



Rescued By the Mountain Man (Darkmore Mountain Search and Rescue #2)

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Description: I never thought the woman who nearly died on my mountain would be the one to teach me how to live again.

Jade, the daredevil ski instructor whose Olympic dreams were shattered years ago, became my unexpected houseguest when an avalanche buried her in the exact terrain I warned people to avoid.

Now, as a snowstorm keeps us isolated in my cabin, were discovering that my prosthetic leg and her reckless spirit are battle scars that might just make us perfect for each other.

Will what started as a rescue turn into something worth fighting for?

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one

Jade

I push off from the top of Elk Run, my class of advanced skiers trailing behind me like ducklings. Well, if ducklings wore thousand-dollar ski gear and had the occasional midlife crisis.

"Keep your weight centered!" I call back, carving a perfect turn that sends a spray of powder into the crisp mountain air. The late afternoon sun catches the ice crystals, turning them into momentary diamonds. God, I love that sight. Never gets old.

Three hours of teaching rich tourists how to not break their necks on Darkmore's black diamond runs would exhaust most people, but for me, it's barely taken the edge off.

The familiar itch is already crawling beneath my skin—that restless energy that's been my constant companion since I hung up my competition skis.

I lead the group down the final stretch, mentally cataloging their form.

Mr. Investment Banker is still leaning too far back.

Yoga Mom has finally stopped pizza-ing her skis on every turn.

The teenage boy who spent the first hour trying to impress me has actually improved the most—though I'd rather eat my ski pole than tell him that and restart the flirting

attempts.

As we glide to a stop at the bottom of the run, I plaster on my professional smile. "Great job today, everyone! Remember what we worked on—weight distribution, pole placement, and respecting the fall line. Questions before we wrap up?"

After fielding the usual questions and deflecting an invitation for "après-ski drinks" from Investment Banker, I watch my students disperse toward the lodge.

The Miner's Lantern will be packed tonight with tourists knocking back overpriced "Mountain Mule" cocktails, all claiming they conquered runs much harder than they actually did.

I check my watch—4:30. The resort closes at 5:00, giving me just enough time for one more run before the lifts shut down.

"Jade!" A familiar voice makes me turn. Carlson, the resort manager, trudges toward me through the snow, his bright blue parka making him look like an overgrown Smurf. His forehead is creased with that particular furrow that appears whenever I'm involved.

"Before you say anything," I start, "I didn't take anyone off-trail today. Scout's honor." I hold up three fingers in what might be the wrong salute, but whatever. I lasted in Girl Scouts for approximately twelve minutes.

Carlson sighs. "Just making my rounds. Weather service called—conditions are deteriorating up on the north face. Some instability in the snowpack."

"Avalanche risk?" I ask, instantly more alert.

"Moderate to high. Search and Rescue already had a chat with me about

preparedness." He gives me a pointed look. "Apparently their training session this morning picked up some concerning readings."

I nod, trying to look appropriately serious. Carlson has been my boss for three years. He knows exactly who he's talking to.

"I mean it, Jade. No off-piste runs. Some of the instructors were talking about hitting the powder beyond Silverback Trail after hours." His eyes narrow. "I don't need to remind you what happened last time."

Last time. The disciplinary hearing. The two-week suspension.

The lecture about "resort liability" and "reckless endangerment."

"The unspoken reminder that I'm lucky to have this job at all after my spectacular flame-out in the qualifying rounds of the Olympic trials two years ago.

That knee injury ended more than just my shot at the gold.

"I'm a reformed woman," I say, placing a hand over my heart. "Totally boring now. I might take up knitting."

Carlson snorts. "Just stay within bounds, okay? I've got enough gray hair because of you." He trudges away, walkie-talkie already crackling with some new crisis.

I kick at the snow with the tip of my ski.

The truth is, I've been good—mostly. I haven't gone off-trail in weeks.

But the fresh powder from last night's storm is calling to me like a siren song.

Untouched. Perfect. Not chopped up by the hundreds of tourists who think watching Warren Miller films makes them experts.

I look up at Darkmore Peak looming above the resort.

The tallest mountain in the range, its rugged face is both invitation and warning.

The locals have all kinds of legends about it.

Old Man Jenkins at the general store claims it has moods, like it's some kind of giant, grumpy neighbor rather than millions of tons of rock and ice.

The resort sits halfway up its flank, the town of Darkmore nestled in the valley below. From here, I can see Silver Creek winding through the valley like a ribbon, the lights of town just beginning to twinkle as dusk approaches.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. A group text from the other instructors.

Not going out of bounds tonight. Conditions sketchy. Meeting at Pinewood for hot chocolate instead. You in?

I should say yes. I should be sensible, join them for overpriced cocoa and swap stories about our most clueless students of the day.

But the mountain is right there, and the powder is perfect, and sometimes I feel like if I don't do something that scares me a little, I might actually die. Like, my soul will just shrivel up from playing it safe.

You guys are lame. But save me a seat. Might be late.

I send the text and shove my phone back in my pocket before they can reply. One

quick run. One moment of perfection. That's all I need.

The ski lift is nearly empty for the last ascent of the day. The operator gives me a knowing look but doesn't comment as I slide into a chair. The benefit of being a local—a certain amount of questionable decision-making is tolerated.

As the lift carries me upward, I watch the shadow of Darkmore Peak stretch across the valley.

The temperature is dropping fast now that the sun is setting.

The cold air burns my lungs in that familiar, clarifying way.

Up here, everything makes sense. Up here, I'm still the same Jade who was destined for glory, not the Jade who teaches tourists how to survive intermediate slopes.

The chair crests the ridge, and I slide off, already mapping my route in my head. Just past the boundary rope is a perfect, untouched bowl of powder that will let me out at the back of the resort property. Twenty minutes, tops. No one will even notice I'm gone.

I push off toward the edge of the resort boundary, my heart already racing with anticipation. The rope marking the boundary flutters in the wind, more suggestion than barrier. I glance around—no one watching—and duck underneath it in one smooth motion.

Beyond lies a pristine white canvas, just waiting for me to make my mark.

Just one run. What could possibly go wrong?

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two

Rhett

"Find it, Aspen. Search."

I watch my German Shepherd's body language change instantly—ears forward, nose working overtime, her whole being focused on the task.

She bounds across the snow, tracking the scent I know is buried beneath three feet of packed powder.

This isn't just training; it's the difference between life and death.

The wind picks up, sending a spray of snow across the ridge where we're working. Darkmore Peak looms above us, indifferent to our presence. The mountain doesn't care about human lives. I learned that lesson the hard way.

Aspen barks sharply—once, twice—then begins digging frantically. Good girl. She's found the training dummy with the scent article buried inside. I click my stopwatch. Four minutes, seventeen seconds. Not her best time, but the wind is making conditions difficult.

"Good girl!" I call, my voice echoing across the empty slope. I pull the training reward from my pocket—a bright orange tug toy—and she bounds over, tail wagging. For her, this is a game. For me, it's duty.

My radio crackles. "Base to Rhett, come in."

I adjust my jacket and grab the radio. "Rhett here. Go ahead, Base."

"Weather station update. Barometric pressure dropping faster than expected. Wind gusts up to forty on the north face."

"Copy that." I squint up at the sky. The clouds have that heavy, gray look that promises more snow. "We're wrapping up training now. Should be back soon."

"Roger that. Oh, and Carlson from the resort called. They've closed the north ridge trails. Readings from the snowpack monitors are in the yellow zone."

"Tell him I'll check the monitors on my way down." I clip the radio back to my belt and whistle for Aspen.

My leg aches as I trudge through the deep snow toward our equipment.

Five years since the accident, and it still protests when a storm is coming.

The titanium and carbon fiber that replaced my left leg below the knee doesn't feel the cold the way flesh and bone did, but the place where man meets machine never quite forgets the trauma.

I kneel to pack up the training gear, adjusting my weight to accommodate the prosthetic.

The morning routine flashes through my mind—the meticulous care of both skin and socket, the specialized liner that prevents chafing, the extra socks I carry for when the fit changes throughout the day.

Little rituals that have become as natural as breathing.

Before the avalanche that took my leg, I'd been reckless. Cocky. The best climber and skier on the SAR team, always the first to volunteer for the most dangerous rescues. I'd thought the mountains respected me because I respected them.

Now I know better. Now I understand that respect means caution, preparation, and sometimes, walking away.

"Come on, girl," I call to Aspen, who's nosing around a patch of trees. "Let's get these readings and head back."

The snowpack monitoring station sits on a ridge overlooking the resort's northernmost boundary.

I pull out my tablet and sync it with the sensors embedded throughout the area.

The data confirms what my instincts already told me—increasing instability, rising temperatures followed by rapid cooling, wind loading on lee slopes. Classic avalanche conditions building.

I tap out a message to the resort and the town's emergency management office, recommending they extend the closure to the entire resort. Better safe than sorry. Better temporary disappointment than permanent loss.

By the time I've finished the readings, the light is fading fast. Darkmore is notorious for its quick sunsets—the high peaks stealing the light long before the official end of day. In the winter, we often joke that the town should be called "Darkmore-than-half-the-damn-day."

The radio chatters with end-of-day reports from the ski patrol and my SAR team

members.

Standard procedure—everyone checking in, reporting conditions, confirming they're headed home or to the next assignment.

This team is my family, more so than my parents who still don't understand why I chose to stay in this remote town after the accident.

I'm about to call Aspen to head back when something catches my eye—a flash of movement along the treeline beyond the resort boundary. I pull out my binoculars and scan the area.

Fresh tracks. A single set, cutting across virgin snow toward the northwest face. The exact area where our morning tests showed substantial weak layers in the snowpack.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter, adjusting the focus. The tracks are fresh—made within the last thirty minutes. Someone has gone off-piste despite the closed trails, despite the warnings, despite the goddamn obvious signs of danger.

My jaw clenches as anger and anxiety battle for dominance. Another thrill-seeker thinking the rules don't apply to them. Another person who doesn't understand that mountains don't give second chances.

I reach for my radio. "Rhett to Base. We've got a situation."

"Go ahead, Rhett."

"Fresh ski tracks heading into the closed area northwest of Silverback. Single set, recent. Looks like someone went off-boundary right before closing."

A pause, then: "Shit. Do you want backup?"

I hesitate, looking at the darkening sky. Proper protocol would be to call in the team, set up a coordinated search. But that takes time—time this skier might not have if the snowpack decides to give way.

"Negative. Aspen and I will follow the tracks and make contact. Have backup on standby. I'll report in twenty."

"Copy that. Be careful out there. Those readings weren't looking good."

I clip the radio back to my belt and whistle for Aspen. She comes bounding over, already alert to the change in my demeanor.

"Let's go, girl. Someone needs a lesson in mountain safety."

As we move toward the boundary rope, I check my rescue pack: probe, shovel, first aid kit, emergency blanket, extra batteries for the radio and headlamp. The familiar weight settles on my shoulders as I clip into my specialized bindings designed to work with my prosthetic.

The light continues to fade, casting long shadows across the snow. The tracks lead directly into a sheltered bowl—a perfect terrain trap if the snow above decides to slide. Exactly the kind of picturesque spot that lures skiers to their doom.

Five years ago, I would have been furious at the skier's stupidity.

Now, all I feel is a cold dread in my stomach.

I know too well what it feels like when the mountain breaks beneath you.

When the world becomes a churning white hell.

When you realize, in perfect clarity, that nature is completely indifferent to whether you live or die.

As Aspen and I cross the boundary, following those single, arrogant tracks into the gathering darkness, I can only hope we find this fool before the mountain decides their fate.

The last light glints off the western peaks as we push forward. Behind us, the resort lights twinkle like stars fallen to earth. Ahead, only wilderness and the reckless tracks that disappear into the shadows of Darkmore's unforgiving embrace.

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three

Jade

Pure. Freaking. Heaven.

That's the only way to describe the feeling of cutting through untouched powder, my skis floating on eighteen inches of pristine snow. No chopped-up runs, no weekend warriors snowplowing their way down, no children's ski school snaking across my path. Just me and the mountain in perfect harmony.

The setting sun paints the snow in shades of pink and gold as I carve my way down the bowl. My breath forms clouds that trail behind me, and the only sound is the soft swoosh of my skis and my own exhilarated laughter.

This is why I can't give it up. This feeling. This perfect moment of freedom where nothing exists except the next turn, the next drop, the next sensation. It's better than any drug, better than sex—well, the sex I've had, anyway.

I catch air off a natural lip in the terrain, suspended momentarily in flight. God, if Carlson could see me now, he'd have an aneurysm. Worth it, though. So worth it.

I land smoothly and continue my descent, heading toward a gully that will lead me back toward the resort's outer boundary. Five more minutes and I'll be back in bounds, none the wiser.

The late-day shadows make it harder to read the terrain, but I've always had good

mountain sense.

I adjust my line slightly, aiming for a passage between two stands of pines.

The snow here is even deeper, reaching mid-thigh when I cut through it.

It's getting heavier too, not quite the champagne powder from higher up.

That's when I hear it. A deep, resonant "whumpf" sound that seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

My blood turns to ice. Every skier knows that sound. It's the sound of snow layers collapsing. The sound of death.

For one suspended moment, nothing happens. Then, a crack appears in the snow about fifteen feet above me, spreading like lightning across the slope. The entire surface layer begins to move.

"No, no, no," I whisper, but the mountain doesn't care about my protests.

I turn my skis downhill, pointing them straight in a desperate attempt to outrun the slide. For a second, I think I might make it—I'm accelerating, pulling ahead of the advancing wave of snow.

Then my right ski catches something beneath the surface. In an instant, I'm tumbling, skis releasing from my boots as designed. The world becomes a violent, spinning nightmare of white.

The force of it is incomprehensible—like being hit by a truck, then dragged behind it.

I'm rolled and flipped and crushed all at once.

Snow forces its way into my mouth, my nose, my clothing.

I can't tell which way is up. I try to swim, to fight against the current as I've been taught, but it's like battling a liquid concrete tsunami.

A searing pain explodes in my left shoulder as I slam against something solid—a tree or a rock. The impact knocks what little air I had from my lungs.

The roar is deafening, then suddenly muffled as the avalanche slows and I'm dragged deeper. The pressure increases around me, squeezing my chest, making it impossible to expand my lungs. I'm being buried alive.

In some detached part of my brain, I remember the training: Make an air pocket. Keep one hand in front of your face. Don't panic.

But my body isn't listening to my brain anymore. Everything hurts. I can't move. The snow is setting like cement around me.

With my last bit of strength, I manage to bring my right hand up near my face, creating a tiny space—a pathetic bubble of air that might give me a few more minutes of life.

Darkness. Cold. Silence.

This is how I die. Not in a blaze of glory on a competition run with cameras rolling, but alone in the wilderness because I was too stupid, too reckless, too desperate for a thrill.

As the oxygen in my little pocket depletes, my mind drifts. I see my parents' faces when I told them I was skipping college to pursue Olympic dreams. My coach's expression when my knee exploded during qualifiers. The look on Carlson's face this

afternoon when he warned me to stay in bounds.

Should have gone for hot chocolate. Stupid, stupid girl.

The edges of consciousness begin to blur. Is this what dying feels like? It's almost peaceful now. The pain is fading. I'm floating.

Wait. What's that sound?

Something above me. Faint. Rhythmic. Scratching?

A bark. Definitely a bark. Am I hallucinating?

More scratching, more urgent now. Voices, muffled by layers of snow.

"...here! Aspen's got something!"

The pressure around my chest lessens slightly. They're digging. Someone is actually digging for me.

I try to move, to call out, but nothing works. My lungs burn. My vision, what little there is in the pitch blackness, sparkles with tiny dots of light.

The sounds grow closer. Frantic digging. More barking.

Suddenly, a rush of cold air hits my face. Light—painful, beautiful light—floods my tiny prison as snow is cleared away from my head.

Strong hands work quickly to free my upper body. I cough weakly, sucking in precious oxygen that tastes better than anything I've ever experienced.

"I've got you. Stay with me." The voice is deep, authoritative. A man's voice.

As they lift me partially out of my icy grave, I force my eyes open.

Through a haze of pain and confusion, I see him—a bearded face, weathered by sun and wind.

Eyes the color of a winter sky—intense, focused, concerned.

Older than me, maybe late thirties or early forties, with streaks of silver at his temples that somehow make him look distinguished rather than old.

Even in my barely conscious state, something stirs inside me—an unexpected flutter that has nothing to do with my injuries. There's something about him—something in those eyes that sees right through me.

"You're safe now," he says, but there's no warmth in his voice. He seems almost disappointed in me.

I try to thank him, to apologize, to say anything, but the words won't come. The world spins violently, darkness creeping in from the edges.

The last thing I register before consciousness slips away is his arms around me, solid and secure, lifting me from the snow. And despite everything—the pain, the fear, the stupidity that got me here—I feel an inexplicable sense of rightness in those arms.

Then nothing but darkness claims me.

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four

Jade

I wake to the sound of crackling wood and the scent of pine.

For a blissful moment, I think I'm back in my childhood bedroom at my parents' cabin in Banff.

Then the pain hits—a symphony of agony with every part of my body playing a different section.

My shoulder screams loudest, followed by a throbbing chorus from my ribs and a persistent drumbeat in my skull.

"What the hell..." My voice is a rasp, barely audible even to my own ears.

"Welcome back." The deep voice startles me. I force my eyes fully open, wincing against the light from a nearby lamp.

He's sitting in a worn leather chair across the room, a German Shepherd curled at his feet.

My rescuer. The man with the winter-sky eyes.

Even through my fog of pain, I register that he's attractive in that rugged mountain-man way that's completely different from the polished ski bros I usually date.

"Where am I?" I try to sit up and immediately regret it, gasping as pain lances through my left side.

"Don't move." He rises and approaches, his movements careful, deliberate.

"You've got three bruised ribs, a dislocated shoulder that I had to put back, and enough bruising to win a bar fight.

Plus mild hypothermia and possible concussion.

" He adjusts something beneath my head—a pillow.

"You're at my cabin. Roads to town are blocked by the same storm system that triggered the avalanche. "

The avalanche. Fragments of memory flash through my mind: the exhilaration of fresh powder, the terrible sound of snow shifting, the crushing weight as I was buried. A shudder runs through me.

"I'm Rhett Sullivan. Search and Rescue." He hands me a glass of water, supporting my head as I sip. "And you're Jade Wilson, ski instructor at Darkmore Resort who apparently doesn't understand what 'closed terrain' means."

The disapproval in his voice stings worse than my injuries. There's no sympathy there, just clinical assessment and judgment.

"How do you know my name?" My voice sounds pathetic even to me.

"Resort ID in your jacket. Plus, Carlson from the resort identified you when I radioed in. He wasn't surprised." Rhett sets the water down and checks my pulse, his fingers warm against my wrist.

"Is he mad?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"Mad? No." Rhett's eyes meet mine directly. "Worried. Disappointed. Probably reconsidering his hiring decisions."

"Ouch. Tell me how you really feel." I attempt a smirk but it probably looks more like a grimace.

"You want honesty? Fine. You're lucky to be alive. If Aspen hadn't caught your scent—" he gestures to the dog, who perks up at the mention of her name, "—you'd be a recovery, not a rescue. And I'd be digging out your frozen corpse in spring."

His bluntness is like a slap. I've been reprimanded for going off-trail before, but never by someone who had to risk their life to save me from my own stupidity.

I swallow hard. "Thank you. For saving me."

Something in his expression shifts slightly. "Just doing my job."

"Your job is risking your life for idiots like me?"

"My job is mountain safety. Sometimes that includes rescuing people who should know better." He stands and moves across the room, and I notice for the first time the slight irregularity in his gait.

As he reaches for something on a shelf, his pant leg rides up slightly, revealing a glimpse of metal and carbon fiber where flesh should be. A prosthetic leg. The realization hits me like another avalanche.

He turns back and catches me staring. His jaw tightens, but he says nothing, just brings over a medical kit and begins checking the bandage on my shoulder.

"I really am sorry," I whisper, embarrassment flooding through me. This man lost his leg, probably in these same mountains, and here I am, creating exactly the kind of situation he warns people about.

"Save your energy," he says, but his tone is marginally softer. "A doctor is on standby via radio if we need, but the roads won't be clear until tomorrow at the earliest."

For the first time, I take in my surroundings. The cabin is small but well-organized. A main room with a stone fireplace, kitchen area to one side, doors leading to what I assume are bedroom and bathroom. Large windows face the mountain. We could be miles from civilization.

"Where exactly are we?"

"North ridge service road. It's a SAR outpost I converted to living quarters." He reapplies a salve to the bruises on my arm. "I'm stationed here during the winter season."

"You live alone up here?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Me and Aspen. We prefer it." The dog wags her tail at the mention of her name. "Fewer people asking stupid questions."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but your bedside manner could use some work." I'm aiming for lighthearted, but it comes out weaker than I intended.

He smirks. "I leave that to the medical professionals. I just haul people out of trouble."

Rhett finishes with my bandages and helps me sip more water. Despite his gruffness, his hands are gentle. He's handsome, rugged, so different from the people at the

resort.

"You should rest." He straightens up, adjusting the blankets around me. "Radio if anything happens."

"Radio?"

He places a small two-way radio on the side table. "Push to talk. I'll be monitoring."

"Where are you going?"

"To check perimeter. Make sure we're not snowed in completely." He pulls on a heavy jacket. "Aspen, stay."

The dog settles next to the couch, her eyes watching me with unnerving intelligence. The door opens, letting in a blast of cold air, then closes behind him.

Left alone with my thoughts and a very attentive rescue dog, I close my eyes and try to process the situation. I've been rescued by the human equivalent of a grizzly bear—growls and judgment on the outside, but capable of surprising gentleness.

And I can't stop thinking about those eyes.

The fever hits sometime in the night. One minute I'm dozing fitfully, the next I'm burning up, my skin on fire while I shiver uncontrollably.

"R-Rhett?" I fumble for the radio, but my coordination is shot.

Aspen whines, then barks sharply. Moments later, a door opens, and hurried footsteps approach.

"What's wrong?" Rhett's voice. Concern has replaced the earlier judgment.

"C-cold. But hot. Everything's spinning." I can hear how nonsensical I sound, but can't seem to form better sentences.

Cool hands touch my forehead. "Damn it. You're burning up."

What follows is a blur—Rhett on the radio with someone, medical terms I don't understand, cool cloth on my skin, pills I'm coaxed to swallow.

"Stay with me, Jade." His voice anchors me as I drift in and out of coherence. "Focus on my voice."

"Why are you so angry with me?" The question tumbles out, unfiltered by fever. "You don't even know me."

A pause. "I'm not angry at you specifically."

"Feels specific."

He sighs, changing the cloth on my forehead. "I've pulled too many bodies from these mountains. People who thought the warnings didn't apply to them."

"Is that...how you lost your leg?" I wouldn't dare ask this if I weren't half-delirious with fever, but the filter between my brain and mouth has completely dissolved.

Another, longer pause. "Yes."

"I'm sorry." And I am—not just for asking, but for everything. For being exactly the kind of person he resents.

"It was a long time ago." His voice is distant now, as if he's traveled back to that moment. "Five years."

"Were you rescuing someone like me?"

"I was acting like you." There's no bite in the words though, just a quiet sadness.

"Yet you still do this. Why?" I force my eyes open, trying to focus on his face through the haze of fever.

His expression softens almost imperceptibly. "Because the mountains have taken enough. And some people are worth saving, even from themselves."

Something about the way he says it—the raw honesty—touches me deeply. Or maybe it's just the fever breaking down all my walls. Either way, I feel tears sliding down my cheeks.

"Hey, none of that." His thumb gently wipes away a tear. "Save your strength for healing."

"I never meant to—" I choke on the words, overwhelmed by the realization of what could have happened, what I put him through. "I just needed to feel something real. Something that mattered."

"I understand that better than you think." His voice has lost its edge completely now. In the firelight, he looks younger, the hard lines of his face softened.

"Will you stay?" I whisper, hating how vulnerable I sound but too exhausted to care. "Just until I fall asleep?"

He doesn't answer, but he doesn't leave either. Instead, he sits beside the couch,

continuing to apply a cool face cloth to my forehead. At some point, his hand finds mine, strong fingers entwining with my smaller ones.

I drift in and out of consciousness throughout the night, but each time I surface, he's there—sometimes checking my temperature, sometimes just sitting quietly, sometimes speaking softly to Aspen. His presence becomes a constant, a tether to consciousness when the fever threatens to drag me under.

By morning, the fever has broken. I wake feeling wrung out but clearer. The first light of dawn filters through the windows, painting the cabin in soft gold.

Rhett is asleep in the chair beside me, his head tilted at an angle that will surely give him a stiff neck. Aspen is curled at his feet, but her eyes open immediately when I stir.

I watch him for a moment, taking advantage of his unguarded state to really see him. The permanent furrow between his brows has smoothed out in sleep. He looks peaceful, almost vulnerable.

As if sensing my gaze, his eyes open, instantly alert. Our gazes lock, and for a moment, neither of us speaks.

"Your fever broke," he says finally, leaning forward to press his palm against my forehead.

The simple touch sends an unexpected current through me. His hand lingers a fraction too long, and I know he feels it too—this bizarre connection between rescuer and rescued, between two people who should have nothing in common but somehow understand each other in ways that defy logic.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For staying."

His eyes hold mine, winter-sky blue meeting whatever shade of disaster mine must be right now. Something unspoken passes between us, a recognition that boundaries have shifted during the long night.

"Always," he replies simply, and the word contains multitudes.

We stay like that, frozen in this charged moment as the morning light strengthens around us, neither willing to be the first to break whatever spell the night has cast.

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five

Rhett

One day. Just one day trapped in this cabin with her, and I'm losing my mind.

I sit on the cabin's small covered porch, the bitter cold a welcome distraction from the thoughts that have been circling my brain like hungry wolves. Aspen whines and nudges my hand with her nose. At least someone understands.

"I know, girl. I'm a mess." I scratch behind her ears, watching my breath form clouds in the frigid air.

The storm finally broke last night, leaving behind three feet of fresh snow and a world silent except for the occasional creak of laden branches. In the distance, Darkmore Peak rises against a flawless blue sky, deceptively peaceful after trying to kill us both.

My radio crackles to life. "Base to Rhett, come in."

I grab it from my pocket. "Rhett here."

"Jake here with your morning update. Road crews made good progress overnight. They should reach your access road by tomorrow afternoon."

Relief and something that feels unnervingly like disappointment war within me. "Copy that. How are things in town?"

"Digging out. The resort's closed until tomorrow for avalanche mitigation. Carlson has been calling every hour for updates on his wayward instructor."

"Tell him she'll live," I say, glancing back at the cabin where Jade sleeps. "Against my better judgment."

Jake chuckles. "That bad, huh? The infamous Jade Wilson finally met her match in you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that your rescue is quite the talk of the town. Local hotshot ski instructor saved by the grumpy mountain hermit. It's like the start of a Lifetime movie."

"Watch it, Jake." My tone carries a warning that surprises even me.

A pause. "Sorry, man. Just trying to lighten the mood. How's she doing, really?"

I sigh, tension draining. "Better. Fever broke yesterday. Shoulder's healing. She's tougher than she looks."

"Good to hear. Think you can handle another day of playing nurse?"

"I've survived worse," I mutter, though I'm not entirely convinced.

"Roger that. Base out."

I clip the radio back to my belt and lean against the porch railing, staring at the snow-covered landscape. The truth is, I don't know if I can handle another day with her. Not because she's a difficult patient—surprisingly, she's not—but because of what's happening to me.

I haven't felt this way about a woman since before the accident. Before Rebecca, my ex, looked at my missing leg and saw a burden she hadn't signed up for. Before I decided that loneliness was preferable to pity.

And now there's Jade. Young, beautiful, reckless Jade who reminds me so much of myself before the mountain took my leg and my arrogance in one brutal lesson. She can't be more than twenty-five. I turned forty-one last month. The age gap alone should be enough to stop these thoughts.

Not to mention she represents everything I've spent the last five years fighting against—the cavalier attitude toward mountain safety, the belief that bad things only happen to other people. Her casual disregard for boundaries and warnings feels like a personal affront to the price I've paid.

Yet when I pulled her from that snow, something shifted inside me.

When her fever spiked and I thought I might lose her, the panic I felt went far beyond professional concern.

I've rescued dozens of people over the years, but I've never sat up all night holding someone's hand, counting each breath like it was precious gold.

I push away from the railing and pace the small porch, the skin rubbing against the prosthetic protests against the cold. Aspen watches me with knowing eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," I tell her. "Nothing's going to happen."

The memory of this morning ambushes me—Jade waking, our eyes meeting, that moment of connection that felt like recognition of something neither of us was looking for. The way her eyes, green as summer pine, had held mine without pity or revulsion when she noticed my prosthetic leg.

I scrub a hand over my face, feeling the days-old growth of my beard.

This is insane. In another day, she'll be gone.

Back to her life at the resort, back to taking reckless chances with her perfect body and vibrant spirit.

I'll be a story she tells—the grumpy rescuer with the missing leg who lectured her while saving her life.

Better that way. Safer.

The cabin door creaks open behind me. I don't turn, knowing exactly who it is. I've become attuned to her movements, to the particular rhythm of her breathing.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I ask, turning to see Jade hobbling onto the porch, wrapped in the blanket from the couch. Even with bruises mottling her face and her hair a tangled mess, she's beautiful in a way that makes my chest ache.

"Getting fresh air," she says, her voice clearer now that the fever has passed. "I was suffocating in there."

"It's freezing out here. You have three bruised ribs and you're recovering from a fever. Get back inside." My voice comes out harsher than intended, fueled by concern and these unwanted feelings churning inside me.

She raises an eyebrow, visibly swaying but determined. "Make me."

Aspen glances between us, sensing the tension. I stare at Jade for a long moment, weighing my options. Her lips are already taking on a bluish tint, and she's shivering despite her bravado.

"Fine." In two strides, I'm next to her. Before she can protest, I scoop her up in my arms, careful of her injured shoulder.

"Hey!" she yelps, startled. "I can walk!"

"Barely," I counter, carrying her back through the doorway. I kick the door closed behind us, the cabin's warmth enveloping us both.

She's so light in my arms, so fragile despite her fierce spirit. I can feel her heart racing—or maybe that's mine. The scent of her hair fills my senses; even after a day without a shower, she somehow smells like mountain wildflowers.

I make it to the couch and attempt to set her down gently, but my prosthetic catches on the edge of the coffee table. I stumble slightly, instinctively tightening my grip to keep from dropping her. The adjustment brings her face inches from mine, her arms now locked around my neck for stability.

Time stops. Her eyes, wide and startlingly green, lock onto mine. Her lips part slightly, and I watch, transfixed, as the tip of her tongue darts out to wet them. My body responds instantly, viscerally, to her proximity. Blood rushes south with such intensity that I nearly groan aloud.

"Rhett..." she whispers, and the sound of my name on her lips breaks something loose inside me.

I lower her to the couch, but don't immediately straighten. We remain suspended in this moment, my face hovering above hers, her arms still around my neck. I can feel her breath against my lips, count each freckle scattered across her nose, see the tiny flecks of brown in her green irises.

Every cell in my body screams to close that final distance, to claim her mouth with

mine, to discover if she tastes as sweet as I've imagined during my wakeful night keeping vigil.

With herculean effort, I pull away, disentangling myself from her arms. The loss of contact is physical pain, but I force myself to straighten, to step back, to rebuild the walls she's somehow breached without even trying.

"You need to rest," I say, my voice rough with restraint. "Doctor's orders."

She simply nods, settling back against the cushions. Disappointed.

"Whatever you say, Mountain Man." There's a new awareness in her voice, a knowledge of the power she holds over me despite her injured state.

I busy myself adjusting her blankets, checking her bandages, anything to avoid meeting her gaze again. My body is still betraying me, my cock is aching, and the cabin suddenly feels too small, too intimate, too dangerous.

"I'll get you some tea," I mutter, retreating to the kitchen area. With my back to her, I grip the edge of the counter, forcing deep breaths until my heart rate slows.

This is temporary, I remind myself. The roads will be clear tomorrow.

She'll go back to her life, and I'll go back to mine.

This strange, powerful connection is nothing more than the natural result of extreme circumstances—her brush with death, my role as rescuer, the forced intimacy of our situation.

But even as I think it, I know it's a lie. In twenty years of search and rescue, I've never felt this way about someone I've pulled from the snow. Never spent the night

memorizing the curve of a sleeping woman's cheek, the rhythm of her breathing, the small sounds she makes in dreams.

Behind me, I hear her shifting on the couch. "You know," she says, her voice casual but with an undercurrent I can't ignore, "for someone determined to keep me at arm's length, you have a funny way of showing it."

I don't turn around. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do." I can hear the smile in her voice. "But it's okay. Your secret's safe with me."

And that's the problem. Nothing feels safe anymore. Not since I pulled her from that snow and felt something buried inside me begin to thaw for the first time in five years.

The tea kettle whistles, startling me from my thoughts. Outside, the winter sun glints off the new snow, promising another clear, cold night ahead.

One more night. I just have to make it through one more night without crossing lines that can't be uncrossed. Without admitting that this woman—this reckless, beautiful, too-young woman—has awakened something in me I thought was dead and buried.

I pour the tea with hands that aren't quite steady, bracing myself to turn and face her again. To resist the gravitational pull that seems to draw me toward her despite every rational objection.

Tomorrow the roads will be clear. Tomorrow this will be over. I can't fall for her.

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six

Jade

Morning seeps into the cabin like honey, golden light sliding across the floorboards.

I've been awake for an hour, trapped in my thoughts and the memory of almost-kisses.

Rhett hasn't been close to me since he fled to the kitchen last night, though I heard him moving around, checking on me from a distance.

He's avoiding me. Smart man.

The cabin door opens, and Aspen bounds in first, shaking snow from her fur before Rhett follows. He's carrying firewood, his face flushed from the cold, beard frosted at the edges. Our eyes meet, and the air between us practically crackles.

"Morning," he says gruffly, moving to the fireplace.

"Morning," I reply, watching the way he arranges the logs. Everything he does has purpose, no wasted movement. It's mesmerizing.

"Fever stayed down?" He doesn't look at me when he asks.

"Yeah. Just sore now." I shift, wincing as my ribs protest. "Though I feel like I got into a fistfight with the mountain. Spoiler alert: the mountain won."

A hint of a smile tugs at his lips. "Mountains usually do."

The silence that follows isn't uncomfortable, exactly, but it's heavy with unspoken things. I watch as he moves around the cabin, his gait slightly uneven but fluid in its own way.

"How long did it take?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

He pauses, back to me. "How long did what take?"

"To learn to walk again. After..." I gesture toward his leg, even though he can't see it under the blankets.

For a moment, I think he'll ignore the question or snap at me. But then his shoulders drop slightly.

"Eight months before I could walk without assistance. A year before I could manage uneven terrain. Two years before I could ski again." He turns to face me. "Why?"

I shrug, then regret it as pain shoots through my shoulder. "It took me seven months after my knee surgery before I could ski again. Not competitively, though. That dream was toast."

He sits in the chair across from me, elbows on knees.

"The Olympic trials. I remember hearing about that from people in town."

"Yeah, well. Not my finest moment." I attempt a smile that probably comes out more like a grimace. "One minute I'm on track for the Olympics, the next I'm sprawled across the slope with my knee pointing the wrong direction and my dreams going up in smoke."

"That's why you take risks," he says. It's not a question.

"Bingo." I meet his gaze directly. "When I'm pushing the limits, just for a moment, I'm me again. The me that had a future beyond teaching tourists how to pizza and french fry."

He nods, understanding in those winter-blue eyes. "And when things go wrong?"

"Then at least I feel something real." The honesty surprises even me. "Even if it's pain or fear."

Rhett looks down at his hands—strong, capable hands that carried me through the snow, that checked my fever through the night. "Five years ago, I was leading a rescue operation on the north face. Climber got disoriented in a sudden storm, fell into a crevasse."

My breath catches. He's actually opening up.

"I was cocky back then. Thought I was invincible." His voice turns hollow. "We located him, but conditions were deteriorating. Others wanted to call it off until morning. I insisted we could reach him."

"What happened?" I ask softly.

"We got him out. My team was ascending with him when I noticed signs of instability above us." His jaw tightens. "I ordered everyone to move. Fast. But I stayed back, anchoring the rope. The slide hit before I could follow them."

I can almost see it—Rhett, holding position while his team escaped, the wall of snow bearing down on him.

"The crevasse stopped me from being swept away completely. But my leg was crushed. By the time they dug me out..." He gestures to his left leg. "Frostbite finished what the rocks started."

"You saved them," I whisper. "You're a hero."

He looks up sharply. "I'm no hero. I was reckless, just like—" He stops abruptly.

"Just like me," I finish. "Except you risked yourself for others. I just risk myself for the thrill."

"My ex didn't see it that way. She saw someone who chose the mountain over coming home safely. Who loved the rush more than..."

"More than her?" I supply when he trails off.

He nods once, jaw tight.

"She left you because of the accident?"

"Six months after. Said she couldn't handle being married to 'half a man.'" His voice is flat, but I can hear the old pain underneath.

Anger flares in my chest. "What a bitch."

A startled laugh escapes him. "She wasn't wrong. I wasn't the same person."

"None of us are, after something like that." I shift, sitting up straighter despite the pain. "But we're still whole people. Different, but whole."

His eyes meet mine, something new flickering in their depths.

"You know what's funny?" I continue. "We both lost the same thing. Our identities. Who we thought we were going to be."

"The difference is how we handled it," he says. "You chase the feeling. I avoid it."

"We're both hiding," I realize aloud. "I'm hiding from accepting a new future. You're hiding from any future at all."

He stares at me like I've reached across the space between us and slapped him.

"You don't know me," he says, with tired resignation.

"I know enough." I hold his gaze. "I know you sit up all night with strangers who've been stupid enough to get themselves buried in avalanches.

I know you risk your life daily for people who'll probably never thank you properly.

I know you pretend to be this grumpy mountain hermit, but you're actually the softest person on this entire mountain range. "

"Careful," he warns, but there's a dangerous warmth in his eyes now.

"Or what?" I challenge. "You'll rescue me again?"

He stands abruptly, moving to the window, putting distance between us. "The roads should be clear soon."

The subject change is so obvious it almost makes me laugh. Almost.

"Rhett."

He doesn't turn.

"Rhett," I repeat, softer. "Look at me."

When he finally does, the raw emotion in his face steals my breath. He's fighting so hard against whatever this is between us.

"Come here," I whisper.

"Bad idea," he says, but his feet are already moving toward me.

He stops just out of reach, like he's afraid to come closer. So I stand, ignoring the protest from my ribs, and close the distance myself.

"I'm going to kiss you now," I tell him, reaching up to touch his bearded cheek. "Unless you can give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

His eyes search mine, conflicted. "I'm seventeen years older than you."

"That's not a good reason." I trace the outline of his jaw with my fingertips. "Try again."

"I live alone on a mountain with a dog."

"Still not good enough." My hand slides to the nape of his neck. "Last chance."

His breathing is uneven now. "I'm broken."

"So am I," I whisper, rising on tiptoes. "Maybe that's why we fit."

When our lips finally meet, it's like the moment before an avalanche—that suspended

breath where the world holds perfectly still before everything breaks loose. His mouth is softer than I expected, contrasting with the scratch of his beard against my skin.

For a heartbeat, he remains frozen. Then, with a sound like surrender, his arms come around me, careful of my injuries but pulling me closer. The kiss deepens, ignites, his restraint crumbling as my fingers thread through his hair.

One kiss becomes many. His hands span my waist, thumbs brushing the skin beneath my borrowed shirt. Mine explore the solid planes of his chest, the strong column of his neck, the surprising softness of his hair.

"Jade," he murmurs against my mouth.

I don't care. I want more—more of his touch, more of the delicious weight of him pressing me carefully back against the wall, more of the heat building between us that has nothing to do with my recent fever.

His hand slides up my ribcage, hesitating just below my breast. I arch into him, silently asking for what I want. With a groan, he palms the weight of me through my shirt, his thumb brushing across the peak. Sparks shoot through my body, pooling low in my belly.

The radio on the counter suddenly crackles to life. "Base to Rhett, come in."

He jerks back like he's been burned, chest heaving. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide with desire as he stares at me.

"You should get that," I say, trying to regulate my breathing.

He nods, but doesn't move for a moment, seemingly torn between duty and desire.

Finally, he steps back, grabbing the radio with a shaking hand.

"Rhett here," he answers, voice rough.

I can't make out the words from the other end, just the staticky voice of whoever's calling. But I see the change in Rhett's posture, the way he straightens, walls rebuilding.

"Copy that. We'll be ready." He sets the radio down and turns to me, expression carefully blank. "Roads will be clear by mid-afternoon. They're sending a snowcat up to get us."

Just like that, the spell is broken. I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold.

"Rhett—"

"I should check your bandages before we go." He's moving away, voice professional once more. "And get you some painkillers for the ride down."

He disappears into what must be a bathroom, leaving me standing there, lips still tingling from his kiss, body still humming with unfulfilled desire.

I sink back onto the couch, reality crashing down around me. This man is wounded in ways that have nothing to do with his missing leg. His ex-wife didn't just leave him—she destroyed something fundamental in him when she did.

As I listen to him moving around, putting distance between us in more ways than one, I realize that rescuing Rhett Sullivan might be the most dangerous thing I've ever attempted.

But I've never been one to back down from a challenge.

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seven

Rhett

I wake before dawn, as always. What's not usual is finding myself on the living room floor, a cushion under my head and a blanket that barely covers my frame. Aspen lies pressed against my side, her warmth a familiar comfort.

The events of yesterday flood back—Jade's fever breaking, our conversation, that kiss—and I close my eyes, cursing myself for my weakness. For giving in. For pulling away.

Aspen's ears perk up, her head turning toward the couch where Jade sleeps. She whines softly, then untangles herself from me and pads over to her. I watch in disbelief as my fiercely loyal companion gently rests her chin on the edge of the couch, eyes fixed on Jade's sleeping form.

"Traitor," I whisper.

Aspen's tail wags once, but she doesn't move from her position. In the six years I've had her, I've never seen her warm up to someone so quickly.

I push myself up, socket protesting after a night on the hard floor.

The fire has burned down to embers, so I add more logs, stoking it back to life.

The cabin gradually brightens with morning light filtering through the windows.

The storm has passed completely, leaving behind that particular crystal-blue sky that only follows heavy snow.

"Good morning."

I turn to find Jade awake, hair tousled, watching me with those summer-green eyes. Aspen immediately jumps up, front paws on the couch, nosing at Jade's hand.

"Sorry about her," I say, moving to pull Aspen back. "She's not usually this pushy with strangers."

"We're not exactly strangers anymore, are we?" Jade says, scratching behind Aspen's ears. The dog's expression is pure bliss, tongue lolling out. "We've bonded. She saved my life too, after all."

I can't argue with that. Instead, I retreat to the kitchen. "Hungry?"

"Starving," she admits, attempting to sit up. Her winces don't escape my notice.

"Let me help." I cross back to her, offering my arm for support. She takes it, her hand small and warm against mine. Once she's sitting, Aspen immediately hops up beside her on the couch, circling three times before settling against her uninjured side.

"Aspen, down," I command.

"It's fine," Jade says, already stroking the dog's fur. "She's keeping me warm."

I shake my head, returning to the kitchen. "You've turned my working dog into a lap dog in forty-eight hours."

"It's my superpower," she calls back. "Corrupting perfectly good rescue animals."

I find myself smiling as I pull out eggs and the few fresh vegetables I have left.

I'll have to go into town soon. The domesticity of the moment doesn't escape me—making breakfast for a beautiful woman while morning sun streams through the windows.

It's been years since I've experienced anything like this.

"Can I help?" Jade asks, attempting to stand.

"Stay put. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor," she argues, but settles back down.

"Closest thing for fifty miles at the moment."

I scramble eggs with peppers and onions, toast the last of my bread, and brew coffee strong enough to stand a spoon in. When I bring a plate over to Jade, Aspen immediately sits up, nose twitching hopefully.

"Don't even think about it," I tell her. "You've already had breakfast."

Jade laughs, the sound warming the cabin more effectively than the fire. "She's got the puppy-dog eyes down to a science."

"Six years of practice," I reply, fetching my own breakfast. I hesitate for a moment, then sit beside her on the couch rather than retreating to my usual chair. Aspen, now squeezed between us, looks absolutely delighted with this arrangement.

We eat in companionable silence for a few minutes. I'm acutely aware of Jade beside me—the subtle scent of her skin, the way she hums appreciatively at the first sip of

coffee, the occasional brush of her arm against mine as she eats.

"This is really good," she says, raising her fork. "I thought mountain men survived on jerky and pine cones."

"Only on special occasions."

She laughs again, warming my body in a way that I thought was no longer possible.

"So," she says, setting her empty plate aside. "What's the plan for today?"

"SAR confirmed roads will be cleared by afternoon. I'd imagine Carlson will send someone up for you as soon as they can."

"Oh." Her expression falls slightly. "Right."

"I'll have to go into the office. Need to debrief, file the incident report."

"Incident report. Is that what I am?" There's a teasing note in her voice, but something vulnerable underneath.

I look at her directly. "You know you're more than that."

Her gaze holds mine, searching. "Am I?"

Aspen chooses this moment to flop dramatically across both our laps, forcing us closer together. Jade giggles, scratching the dog's belly.

"She's not subtle, is she?" she says.

"Never has been." I find myself smiling again. It's becoming a habit around her.

We spend the morning like this—talking easily, sharing space.

I change Jade's bandages, our breaths mingling as I lean close.

She tells me stories about her most ridiculous ski students; I counter with tales of bizarre rescue missions.

Aspen shuttles between us, bringing toys to Jade as offerings, then looking to me for approval, as if ensuring I know she's still loyal.

When Jade attempts to stand unassisted and wavers, I'm there instantly, steadying her. Her hand grips my forearm, fingers pressing into muscle.

"I've got you," I say.

"I know," she replies softly, looking up at me with an expression that makes my chest tighten.

Against every better judgment, I bend down and kiss her again—briefly, lightly. When I pull back, her eyes remain closed for an extra heartbeat, lashes dark against her cheeks.

Aspen whines, circling us anxiously.

"Even she doesn't want this to end," Jade murmurs.

The radio crackles before I can respond. "Base to Rhett."

I reluctantly move away to answer it. "Rhett here."

"Road's clear to your position. Carlson is sending up the resort's snowcat for Wilson.

ETA ninety minutes."

"Copy that." I set the radio down, turning back to Jade. "Sounds like your ride is on its way."

The silence that follows feels heavier than before.

"We should get you ready," I say finally. "I'll find your things."

I busy myself gathering her now-dry clothes, the few items from her pockets, anything to avoid the uncertainty hanging in the air.

What happens when we leave this cabin? When we return to our separate lives—the reckless ski instructor and the cautious rescuer?

When the intensity of these days fades into memory?

I'm folding her jacket when arms slide around my waist from behind. She presses her cheek against my back, and I freeze.

"Jade..."

"I don't want to pretend this didn't happen," she says, voice muffled against my shirt. "I don't want to go back to being strangers."

I close my eyes, savoring the feel of her against me. "I don't either."

"But?"

I turn in her arms, looking down at her upturned face. "But I don't know how this works. Out there."

Before she can respond, something nudges hard against the backs of my knees, nearly buckling them. Aspen stands there, looking enormously pleased with herself as she forces us closer together.

Jade laughs, the sound slightly watery. "See? Even Aspen thinks we should figure it out."

I rest my forehead against hers, allowing myself this moment. "She's usually right."

"Smart dog."

"Smartest I know."

We stand like that until the radio crackles again, calling us back to reality. As we prepare for her departure, Aspen follows Jade everywhere, carrying her glove in her mouth, whining whenever she moves too far away.

Just like her owner, my dog seems unwilling to let Jade Wilson go. And just like my dog, I have no idea what to do about it.

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eight

Jade

Ninety minutes until reality crashes back in. Ninety minutes until whatever this is between us gets tested by the outside world. Ninety minutes left in our snow globe.

I watch him move around the cabin, gathering my things. Aspen follows him, then me, then back to him, as if she's trying to herd us together.

"Rhett." His name on my lips stops him in his tracks. He turns, and the raw emotion in his eyes makes my breath catch.

"We should get you ready," he says, but he doesn't move.

I cross to him slowly, mindful of my still-aching ribs. "I am ready."

"Jade..." There's warning in his voice, but underneath it, need.

I reach up, brushing my fingers along his jawline, feeling the scratch of his beard against my skin. "Ninety minutes is a long time," I whisper.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "Not long enough."

"Then let's not waste it."

His restraint—the control he's been clinging to since we met—fractures visibly. His

hands come up to frame my face, and then his mouth is on mine, hungry and desperate. This isn't the cautious kiss from earlier. This is a man who's been starving for years finally allowed to feast.

I wind my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his as much as my injuries allow. He tastes like coffee and possibility, and I want more—more of his hands, more of his mouth, more of him.

"Your shoulder," he murmurs against my lips, even as his fingers slide into my hair.

"I'll manage," I breathe, nipping at his lower lip.

He pulls back slightly, eyes darkened with desire but still cautious. "We should stop."

"Why?" I challenge, my fingers tracing the strong column of his neck.

"Because once I start, I don't think I'll be able to."

Heat pools low in my belly at his words, at the intensity in his gaze. "Then don't stop."

Something breaks loose in him. With a growl that vibrates through my body, he lifts me—mindful of my injuries but with undeniable strength—and carries me toward the bedroom. Aspen whines once, then settles on her bed near the fire as Rhett kicks the door closed behind us.

The bedroom is sparse but warm, dominated by a large bed covered with a handmade quilt. He sets me down beside it, his hands steady on my waist.

"Are you sure?" he asks, searching my face.

In answer, I grab the hem of my borrowed shirt—his shirt—and pull it over my head in one fluid motion, leaving me in just my underwear. His sharp intake of breath is gratifying.

"Very sure," I say, watching his eyes darken as they travel over me.

"God, you're beautiful." His voice is rough, reverent. His hand, when it reaches out to trace the curve of my collarbone, trembles slightly.

"Your turn," I whisper.

In one fluid motion, he pulls his shirt over his head, and I nearly gasp aloud.

This man is magnificent—all muscle and sinew crafted by years in the mountains, not a gym.

His broad shoulders taper to a narrow waist, his chest dusted with dark hair that runs in a tantalizing trail down his stomach.

Scars mark his skin—a roadmap of survival etched across his torso—making him even more breathtaking.

I step closer, placing my palms against the solid wall of his chest, feeling his heartbeat thundering beneath my hands. "I want to see all of you," I say, my eyes meeting his.

Uncertainty flashes across his face. I know what he's thinking about—his prosthetic.

"All of you," I repeat firmly, my fingers trailing down the ridges of his abdomen.

A growl rumbles through his chest as he captures my hands, bringing them to his lips.

"You first," he counters, and the primal hunger in his eyes makes me shiver.

His hands are gentle as they explore me, tracing the curves of my waist, skimming over the bruises with feather-light touches. When his thumbs brush the undersides of my breasts, I gasp. He guides me back until my legs hit the edge of the bed, then eases me down onto the quilt.

"I know it's wrong but...I've thought about this since I pulled you from that snow," he admits, trailing kisses along my jawline. "About what you'd feel like beneath me."

"Show me," I urge, arching up against him.

His mouth captures mine again as his hand cups my breast, thumb circling my nipple until it peaks against his palm. I moan into his kiss, my body already on fire from his touch.

"Rhett," I plead, threading my fingers through his hair. "I need more."

"Tell me," he commands softly, his breath hot against my skin. "Tell me exactly what you need."

The words tumble out, unfiltered and raw. "I need your mouth on me. I need you inside me. I need you to make me forget everything but this."

A groan rumbles through his chest. His kisses trail lower, across my ribs, my stomach, to the edge of my underwear. His eyes meet mine, asking silent permission. I nod, lifting my hips to help as he slides the fabric down my legs.

Then his mouth is there, right where I need him most, and I cry out at the first touch of his tongue. His hands hold my thighs apart as he tastes me, one finger sliding inside to curl against that perfect spot.

"God, you taste amazing," he murmurs against me. "So sweet. So delicious."

I can't form words, can only moan as he adds another finger, stretching me deliciously as his tongue circles my clit. The pressure builds quickly, too quickly—it's been so long, and he's too good at this.

"Rhett, I'm going to—"

"Let go," he urges. "I want to feel you come on my tongue."

His words push me over the edge. I shatter with his name on my lips, my body arching off the bed as pleasure crashes through me in waves. I don't feel pain any more, only pleasure. He works me through it, gentling his touch as I come down, trembling.

Before I can recover, he's moving up my body, claiming my mouth in a kiss that lets me taste myself on his lips. I reach for his jeans, impatient now.

"Off," I demand, fumbling with the button. "Now."

He chuckles, the sound deep and satisfied. "Yes, ma'am."

Clothes disappear in a frantic blur of hands and mouths.

When he's finally naked before me, I can't help but stare in wonder.

His cock is magnificent—thick and long, flushed dark with need, curving proudly toward his stomach.

The sight of him makes my mouth water, my core clench with anticipation.

This man is pure raw power—a force of nature barely restrained.

But then my gaze drops lower, to where flesh meets metal on his left leg. His body tenses, the vulnerability in his eyes breaking my heart.

I sit up, sliding to the edge of the bed. I reach out, my fingers hovering just above the junction. "Can I?"

He nods tightly, jaw clenched as if preparing for rejection.

I trace the edge gently, feeling the contrast between warm skin and cool prosthetic. Then I lean forward and press a kiss to the scarred skin just above it.

He inhales sharply. "Jade..."

I look up at him, my hand wrapping around his impressive length, feeling him pulse against my palm. "I want all of you, Rhett Sullivan. Every part."

Something feral flashes in his eyes—a man who's denied himself for too long finally given permission to take what he wants.

In one smooth motion, he has me on my back, his powerful body covering mine as he settles between my thighs.

I can feel him, hot and heavy against me, his control visibly fraying at the edges.

The head of his cock The stretch as he pushes inside me is exquisite, bordering on too much. I gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders, leaving half-moon indentations in his skin.

"Okay?" he asks, his voice strained, body trembling with the effort of holding back.

"More than okay," I breathe. "Don't stop."

He begins to fuck me, and it's clear he's fighting a war with himself—wanting to be gentle with my injured body but desperate to claim me completely.

His powerful thighs flex as he thrusts, each movement precise yet barely controlled.

Years of solitude have left him starved for touch, and now he's feasting.

His hand slides between us, finding my clit with unerring accuracy, and I'm climbing again, faster this time. The contrast of his touch—those calloused mountain-man fingers so delicate against my most sensitive spot—undoes me completely.

"You feel incredible," he groans, his pace increasing, control slipping. "So tight. So perfect around me. Been so long... can't..."

"Harder," I urge, wrapping my legs around his waist, drawing him deeper. "Please, Rhett."

Something snaps in him. His movements become fiercer, more primal, driving deeper, hitting a spot that makes me cry out with each thrust. Yet even in this unleashed state, there's care—his weight carefully distributed to avoid my injuries, his free hand cradling my head.

Our eyes lock, the rest of the world long gone. Words pour from me—filthy, desperate pleas for more, for faster, for harder.

"Come for me again," he commands, his voice a ragged growl that sends shivers down my spine. "I need to feel you come around my cock."

His words send me hurtling over the edge. I come with a keening cry, clenching

around him, wave after wave of pleasure washing through me.

Rhett follows moments later, his rhythm faltering as he groans my name against my neck, his body shuddering above mine. With a loud groan he empties himself inside of me, hot and full to the brim with his seed.

Finally, when every last drop is spent, he presses a tender kiss to my temple and withdraws, leaving a wet puddle beneath us.

I curl into him, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat return to normal. His fingers trace lazy patterns on my back, and I've never felt so content, so perfectly at peace.

Then, reality intrudes. Soon the snowcat will arrive. Soon we'll have to leave this cabin, this bubble where nothing exists but us.

"What happens now?" I ask, voicing the question that hangs between us.

His arm tightens around me. "I don't know," he admits. "This isn't something I expected."

"Me neither." I prop myself up to look at him. "But I want to find out where it goes."

Uncertainty clouds his eyes. "Jade, our lives are completely different. You're young, you've got your whole career ahead of you. I'm—"

"If you say 'too old' or 'damaged goods,' I might have to hurt you," I warn, placing my finger over his lips. "And I'm already injured, so that would be inconvenient."

A reluctant smile tugs at his mouth. He kisses my finger. "It won't be easy."

"Nothing worth having ever is." I lean down to kiss him softly. "And you, Mountain Man, are definitely worth having."

The radio in the other room crackles to life, announcing the snowcat's approach. Our time is up.

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Rhett

I stand on the porch, watching as the snowcat approaches. Its rumbling engine shatters the perfect silence of the past days. Reality, arriving right on schedule.

Beside me, Jade shivers slightly in the cold, though she's now dressed properly in her own clothes, her injured arm supported in a makeshift sling. The bruises on her face have begun to fade to a sickly yellow-green, but somehow she's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"That's your ride," I say unnecessarily, my voice rougher than intended.

She nods, eyes fixed on the approaching vehicle. "Looks like it."

Aspen whines at my feet, sensing the impending separation. I know exactly how she feels.

The orange snowcat grinds to a halt, and Jake hops out, his usual grin in place as he trudges through the snow toward us. He gives Jade a quick once-over, professional assessment mixed with undeniable curiosity.

"Miss Wilson," he says with a nod. "Ready to head back to civilization?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replies, but her eyes find mine, full of unspoken things.

Jake, never one for subtlety, glances between us, his eyebrows rising slightly. "I'll, uh, get the cabin warmed up. Take your time." He retreats, giving us a moment of privacy.

Neither of us speaks immediately. What can I possibly say? That in the span of forty-eight hours, this woman has crashed through every barrier I've built over the past five years? That I'm terrified of what that means?

"So," she finally says, "this is where I get my dramatic rescue part two, huh?"

"Looks that way." I step closer, unable to help myself. "Though this one's considerably less harrowing than the first."

"I don't know about that." She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "First one just involved almost dying. This one's..." She trails off, leaving the sentence hanging between us.

Complicated. Impossible. Life-changing.

"Jade," I begin, not sure what I'm about to say.

"Don't." She shakes her head. "Don't say something you'll regret, or something noble and self-sacrificing." She reaches up, her cold fingertips brushing my cheek. "Just tell me one thing—was this just some cabin fever fantasy for you?"

"No." The word comes out instant, emphatic. At least I can give her that truth. "Not even close."

Relief flashes across her face. "Good. Because it wasn't for me either."

Jake calls from the snowcat, reminding us of the limited time. The mountain won't

wait forever.

"You should go," I say, though every part of me wants to ask her to stay. "Carlson is probably pulling his hair out wondering where his star instructor is."

She laughs softly. "What's left of it, anyway."

I help her to the snowcat, supporting her around the waist, savoring these last moments of contact. Jake discreetly busies himself with the controls as I help her into the passenger seat.

"Rhett," she says, her voice low enough that only I can hear. "I meant what I said. I want to find out where this goes."

I nod, unable to trust my voice. Want and fear waging war inside me.

She leans forward, pressing her lips to mine in a brief, fierce kiss. "Think about it," she whispers.

Then she's settling back, door closing, window between us. Aspen barks once, plaintively, as the engine roars to life.

I stand in the snow with my dog, watching the taillights recede down the mountain, taking with them something I didn't even know I was missing until now.

Three days. That's how long it's been since Jade Wilson left my cabin and my life. It feels like three hundred years.

I adjust the straps on my demonstration pack, checking the avalanche beacon inside for the fifth time. Busy hands keep my mind from wandering to green eyes and soft lips and the echo of my name gasped in pleasure.

"Mr. Sullivan? They're ready for you."

I nod at the young teacher—Ms. Singh, if I remember correctly—and follow her out of the lodge's back room. This is my monthly routine: safety seminars for the high school groups that visit Darkmore on field trips. Usually, I find it grounding. Today, it feels like going through the motions.

Thirty teenagers in brightly colored ski jackets await in the resort's outdoor classroom area, a cleared space near the bunny slopes. Their attention spans are as short as expected, eyes constantly darting to the main slopes where they'd clearly rather be.

"Morning," I begin, setting my pack down. "I'm Rhett Sullivan, Search and Rescue. Today we're going to cover mountain safety basics, because what you don't know up here can kill you."

That gets their attention. Nothing like a little blunt mortality to focus teenage minds.

I'm halfway through demonstrating proper beacon use when I feel it—that prickle at the back of my neck that tells me I'm being watched. Not by the kids or their chaperones, but by someone else.

I scan the small crowd and freeze. There, at the back, leaning against a wooden post with arms crossed and a small smile playing at her lips, is Jade.

Our eyes lock, and the rest of the world falls away. She looks good—too good. The bruises on her face have been artfully concealed with makeup, her arm is in a proper sling now, and she's dressed in the resort's instructor uniform. Her hair catches the morning sunlight like burnished copper.

Somehow, I continue the demonstration on autopilot. Beacon signals. Probe techniques. Emergency protocols. My mouth forms the words while my mind tries to

process her presence.

I force myself to focus on the students, answering questions, correcting techniques as they practice with the equipment. All the while, I'm acutely aware of her watching me, her eyes never leaving my face.

"Remember," I tell the group as we wrap up, "the mountains don't care if you've made plans. They don't care if you think you know better. Respect them, prepare properly, and you'll get to enjoy them for many years to come."

As the teachers shepherd the students toward the ski rental area, I slowly pack up my equipment, heart hammering in my chest. I don't look up—can't look up—afraid she might have disappeared, or worse, that she was never there at all.

"That was quite the speech, Mountain Man."

Her voice washes over me like a warm current. I straighten to find her standing a few feet away, that small smile still playing at her lips.

"Standard warning," I manage to say. "They usually only half-listen."

"I don't know. You're pretty compelling when you get all serious about safety." She takes a step closer. "Though I'm probably not the best judge, considering I'm the poster child for what not to do."

"What are you doing here, Jade?" The question comes out harsher than intended.

Her smile falters slightly. "Watching you. Learning."

"Learning what?"

"That you're the same man here as you were up there." She gestures toward the cabin's location high on the mountain. "That wasn't just some... isolated incident."

I zip my pack closed with more force than necessary. "And what was it, exactly?"

"You tell me." She moves closer, stopping just out of reach. "You're the one who's been avoiding me since we got back."

"I haven't been avoiding you," I lie. "I've been busy."

"Right." She doesn't bother hiding her skepticism. "Too busy to return a call? Too busy to stop by the resort when you dropped off the incident report yesterday?"

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. "What do you want from me, Jade?"

"The truth would be a good start." Her voice is steady, but I can see the vulnerability in her eyes. "Was it just sex for you? A nice distraction while we were stuck together?"

"You know it wasn't."

"Do I? Because from where I'm standing, it looks a lot like a man who got what he wanted and is now finding every excuse to disappear."

Her words hit like an avalanche, burying me in shame. Because she's right—I have been avoiding her. Not because I don't want her, but because I want her too much.

"I'm seventeen years older than you," I say, the same argument I've been repeating to myself since she left.

"I'm aware of basic math."

"I live alone on a mountain."

"Also aware of geography."

"I'm not the man I was before the accident."

At this, her expression softens. "That's kind of the point, Rhett. Neither of us is who we were before our accidents. That's why this works."

Hope, dangerous and fragile, unfurls in my chest. "This thing between us—it can't be simple."

"Nothing worth having ever is," she echoes her words from the cabin, stepping closer. "I don't want simple. I want real."

The last of my resistance crumbles like snow under boots. In two strides, I close the distance between us, my hands framing her face as I claim her mouth with mine. She makes a small, surprised sound that quickly turns to approval, her good arm winding around my neck to pull me closer.

I pour everything into the kiss—all the longing, the fear, the tentative hope that's been building since I first pulled her from the snow. She meets me equally, her response just as fierce, just as honest.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, I rest my forehead against hers. "I thought this would fade once we left that cabin. That whatever sparked between us was just circumstance."

"And?" Her eyes search mine.

"And I haven't thought about anything but you since you left." The confession costs

me nothing, not when the reward is her brilliant smile. "I tried to talk myself out of this a hundred different ways."

"Let me guess—I'm too young, too reckless, you're too set in your ways, we're too different." She ticks them off on her fingers. "Did I miss any?"

"You covered the greatest hits." I can't help smiling back at her. "I've been an idiot, haven't I?"

"Monumentally." She rises on tiptoes to press another quick kiss to my lips. "But you're my idiot, if you want to be."

"I do." The certainty of it surprises me. "God help me, I do."

"Good, because I'm not letting you go that easily, Rhett Sullivan." Her expression turns serious. "I know we have things to figure out. I know it won't always be easy. But when I was buried in that snow, I thought I'd never get a second chance to really live. And then you gave me one."

"You gave me one too," I realize. "I've been half-living since the accident. Going through the motions."

"Then let's figure it out together." She takes my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. "I'd rather face the challenge with you than play it safe without you."

In that moment, looking into her eyes with the mountain rising behind her, I understand something fundamental: some risks are worth taking. Some leaps of faith lead not to disaster, but to salvation.

"I think," I say slowly, "that might be the most sensible thing you've ever said."

Her laugh rings out across the snow, bright and clear. "Don't get used to it. I still plan to make plenty of reckless decisions."

"As long as they don't involve going off-trail in avalanche conditions."

"Deal." She squeezes my hand. "Though I can't promise I won't occasionally need rescuing."

I pull her close again, marveling at how perfectly she fits against me. "Lucky for you, I'm pretty good at that."

As we walk toward the lodge, hand in hand, I glance back at the mountain that nearly took her from me before I ever found her. But I did. And we rescued each other.

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Two Years Later...

The mission lasted thirty-six hours. Three hikers caught in an unexpected early autumn storm, trapped on Darkmore's north face with dwindling supplies and hypothermia setting in.

Standard procedure turned complicated when the weather worsened, visibility dropped to near zero, and temperatures plummeted to dangerous lows.

But we got them. We always do.

Aspen, who'd been dozing in the passenger seat, perks up as we approach. Despite being older now, her excitement at coming home never diminishes. She knows who waits inside.

The porch light glows warmly against the gathering dusk. Through the front window, I catch a glimpse of movement—Jade. My heart does that familiar stutter it always does when I see her.

I kill the engine but sit for a moment, savoring the anticipation of homecoming. Two years together, and this feeling hasn't faded. If anything, it's deepened, like a river carving its essential path through stone.

The front door opens before I reach it. Jade stands in the doorway, silhouetted by the warm light behind her, wearing one of my flannel shirts that barely covers the tops of her thighs.

Her hair is longer now, falling in waves past her shoulders.

Her body has changed too—before her pregnancy she was all lean muscle and sharp angles, she's now softer, fuller, with curves that my hands have memorized in the darkness of countless nights.

"You're home," she says simply, and those two words contain everything. The anxiety leaves her body in a visible rush.

"I'm home," I confirm, dropping my gear bag on the porch and reaching for her.

She comes into my arms without hesitation, her body fitting against mine in that perfect way that still amazes me. She smells like baby powder and the lavender soap she makes herself and something uniquely Jade that I've never been able to describe, only crave.

"Everyone okay?" she asks against my chest.

"Everyone safe. No serious injuries." I press my face into her hair. "Cold as hell, though."

She pulls back, eyes scanning my face with the assessment that's become second nature to her since completing her emergency response training last year. "You look exhausted."

"Thirty-six hours will do that." I smile, brushing my thumb across her cheek. "How are my girls?"

Her face softens. "Lilybeth went down about an hour ago. Should be out for a while—she was fighting sleep all day."

Our daughter, six months old and already displaying the stubborn determination of

both her parents. Sometimes I look at her tiny face and see Jade's eyes, my jawline, and feel such overwhelming love it's almost painful.

"And how's this one?" I place my hand gently on the small swell of Jade's stomach, where our second miracle is growing. Just starting to show at four months, this pregnancy is somehow even more miraculous than the first.

"Active today." She covers my hand with hers. "I think we've got another future rescue specialist in there. Or maybe an extreme snowboarder."

"God help us," I chuckle, letting her lead me inside.

The cabin is warm, the fire crackling in the stone hearth.

It's bigger than my old place—three bedrooms, an open kitchen and living area, wide windows that showcase the mountains in every direction.

Photos line the walls—our makeshift wedding at Darkmore Peak's summit, Jade's first day leading the resort's new avalanche awareness program, Lilybeth's birth, countless moments of our life together.

I shed my jacket and boots while Aspen heads straight for her cushion near the fire, circling three times before collapsing with a contented sigh.

"Hungry?" Jade asks, moving toward the kitchen.

"Just tired," I admit. "And cold. Can't seem to get warm."

She turns, eyeing me with a look I've come to recognize—and anticipate. "I think I can help with that."

Before I can respond, she's crossed back to me, rising on tiptoes to press her mouth to

mine. The kiss starts soft, a welcome home, but quickly deepens as her tongue traces the seam of my lips. I respond instantly, my body forgetting its exhaustion as more primal needs take over.

"Jade," I murmur against her mouth. "I should shower first."

"Mmm, in a minute." Her hands slide under my thermal shirt, palms flat against my stomach. "First, I want to warm you up."

She guides me to the couch, pushing gently until I'm seated. Then she kneels between my legs, looking up at me with those green eyes that still hold the power to undo me completely. Her hands work at my belt, then the button of my jeans.

"You don't have to—" I begin.

"I want to," she interrupts, her smile both sweet and wicked. "I missed you. Let me show you how much."

She tugs my jeans and boxers down just enough to free me. Despite my exhaustion, I'm already hardening under her gaze. Her hand wraps around me, stroking slowly, her touch both familiar and thrilling.

"You have no idea how sexy you are when you come home from a mission," she says, her voice low. "All rugged and heroic."

"I'm just doing my job," I reply, though her words send heat coursing through me.

"My job right now," she says, maintaining eye contact as she leans forward, "is to make my husband forget about everything but how good this feels."

Her mouth closes over me, warm and wet, and a groan escapes before I can stop it. Her lips slide down my length, taking me deeper than seems possible. My hands find

her hair, not guiding, just connecting, feeling the silky strands between my fingers.

She works me with practiced skill, knowing exactly how to bring me to the edge without pushing me over.

Her tongue swirls around the head, tracing patterns that make my hips buck involuntarily.

All the while, she watches me, her eyes locked on mine, the connection between us so much more than physical.

"God, Jade," I breathe, cupping her cheek in my palm. "You're incredible."

She hums in response, the vibration sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. Her free hand slides up my thigh, then higher, under my shirt, nails lightly scratching across my abdomen. The dual sensation—her mouth around me, her hand on my skin—is intoxicating.

The cold that had seeped into my bones during the long rescue is replaced by scorching heat. Every muscle in my body tightens as pleasure builds, coiling at the base of my spine. I fight to maintain control, to prolong this exquisite torture.

"Jade," I warn, my voice strained. "I'm close."

She pulls back just enough to whisper, "I want to taste you," before taking me deep again.

Her words push me over the edge. My release hits with the force of an avalanche, white-hot pleasure flooding every nerve ending as I come in her mouth. She stays with me through every pulse, every shudder, only pulling away when I'm completely spent.

I slump back against the couch, breathing hard, as she rises to sit beside me. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

"Warmer now?" she asks innocently.

I laugh, pulling her against my side. "Much. Though I'm not sure I can move anymore."

"Mission accomplished, then." She snuggles closer, her head on my shoulder.

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment, my heartbeat gradually slowing. My hand finds its way to her stomach again, to the miracle growing there.

"I love you," I say, the words simple but carrying the weight of everything I feel for this woman who crashed into my life and refused to leave.

She tilts her face up to mine. "I love you too. Even when you come home smelling like a wet dog."

"Speaking of which, I should shower." I make no move to get up, too content with her warm weight against me.

"In a minute," she says, echoing her earlier words. "I want to enjoy having you home."

I look around our cabin, at the life we've built together. Photos of adventures and quiet moments. Lilybeth's toys scattered across the floor. Aspen snoring softly by the fire. The small swell of Jade's stomach where our second child grows.

Two years ago, I thought I had everything figured out. I had my routines, my solitude, my purpose. I was surviving, not living. Then a reckless ski instructor with something to prove went off-trail, and my carefully constructed world imploded.

Thank God it did.

"What are you thinking about?" Jade asks, noticing my distant expression.

"Just how lucky I am that you ignored every warning sign on that mountain."

I kiss the top of her head, breathing her in.

In a few minutes, I'll shower. We'll eat dinner.

Maybe Lilybeth will wake up, and I'll get to hold my daughter, marvel at her tiny fingers and the way she already has her mother's determination.

We'll fall asleep together, Jade curled against me, our second child growing between us.

But for now, I just want to sit here, holding the woman who taught me that sometimes, the greatest risks bring the greatest rewards. The woman who showed me that a life half-lived is no life at all.

The woman who, in needing her own rescue, somehow rescued me.