kneel directly in front of me. His hands, always so capable and strong, come to rest on either side of my rounded belly. "I wanted it to be perfect. For her."

As if responding to her father's voice, the baby gives a forceful kick right against his palm. Paul's face lights up with the same wonder it showed the first time he felt her move.

"Strong," he says, rubbing the spot gently. "Like her mother."

"Stubborn," I counter with a smile. "Like her father."

"Determined," he corrects, leaning forward to press a kiss to my belly. "There's a difference."

I laugh, running my fingers through his hair. "Is that what you call it when you spent three days searching the forest for exactly the right piece of burl wood for our dining table?"

"That was craftsmanship," he defends, but his eyes crinkle with humor. "Speaking of which, did you eat the lunch I left for you?"

"I did," I nod. "And then I ate yours too. And then I may have made a peanut butter and pickle sandwich."

He grimaces. "That's still happening, huh?"

"Judge all you want, mountain man, but your daughter has specific tastes." I shift again, making room for him on the swing beside me. "Besides, you're the one who put pickle juice in the refrigerator door last week 'for easy access.'"

He settles next to me, his arm around my shoulders, fingers absently stroking my arm. "I'm just supporting my girls' needs," he says, dropping a kiss to my temple. "Even the disgusting ones."

The familiar weight of him beside me, the scent of sawdust and pine that clings to his skin—these simple things ground me in the present moment, in this life we've built together.

Three years ago, I came to this mountain expecting to spend less than forty-eight hours here. Now, I can't imagine being anywhere else.

"How's the commission coming?" I ask, nodding toward the workshop.

"Almost finished. The Hendersons are picking it up next week." His hand moves to my lower back, fingers working at the knot that's been bothering me all morning. "That'll be three major pieces this month. Your social media marketing is working wonders."

"It's not the marketing," I correct him. "It's your work. Word travels fast when someone creates pieces like yours."

He shrugs, never comfortable with praise, but I feel the pleased tension in his shoulders. Our partnership extends beyond the personal—his craftsmanship and my eye for value creating something neither of us could have built alone.

"I have another surprise," he says after a comfortable silence. "But this one's not ready yet."

"Another one? The cradle would have been more than enough."

His hand slides over my belly again, protective and possessive in that way that still makes my heart race. "I'm building her a tiny chair. For when she's a little older. And a table to match. And maybe a set of blocks." He pauses, looking slightly embarrassed. "I may have gotten carried away."

"You think?" I tease, but there's no real criticism in it. His dedication, his careful attention to detail, his need to create and protect—these are the things that made me fall in love with him three years ago. They're the things I fall in love with again every day.

"It's not like you're any better," he points out. "I saw the tiny art easel you ordered last week. She's not going to be painting landscapes for at least a few years."

"It's never too early to nurture creativity," I say primly, then break into a smile at his knowing look. "Fine. I may have gotten a little carried away too."

His laugh is low and warm against my ear. "We're going to be those parents, aren't we?"

"Completely hopeless," I agree. "Utterly besotted before she's even here."

The baby moves again, a slow roll that visibly shifts the landscape of my belly. Paul watches with fascination, then leans down to speak directly to my stomach.

"Your mom and I are very excited to meet you," he says seriously. "But you need to stay put a little longer. I have three more projects to finish before you arrive."

"Five more weeks," I say, though we both know babies operate on their own schedules. "Just enough time for me to finish the Anderson estate valuation and set up the home office for remote work."

Paul nods, but his expression turns thoughtful, almost wistful. "Three years ago, I stood on this porch waiting for you, not even knowing what you looked like. Just knowing you belonged here." His hand spreads wide over the crest of my belly. "Now look at us."

I cover his hand with mine, feeling the strength in his fingers, the calluses earned through years of working with wood and metal and earth. "I still can't believe I almost sold this place," I admit. "That I almost walked away from all of this."

"You wouldn't have," he says with that same quiet certainty he's always had. "This mountain gets in your blood. This place was always waiting for you to come home. I was just the caretaker until you were ready."

"Always so sure," I tease, leaning into his side. "My obsessive mountain man."

He turns my face to his, kissing me with a tenderness that still holds the heat of those first desperate embraces. "I knew this was our home," he murmurs against my lips. "From the very beginning."

I smile against his mouth, feeling the baby shift between us, completing the circle. In the distance, thunder rumbles. Another summer storm approaching, like the one that first stranded me here. Like the one that changed everything.

"And you were always mine," I whisper back, the truth of it settled deep in my bones, as solid and eternal as the mountains that surround us.

Thank you for reading!