



Saved by the Mountain Man (Darkmore Mountain Search and Rescue #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: My job is to rescue others, but shes the one who saved me from myself.

Sheryl, the spirited romance novelist, stumbled into my world and set it on fire – literally and figuratively. The fire left her with nowhere to go, so I opened my home to her.

My secluded cabin is my sanctuary, a place to escape the ghosts of my past. But she sees through my defenses. That woman is a force of nature, determined to drag me out of the darkness and teach me how to live again.

Saved by the Mountain Man is a steamy, age-gap, insta-love romance about a closed-off search and rescue man and the woman who helps him find his way back to himself. Get ready for forced proximity, a hero with a haunted past, and a love that proves its never too late for a second chance.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

one

Sheryl

The cabin creaks like an old paperback being opened for the first time, and I can't help but think it's the perfect soundtrack for a writer on deadline. My deadline. The one that's approximately—I check my phone—eighteen days, seven hours, and twenty-three minutes away.

"This is where bestsellers are born," I whisper to myself, setting my laptop on the rustic wooden table by the window.

The view of the Darkmore Mountains stretches before me, all imposing peaks and mysterious shadows.

Exactly what I need to inspire this romance novel that currently exists as forty-seven disconnected scenes and a prayer.

My agent Melanie's voice echoes in my head: "Sheryl, darling, 'Blood Moon Desires' tanked harder than the Titanic. If this third book doesn't deliver, we can kiss your three-book deal goodbye." Always the motivational speaker, that one.

I unpack my "writing nest" essentials: favorite oversized cardigan (with only two small holes), three notebooks of varying sizes (one for plot, one for character development, one for random brilliance), my collection of rainbow sticky tabs, and enough tea to hydrate a small country.

The cabin's owner left detailed instructions about everything from the temperamental hot water heater to the location of the circuit breaker, but all I really care about is the Wi-Fi password.

At twenty-two, I should probably be at some college party doing jello shots off a future investment banker's abs. Instead, I'm arranging my reference books and hoping this self-imposed isolation will somehow transform me into a romance writer who doesn't make her publisher regret their advance.

The irony isn't lost on me. I write steamy romance novels that make my few readers fan themselves, yet my own romantic experience consists primarily of awkward coffee dates that go nowhere.

"Time to write an expert level sex scene," I mutter, opening my laptop. "Based on extensive research and absolutely zero practical application."

The power flickers as the sun begins to set, and I light the trio of scented candles I brought.

Three hours and two cups of tea later, something magical happens. The words start flowing like they haven't in months. My characters, Brooke and Dominic, suddenly feel real. Their banter sparkles on the page, their chemistry practically steams off my screen. I'm getting somewhere. Finally.

I push my glasses up and stretch, glancing at the clock. 11:47 PM. The candles have burned down considerably, but I barely notice as I dive back in. This is the scene where Brooke finally admits her feelings to Dominic. It's pivotal, it's emotional, it's—

My eyelids grow heavy. Just a few more sentences. Just need to finish this scene before...

Dominic reached for her, his strong hands gentle against her face. "I've wanted you from the moment I saw you," he confessed, his voice rough with emotion. "But wanting and deserving are two different things."

Brooke stepped closer, eliminating the distance between them. "Then let me be the judge of what I deserve," she whispered, rising onto her tiptoes as his mouth descended toward hers...

My head dips forward, then jerks back up. One more paragraph. Just one more...

His kiss was everything she had imagined and nothing like she expected. It was...

It was...

The word escapes me as my consciousness fades.

I rest my head on my arms, just for a moment.

Just until the right description comes to me.

The manuscript pages I printed earlier to review scatter slightly in the draft from the window I cracked open for fresh air.

The candles flicker, casting dancing shadows across my notes.

In my half-dreaming state, I imagine the perfect hero. Not the sculpted college boys with their rehearsed pickup lines, but someone real. Someone with experience etched into the lines of his face. Someone who knows who he is and what he wants.

Someone whose kiss would be worth writing about.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

two

Alex

Something's off.

"Brennan checking sector eight, all clear," I report, my breath visible in the cold night air.

This route takes me past the rental cabins on the eastern ridge. It's added twenty minutes to my patrol for the past five years, but I make the detour anyway. Old habits. Necessary precautions. At forty, I've learned that five minutes of prevention saves years of regret.

The memory surfaces without invitation: coming home to find our house engulfed in flames, the knowledge that Mike and Jason were inside. The knowledge that I wasn't.

I push the thought away and focus on my surroundings. The dry conditions have everyone on edge. Three months without significant rainfall means the forest is a tinderbox waiting for a careless camper or a lightning strike.

The smell hits me first. Smoke. Not the pleasant, contained scent of a properly maintained fireplace, but the acrid warning of something burning that shouldn't be.

I break into a jog, scanning the treeline. The rental cabins come into view—four of them scattered along the ridge, currently only one occupied according to the property manager's report. A wisp of smoke curls from the chimney of the occupied cabin, but

that's not what concerns me.

It's the darker smoke seeping from beneath the eaves.

"This is Brennan. Possible structure fire at Pine View rentals, cabin three. Requesting backup." My voice is calm, practiced. I've made hundreds of similar calls over the years.

I don't wait for a response before breaking into a run. The smoke is thickening by the second.

At the door, I pound hard enough to wake anyone inside. "Fire department! Anyone in there?"

No response. I test the handle—unlocked. Smoke billows out as I push the door open, dropping into a crouch to stay beneath it. The heat hits me like a physical wall.

"Fire department! Call out!"

The main room is filling with smoke, but the source isn't immediately visible. A candle has burned down to nothing on a side table, but the flames are coming from the far corner where papers are scattered around a desk. As I move closer, I see her.

A young woman slumped over the desk, unconscious. Her face is pressed against an open laptop, a cascade of auburn hair spilling across the keyboard. She's not moving.

I cross the room in long strides, scanning for spreading flames. The burning papers have caught the edge of a curtain, and the dry fabric is feeding the fire along the wall. The structure is old, the wood seasoned by decades of mountain weather. This place will go up like kindling.

I lift the woman from the chair, noting how small she feels. Young. Probably mid-twenties. Breathing.

"I've got you," I mutter, though she can't hear me. Her head rolls against my shoulder as I carry her toward the door. A loud crack from above signals the fire reaching the support beams. We have minutes, maybe less.

Outside, I lay her down a safe distance from the cabin, checking her pulse and breathing. The cold air seems to rouse her slightly; her eyelids flutter but don't open.

"Station, this is Brennan. One victim, female, early twenties, smoke inhalation, semi-conscious. Fire spreading to roof structure. Need medical and full response."

While waiting for her to regain consciousness, I make a quick assessment. No visible burns. Breathing labored but improving in the clean air. Pulse rapid but strong. She's wearing an oversized sweater and leggings—hardly adequate for the mountain night chill. I remove my jacket and lay it over her.

A groan escapes her lips as her eyes begin to open. Green, I notice. The kind of green that reminds me of spring growth after a forest fire.

"W-what's happening?" Her voice is raspy from the smoke.

"Your cabin caught fire. You're safe now." I keep my voice even, professional, fighting an unexpected urge to hold her close.

Her eyes widen suddenly, panic replacing confusion. "My manuscript!" She tries to sit up, looking toward the cabin where flames are now visible through the windows. "My laptop!"

I place a firm hand on her shoulder, the contact sending an unsettling jolt through me.

"Stay down. Nothing in there is worth your life."

Tears well in her eyes, and something inside me shifts. "You don't understand," she whispers. "That book is my career."

In the distance, I hear the wail of sirens approaching.

The backup team will be here in minutes.

The cabin's roof is fully involved now, orange flames licking up toward the night sky.

It's both beautiful and terrible, the way fire always is.

Yet I find myself unable to look away from her face, illuminated by the dancing firelight.

"What's your name?" I ask, keeping her focused away from the burning building, but also needing to know who she is in a way that defies professional interest.

"Sheryl," she manages between coughs. "Sheryl Cabot."

"I'm Alex Brennan, SAR Fire Coordinator." I check her pupils with my penlight—equal and reactive. Good sign. My fingers tremble slightly, an unfamiliar sensation. "You're going to be fine, Sheryl. The medical team will be here soon."

She watches my face with an intensity that feels almost physical, like she's reaching inside and rearranging things I'd carefully locked away. "You... you came in and got me?"

I nod once, unsettled by both her gratitude and my own visceral response to it.

This was supposed to be routine. After all, I've rescued dozens of people over the years.

Yet nothing feels routine about the way my pulse quickens when her fingers briefly touch my wrist. "You'll need to be checked for smoke inhalation.

The clinic will want to keep you overnight for observation. "

The reality of her situation seems to dawn on her as she looks back at the cabin. Her home, at least temporarily, being consumed by flames. "Where will I go?" The question seems directed more at herself than at me, but I feel its pull like a physical force.

The fire trucks arrive, bathing us in pulsing red light. The team jumps into action, unrolling hoses and assessing the structure. It's too late to save much, but they can prevent the fire from spreading to the surrounding forest.

I should join them. It's my job, my responsibility. Every instinct honed over twenty years in rescue work tells me to move, to help contain the blaze. Instead, I find myself rooted in place, watching this young woman as she stares at the destruction with devastation in her eyes.

I feel a certainty I haven't felt in years, maybe ever. The completely irrational thought forms before I can stop it: She's important. She matters in ways I don't understand yet.

I push the thought away. Still, I hear myself say, "We'll figure something out." The words hold a weight I hadn't intended.

The medical team approaches with a stretcher, and I step back, forcing myself to return to the professional distance I maintain with everyone. This attraction is

dangerous. Inappropriate. She's barely out of college, for God's sake, and I'm forty with enough baggage to sink us both.

As they load her into the ambulance, our eyes meet again and I can't look away.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

three

Sheryl

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The rhythmic sound penetrates my consciousness before anything else. My throat feels like I've swallowed a ball of sandpaper, and my eyes burn when I try to open them. A hospital room comes into focus.

"You're awake. Good." A nurse appears at my bedside, checking the monitor beside me. "How's the breathing? Any tightness?"

I try to answer but dissolve into a coughing fit instead.

"Take it easy," she says, handing me a cup of water. "Smoke inhalation. Doctor says you're lucky. Another few minutes..."

The memory crashes back. My cabin. The fire. My manuscript.

"My laptop," I croak after sipping the water.

"The fire chief brought this by." She points to a plastic bag on the side table containing my laptop, charger, and a singed notebook. "Said they managed to save a few things from the desk area."

Relief floods through me until another realization dawns. "Where am I supposed to

go? The cabin is..." My voice gives out, replaced by another coughing spell.

"Darkmore Medical Clinic," the nurse answers, misunderstanding my question. "Doctor Bertram will be by shortly to check on you. If your oxygen levels remain stable, you might be discharged this afternoon."

After she leaves, I sink back against the pillow and try to organize my thoughts. I need a place to stay. I need to finish my book. I need to call Melanie to explain the delay.

A knock on the doorframe interrupts my mental catastrophizing.

And there he is. The man from last night. My rescuer.

If I thought he was intimidating in the flickering firelight, he's downright overwhelming in daylight.

Taller than I realized with broad shoulders filling out his Search and Rescue jacket.

Dark hair peppered with silver at the temples.

A neatly trimmed beard framing a face that could have been carved from the mountains themselves.

Deep-set eyes that hold mine for a moment before glancing away.

My heart monitor betrays me with a quickened beep.

"Ms. Cabot." His voice is deep, resonant. "How are you feeling?"

Like a character from one of my novels just walked off the page, I think, but say

instead, "Better, thank you. And please, call me Sheryl."

He nods once, still standing in the doorway like he's not sure whether to enter. "Alex Brennan. We met briefly last night."

"You saved my life." The words come out with more emotion than I intended. "Thank you doesn't seem adequate."

He shifts uncomfortably. "Just doing my job."

A million questions race through my mind, but before I can ask any of them, he steps aside to allow a doctor to enter.

"Ms. Cabot, I'm Dr. Bertram." She picks up my chart. "Your oxygen levels have improved significantly, but I'd like to keep you under observation for at least twenty four hours. Smoke inhalation can have delayed effects."

"Twenty four hours?" I repeat, panic rising. "I can't stay that long. I need to figure out where I'm going to live, salvage what I can from the cabin, call my agent—"

"The cabin suffered significant damage," Alex interrupts, his voice matter-of-fact. "The bedroom area is destroyed. Main room has extensive smoke and water damage."

Each word hits like a physical blow. "My work," I whisper. "My deadline..."

"We recovered what we could." He gestures to the laptop and a plastic bag of clothes and whatever other belongings they saved. "The property manager has been notified. Insurance adjusters will contact you."

Dr. Bertram looks between us with pursed lips. "Ms. Cabot, my concern is your health. You need monitoring, and frankly, you shouldn't be alone for the next day or

so. Is there someone local who could stay with you?"

I shake my head. "I don't know anyone in Darkmore. I just arrived yesterday to work on my book."

"What about the hotels?" I ask, though I already know the answer from my booking research.

"Booked solid," Alex confirms. "Annual Darkmore Mountain Festival starts today."

Dr. Bertram frowns. "Well, we can keep you here if necessary, but—"

"She can stay with me."

The words hang in the air. I'm not sure who's more surprised—me, the doctor, or Alex himself, who looks like the offer escaped before he could catch it.

"I have a guest room," he continues, his tone suggesting he's already regretting this. "And I'm trained in emergency medicine. SAR certification."

Dr. Bertram brightens. "That would be ideal, actually. Just for a day or two of observation."

They discuss my care like I'm not present—oxygen levels, symptoms to watch for, follow-up appointments. Meanwhile, I'm having an internal panic attack at the thought of staying with him. With Alex. Mountain man. Rescue hero. Living romance novel cover model.

He catches me staring and raises an eyebrow. I flush and look away.

"Is that arrangement acceptable to you, Ms. Cabot?" Dr. Bertram finally asks me.

No , a voice in my head screams. He's too handsome, too masculine, too everything. I'll make a fool of myself. I'll say something awkward.

"It's very kind of you to offer," I manage, my voice small. "If you're sure it's not an imposition."

"It's not," he says, though his tone suggests otherwise.

Three hours later, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of his truck, clutching my meager rescued possessions as we wind up a mountain road.

I've never felt more awkward in my life and that includes the time I accidentally sent my freshman creative writing professor a draft of my first sex scene instead of the assigned pastoral poem.

"Thank you again," I say, breaking the silence for the fifth time. "I really appreciate this."

He nods without taking his eyes off the road.

I try again. "Have you lived in Darkmore long?"

"Five years."

"It's beautiful here. The mountains are so... imposing." OMG, stop talking, Sheryl. This is so awkward.

His hands flex on the steering wheel. "Safety briefing. My cabin has specific rules."

The sudden topic change throws me. "Rules?"

"Fire safety rules." His voice has taken on a professional tone. "No candles. No incense. No smoking of any kind. Kitchen use requires supervision until I've assessed your awareness of proper safety protocols."

I blink, caught between offense at the implication and admiration of his thoroughness. "I'm not completely helpless, you know. Last night was an accident."

His jaw tightens. "Accidents are preventable with proper precautions."

"Right," I mutter, looking out the window. He probably thinks I'm a complete disaster. Some helpless girl who can't even handle a candle properly. He's not entirely wrong.

We turn onto a narrow drive leading to a cabin that looks nothing like the rustic rental I'd been staying in.

This is solid, well-maintained, with a metal roof and wraparound porch.

The landscaping is immaculate, with cleared space between the structure and the surrounding forest. It looks exactly like the kind of place a competent mountain man would live.

My stomach flutters as he parks and comes around to open my door. His hand extends to help me down from the high truck cabin, and I take it, trying not to notice the warmth of his palm against mine or how small my hand looks enveloped in his.

"This is it," he says, releasing my hand quickly. "Guest room is on the first floor. I'll show you."

Inside is just as impressive. An open concept with gleaming hardwood floors, vaulted ceilings, and large windows framing mountain views.

But what strikes me most is how orderly everything is.

Books aligned perfectly on shelves. No clutter on surfaces.

A place for everything, and everything in its place.

I immediately feel like an intruder, especially when I notice him watching me with a furrowed brow, as if he's already categorizing all the ways I'll disrupt his perfect system.

"This way." He leads me down a hallway to a simply furnished guest room. "Bathroom is across the hall. Clean towels in the cabinet."

"It's lovely," I say, and mean it. The room is sparse but comfortable, with a queen bed, simple dresser, and reading chair by the window.

"Rest," he says. "Doctor's orders. I'll be in my workshop if you need anything. There's a button by the bed that connects to my phone if there's an emergency."

An actual panic button. I'm not sure whether to laugh or be impressed by his preparedness.

"I won't be a bother," I promise. "I just need to work on my book."

His expression shifts slightly. "The manuscript you were worried about."

"My third novel," I explain. "I have a deadline. It's why I came to Darkmore in the first place. Peace and quiet to finish writing."

"What kind of novels?" He looks genuinely curious, the first real interest he's shown in me rather than my medical status.

Heat crawls up my neck. "Romance," I admit, watching his face carefully for the dismissal I usually see when I tell people what I write.

Something almost like amusement flickers in his eyes. "Romance," he repeats. "Interesting."

Is he laughing at me? I can't tell, but my defensive instincts flare. "It's a legitimate genre with a massive readership and significant cultural impact."

He raises his hands slightly. "I didn't say otherwise."

"You were thinking it," I mutter.

"You don't know what I'm thinking." There's an edge to his voice that makes me shiver.

We stand there, the air between us charged with something I can't name.

He's the epitome of every hero I've ever written. A man who's capable, mysterious, with hidden depths behind guarded eyes.

The kind of man who populates the fantasies of a twenty-two-year-old virgin who knows the theory of desire but none of the practice.

And for the next twenty-four hours, I'm staying in his house.

My heart gives a terrified little leap that feels suspiciously like exhilaration.

"I should let you rest," he says finally, breaking the moment. He turns to leave, pausing at the door. "If you're hungry later, kitchen's stocked. I'll be back to check your oxygen levels in an hour."

When he's gone, I sink onto the bed, suddenly exhausted from the stress of everything—the fire, the hospital, and now this unexpected arrangement. The pillowcase smells faintly of cedar and pine, clean and masculine.

I pull out my singed laptop, relieved when it powers on without issue. Opening my manuscript, I stare at where I left off—my heroine about to be kissed by a man who knows exactly what he wants.

With trembling fingers, I begin to type.

His kiss tasted of wilderness and certainty. Of danger and safety somehow existing in the same moment.

The words come easily now, fueled by the memory of steel-blue eyes and capable hands.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

four

Alex

I close the guest room door behind me, trying to ignore the lingering smokey scent of her hair. My cabin has never felt so small, the walls closing in with her presence. What was I thinking, bringing her here?

I head to my workshop, needing distance. The space has always been my sanctuary. I keep my tools organized on pegboards, equipment neatly stored, everything in its place. Here, I can focus on maintaining gear that keeps people safe. Keeps me safe.

But today, even surrounded by familiar order, my mind strays to the young woman in my guest room. The way she looked at me when I mentioned her romance novels. That defiant tilt of her chin mixed with vulnerability. She's twenty-two, for god's sake. Barely more than a kid.

I pick up a length of climbing rope, inspecting it for wear—a mindless task that usually centers me. Today, it's not working. My thoughts keep circling back to her. Sheryl. The sound of her name in my head is unwelcome.

The security panel on the wall shows all green indicators. No fire alerts. Everything safe and controlled, exactly as I've designed it.

A while later, I check my watch. Time for her oxygen levels again. Medical necessity. That's all this is.

When I knock on her door, there's no answer. A spike of alarm sends me quickly through the house, fear rising until I find her in the kitchen, staring confusedly at my coffee maker.

"Oh!" She jumps when she notices me. "Sorry. I needed caffeine for writing, but your coffee machine looks like it belongs on a spaceship."

Relief turns quickly to irritation. "You should be resting."

"I've rested enough. I need to work." She gestures to her laptop on the counter. "My publisher isn't going to extend my deadline just because I nearly burned to death."

The casual way she references what happened makes my jaw clench. "That's not funny."

"Gallows humor. How else am I supposed to process nearly becoming a tragic headline?" Her voice softens. "Sorry. I cope with inappropriateness."

I move to the coffee maker, pressing buttons with practiced efficiency. "I need to check your oxygen levels."

She extends her finger without comment, watching as I clip the device in place. 96%. Better than before.

"All good." I remove the oximeter, careful not to let our skin touch. "Coffee will be ready in two minutes."

"Thank you." She leans against the counter, studying me with those writer's eyes that seem to catalogue every detail. "Can I ask you something?"

I brace myself for questions about fire safety, about why my entire house seems

designed to prevent disaster.

Instead, she asks, "Why did you offer to let me stay?"

The question catches me off guard. I could give the professional answer—medical training, sense of duty. Instead, I find myself saying, "You needed help."

"Lots of people need help. You don't bring them all home."

"No, I don't." I pour coffee into two mugs, buying time. "Cream or sugar?"

"Both, please. Lots."

I grimace as I slide the doctored coffee toward her, taking my own black. "The festival has the town full. There weren't other options."

She wraps slender fingers around the mug, looking unconvinced. "Thank you, anyway. I promise I'll be out of your hair tomorrow."

"It's fine." The words come out gruffer than intended.

We drink in silence, the quiet interrupted only by the soft ping of her email notifications. She frowns at her screen.

"Bad news?" I ask, despite myself.

"My agent. She's sympathetic about the fire but still needs chapters by next week." She sighs. "I lost important scenes in the fire. Obviously, I didn't save them. I'm trying to recreate them, but it's not the same."

"What's your book about?" The question surprises us both.

Her cheeks flush pink. "It's a romance. About a woman who goes to a remote place to find herself and instead finds..." She trails off.

"Finds what?" I'm genuinely curious now.

"Someone unexpected. Someone who challenges her." Her eyes meet mine briefly before darting away. "It's silly, I know."

"I don't think so." The words come out softer than intended.

She looks up, surprise evident. "Most people dismiss romance novels. Especially men."

"I've never understood why. People risk their lives for love all the time. I've seen it in rescue work."

Something shifts in her expression—interest, maybe. "That's... not what I expected you to say."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Something dismissive about bodice-rippers or Fabio covers."

I allow myself a small smile. "I try not to have opinions on things I know nothing about."

"That's remarkably rare." She returns the smile, and something tightens in my chest.

"I should let you work." I take my coffee and retreat, feeling distinctly like I'm running away.

Hours later, I find her still typing, curled up in the guest room's reading chair, brow furrowed in concentration.

I stand in the doorway longer than I should, watching her work.

There's something captivating about her focus and the way she bites her lower lip, the small furrow between her brows, how she occasionally mouths dialogue to herself.

I knock on the doorframe, breaking her concentration. "Dinner," I say. "You should eat."

She blinks, surfacing from whatever world she's been creating. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Already?" She stretches, and I look away from the sliver of skin revealed as her shirt rides up. "I lost track."

"Your writing going well?"

"Actually, yes." She seems surprised by this. "Sometimes a change of environment helps. Different energy."

In the kitchen, I heat the stew I prepared earlier. She hovers nearby, watching me move around the space.

"Do you cook? Or is it all military-grade rations and protein bars?" she asks.

The question makes me almost smile. "I cook. Living alone, you learn or you starve."

"Or you order takeout," she counters. "That's my usual approach in the city."

"Not many delivery options up here."

"No, I imagine not." She smiles. "Thank you for dinner. And for checking on me. And for everything, really."

I nod, uncomfortable with gratitude. "Sit. It's ready."

We eat at the kitchen island, the silence surprisingly comfortable. She's less talkative now, fatigue from the day's events catching up with her. I should be relieved by the quiet, but instead, I find myself wanting to know more.

"Have you always written romance?" I ask.

She seems startled by my continued interest. "Since college. I published my first novel at twenty-one."

"That's impressive."

"It did well, surprisingly. The second one..." She makes a face. "Not so much. This one needs to succeed or my publishing career might be over before it really begins."

"High stakes."

"Hence the cabin retreat. No distractions, limited internet, just writing time." She laughs without humor. "I'm grateful I can work here, too."

After dinner, I check her vitals one last time before bed. Her pulse is slightly elevated, but still within normal range.

"Everything okay?" I ask, removing the oximeter from her finger.

"Just processing everything." She sits on the edge of the guest bed, looking small against the dark blue comforter. "It's been a day."

"Get some sleep. The doctor will call in the morning."

I turn to leave, but her voice stops me. "Alex? Why are you so careful about fire?"

The question freezes me in place. I should walk out. Change the subject. Maintain the distance I've cultivated for years.

Instead, I find myself saying, "Experience. Bad experience." I can't bring myself to say more, not yet, but it's more than I've offered anyone in a long time.

She reads between the lines, her expression softening. "I'm sorry."

I nod once, uncomfortable with her compassion. "Your oxygen levels are good. You should sleep."

But as I reach the door, she speaks again. "You're a good person, Alex. You care so much you've built a life around protecting others."

I turn back, struck by her words and the certainty behind them. She's looking at me with an expression that makes my pulse quicken.

"You don't know me," I say.

"I know enough." She stands, crossing the room. "I know you saved my life. I know you brought me into your home. I know you check my oxygen levels even though we both know I'm fine."

She's too close. Too young. Too perceptive. I should step back, maintain the

professional distance this arrangement requires.

Instead, I find myself noticing details I have no business observing: the curve of her lower lip, the light freckles across her nose, the way her pulse visibly flutters at the base of her throat.

"I write about men like you," she whispers, her confidence faltering slightly. "Strong, protective. Haunted. But I've never actually..." She stops, uncertainty replacing her earlier boldness. Her hands disappear into her oversized sleeves and the curvy author suddenly looks meek again.

I know I should end this, whatever it is. She's twenty-two. I'm forty. She's in my care. Every rational thought tells me to step back, to restore appropriate boundaries.

But when her hand tentatively touches my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart beneath my shirt, rationality burns away like kindling.

"I'm not one of your characters," I warn, my voice rough.

"No," she agrees. "You're real ."

The moment stretches between us, taut with possibility. My carefully constructed rules, my defenses, my professional distance—all of it crumbling under the weight of something I haven't felt in years. Maybe ever.

“Goodnight, Sheryl.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

five

Sheryl

I wake with a groan, burying my face in the pillow that smells faintly of cedar and pine.

Last night replays in my mind for the hundredth time—standing so close to Alex I could feel the heat radiating from his body, my hand on his chest, his heart hammering beneath my palm.

The warning in his voice when he said my name.

And then... nothing.

He'd stepped back and disappeared, leaving me standing there with my hand still tingling from the contact.

"Coward," I mutter into the pillow, though I'm not sure if I mean him or myself. Twenty-two years old, and I've written dozens of first kisses, hundreds of passionate encounters, but never actually experienced one worth remembering.

The irony isn't lost on me. Here I am, a virgin romance novelist, finally face-to-face with exactly the kind of man I write about and I freeze up like a middle schooler at her first dance.

I stretch, then grab my laptop. Might as well use this burst of frustrated energy to

write.

My characters are currently in a situation not unlike my own.

The tension crackling between them and yet neither willing to make the first move.

Unlike me, however, my heroine knows exactly what she wants and how to get it.

Maybe I should take notes.

A movement outside the window catches my eye. I peek through the curtains and my breath catches.

Alex is in the cleared space beside the house, chopping wood. He's wearing a fitted gray t-shirt that clings to his broad shoulders, work jeans, and boots. Each swing of the axe causes the muscles in his arms and back to flex visibly, even from this distance.

I should look away. I definitely shouldn't be watching him like some voyeur, mentally cataloging every movement for future reference in my writing.

But I can't tear my eyes away.

He works with efficient precision, no wasted motion. Each log splitting cleanly under the force of his swing. There's something mesmerizing about the rhythm—the lift, the controlled arc, the powerful connection, the satisfying crack of wood yielding. Over and over again.

My fingers itch to capture this on the page. This is exactly what my hero would do: channel his frustrations into physical labor, unaware he's being watched by the woman who's disrupting his carefully ordered life.

I grab my laptop and start typing furiously, my earlier embarrassment forgotten in the rush of creative energy.

The words flow faster than they have in months.

The scene unfolding beneath my fingers isn't what I'd planned for this chapter, but it's perfect, raw and honest in a way my writing hasn't been before.

Two hours pass before I surface from the writing trance, fingers cramping but mind buzzing with satisfaction. I've written more this morning than I did in the entire week before the fire.

My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since the soup last night. I set the laptop aside and venture out to the kitchen, hoping to find something simple for breakfast.

The cabin is quiet. Through the main room's large windows, I can see Alex is no longer outside. His truck is still in the driveway, so he must be in his workshop or somewhere nearby.

The kitchen intimidates me with its gleaming surfaces and high-end appliances. Everything is spotless and well organized.

Making breakfast seems like the least I can do to thank him for his hospitality. I'm not much of a cook, but even I can handle eggs and toast, right?

I find a pan, butter, eggs in the refrigerator. Simple enough. I turn on the stove, drop in a generous pat of butter, and crack three eggs into a bowl. So far, so good.

I pop some bread into the toaster and turn my attention back to the eggs, whisking them perhaps more vigorously than required.

I'm so focused on not ruining breakfast that I don't hear Alex enter until he speaks.

"What are you doing?" His deep voice startles me, and the whisk clatters against the bowl.

"Making breakfast," I explain, trying to sound more confident than I feel. "As a thank you."

He approaches cautiously, as if I'm handling explosives rather than eggs. "The butter's smoking."

I turn to the stove where, indeed, the butter has gone from melted to smoking while I was distracted. "Oh! I'll just—"

The smoke alarm interrupts me with a piercing wail. The pan isn't even on fire, just smoking slightly, but the alarm screams as if the whole house is ablaze.

Alex moves with startling speed. He grabs the pan from the stove, turns off the burner, and places the pan in the sink. His movements are precise but there's something in his expression I haven't seen before—raw panic barely contained beneath his controlled exterior.

I stand frozen, the bowl of eggs still in my hands. The alarm continues its assault on our eardrums until he reaches up and silences it.

The sudden quiet feels almost as jarring as the noise.

"I'm so sorry," I stammer. "It was just smoking a little. I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't," he snaps, his voice tight. "Any open flame or smoke triggers the alarm. It's designed that way."

His reaction seems extreme for a small kitchen mishap. Then I remember his comment yesterday about fire not giving second chances, the way his expression had darkened.

"Alex," I say softly, setting down the bowl. "Will you tell me what happened to you? With fire?"

He stands by the sink, hands braced against the counter, tension radiating from his rigid posture. For a moment, I think he won't answer.

"Five years ago," he finally says, voice low, "I lived with two roommates. Mike and Jason. College friends."

I remain perfectly still, afraid any movement might stop his words.

"I was away." His knuckles whiten against the counter edge. "There was an electrical fire while I was gone. By the time I got home, the house was already gone. So were they."

My heart constricts. "Alex, I'm so sorry."

"Mike was getting married that summer. Jason had just started medical school." He recites these facts like he's said them many times, each word weighted with grief. "I was the one who always checked the wiring, tested the smoke alarms. The one time I wasn't there..."

I move toward him slowly, unsure if my presence will be welcome. "It wasn't your fault."

"That's what everyone says." His voice is rough. "Doesn't make it true."

"Is that why you live like this? All the safety measures, the protocols?"

He nods once, still not looking at me. "Never again. Not on my watch."

Without thinking, I place my hand on his arm. "What happened doesn't define you, Alex. What you did afterward does. And you've dedicated your life to saving others."

He finally turns to face me, and the raw emotion in his eyes steals my breath.

"Sheryl."

"You saved my life," I whisper, moving closer. "Let me help save yours." I don't know where these words come from. They sound like something one of my heroines would say, too dramatic for real life. But they feel right, necessary.

His hand comes up to cup my face, calloused palm warm against my cheek. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Maybe not," I admit, heart hammering so loudly I'm sure he can hear it. "But I want to find out."

Time stretches between us, taut with possibility. I've written this moment a dozen different ways, but nothing compares to the reality of standing here, caught in the gravity of his gaze, waiting for him to close the distance between us.

When he finally does, it's not the tentative brush of lips I expected. His mouth claims mine with certainty, with hunger, with eighteen years of experience I don't possess. His beard scratches my skin, a delicious friction I've never felt before.

I make a small, embarrassing sound of surprise and pleasure, my hands instinctively grasping his shirt for stability as the kitchen seems to tilt around me.

His arms encircle me, one hand at the small of my back, the other threading through my hair, cradling my head with unexpected gentleness despite the urgency of his kiss.

This, I realize with sudden clarity, is why I've never been able to write a truly convincing first kiss.

I've been inventing approximations of something I couldn't possibly understand until this moment—the way it consumes you entirely, how thought becomes impossible, how your body responds with a mind of its own.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathless, clinging to him like he's the only solid thing in a spinning world. He looks as stunned as I feel.

"I'm too old for you." His voice is rough, conflicted. "You're twenty-two. I'm forty."

"I'm old enough to know what I want." I sound braver than I feel.

"And what is that, exactly? Research for your novel?" There's an edge to his question.

The accusation stings, but I recognize the fear behind it. "Is that what you think this is?"

"I think you're young and curious, and I'm convenient inspiration."

"You're infuriating is what you are," I say, surprising myself with the heat in my voice. "I've written two novels without needing to seduce anyone for 'research.' Give me some credit."

"Then what is this?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But it's not research, or curiosity, or gratitude, or whatever

other excuse you're looking for to push me away."

His thumb traces my lower lip, sending shivers down my spine. "This is a bad idea."

"Probably," I agree. "Most of the best things are."

He makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan. "You're impossible."

"So I've been told." I rise on tiptoes, bringing my face closer to his again. "Are you going to kiss me again, or just list all the reasons you shouldn't?"

The challenge hangs between us for a heartbeat before he mutters something that sounds suspiciously like "to hell with it" and captures my mouth again.

This kiss is different. Slower, deeper, more deliberate. His hands span my waist, lifting me effortlessly to sit on the counter, bringing us to eye level. I wrap my arms around his neck, fingers threading through his hair, marveling at how different reality is from imagination.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. His forehead rests against mine, our breath mingling in the small space between us.

"What now?" I whisper, terrified and exhilarated by the possibilities.

"Now," he says, his voice dropping to a low rumble that vibrates through me, "we figure out what to do about breakfast."

The unexpected statement startles a laugh from me. "Mood killer."

His gaze travels slowly down my body, lingering in a way that makes heat pool low in my stomach. "I didn't say we needed food for breakfast." His thumb traces my

lower lip, his meaning unmistakable. "There are other appetites to consider."

My breath catches as understanding washes over me. The romantic novels I write suddenly seem woefully inadequate preparation for the reality of this moment. I'm reeling from the intensity in his eyes as he looks at me like I'm something he wants to devour.

"Oh," is all I manage to say.

He steps between my knees where I'm still perched on the counter, his large hands spanning my waist. "Unless you want me to stop."

Do I? This is happening faster than I ever imagined my first real experience would unfold. Yet there's nothing about this moment that feels wrong. Terrifying, yes. Overwhelming, definitely. But wrong? No.

I shake my head slowly, holding his gaze. "Don't stop."

"Good."

As he leans in to claim my mouth again, one thought flashes through my mind: no fictional hero will ever compare to the very real man about to show me everything I've only imagined.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

six

Alex

Something primal rises in me when I kiss her. I've spent five years building walls, creating distance, protecting myself from connection. Yet here I am, about to tear down every barrier for this woman I barely know but somehow can't resist.

I capture her mouth again, this kiss deeper and more demanding than before.

Her inexperience is evident in the tentative way she responds, but what she lacks in technique she makes up for in enthusiasm.

Her hands clutch at my shoulders, fingers digging in as I press closer. She still smells like smoke.

"Alex," she gasps when I trail kisses down her throat, finding the sensitive pulse point that makes her shiver.

Her head falls back, giving me better access to the delicate line of her throat. I take full advantage, alternating between gentle kisses and light grazes of teeth that draw small, intoxicating sounds from her lips.

My hands slide under the hem of her shirt, encountering bare skin that feels like silk against my calloused fingers.

"Cold hands," I apologize, about to withdraw.

"No," she catches my wrists, keeping my hands against her warm skin. "Just new. Don't stop touching me."

I push her shirt higher, revealing the soft curve of her stomach, the edge of her simple cotton bra. Her cheeks flush pink as I take in the sight of her.

"Beautiful," I say, meaning it. She's all delicate curves and creamy skin. There's a vulnerability to her partial nudity that makes my chest tighten with unexpected tenderness.

I can't let her be the only one naked. I tear off my sweaty shirt, watching her eyes widen as she takes in my chest and torso. Her fingers reach out tentatively, tracing the line of an old climbing scar across my ribs.

"You're... wow," she breathes, exploring the landscape of my body with careful fingers. "Like something carved from stone."

I should feel self-conscious under her scrutiny—the silver in my chest hair, the evidence of forty years of living etched into my skin. But the naked admiration in her eyes makes me feel powerful, desired in a way I haven't experienced in years.

"Can I touch you?" she asks, her gaze dropping to the obvious bulge straining against my jeans.

"Not yet," I reply, pressing her back slightly. "Ladies first."

Her brow furrows in confusion until I drop to my knees before her, hands gripping her hips at the edge of the counter. Understanding dawns in her eyes, followed immediately by uncertainty.

"You don't have to," she begins.

"I want to," I interrupt, looking up at her. "I want to taste you. All of you."

The flush deepens across her chest and face. "No one has ever done this to me before."

Sheryl's innocent admission inflames me further. "Let me be the first, then."

When she's left in only simple cotton panties, I press a kiss to her inner thigh, feeling the muscles jump beneath my lips. "Relax," I murmur against her skin. "Trust me."

"I do," she whispers, and something in my chest clenches at the simple declaration.

I slide her panties down her legs, revealing all of her to my gaze. I press a kiss to her inner thigh, then higher, then higher still until my mouth finds her center.

Her sharp intake of breath turns into a moan as I taste her for the first time. Sweet and heady, the flavor of her desire like nothing I've experienced before.

I take my time, learning her body's responses, discovering that firm pressure here makes her gasp, that gentle circles there make her thighs tremble. Her hands find my hair, fingers tangling in the strands as her hips begin to move against my mouth.

"Alex," she pants, the sound of my name on her lips driving me wild.

"Let go," I encourage her between strokes of my tongue. "I've got you."

Her inexperience shows in how quickly she builds toward release, in the surprised sounds she makes as pleasure overtakes her. When she finally comes, it's with a cry that echoes through the kitchen, her body tensing then shuddering beneath my hands and mouth.

I ease her through it, gentling my touch as she catches her breath. When I finally look up at her, the sight nearly stops my heart—flushed skin, parted lips, eyes heavy-lidded with satisfaction, hair a wild tangle around her shoulders. She's never looked more beautiful.

I rise to my feet and pulling her against me for a kiss. She moans softly as she tastes herself on my lips.

Her hands find the button of my jeans, more confident now. "I want you," she says against my mouth. "Please."

I help her with the button and zipper, freeing myself from the confining denim. Her eyes widen as she takes in the size of me with hunger and determination.

"Wait," she says, her hand on my chest stopping me. "There's something you should know." She takes a deep breath, her cheeks flushing deeper. "I'm a virgin."

The words hit me, sending a surge of primal possessiveness through me that I never expected. I step back, running a hand through my hair as I try to process this. "You're a virgin?"

"Does that change anything?" she asks, suddenly looking vulnerable sitting naked on my counter.

"Of course it does," I say, even as every cell in my body urges me to take her, claim her, make her mine. "You should have your first time with someone your own age. Someone—"

"Someone boring and fumbling and just as inexperienced?" she interrupts, fire returning to her eyes. "I don't want that. I never have."

I shake my head, trying to be the responsible one even as desire burns through me like wildfire. "You're twenty-two. I'm forty. This is—"

"This is exactly what I want," she says firmly. "I write about passion, Alex. About first times that matter. About men who know what they're doing." Her hand reaches for me, wrapping around my length with unexpected boldness. "I want you to be my first. I've been dreaming about a man like you."

Her touch is destroying what's left of my restraint. The knowledge that no one has had her before, that I would be the first to claim her body, awakens something primitive in me that I didn't know existed.

"You deserve better than being taken on a kitchen counter," I growl.

A smile plays at her lips. "Maybe that's exactly what I want." She leans forward. "Please, Alex. Make me yours."

The last threads of my control snap. I crush my mouth to hers, lifting her from the counter with hands beneath her thighs. I turn, pressing her back against the nearest wall, her legs wrapping instinctively around my waist.

I press my throbbing cock into her slowly, feeling the resistance of her body, watching her face carefully for any sign of pain. Her breath catches as I breach her, a small wince crossing her features.

"Breathe," I instruct her, holding still despite every instinct screaming to thrust deeper. "Relax around me."

She nods, her teeth releasing her lower lip as she exhales slowly. I feel her body yield further, accepting more of me.

"That's it," I encourage her. "You're doing so well, taking me so perfectly."

The praise seems to relax her further, and I'm able to press deeper, careful not to rush. Her pussy is so hot and wet, it feels like heaven.

"You feel incredible," I tell her, my voice strained with the effort of remaining still. "So tight. So perfect around me."

Her hands clutch at my shoulders, nails digging in slightly. "Fuck me," she begs. "Please."

I obey, beginning with gentle, shallow thrusts that gradually deepen as her insides accommodate me. The discomfort on her face slowly transforms into pleasure, her little gasps and moans driving me wild.

"Yes," she breathes as I find a rhythm that has her head falling back against the wall. "Just like that."

I adjust my grip, one hand supporting her weight, the other sliding between us to where we're joined. My thumb finds the sensitive bundle of nerves that makes her cry out.

"Alex!" she gasps as I circle that spot in time with my thrusts.

"That's it, sweetheart," I encourage her. "Let me feel you come around me."

Her inexperience means she's building quickly again, her inner muscles fluttering around me in a way that threatens my own control. I increase the pace slightly, angling to hit the spot that makes her moan louder.

"I'm so close," she whimpers, her arms tightening around my neck.

"Come for me," I command softly against her ear. "Let go."

She shatters with a cry of my name, her body clenching around me so tightly it nearly makes me come, too. But the sight of her coming undone, the knowledge that I'm the first—the only—man to ever see her like this, unleashes something feral inside me.

I withdraw suddenly, turning her and bending her over the kitchen counter in one swift motion. She gasps in surprise, her hands scrambling on the smooth granite.

"I need to take you hard," I growl against her ear, one hand tangled in her hair, the other holding her hands behind her back. "Tell me if it's too much."

"Yes," she moans, arching her back to press herself against me. "Please, Alex."

I enter her again in one powerful thrust, my control shattered by her willing surrender. She cries out, but it's a sound of pleasure, not pain, spurring me on. I set a relentless pace, claiming her body with a primal intensity I've never felt before.

"You're mine," I hear myself say, the words pulled from somewhere deep and possessive. "All mine."

"Yours," she agrees breathlessly, meeting each thrust with growing confidence. "Only yours."

I grip her hips hard enough to leave marks, driving into her with abandon. Each thrust makes her eyes roll back and her tongue flick out on her lower lip.

I feel my release building, pressure coiling at the base of my spine, tightening with each thrust. "You feel too good," I groan, pace becoming erratic as I chase the edge. "I'm going to come."

"Inside me," she gasps, the words nearly my undoing. "I want to feel all of you deep inside of me."

With a roar I didn't know I was capable of, I drive into her one final time, release crashing through me like a wildfire.

The pleasure is blinding, overwhelming, consuming every sense as I empty myself deep inside her.

Every pulse feels endless, my body locked in a state of perfect ecstasy as I mark her as mine in the most primal way possible, painting her with my seed.

I collapse over her back, chest heaving, my arms braced on either side of her to keep from crushing her smaller frame. Her body still pulses around me, aftershocks of her own pleasure milking the last of mine.

For several heartbeats, the only sound is our ragged breathing. Then I press a kiss between her shoulder blades, gently withdrawing and turning her to face me. Her expression is dazed, lips swollen from our kisses, cheeks flushed with exertion.

"Are you okay?" I ask, suddenly aware of how rough I'd been. "Did I hurt you?"

She shakes her head, a slow smile spreading across her face. "That was so much better than I could have even imagined."

I kiss her again. This young woman with her romance novels and candles has somehow slipped past every defense I've built, igniting something I thought had died in that fire five years ago.

And for the first time since then, I'm not afraid of getting burned.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

seven

Sheryl

There's a moment right after everything changes when you're suspended between who you were and who you're becoming. I'm caught in that moment now, cradled against Alex's chest as he carries me from the kitchen through the hallway of his meticulously organized cabin.

My body aches in unfamiliar ways—pleasant reminders of what just happened between us. I press my face against his neck, breathing in his scent.

"You still smell like smoke," he murmurs against my hair, not unkindly. "From the fire."

"Sorry," I mumble, suddenly self-conscious. "Hospital showers aren't exactly spa quality."

He nudges open the bathroom door with his shoulder. "Neither are mine, but they'll do. Sorry I didn't offer this last night." His voice is gentle as he sets me on my feet, keeping a steadying hand at my waist when my legs wobble beneath me.

"Are you sore?" he asks, his eyes searching my face with a concern that makes my chest tighten.

"A little," I admit. "But the good kind."

Alex leans over to start the bath, checking the temperature. Steam begins to rise as the large claw-foot tub fills.

"You think of everything, don't you?" I observe, watching him add what looks like epsom salts to the water.

"Force of habit." He tests the water again. "This will help with any soreness."

When he straightens and turns to me, there's a moment of awkwardness. We've just been as intimate as two people can be, yet standing naked in his bathroom feels somehow more vulnerable.

He seems to sense my discomfort. "I can leave if you want."

"Stay," I interrupt, surprising myself with the request. "Please."

When the tub is full, he helps me in, the warm water enveloping my body like a caress. I can't hold back a grateful sigh as the heat begins to work on my sore muscles.

Alex kneels beside the tub, rolling up his sleeves. He picks up a washcloth and soap, working up a lather between his large hands.

"May I?" he asks, holding up the soapy cloth.

I nod, unable to form words around the emotion lodged in my throat. This gentle care after such intensity feels more intimate somehow than what we shared in the kitchen.

He starts with my shoulders, strong hands working the cloth in gentle circles over my skin. His touch is methodical but tender, washing away the lingering scent of smoke and hospital antiseptic.

"Close your eyes," he instructs softly, and I obey as he carefully washes my face, the cloth passing gently over my eyelids and cheeks.

"Lean forward."

I comply, hugging my knees as he washes my back with the same gentle thoroughness. When his hands move to my breasts, his touch remains caring instead of sexual, but I still feel my body responding.

"Relax," he murmurs, noticing my tension. "I'm just taking care of you."

The simple statement brings unexpected tears to my eyes. When was the last time someone took care of me, really took care of me? Not since I left home for college at eighteen, determined to prove my independence.

He works his way down, lifting each of my legs to wash them thoroughly. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, his movements become even gentler, the cloth carefully cleaning the evidence of our passion from my tender flesh.

I hiss slightly at the contact, still sensitive, and his eyes immediately find mine. "Too much?"

"No," I assure him. "Just... new."

Understanding crosses his features. He continues with careful strokes, his attention focused entirely on my comfort.

"Thank you," I whisper when he's finished.

"For what?" he asks, wringing out the cloth.

"For being careful with me." The words seem inadequate for what I'm trying to express. "Not just now, but before, too. In the kitchen."

His expression softens. "You deserved care for your first time." He pauses, regret crossing his features. "Though I wasn't as gentle as I should have been."

"You were perfect," I tell him honestly. "Exactly what I needed. What I wanted."

He looks unconvinced but doesn't argue. Instead, he reaches for a bottle of shampoo. His fingers in my hair feels indescribably good, massaging my scalp with just the right pressure. I close my eyes, surrendering to the sensation.

When he's finished washing my hair, he helps me rinse, one large hand shielding my eyes from the water he pours from a cup.

After helping me from the tub, he wraps me in a large, soft towel, rubbing gentle circles on my back as I snuggle into the warmth.

"I should find you something else to wear," he says, looking at the discarded clothes on the floor. They were the only ones that survived the fire. "Those won't do. Do you need help dressing?"

"I can manage," I assure him, suddenly wanting a moment alone to process everything that's happened.

He nods, pressing a kiss to my forehead that feels unexpectedly intimate. "Take whatever you need from my closet. I'll make us something to eat."

Oh, right. We were supposed to be making breakfast.

After he leaves, I lean against the counter, studying my reflection in the mirror. My

lips are slightly swollen, a flush still lingering on my chest, small marks on my hips where his fingers pressed into my skin.

I look like a woman who's been thoroughly loved. The romance novelist in me appreciates the visual narrative; the woman in me is still processing the reality of it.

After drying off, I wrap the towel around myself and venture into his bedroom to find clothes. The room is as ordered as the rest of the cabin. The only decorative items are a few framed photographs on the dresser.

I open a drawer, finding neatly folded t-shirts, and borrow one that will hang like a dress on my smaller frame. As I close the drawer, my gaze returns to the photographs.

One shows a younger Alex standing between two other men. They look happy, carefree in a way I haven't seen on Alex's face. The next shows them in front of a house I don't recognize, holding up beers in a toast.

With a start, I realize these must be Mike and Jason—the roommates he lost in the fire. I pick up the cookout photo, studying their faces. One is tall and lanky with glasses, the other stockier with a wide grin. Both look young, full of life.

"What are you doing?"

Alex's voice from the doorway makes me jump. I fumble the frame, nearly dropping it before setting it back on the dresser.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I was just looking for a shirt and saw the photos."

His expression closes off completely, the openness from our bath time together vanished behind a mask of controlled displeasure.

"Those are private," he says stiffly.

"I didn't mean to intrude." I clutch the towel tighter around me. "I was just curious about them. About Mike and Jason."

His jaw tightens. "They're not a topic for discussion."

"Alex, I understand grief."

"No, you don't," he interrupts, his voice sharp. "You don't understand anything about it."

The sudden coldness hurts more than I expected. "That's not fair. I was just trying to help."

"Help? Psychoanalyze me? Use my past for your novel?"

I recoil as if slapped. "That's a terrible thing to say."

"Is it?" He gestures toward the photos. "You're a writer. Everything's material to people like you."

"People like me?" My initial hurt transforms rapidly into anger. "You didn't seem to have a problem with 'people like me' when you were taking my virginity in your kitchen."

His walls come back up, higher than before. "Get dressed. I'll be in the kitchen."

He turns to leave, but I'm not ready to let this go. "You don't get to do that."

He pauses, back still to me. "Do what?"

"Shut down. Push me away because I accidentally touched something painful." I drop the towel and pull his t-shirt over my head, finding courage in my anger. "I'm not trying to invade your privacy or use your pain. I just want to know you."

Before he can respond, a sharp electronic tone cuts through the tension. His radio.

"Brennan here," he answers, all business now.

I can't make out the words from the other end, but I see his posture change, shoulders squaring, focus narrowing.

"Coordinates?" he asks, already moving toward his closet. "ETA?"

As he listens to the response, he pulls out what looks like a go-bag and specialized clothing.

"Emergency?" I ask when he clicks off the radio.

"Hiker down on the north ridge," he confirms, already changing into his SAR gear with efficient movements. "Helicopter extraction required."

I step back, giving him space to prepare. "How long will you be gone?"

"Hard to say. Six hours minimum. Could be overnight depending on weather and location." He glances at me, his expression softening slightly. "Will you be okay here?"

The fact that he's asking, that he's concerned about me despite our argument, makes some of my anger dissipate. "I'll be fine. I have writing to do anyway."

He nods, checking his equipment one last time before heading toward the door. He

pauses at the threshold, looking back at me.

"We're not done with this conversation," he says, voice less harsh than before.

"Good," I reply. "Because I'm not done with you."

Something that might be a smile tugs at his mouth before he's gone, the front door closing behind him with a decisive click.

I stand in his bedroom, wearing his shirt, surrounded by evidence of his carefully ordered life and the ghosts of his past. The cabin suddenly feels too large and too quiet without his presence.

I move to the window, watching as his truck pulls away down the mountain road, emergency lights flashing against the darkening sky.

The irony isn't lost on me: after years of creating fictional men who rush into danger while my heroines wait for their return, I'm living that reality. Except in my novels, I control the outcome. In real life, I have no idea what happens next.

I turn away from the window, gathering the borrowed clothes and my laptop. If I can't control what happens when Alex returns, I can at least control what happens to the characters in my novel.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

eight

Alex

The wind howls across the ridge, driving rain into my face as I secure the guideline.

Forty feet below, the rest of the SAR team works to stabilize the injured hiker—a twenty-eight-year-old male with a compound fracture of the tibia and early signs of hypothermia.

The chopper can't land in this terrain, so we're setting up a wire evacuation system to lift him to a clearing half a mile upslope.

"Line secure!" I call through the radio, the wind nearly drowning my voice.

"Copy that," comes Martinez's reply. "Beginning patient prep for transport."

I check the anchors one more time, my movements automatic after years of practice. The rain is getting heavier, visibility dropping by the minute. If we don't get this guy out in the next hour, we'll all be spending the night on this mountain.

Lightning flashes in the distance, followed by a rumble of thunder. Not good. Not good at all.

"Weather's turning," I report. "How long on the prep?"

"Ten minutes," Martinez responds. "Kid's in rough shape."

I secure my position and scan the darkening horizon. The mission parameters dance through my mind—weight calculations, wind variables, extraction angles—the familiar rhythm of risk assessment that's been my lifeline for five years.

My thoughts unexpectedly slide to Sheryl, waiting back at my cabin. The image of her wearing my shirt, standing in my bedroom among the photographs of my past, is still sharp in my mind.

I'd reacted badly. Too harshly. The old defensive reflexes kicking in at the sight of her holding that piece of my history.

Another flash of lightning, closer this time, followed almost immediately by a crack of thunder. The storm is moving fast.

"Martinez, we need to move, NOW."

"Working on it, Brennan. Two more minutes."

I check the rigging again, though I know it's perfect. My mind splits between the immediate danger and thoughts of Sheryl. What if something goes wrong? What if I don't make it back?

The thought hits me with unexpected force. For five years, the only consequence of me not coming back was an empty cabin. No one waiting, no one wondering, no one caring particularly if Alex Brennan made it home.

Now there's Sheryl. Sheryl with her romance novels and her green eyes and her way of seeing through the barriers I've built around myself.

Lightning strikes a tree on the adjacent ridge, the crack and sizzle raising the hair on my arms. Too close.

"Martinez!"

"Ready for transport!"

I snap back to full focus, directing the team through the evacuation procedure. The stretcher rises slowly through the rain, the injured hiker secured inside. Every movement is critical, every hand placement essential. One mistake could send him plummeting down the mountainside.

As I guide the line, I realize my thoughts keep returning to her. Not as a distraction, but as an anchor. For the first time in years, I'm thinking beyond the mission parameters, beyond getting everyone else home safely.

I'm thinking about getting myself home too. To her.

The realization shakes me. I've been going through the motions of living since the fire, moving from one rescue to the next, one day to the next, without any real connection. Existing rather than living.

When the wire evacuation is complete and the injured hiker safely transferred to the helicopter, I find myself checking my watch. The mission has taken nearly seven hours, longer than expected due to the weather.

"Good work, Brennan," Martinez says, clapping my shoulder as we pack up the gear. "You want to ride with us back to base or take your truck?"

"Truck," I answer immediately. "I need to get home."

Martinez raises an eyebrow, a knowing look crossing his face. "That girl from the cabin fire?"

I don't answer, but my expression must give me away.

"About damn time," he says with a grin. "The mountain man rejoins the land of the living."

I roll my eyes, but I can't deny the truth in his words. Something has shifted inside me, fundamental and irreversible. The thought of returning to my empty, ordered existence seems suddenly unbearable.

The drive back takes longer than usual with the storm-slick roads. It's after two in the morning when I finally pull up to my cabin. I expect darkness, assuming Sheryl would be asleep by now, but light spills from the windows into the rainy night.

She's still awake. Waiting for me.

I sit in the truck for a moment, gathering my thoughts. I owe her an apology, but it's more than that. I owe her the truth about Mike and Jason, about the walls I've built, and about the fear that's been driving me for five years.

The cabin door opens before I reach it. Sheryl stands in the doorway, silhouetted by the warm light behind her. She's still wearing my t-shirt. The sight of her stops me in my tracks.

"You're soaked," she says, concern replacing whatever anger might have remained from our argument.

"Occupational hazard." I step inside, dripping on the entryway floor. "Sorry about the mess."

"I don't care about the floor." She closes the door against the storm. "Are you okay? Was anyone hurt?"

Her concern for strangers she's never met is so genuine it makes my chest ache. "The hiker has a bad break and mild hypothermia, but he'll recover. Everyone else is fine."

She nods, relief evident in her expression. An awkward silence falls between us, the weight of our unfinished argument hanging in the air.

"I need to change," I finally say, gesturing to my soaked clothes.

"Of course." She steps back, giving me space to move past her. "I'll make coffee. You probably need it after being out in this."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture isn't lost on me. "Thank you."

In my bedroom, I strip off the wet gear and towel dry quickly before pulling on dry clothes. My gaze falls on the photographs on my dresser—the ones she'd been looking at when I reacted so poorly.

I pick up a photo, studying the three smiling faces. Mike with his wild theories about everything. Jason with his medical textbooks and terrible jokes. Me, younger and unburdened by loss.

For the first time in years, the memory brings a bittersweet ache rather than sharp pain. I set the photo back carefully and head to the kitchen.

Sheryl is pouring coffee into a mug, looking nervous. She hands me the coffee without meeting my eyes.

"Thank you," I say, taking a sip.

She nods, finally looking up at me. "About earlier."

"I'm sorry," I interrupt. "I overreacted."

"No, I shouldn't have been snooping."

"You weren't snooping. You were looking for clothes, and the photos were right there." I set the coffee down and take a deep breath. "I'm not used to sharing my space. Or my past."

She leans against the counter, watching me carefully. "I understand if you don't want to talk about them."

"That's just it," I say, surprising myself with the realization. "I think maybe I do. Need to talk about them, I mean."

Her expression softens. "I'm listening."

I pick up my coffee again, needing something to hold. "Mike and Jason were more than roommates. They were family, the closest thing I had after my parents died in my twenties."

She listens silently as I tell her about them—Mike's dreams of opening a climbing school, Jason's determination to become a trauma surgeon, our shared adventures camping in the mountains. For the first time, I find myself sharing the good memories, not just the tragedy of their loss.

"I'm so sorry, Alex," she says when I finally fall silent. "They sound like amazing people."

"They were." I look down at my now-empty mug. "When they died, it changed me. I shut down. Built walls. Decided it was easier not to care too much about anyone."

"And then I showed up and set fire to your carefully ordered world," she says, a small smile playing at her lips.

"Literally," I agree, feeling the tension between us finally begin to ease. "Sheryl, what I said before, that was unfair. I know that's not who you are."

"Thank you." She takes a step closer. "For what it's worth, I think Mike and Jason would want you to be happy. To live, not just exist."

"That's what I was thinking out there tonight. During the rescue."

"What do you mean?" she asks, her head tilting slightly.

"For five years, I've been going through the motions.

Doing my job, coming home to an empty cabin, repeating the cycle without really living.

"I set the mug down and move closer to her.

"Tonight was different. For the first time, I found myself thinking about getting back safely.

Not just for the mission, but for myself. For you."

Her eyes widen. "For me?"

"I had something to come back to." The admission feels like jumping off a cliff without a safety line. "Someone waiting."

She steps forward, closing the distance between us. "I was waiting. Worried, too."

I reach out slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wants. She doesn't. My hand cups her cheek, thumb tracing the curve of her lower lip. "I've been alone by choice for a long time. I'm not sure I remember how not to be."

"We could figure it out together," she suggests.

"Your book," I remind her. "Your deadline. You'll be leaving soon."

"Or I could stay here. With you." The words come out in a rush. "If you wanted that."

"I want that," I admit. "I want you to stay."

Relief and joy flood her expression. "Really?"

"Really." I pull her closer, our bodies fitting together naturally. "Fair warning, though. I'm not good at this. Relationships. Letting people in."

"Good thing I'm a writer," she says with a smile that lights up her entire face. "I'm excellent at working through difficult character development."

I can't help but chuckle, rusty from disuse but genuine. "Is that what I am? A difficult character?"

"The best kind," she assures me, rising on tiptoes to brush her lips against mine. "The kind with a complex backstory and hidden depths. The kind worth writing about."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

nine

Sheryl

Two weeks have passed since he asked me to stay. Two weeks of settling into a rhythm together, of learning each other's habits and quirks, of finding a balance between his orderly nature and my creative chaos. Two weeks of falling deeper into something I never expected to find in these mountains.

I wake before him, watching him sleep. He stirs, eyes opening to find me watching him.

"Morning, voyeur," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep.

"I prefer 'admirer,'" I counter, reaching out to trace the line of his jaw, enjoying the scratch of morning stubble against my fingertips. "You're ridiculously handsome when you sleep, you know."

"Only when I sleep?" He catches my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm.

"Well, you're not bad the rest of the time either." I shift closer, drawn to his warmth like a moth to flame. "Especially when you're chopping wood. Or climbing. Or basically anytime you're using those muscles."

"So I'm just eye candy to you? And here I thought you liked me for my sparkling personality."

"That too," I concede with mock seriousness. "Though your sparkling personality is significantly less visible through a shirt."

In one swift movement, he pulls me on top of him, my body sprawled across his chest, our faces inches apart. "Is this better?"

"Much," I agree, leaning down to press my lips to his.

What begins as a gentle good morning kiss quickly deepens into something more urgent. His hands slide under my sleep shirt, palms warm against my skin as they travel up my sides to cup my breasts.

I gasp against his mouth as his thumbs brush over my nipples, the simple touch sending sparks of pleasure through my body.

"Alex," I breathe as his mouth moves to my neck.

"Hmm?" he hums against my skin.

I sit up, straddling his hips, feeling the hard length of him pressing against my core through the thin barriers of our sleep clothes.

The position gives me a perfect view of him—broad chest dusted with hair, the defined muscles of his torso, the intriguing trail leading down beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs.

"I want to try something," I say, surprising myself with my boldness.

His eyes darken with interest. "I'm listening."

I bite my lower lip, suddenly shy despite everything we've shared. "I want to be on

top."

His hands settle on my hips, thumbs tracing small circles over my hipbones. "Any particular reason?" he asks. The sudden fire in his eyes makes heat pool between my thighs.

I feel a blush rising to my cheeks. "It's my favorite position to write. I've described it dozens of times, imagined how it would feel, but I've never..."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, followed by something darker, more primal. "You want to ride me."

I blush deeper, but I nod. "Yes."

"Take off your shirt," he commands softly.

I cross my arms, grasping the hem of the oversized t-shirt and pulling it over my head in one fluid motion. The cool morning air pebbles my skin, though whether from the temperature or his heated gaze, I couldn't say.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, his hands sliding up to cup my breasts again, this time with nothing between his calloused palms and my sensitive skin. "Every inch of you."

I lean into his touch, arching my back slightly. In these past two weeks, he's helped me shed my self-consciousness.

"You're beautiful,too," I tell him honestly.

He looks slightly uncomfortable with the praise, as he always does. "Men aren't beautiful."

"You are," I insist, leaning down to press a kiss over his heart. "Accept the compliment, mountain man."

His laugh rumbles through his chest. "Yes, ma'am."

I continue my exploration, gaining confidence with each appreciative sound he makes. When my fingers reach the waistband of his boxer briefs, his erection springs free, thick and hard against his stomach. He's so big and thick, just seeing him makes me wet.

I slide my panties off, now naked and straddling his thighs, completely exposed to his gaze.

"Perfect," he murmurs, his hands returning to my hips. "Now, come here."

He guides me forward until I'm positioned over him, his throbbing cockhead pressing against my pussy. I can feel how ready I am, slick and swollen with desire.

"Take your time," he tells me, his voice strained with the effort of remaining still. "Go as slow as you need."

I nod, grateful for his patience as I position myself properly. With one hand braced against his chest for balance, I use the other to guide his cock to my entrance. The first press of him against me draws a gasp from my lips.

"That's it," he encourages, his hands steady on my hips but not pushing. "Take what you need."

I sink down slowly, feeling the delicious stretch as my body accommodates his size. The stretch is more intense in this position. I can't help but whimper as I slide down every inch until my pussy is flush with his pelvis.

"God, Sheryl," he groans, his fingers flexing against my skin. "You feel incredible."

I experiment with a small movement, lifting slightly before sinking back down. The sensation pulls a surprised moan from my throat. In this position, I can control the angle, the depth, and the pace. The power of that control is intoxicating.

"That's it," Alex encourages, his eyes fixed on my face. "Find your rhythm."

I begin to move more confidently, discovering what feels good, what makes his breath catch, and what makes my own pleasure build.

The freedom of movement is everything I imagined when writing these scenes and more—the roll of my hips, the flex of my thighs, the way his length hits spots inside me that send sparks of pleasure radiating outward.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, one hand moving from my hip to where we're joined, his thumb finding my clit. "So beautiful, taking me like this."

His touch amplifies every sensation, pushing me higher as I ride him with increasing confidence. I brace my hands on his chest, changing the angle slightly, and cry out at the new sensations the shift creates.

"There?" he asks, reading my reaction.

"Yes," I manage, voice breathy and unfamiliar. "Right there."

His hands guide my hips now, helping me maintain the angle that sends pleasure spiraling through me with each movement. The sizzling combination of his thumb circling my sensitive bud while his thickness presses against that perfect spot inside me quickly pushes me toward the edge.

"Alex," I gasp, movements becoming less coordinated as pleasure builds. "I'm close."

"Let go," he urges, his own voice rough with need. "Come on me while you ride me like a good girl."

His words, combined with a particularly perfect thrust, send me over the edge. Pleasure crashes through me in waves, my inner muscles clenching around him as I cry out his name. My entire body freezes then melts as the sensation crests and breaks.

Before I can fully recover, Alex sits up, wrapping one arm around my waist to hold me steady while the other hand tangles in my hair. The new position drives him even deeper, wringing a gasp from my overstimulated body.

"I need to be closer," he growls against my neck, his hips beginning to thrust upward to meet my downward movements.

The feeling of his chest pressed against mine, his mouth hot on my throat, the new angle hitting sensitive places that have me building toward another peak surprisingly quickly.

"You feel so good," I moan, clinging to his shoulders as he takes control of our rhythm. "So deep like this."

His only response is a feral groan against my skin, his movements becoming more urgent, more primal. I can feel the tension in his muscles, and the restraint he's still exercising despite his growing need.

"Alex," I whisper in his ear, echoing his earlier words. "I want to feel you lose control."

Something breaks in him at my permission.

His movements become more powerful, more insistent, driving up into me with a passion that borders on desperation.

Each thrust sends shockwaves of pleasure through my already sensitive body, building impossibly toward another release. He cries out with every thrust.

"Sheryl," he groans, his face buried in my neck. "I'm close." His rhythm falters, his arms tightening around me as he drives deep one final time. I feel the pulse of his release inside me, each hot spurt of his seed flooding into me.

In the aftermath, we remain connected, neither willing to break the intimacy of the moment.

His forehead rests against mine, our breath mingling in the small space between us.

I feel boneless, liquid, utterly sated in a way I never imagined possible.

I kiss the top of his head before finally moving back to his side.

"So," he says after our breathing has returned to normal. "I take it research was successful?"

I laugh, poking his ribs gently. "Very. Though I might need multiple trials to ensure accuracy. For the book, of course."

"Of course," he agrees solemnly, though I can hear the smile in his voice. "Anything for literature."

We lie in comfortable silence for a while, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my

shoulder, my hand resting over his heart.

"I should get up," I sigh eventually. "I've got three chapters to finish today if I'm going to meet my deadline."

"Motivated now?" he asks, a hint of masculine pride in his tone.

"Incredibly," I confirm. "Nothing like practical experience to fuel the creative process."

He chuckles, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Glad to be of service."

I make no move to leave, however, too comfortable in his embrace. "Five more minutes."

"Take all the time you need," he says softly. "I'm not going anywhere."

The simple statement carries more weight than its surface meaning. For a man who has spent five years holding everyone at arm's length, it's a declaration of sorts.

I prop myself up on one elbow to look at him properly. "Neither am I, you know. Going anywhere."

His expression softens. "Even when the book is finished?"

"Especially then," I assure him. "I've already talked to my agent about staying here. The publishers love what I've sent so far. Apparently nearly dying in a fire did wonders for my writing, and now they're offering a three-book deal."

Hope flickers in his eyes. "So you could stay in Darkmore? For a while?"

"For as long as you'll have me," I say, my heart pounding with the implied commitment.

Then, after a beat, Alex says the words that change everything. "I love you."

Three simple words that I've written countless times for my characters but have never heard directed at me with such quiet certainty.

"I love you too," I reply. "I think I have since you carried me out of that burning cabin." I pause, kissing him as I feel a spark of inspiration hit me again. "I just found the perfect ending to my story."

"Which is?"

I smile, heart full and certain in a way I've never experienced before. "The rescued becomes the rescuer. The protector learns to be vulnerable. And they both discover that the safest place to be is in each other's arms."

He pulls me closer, his expression a mixture of wonder and contentment. "That sounds like a happy ending."

"The best kind," I agree, settling back against him. "Though personally, I prefer to think of it as a beginning."

My beginning. My mountain man and me, writing our own love story one day at a time. And unlike the novels I create, this story has no final page, no predetermined conclusion. It simply continues, evolving and deepening with each chapter we add.

I couldn't imagine a more perfect plot.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:40 pm

One Year Later...

"You're sure you don't mind?" I ask, watching Alex adjust his tie in the mirror.

"These publishing events can be painfully boring."

"Yes, but there were no literary agents in those blizzards," I counter, stepping behind him to smooth the collar of his dark blue shirt. "Or reviewers asking what it feels like to be the inspiration for the 'sexiest mountain man in contemporary romance.'"

He turns, catching me by the waist and pulling me against him. "Is that what they're calling me?"

"That's the tame version." I straighten his tie, enjoying the warmth of him beneath the crisp fabric. "You should see my TikTok. Women across America are falling in love with Ranger Brenner."

He grimaces slightly. "Remind me why I agreed to let you use me as inspiration?"

"Because you love me," I say simply. "And because I promised to change enough details that only we would know the truth."

"The truth being that I'm far less charming and heroic than your fictional creation," he teases.

"Actually, the truth is that reality is better than fiction." I rise on tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips. "Ranger Brenner might be dreamy, but he can't hold a candle to Alex Brennan."

His arms tighten around me briefly before he releases me with obvious reluctance. "We should get going. Wouldn't want to be late to your big night."

I step back to take him in. He's tall and imposing in his charcoal suit, silver threading his dark hair at the temples, clean-shaven for the occasion. He looks every bit the successful search and rescue coordinator he is, though I know he's far more comfortable in climbing gear than formal wear.

It has been a year of transformations. The cabin has slowly become our home rather than just his—my books mingling with his on the shelves, my laptop permanently stationed by the window with the best view, photos of us together joining the ones of his past. Now they're on the walls, not hidden away in his bedroom.

The biggest change, though, is in Alex himself.

The man who once built his life around barriers and safety protocols has gradually learned to lower his defenses.

And me? The inexperienced romance novelist who once crafted love stories based purely on theory is now writing from a place of understanding.

My latest book, "My Rugged Savior," hit the New York Times bestseller list three weeks ago and hasn't budged since.

"Come on," Alex says, checking his watch. "Your adoring public awaits."

The Darkmore Community Center has been transformed for the book launch party.

String lights hang from the rafters, tables are decorated with miniature pine trees and tiny fire-rescue equipment, and a massive backdrop featuring the book cover—a broad-shouldered man in a search and rescue jacket standing against a mountain backdrop—dominates the far wall.

"This is..." Alex pauses, searching for the right word.

"Too much?" I suggest, suddenly nervous about how he'll react to the fuss.

"Perfect," he decides, squeezing my hand. "You deserve it all."

My agent Melanie swoops in before I can respond, pulling me into a perfumed embrace. "There she is! Our literary star!"

"Hi, Melanie." I return the hug before stepping back to Alex's side. "You remember Alex?"

"The muse himself!" She extends a manicured hand. "Wonderful to see you again. Are you prepared for your celebrity status? I've had three editors ask if you'd consider posing for the next cover."

Alex's expression is priceless. "I think I'll stick to rescuing real people, thanks."

Melanie laughs. "Smart man. Now, Sheryl, you need to mingle. The bookstore has already sold out twice, and Reader's Circle is talking film rights. This is just the beginning!"

As she guides me toward a group of publishing executives, I glance back at Alex. He gives me an encouraging nod before making his way to the small cluster of familiar faces from town.

The next hour passes in a blur of congratulations, questions about my writing process, and inquiries about the next book in the series.

I sign countless copies, pose for photos, and try to absorb the reality that my little romance novel about a search and rescue officer falling for a city girl caught in a wilderness emergency has resonated with so many readers.

Eventually, I spot Alex by the refreshment table, deep in conversation with a silver-haired man I don't recognize. They're both laughing—a sight that still catches me off guard sometimes, given how rarely Alex used to show that side of himself.

I excuse myself from a conversation with my publisher and make my way to them.

"Sheryl!" Alex's face lights up as I approach, his arm automatically extending to draw me to his side. "There's someone I want you to meet. This is Dr. Hansen, Jason's father."

I feel a momentary jolt of surprise. In the year we've been together, Alex has gradually opened up about Mike and Jason, sharing stories and memories, but he's never before sought out connection with their families.

"It's lovely to meet you," I say, extending my hand. "I've heard so much about Jason."

Dr. Hansen's eyes crinkle warmly as he shakes my hand. "And I've heard a great deal about you. Alex tells me you're responsible for bringing him back to the land of the living."

I glance up at Alex, touched by the sentiment. "I think we rescued each other, honestly."

"Well, whatever the case, I'm grateful." Dr. Hansen's expression grows more serious. "For five years after the fire, we hardly saw Alex. Now he's joining us for the memorial picnic next month."

I squeeze Alex's hand, understanding the significance of this step. The annual picnic honoring Mike and Jason is something he's avoided for years, unable to face their families while carrying the weight of survivor's guilt.

"We're looking forward to it," Alex says, and I can hear in his voice that while it

won't be easy, he's ready.

After Dr. Hansen moves on to get another drink, I turn to Alex. "Are you okay?"

He nods, a certain peace in his expression I've come to treasure. "Better than okay. It's time to honor them properly, not just through work, but by living the kind of life they'd want for me." He pauses, eyes finding mine. "The kind of life you've helped me build."

Before I can respond, Melanie taps a glass, calling for attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to propose a toast to Sheryl Cabot, whose novel 'My Rugged Savior' has captured hearts across the country. To Sheryl!"

Glasses raise around the room, and a chorus of voices echoes the toast. As the applause dies down, Alex surprises me by stepping forward.

"If I could add something," he says, his voice carrying effortlessly through the room despite its quietness. All eyes turn to him, curiosity evident on many faces.

"A year ago, I found Sheryl unconscious in a burning cabin." A murmur ripples through the crowd; though many know the basics of our story, hearing it from Alex is rare. "I thought I was saving her life. What I didn't realize was that she was about to save mine."

His eyes find me in the crowd, and the naked emotion in them makes my throat tight.

"Before Sheryl, I existed. After her, I lived again.

" He raises his glass. "So here's to the real hero of this story—not the man on the cover of that book, but the woman who wrote it.

Who taught me that the greatest act of courage isn't running into a burning building,

but opening your heart when every instinct tells you to keep it locked away. "

The room erupts in applause, but I barely hear it. I'm too busy trying not to cry as Alex makes his way back to me.

After I kiss him, I think about the dedication I wrote in "My Rugged Savior," words that seemed fitting for both the fictional characters and our very real story:

For those brave enough to walk through fire—literal or metaphorical—and come out the other side, forever changed but not defined by the flames.

We've both been forged by different fires. But what matters isn't the burn.

It's what rises from the ashes.