



Snowed in with the Mountain Man (Darkmore Mountain Men #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Phoebe crashed into my life like an avalanche—a city girl with an impossible dream of renovating her uncle’s decrepit cabin. When a freak April snowstorm strands us together, we ignite a flame that has nothing to do with the fireplace.

Two days snowbound changes everything. Now I’m faced with an impossible choice: let her return to Vancouver when the roads clear, or convince her that sometimes the most unexpected shelter is the one you build together.-Snowed in with the Mountain Man is a steamy insta-love romance featuring a grumpy mountain man and a resilient city girl trapped together during a dangerous blizzard. This forced proximity, snowed-in story delivers lots of spice and a happily ever after that proves sometimes the perfect storm brings the perfect match.

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one

Phoebe

I grip the steering wheel tighter as my little Chrysler crawls up the winding mountain road. The GPS lady announced "You have arrived at your destination" about ten minutes ago, which is a complete lie. There's nothing but trees, rocks, and more trees.

"Come on, Uncle Max," I mutter. "Where's this dream cabin you left me?"

The April air nips at my face through the half-open window. Vancouver is mild and rainy—I'm not prepared for the bite in the mountain air. I crank the heat up and check the hastily scribbled directions one more time.

Left at the fork after Silver Creek Bridge. Look for the wooden sign with a pine tree carving.

There! A weathered wooden post appears around the bend, the carved pine tree barely visible under years of exposure. I turn onto what can hardly be called a road—more like two dirt tracks with grass growing between them. My poor city car bounces and protests as I navigate around potholes the size of kiddie pools.

"It'll be worth it, Phoebe," I remind myself for the hundredth time. It has to be.

Three weeks ago, I was managing social media accounts for Vancouver's trendiest boutiques. Then came the company-wide email about "restructuring," followed by the awkward meeting with HR. Two days later, Kyle decided we were "moving too fast"

and maybe we should "take a break to explore ourselves individually." Perfect timing.

Then came the lawyer's letter about Uncle Max's will. I'd barely known my mother's eccentric brother who moved to the mountains twenty years ago, but apparently, he'd left me his cabin in Darkmore Mountain, Alberta. A sign from the universe if I've ever seen one.

My car rounds a final curve, and there it is—my inheritance, my fresh start, my escape from city life.

"Oh... crap."

I slam on the brakes, sending my coffee tumbling from the cup holder. The cabin sits in a small clearing, surrounded by towering pines. It might have been charming once. Might have been.

Now, half the front porch has collapsed like a sandcastle at high tide. Several windows are either cracked or covered with plywood. The roof—oh God, the roof—sags ominously on one side with what looks suspiciously like a tree branch poking through.

"This is fine," I say to absolutely no one. "Totally fine."

I check my phone: one bar of service. I snap a quick photo of the cabin and text it to my best friend Priya with the caption: My new palace! ????

The message fails to send.

"Perfect."

I park as close as I dare to the cabin and zip my thin jacket up to my chin. I should

have packed my winter coat, but it's April for crying out loud. April in Vancouver means cherry blossoms and light rain jackets, not this knife-edge cold that slices through my clothes.

With a deep breath that turns to vapor in front of my face, I approach my new home. The key from the lawyer's packet fits the rusted lock after some jiggling, and the door swings open with a horror-movie creak.

"Hello?" I call, half-expecting someone to answer. Maybe Uncle Max was secretly a multimillionaire who left a caretaker. The silence mocks me.

Inside smells like dust, pine, and something musty I can't identify. I pull the chain on a lamp, but nothing happens.

"Right. Electricity. That would be too convenient."

I use my phone's flashlight to explore. The main room isn't terrible—a stone fireplace dominates one wall, surrounded by bookshelves stuffed with paperbacks and field guides. A worn leather couch faces the fireplace, flanked by two armchairs that have definitely seen better days.

The kitchen is basic but functional—if I can get the power turned on. A gas stove, a refrigerator old enough to qualify as vintage, and cupboards that probably contain mouse condominiums by now.

A narrow staircase leads to a loft bedroom with a surprisingly solid-looking bed frame. The mattress is another story—stripped bare and sporting suspicious stains that make me mentally add "new mattress" to my rapidly growing list.

The bathroom... I close that door quickly. Some things are better left unexplored until daylight and possibly hazmat gear.

Water drips steadily from a corner of the ceiling, landing with rhythmic plops into a strategically placed cooking pot. I count three more pots scattered around, catching similar leaks.

"Home sweet home," I whisper, fighting back the urge to cry. Or scream. Or get back in my car and drive straight to Vancouver.

No. I'm not giving up that easily.

I pull out my phone and open my list-making app—my digital security blanket.

CABIN EMERGENCY FIXES: 1. Roof (!!!) 2. Windows 3. Porch 4. Plumbing??? 5. Electricity 6. New mattress 7. Everything else

I check my watch—nearly 4 PM. The drive took longer than expected, and if this town is anything like other mountain towns, businesses probably close early.

Back in the kitchen, I rummage through drawers until I find an ancient phone book. Darkmore Mountain Supply is listed with hours until 5 PM. If I hurry, I can make it.

As I head back to my car, fat snowflakes begin to drift from the steel-gray sky. I check the temperature on my phone: 28°F and dropping. In April . What have I gotten myself into?

I turn on the radio as I navigate back down the treacherous driveway.

"—expect this unusual cold front to intensify overnight with potential for significant accumulation in mountain areas," the meteorologist's voice crackles through the speakers. "Residents of Darkmore Mountain and surrounding areas should prepare for possible power outages and limited road access as this late-season system moves through. We're looking at potentially eight to twelve inches in higher elevations—"

I snap off the radio. Perfect. Just perfect. My first night in my new life, and I'm facing a blizzard in a cabin that's more hole than home.

As I reach the main road, I pull over and add one more item to my list:

8. WINTER GEAR. NOW.

Then I point my car toward town, hoping The Mountain Supply Shop lives up to its name. I need tools, materials, and advice—fast. What I don't need is the knot of panic forming in my chest or the voice in my head that sounds suspiciously like Kyle's: "This is what happens when you make impulsive decisions, Phoebe."

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. I'll prove that voice wrong if it's the last thing I do.

Even if I freeze to death trying.

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two

Aiden

Five minutes to closing. I check the weather radar one more time on the ancient computer behind the counter. The storm's moving in faster than predicted. Blue and white swirls across the screen, bearing down on our little dot on the map like a predator.

Weather doesn't lie. My knee has been aching all day—never fails when pressure drops this fast.

I start my closing routine: counting the register, checking inventory on the winter emergency supplies we'd put on clearance last week. Darkmore winters linger, but nobody expects a blizzard in April.

The bell above the door jingles. Suppressing a sigh, I look up.

And forget how to breathe.

She bursts in like a summer storm—all flushed cheeks and wild eyes. Her chestnut hair tumbles around her shoulders, snowflakes melting against the strands. She's wearing a jacket that might handle a coastal drizzle but will be useless against what's coming.

"You're still open, right?" Her voice has an edge of panic. "Please tell me you're still open."

I glance at the clock. 4:55 PM.

"Five more minutes," I manage, my voice rougher than intended.

Relief floods her face. "Thank God. I need—well, everything, apparently. My cabin is falling apart, and there's a storm coming, and—" She stops abruptly. "Sorry. I'm Phoebe. Phoebe Hartley. I just inherited Max Hartley's place."

Max Hartley. That explains it. Poor girl has no idea what she's walked into. Max's cabin had been abandoned for nearly two years before he died.

"Aiden Calloway," I reply, watching as she tugs off thin leather gloves. City hands. Soft. "Max was a good man. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I barely knew him," she admits, looking around the store with wide eyes. "But he left me his cabin, and I thought... well, I needed a change."

She can't be more than twenty-five. I'm nearly forty. The observation brings an unwelcome tightness to my chest.

"What do you need?" I ask, keeping my voice neutral despite the unfamiliar warmth spreading through me.

She pulls out her phone and shows me a list. It's long. Too long for tonight.

"Top priorities," I say. "Storm's moving in fast."

Something in my tone must register because her shoulders straighten. "Roof repair supplies. The bedroom ceiling is leaking in at least four places. And something for the broken windows. And maybe a space heater? There's a fireplace, but I don't know how to use it, and—"

"Gas or electric?" I interrupt, moving toward the hardware section.

"What?"

"Your stove. Gas or electric?"

She blinks. "Gas, I think? It's ancient."

"Good. Power will go out." I grab a tarp, roofing sealant, and weatherstripping.

"How'd you get here?"

"I drove from Vancouver. My Chrysler's outside."

I glance out the window at her little city car. It might as well be made of paper for all the good it'll do in what's coming.

"Not that. How'd you get to the cabin? Road's been washed out since spring melt began."

Her eyes widen. "There was a dirt track? It was rough, but I made it."

Stubborn. And lucky. That track turns to mud soup in any real precipitation.

I grab more supplies: a kerosene heater, matches, batteries, flashlights. She follows, asking questions about each item. Smart questions, actually. Not what I expected.

"Do you know how to use a caulk gun?" I ask, holding one up.

She shakes her head.

"Like this." I demonstrate, and she steps closer. The scent of her—something floral

mixed with coffee—hits me like a physical force. My body responds instantly, a rush of heat surging south. Christ. It's been years since a woman affected me this way. Years longer since I've done anything about it.

Her fingers brush mine as she takes the tool, sending electricity up my arm. "Like this?"

Her grip is wrong. Without thinking, I reach around her, adjusting her hands. The contact is brief, but it jolts through me like lightning striking a pine. I step back quickly, my jeans suddenly uncomfortable.

"You'll need these too," I mutter, grabbing a heavy-duty flashlight and extra batteries.

She nods, studying my face. I turn away before she reads too much. Women like her don't look at men like me—not seriously. I've seen it before. City folks come up for adventure, maybe a fling with a mountain man, then return to their real lives.

The radio crackles. "—immediate winter storm warning for Darkmore Mountain and surrounding areas. Heavy snowfall expected to begin within the hour, with accumulations of eight to twelve inches overnight. Temperatures will drop to fifteen degrees Fahrenheit with windchill factors reaching—"

Her face pales. "That can't be right. It's April."

"Mountain weather doesn't follow calendars," I say, adding a double sleeping bag to her pile. "You have food? Water?"

"Some groceries in my car. I was going to unpack, then this—" she gestures at the supplies.

"I'll help you load up." The words surprise me as much as her. I don't offer help.

Don't get involved. But the thought of her alone in that broken-down cabin during a spring blizzard...

I ring up her purchases, wincing at the total. She doesn't flinch, just hands over a credit card. As I pass her the receipt, our fingers brush again. This time, I don't imagine the slight tremor in hers, the way her pupils dilate just a fraction.

Stop it, Calloway. She's too young, too different. Too temporary.

Outside, snow falls more heavily now, fat flakes coating the ground. I load her supplies into her trunk while she cranks the engine.

Nothing happens.

She tries again. The car makes a clicking sound, then dies.

"No, no, no," she mutters, pounding the steering wheel. "Not now!"

I know that sound. Battery's dead, probably from the cold. Could jump it, but that's just delaying the inevitable. That car won't make it up the mountain tonight.

"I can take you," I hear myself say. "My truck can handle it."

She looks at me. Measuring, assessing. I know what she sees. Tall, bearded, rough-edged. Fifteen years her senior at least. A stranger offering a ride up a mountain as a blizzard rolls in.

"I don't have much choice, do I?" she finally says.

"You could stay in town. Darkmore Lodge has rooms."

"I can't afford that. Not after this—" she gestures toward her purchases. "And everything I own is in my car."

I nod. "We'll transfer your stuff to my truck. Lock your car. I'll have my brother tow it to the garage tomorrow."

"Your brother?"

"Search and rescue. Apprenticing at the town garage on the side." I start unloading her groceries, trying not to notice the box of fancy tea, the organic vegetables. City tastes.

"Thank you," she says, helping me transfer her bags. "I don't know what I would've done."

The gratitude in her voice makes something twist inside me. I grunt in response, not trusting myself to speak.

My truck starts with a rumble, heat blasting from the vents. She climbs in, looking small against the worn leather seat. This close, in the confined space, her scent is even stronger. My hands tighten on the steering wheel as my body reacts. Down, boy. Been so long since I've been with a woman that my cock's forgotten its manners.

"Nice truck," she offers as we pull away from the shop.

"Never let me down."

"Unlike my traitor Chrysler," she sighs.

The snow falls harder now, the windshield wipers barely keeping up. Visibility shrinks with each passing minute. I drive slowly, carefully, knowing every curve of

this road like my own palm.

"Have you lived here long?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"All my life. Except four years of college."

"What did you study?"

"Business. Forestry minor."

She waits for more, but I don't elaborate. Don't tell her how I fled back to these mountains after graduation, how cities made me feel like I couldn't breathe. Don't mention that I took over the store when my father's heart gave out eight years ago, or that I haven't regretted it once.

"I worked in marketing," she volunteers. "Digital stuff. Until they laid everyone off three weeks ago."

That explains it. Not just a vacation, then. She's running from something, or toward something. Both, maybe.

"Sorry to hear that."

"Best thing that ever happened to me," she says with forced brightness. "Otherwise I'd never have had the guts to do this."

I nod, respecting the lie. We all tell ourselves what we need to hear during hard times.

The truck's tires slip slightly as we begin the steeper ascent. Snow blankets everything now, transforming the familiar landscape into something alien and treacherous. The road to Max's cabin is barely visible.

"Is it much farther?" she asks, tension threading her voice.

"About a mile. Road, or mud trail, really, gets rough from here."

Her phone pings with a message, surprising us both. She checks it. "Last gasp of service, I guess. My friend Priya thinks I'm crazy for coming here."

"She might be right."

That earns me a sharp look. "I'm not afraid of a little snow."

"Should be," I mutter, but she hears me.

"Look, I know I'm a city girl, but I'm not helpless. I can learn."

The determination in her voice catches me off guard. Maybe there's more to Phoebe Hartley than I thought.

A sudden gust of wind rocks the truck. The snow thickens, becoming a white wall before us. I slow even further, straining to see the road.

Then it happens. A patch of black ice, invisible beneath the fresh snow. The truck slides sideways, tires finding no purchase. I counter-steer, but momentum carries us toward the ditch.

"Hold on!" I bark, throwing my arm instinctively across her chest as we slide off the road. The truck tilts, then settles with a bone-jarring thud.

When I look over, my arm is still pressed against her. Her heart hammers beneath my forearm. Our faces are inches apart, her eyes wide with fear and something else—something that makes my breath catch.

"You okay?" I manage, my voice rough.

She nods, not moving away from my touch. "What now?"

I force myself to pull back, to assess our situation professionally. The truck's front wheel is buried in snow, tilted at an angle that means we're not driving out.

"We walk," I say, reaching behind the seat for my emergency pack. "Your cabin's about half a mile from here."

"Walk? In this?" She gestures at the whiteout conditions outside.

"Only getting worse." I pull out two headlamps. "Put on everything warm you have. We move now or we don't move at all."

She swallows hard, then nods. I watch as she layers a sweater under her raincoat, pulls a knit hat from her bag.

Not enough. Not nearly enough.

I shrug out of my heavy flannel jacket and hold it out to her.

"I can't take your coat," she protests.

"Not a debate." I'm already pulling on my waterproof shell from behind the seat.

"Layer up. Now."

To my surprise, she doesn't argue further. Just slips into my jacket, the sleeves hanging well past her fingertips. Something primal stirs in me at the sight of her wrapped in my clothing.

Focus, Calloway. Getting her safely to shelter is all that matters. Whatever this impossible attraction is, it doesn't change the facts. She's young. She's temporary. And men like me don't get chances with women like her.

But as we prepare to step into the storm, I can't help wondering what it would be like if we did.

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three

Phoebe

The world has disappeared.

Nothing but white—above, below, all around. Snow stings my face like tiny needles, each gust driving it deeper into my skin. I can barely see Aiden's broad back three feet in front of me.

"Keep moving!" he shouts, voice nearly lost in the howling wind.

My legs burn. The snow is already past my ankles, my fashionable boots soaked through and frozen. I wasn't made for this. Vancouver's idea of a snowstorm is two inches followed by immediate rain.

"How much further?" I call, teeth chattering violently.

He turns back, face barely visible beneath his snow-crusting beard and the headlamp he insisted I wear.

"Quarter mile. Maybe less."

I stumble forward. Aiden's jacket swallows me, sleeves rolled up three times. It smells like him—pine and motor oil.

My phone died ten minutes ago. No help coming.

Focus, Phoebe. Keep. Moving.

My foot catches on something hidden beneath the snow. I pitch forward with a startled cry. Before I can faceplant, strong hands grab my arms, hauling me upright.

"You okay?" Aiden's face is inches from mine, concern etched in the hard lines around his eyes.

"F-fine," I stammer. My feet have gone from burning to numb—bad sign.

He looks down at my pathetic footwear. Without warning, he crouches, back to me.

"Climb on," he orders.

"What? No, I can walk—"

"Your lips are blue. Get on my back or I'll carry you like a sack of feed."

The mental image of being slung over his shoulder makes the decision for me. I awkwardly clamber onto his back. He stands in one fluid motion, hands securing my thighs.

Oh...

His body heat envelops me instantly. The man radiates warmth like a furnace. He adjusts my weight with ease, as if I weigh nothing.

"Hold tight," he says, voice rumbling through his back and into my chest.

I press my frozen face against his shoulder, focusing on the steady rhythm of his breathing, the solid strength of his body moving beneath mine.

Definitely not the circumstances I imagined for being this close to a man again. Especially one who looks like he stepped off the cover of "Rugged Mountain Men Monthly." ??

Wait, did I really just mentally add a fire emoji? I'm delirious from the cold.

"There," he says after what feels like forever. "Look up."

Through the curtain of white, a dark shape materializes. My cabin.

Aiden doesn't set me down until we reach the porch. My legs wobble as they take my weight. He steadies me with one hand while digging through his pack.

"Key?" he asks.

It takes three tries with frozen fingers. He unlocks the door, pushing it open against the weight of snow.

We stumble inside, bringing a swirl of snowflakes with us. The cabin is dark and somehow even colder than I remember. The door slams behind us.

For a moment, we just stand there, panting, covered in snow. Then Aiden springs into action.

"Get those wet boots off," he commands, already unlacing his own. "Socks too."

I comply, fingers fumbling. Everything is numb. My jeans are soaked to the knees.

Aiden returns with an armful of throw blankets. "Wrap up," he says, draping one around my shoulders. "I'll check the power."

He moves to the fuse box, clicking switches. Nothing happens.

"Lines are down," he pronounces. "Gas still working?"

I shrug helplessly. "I don't know. I just got here before going to your store."

He tests the stove. A blue flame flickers to life.

"Thank God for small mercies," he mutters.

That's when it hits me. We're trapped. In a powerless cabin. During a blizzard. With a stranger.

A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat.

"This is fine," I say, voice higher than normal. "Totally fine. Just stuck in a blizzard in April with no power, barely any supplies, and a cabin that's basically made of holes. No problem. I've got this. Totally normal Tuesday."

Aiden pauses his inspection to look at me. His expression softens marginally.

"You're going to be okay," he says, gruffness tempered. "We both are."

"We can't stay here," I protest. "The roof is leaking, the windows are broken, there's no power—"

"We can and we will," he cuts me off, not unkindly. "No choice now."

He crosses to the fireplace. "When was the last time this was used?"

"I have no idea. I told you, I barely knew my uncle."

He pokes at something inside the chimney. "Damper works. No birds' nests. That's something."

My panic recedes, replaced by my natural tendency to organize chaos.

"Let's list our assets," I say. "Shelter, technically. Supplies from your store. Food from my groceries. Fire soon, hopefully. Gas stove works. That's... something, right?"

"Water?" Aiden asks, arranging kindling.

"Pipes probably frozen. But we have snow. Infinite snow."

He almost smiles. Almost. "We'll melt it. For drinking and basic washing."

The fireplace catches with a whoosh. The immediate heat makes my eyes water with relief.

"What about your brother?" I ask. "Could he help?"

Aiden shakes his head. "Jake works search and rescue. Storm like this, he'll be handling emergency calls, not checking on his big brother."

"But we are an emergency!"

"We're inconvenienced," he corrects. "We have shelter, heat, food, water. Others won't be so lucky."

He's right, but it doesn't make our situation any less surreal.

Together, we secure the cabin. Aiden uses the tarp to cover the worst roof sections. I hold the flashlight while he staples plastic over broken windows. The wind still

creeps in, but it's better.

By the time we finish, darkness has fallen completely. The temperature drops noticeably. I add another layer but can't stop shivering.

"Your temperature is still low," Aiden observes. "Body can't generate enough heat after that exposure."

"I'm f-fine," I insist, teeth chattering.

He moves around the cabin with purpose, inspecting the loft. His expression is troubled when he returns.

"What?" I ask.

"Roof leak damaged your mattress. Soaked through and moldy."

"Great. So I'll sleep on the couch?"

"Too cold. Heat rises. Need to sleep in the loft."

"On what? The floor?"

"I've got a sleeping bag," he says. "You take that. I've slept on worse than a wooden floor."

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't sleep on the floor in these temperatures." The words tumble out. "The sleeping bag is big enough for both of us."

His head snaps up, blue eyes locking with mine. Something electric passes between us.

"That's not a good idea," he says, voice rough.

"Why not? It's basic survival," I counter with false confidence. "Unless you're worried I'll attack you in your sleep?"

That almost-smile again. "Not my concern."

"Then what is?"

He doesn't answer, just studies me with those intense eyes. I refuse to look away.

"Fine," he finally says. "But it's survival only. Body heat helps prevent hypothermia."

"Of course," I agree quickly. "Just survival."

While he sets up our makeshift bed in the loft, I change into the warmest clothes I brought—fleece joggers and a thermal shirt. When I return, Aiden is adding wood to the fire.

"I'll bank it before we sleep," he explains. "Should last most of the night."

I nod, suddenly awkward. We're strangers about to share a sleeping space. Very attractive strangers. At least, he's very attractive. With his beard and flannel and those forearms that flexed when he carried me...

Stop it, Phoebe. Survival situation. Not a Hallmark movie.

Though if it were, this would definitely be the meet-cute...

"You should eat something," Aiden's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Keep your energy up."

We cobble together a meal from my groceries—crackers, cheese, apples. It's meager but satisfying with hot tea from the gas stove.

"How long will the storm last?" I ask, wrapping my hands around the mug.

"Hard to say. At least through tomorrow, by the look of it."

Tomorrow. An entire day trapped with him. The thought sends an unexpected thrill through me.

By the time we've cleaned up, I can see my breath even near the fire. Aiden banks the flames carefully.

"We should sleep," he says, not meeting my eyes. "Body conserves energy that way."

The sleeping arrangement looks painfully intimate—a single sleeping barely big enough for two who don't mind closeness. We've piled all the extra blankets to make what looks like a make-shift human-sized dog bed.

I slide in first, back to the wall. He hesitates, then joins me, his large frame making the space seem tiny.

We lie stiffly, not touching, both staring at the ceiling. The absurdity bubbles up again.

"Well," I whisper, "this isn't how I pictured my first night in my new mountain paradise."

His low chuckle surprises me. "No?"

"Shockingly, 'trapped in blizzard with taciturn mountain man' wasn't on my vision

board."

"Taciturn?"

"Would you prefer 'laconic'? 'Reticent'? I have more synonyms."

"I prefer Aiden."

That makes me laugh. "Noted."

A violent gust rattles the cabin. I flinch. Without comment, Aiden shifts closer, his heat radiating like a beacon.

"Try to sleep," he murmurs. "Tomorrow we'll figure things out."

"Thank you," I whisper. "For everything today. I'd probably be a Phoebe-shaped popsicle without you."

He's quiet so long I think he's asleep. Then, softly: "You're welcome."

I close my eyes, listening to the storm and Aiden's steady breathing. Despite everything, I feel strangely safe.

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four

Aiden

I wake to the sound of chattering teeth.

For a moment, I'm disoriented. This isn't my cabin. Then it rushes back—the storm, the stranded city girl, the emergency arrangements.

Phoebe.

She's trembling beside me, curled into herself, fighting for warmth that the sleeping bag alone can't provide. The cabin's temperature has plummeted; I can see my breath ghosting the air even in the loft. The fire must have died down faster than I anticipated.

I check my watch: 2:17 AM. The storm still rages outside, wind shrieking around the cabin's edges like something wounded and angry.

Her shivering is getting worse. Hypothermia's a real danger, especially after her exposure during our trek to the cabin. Her body temperature had dropped too low and hasn't fully recovered.

There's only one solution, and it's going to make things complicated.

I hesitate for just a second before shifting closer to her back. Slowly, deliberately, I curve my body around hers. Spoon position. The most efficient way to share body

heat.

"Shhh," I murmur when she stiffens slightly. "You're freezing. Body heat."

She relaxes marginally, either from understanding or simply too cold to protest. I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her closer until her back is flush against my chest, her ass nestled against my thighs.

My cock springs to life immediately, hardening against the soft curve of her backside. Fifteen years since high school, and my body still has the self-control of a teenager. I try to shift my hips back, but there's nowhere to go in the confines of the sleeping bag.

"Sorry," I mutter, embarrassment burning hotter than the embers downstairs.

But instead of pulling away, she presses back against me. Deliberately.

"Don't be," she whispers.

I freeze, certain I've misinterpreted. Then she moves again, a subtle roll of her hips that couldn't possibly be accidental.

"Phoebe..." I manage, my voice rough as pine bark.

She turns in my arms until we're face to face, our breath mingling in the cold air between us. Even in the dim light filtering up from the banked fire below, I can see her eyes are dark, pupils wide.

"I'm not usually this forward," she says, "but we could actually die in this storm, and you're ridiculously hot, and I haven't been touched in weeks, and—"

I cut off her rambling with my mouth, unable to hold back any longer. Her lips are soft, pliant, opening instantly beneath mine. The kiss deepens immediately, her tongue sliding against mine. She tastes like the mint tea we drank earlier and something else, something uniquely her.

My hand finds her waist, slides up to cup her breast through the thermal shirt. She moans softly against my mouth, arching into the touch.

"We shouldn't," I murmur, even as my thumb brushes across her hardened nipple.

"Probably not," she agrees, her hands already pushing up my henley, fingers splaying across my bare stomach. "But I really, really want to."

Her touch ignites something primal in me, something I've kept buried too long. I roll her onto her back, settling between her thighs. The position aligns us perfectly, my hardness pressed against her core, separated by too many layers of clothing.

"You have no idea what you're doing to me," I growl against her neck.

She laughs, breathless and wanting. "I think I have some idea." Her hand slides between us, palming my cock through my jeans. "Unless you're just really happy about the blizzard."

A laugh rumbles through my chest. This woman—so quick-witted even now.

"I want you," I tell her, pulling back to look into her eyes. "But I need to know this isn't just because we're stuck here."

Her expression softens. "Would it matter if it was?"

"Yes." The answer comes without hesitation.

She studies my face, then reaches up to trace my beard-roughened jaw. "I wanted you the moment I saw you in your store."

That's all I need to hear. I capture her mouth again, kissing her deeply while my hands tug at her clothes. We wrestle awkwardly with layers, laughing when she gets tangled in her thermal shirt, cursing when I bang my elbow trying to shimmy out of my jeans without leaving the relative warmth of the sleeping bag.

And then, finally, we're skin to skin.

"Jesus," I breathe, taking in the sight of her. Soft curves, smooth skin glowing in the faint firelight. "You're beautiful."

Color floods her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. Instead, her gaze travels down my body, lingering on the tattoo across my ribs, the scar on my shoulder, the unmistakable evidence of my want for her.

"You're not so bad yourself, mountain man," she says, running her fingers through the hair on my chest. "All this time hiding under flannel."

I lower myself to her again, the feeling of her naked beneath me almost overwhelming. She's warm now, no trace of her earlier shivers. My mouth finds her neck, tasting the salt of her skin, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips.

"Tell me what you want," I murmur against her collarbone.

"Everything," she says simply. "I want everything."

I take my time, exploring her body with hands and mouth. Learning what makes her gasp, what makes her arch, what makes her dig her nails into my shoulders. When I finally take her nipple into my mouth, she cries out, her hands tangling in my hair.

"More," she demands. "Please, Aiden."

I trail kisses down her stomach, settling between her thighs. The first taste of her nearly undoes me—hot and slick and ready. I groan against her, the vibration making her buck against my mouth.

"Oh God," she gasps, thighs trembling as I circle her clit with my tongue. "Yes, just like that."

I work her with deliberate precision, adding a finger, then two, curling them inside her until I find the spot that makes her back bow off the floor. Her hands clutch at my hair, her voice a stream of encouragement and profanity that stokes my own desire higher.

"I'm close," she pants. "So close. Don't stop."

I increase the pressure, the pace, driving her toward the edge until I feel her tighten around my fingers, her thighs clamping around my head as she comes with a cry that echoes in the small loft. I work her through it, relentless, until she's pushing at my shoulders, too sensitive to take more.

I move back up her body, kissing her deeply, letting her taste herself on my tongue. Her hands roam my back, my ass, pulling me against her. I settle between her thighs again, the head of my cock sliding against her slickness..

I push inside slowly, giving her time to adjust to the intrusion. The sensation is exquisite—tight, wet heat enveloping me inch by inch.

"Fuck," she breathes. "You feel incredible."

I press my forehead to hers, fighting for control. "Give me a second," I grind out. "Or

this'll be over embarrassingly fast."

She laughs, the sound turning to a moan as the movement shifts me inside her. "I'll take that as a compliment."

When I trust myself again, I begin to move, setting a steady rhythm. She meets me thrust for thrust, her legs wrapping around my waist, changing the angle until I'm hitting deeper.

"Yes," she gasps. "Right there. Harder."

I comply, driving into her with increasing force, the sleeping bag slipping away as our bodies move together. The cold air hits our sweat-slicked skin, but neither of us notices, too lost in the building pleasure.

"You feel so good," I tell her, my voice rough with exertion and need. "So fucking perfect."

Her nails score my back, urging me on. "Don't stop," she pleads. "I'm going to come again."

I reach between us, finding her clit with my thumb, circling in time with my thrusts. Her inner walls flutter around me, tightening as she approaches her peak.

"Come for me," I urge. "Let me feel you."

She shatters with a cry, pulsing around me, pulling me deeper. The sight of her—head thrown back, lips parted, eyes closed in pleasure—pushes me over the edge. My rhythm falters as my release builds, urgent and unstoppable.

"I should pull out," I manage to say, though it's the last thing I want to do.

"No," she says, tightening her legs around me. "I want you. All of you."

That's all it takes. With a final thrust, I bury myself deep and let go, pleasure crashing through me as I empty myself inside her, filling her warm pussy with my seed.

Once I'm empty, I roll to the side, bringing her with me so we're facing each other.

The reality of what we've just done settles over me. Not the act itself—nothing wrong with two consenting adults finding pleasure together—but the complication it adds to an already complicated situation. Because I know, with absolute certainty, that what just happened meant more to me than it probably did to her.

She's watching me, a small smile playing on her lips. "What are you thinking?" she asks, tracing patterns on my chest.

"That you're trouble," I answer honestly.

She laughs softly. "The good kind or the bad kind?"

"The kind that makes a man forget himself." The kind that makes a man want impossible things. Like a city girl deciding to stay in a mountain town. Like a second chance at not being alone.

I don't say these things aloud. Instead, I pull the sleeping bag back over us, tucking her against my side. She comes willingly, draping a leg over mine, her head resting on my chest.

I don't regret it. Even knowing she'll leave when the roads clear. Even knowing she belongs to a different world than mine. Even knowing this is probably just a storm-induced aberration, a vacation fling for her to tell her city friends about later.

For now, she's in my arms, warm and sated, her breathing slowing as sleep reclaims her. The storm still rages outside, but here, we've created our own shelter against the cold. Temporary, but no less real for it.

I tighten my hold on her slightly, allowing myself this moment of pretending it could last. Tomorrow will come with its own complications. But for tonight, she's mine.

And I'll take what I can get.

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five

Phoebe

I wake up surrounded by warmth, cocooned in a bubble of heat that seems impossible given the icy cabin. For a moment, I keep my eyes closed, savoring the sensation of Aiden's body pressed against mine, his arm heavy across my waist, his soft chest hair on my back, his breath warm against my neck.

Last night rushes back in vivid detail. The way he touched me. The things he said. The way he looked at me like I was something precious and wild all at once.

He's still asleep, his face relaxed in a way it never is when he's awake. Without the constant furrow between his brows, he looks younger. Still rugged, still undeniably masculine, but softer somehow.

I should probably feel awkward. We went from strangers to lovers in less than twenty-four hours. Some feminist part of my brain is wagging a finger at me for falling into bed with the first mountain man who crossed my path. But honestly? I regret nothing.

Carefully, I extract myself from his embrace and peer over the edge of the loft. The fire has died completely, and the cold air hits me like a slap. I grab my clothes from where they landed during our frantic undressing and pull them on quickly.

Downstairs, I head for the window, curious about what the morning has brought. I wipe away the layer of frost from the inside of the glass and gasp.

"Holy shit."

The world outside has disappeared. Snow covers the window almost completely, just the top few inches revealing the still-falling flakes. I move to the front door and crack it open—or try to. It doesn't budge.

"Problem?" Aiden's sleep-roughened voice comes from behind me. He's descended from the loft, pulling a sweater over his head, hair mussed in a way that makes my stomach flip.

"We're snowed in," I say. "Like, literally snowed in. The door won't open."

He joins me, muscling the door with his shoulder. It gives an inch, revealing a solid wall of white.

"Snow drift," he explains, letting the door close. "Wind pushed it against the cabin. Back door might be clearer."

It isn't. We're completely entombed in snow.

"So what now?" I ask, unable to keep the nervous edge from my voice. "Are we trapped?"

"Not trapped," he corrects, finger-combing his beard straight. Well, straight-ish. "Just need to dig out. There's a shovel in the shed."

"Which is buried under four feet of snow."

He considers this. "We'll improvise."

And improvise we do. For the next hour, Aiden uses a cookie sheet from the kitchen

as a makeshift shovel, carving a narrow path from the back door. I follow behind with a pasta pot, widening the channel. It's exhausting, frigid work, but there's something oddly satisfying about it too.

"Do you live like this all winter?" I ask, dumping another pot-full of snow. This can't be good for my back.

He glances back at me. "Not usually this bad. April storms are rare."

"But does it snow this much regularly?"

"Sometimes more." He pauses, assessing our progress. "You get used to it."

I try to imagine getting used to this—to being so completely at the mercy of nature. In Vancouver, weather is an inconvenience, something to check on your phone before deciding which jacket to wear. Here, it's life or death.

We finally reach the shed, which takes another thirty minutes to unbury enough to wrench the door open. Inside, Aiden retrieves a proper snow shovel and some other tools.

"We need to clear the roof, too," he says, eyes tracking the snow load above us. "Too heavy. Could collapse."

The thought of Uncle Max's cabin caving in on us is enough to spur me to action. Together, we work through the morning, Aiden showing me how to use a roof rake to pull snow down in manageable sections.

By noon, we've cleared essential pathways and reduced the roof load. We're both sweating despite the cold, our breath coming in visible puffs.

"Break time," Aiden announces, leaning the shovel against the porch. "Need to hydrate."

Inside, I boil snow on the stove while Aiden builds a new fire. The cabin gradually warms, and with it, my outlook improves. We're not going to freeze or be crushed by snow. That's something.

"So," I say, handing him a mug of hot chocolate made from powder I'd packed, "you seem to know what you're doing. Have you always lived in Darkmore?"

He nods, cupping the mug in his large hands. "Born here. Left for college, came back."

"What did you study?"

"Business. Forestry minor." He takes a sip. "Always knew I'd take over the store eventually."

"But not so soon?" I guess, thinking of the glimpses of pain I've seen when he mentioned his father.

Something flickers across his face—surprise that I've read him correctly, perhaps.

"Dad's heart gave out eight years ago. Wasn't supposed to be my turn yet."

I want to reach for his hand but sense he wouldn't welcome the gesture. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "It's life. Mountains teach you that. Nothing's guaranteed."

"Is that why you love it here? The mountains, I mean."

His expression shifts, softens. "Partly. They're honest. Dangerous but straightforward. No pretending."

"Unlike cities," I supply.

"Unlike people," he corrects.

We lapse into comfortable silence, sipping our drinks. I study him over the rim of my mug, trying to reconcile the gruff man from yesterday with the passionate lover of last night, with this thoughtful person before me now.

"The leak," I say suddenly, remembering. "We should fix that before the snow melts and makes it worse."

He nods, finishing his drink. "Was thinking the same."

We move upstairs, and Aiden examines the ceiling with practiced eyes. "Need to patch from the outside, but we can stop the inside leak for now."

From his pack, he produces the roofing sealant we bought yesterday. With methodical precision, he applies it to the worst areas, explaining each step.

"You've done this before," I observe.

"Few times." He smooths the sealant with a practiced motion. "Cabins up here always need maintenance."

"Like yours?"

A nod. "Built it myself. Five years ago."

This stops me. "You built a whole cabin? By yourself?"

That almost-smile appears. "Had help with the foundation. Rest was me."

"That's... incredibly impressive."

He shrugs off the compliment, but I catch the slight flush on his neck. He continues working, and I find myself mesmerized by his hands—strong, calloused, yet capable of such gentleness, as I discovered last night.

By mid-afternoon, we've repaired the immediate leaks, reinforced the plastic over the broken windows, and the cabin is actually starting to feel cozy rather than desperate.

Aiden stands on the porch, surveying our work with satisfaction. The storm has finally stopped, leaving behind a blindingly white landscape and absolute silence.

I join him, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders. "It's beautiful," I admit. "In a terrifying way."

"That's the mountains," he says simply.

Steam rises from his body, the exertion of our work meeting the frigid air. The sight stirs something in me—a primal attraction to his strength, his capability. Without overthinking it, I drop to my knees in front of him.

His eyes widen. "Phoebe, what—"

"I want to thank you," I say, looking up at him through my lashes. "For everything."

His breath catches as I reach for his belt. "You don't need to—"

"I know." I maintain eye contact as I unbuckle his belt. "I want to."

His pupils dilate, desire darkening his eyes. "Anyone could see us."

I glance around at the pristine snow stretching unbroken in every direction. "Who? The squirrels?"

That earns me a genuine laugh, which turns into a sharp intake of breath as I free him from his jeans. He's already hardening, growing impressively under my gaze.

I blow warm air against him, watching him twitch in response. The contrast of the frigid air around us and the heat of him in my hand is intoxicating.

"Phoebe," he groans as I take him into my mouth.

I work him slowly at first, savoring the weight of him on my tongue, the taste of him. His hands come to rest in my hair, not pushing, just holding on as if he needs an anchor.

"Look at you," he rumbles, voice thick with desire. "So fucking beautiful."

The praise sends heat pooling between my legs. I take him deeper, hollowing my cheeks, drawing a string of curses from his lips that steam in the cold air.

"That's it," he encourages, fingers tightening in my hair. "Take all of me."

I comply eagerly, relaxing my throat to accommodate him. His hips buck slightly, unable to remain still. I look up, meeting his gaze as I work him, and the raw hunger I see there nearly undoes me.

"Your mouth," he groans. "So hot. So perfect."

The condensation rises more heavily around him now, his body temperature soaring with arousal. I pull back to swirl my tongue around the sensitive head, one hand stroking the shaft while the other cups him from below.

"Fuck," he hisses. "You're too good at this."

I smile around him before taking him deep again, establishing a rhythm that has his thighs tensing beneath my hands. I can feel him getting close, his cock hardening further, his breathing ragged.

"I'm going to come," he warns, trying to pull back. "Phoebe—"

I tighten my grip on his hips, silently urging him to let go. His restraint breaks with a guttural moan that echoes across the snow-covered clearing. Salty and hot. I take everything he gives, swallowing around him until he's spent.

When I finally release him, he hauls me to my feet and kisses me deeply, seemingly unconcerned about tasting himself on my tongue. His hands frame my face with surprising tenderness.

I'm in trouble. Because this isn't just physical attraction anymore. This isn't just convenient proximity or storm-induced passion. Standing here on this snow-covered porch, looking at this man who's shown me nothing but strength and unexpected kindness, I'm developing real feelings.

The kind that will make leaving when the roads clear a lot more complicated than I anticipated.

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six

Aiden

My muscles ache in that good way that comes from honest work. We've spent the whole day battling the aftermath of the storm—clearing paths, securing the cabin, hauling in firewood from the shed. Through it all, Phoebe surprised me with her tenacity. No complaints, just determination and that quick wit of hers.

Night has fallen now, bringing with it a bone-deep cold that seeps through the cabin walls despite our best efforts. The temperature will likely drop into the single digits before morning. But we're prepared this time—fire roaring, extra blankets found in a trunk, snow melted for drinking water, a decent meal cobbled together from our supplies.

Phoebe sits cross-legged on the hearth rug, firelight dancing across her face. She's wrapped in one of my flannel shirts over her own clothes. The sight of her in my clothing does something primitive to my insides. Like I've marked her somehow.

"What?" she asks, catching me staring.

"Nothing." I poke at the fire, adding another log. "Just thinking you handled today better than most locals would have."

She smiles. "Don't sound so surprised. City girls can be tough too."

"Never doubted it."

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle of amber liquid. "I think we've earned this, don't you?"

JP Wisers. Not what I expected from her. I figured wine, maybe some fancy craft cocktail ingredients.

"Didn't take you for a whiskey drinker," I say as she unscrews the cap.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, mountain man." She takes a swig directly from the bottle, doesn't even wince, then passes it to me.

The whiskey burns pleasantly down my throat, warming me from the inside. I hand the bottle back, our fingers brushing in the exchange. Even that brief contact sends electricity through me.

"So," she says, settling back against the couch. "Tell me something I don't know about you."

"Like what?"

She shrugs. "Anything. Favorite color. Deepest fear. Why you choose to live alone in the mountains like some sexy hermit."

I snort at the description. "Sexy hermit?"

"If the flannel fits..." She grins, taking another pull from the bottle.

I find myself wanting to tell her things. Things I don't share with people. Maybe it's the whiskey, or the firelight, or the way she's looking at me like whatever I say matters.

"Blue," I say finally. "Deep blue, like the sky just before full dark."

"See? Was that so hard?" She nudges my knee with her foot. "What else?"

I take the bottle, buying time with another swallow. "I read. A lot. Mostly classics, some history. Philosophy in winter."

Her eyes widen. "You're secretly a nerd!"

"Don't sound so surprised," I echo her earlier words, which earns me a laugh.

"What's your favorite book?"

"Depends on the season."

"What's your winter book, then?"

I hesitate. "Walden. Thoreau."

She nods, thoughtful. "Makes sense. Man alone in nature, finding meaning in simplicity."

"You've read it?"

"English lit minor." She smiles. "What's your summer book?"

"The Old Man and the Sea."

"Also tracks. Man versus nature, elemental struggle, stoicism in the face of hardship." She studies me. "You're very on-brand, Aiden Calloway."

I can't help but smile at that. She sees more than I give her credit for.

"Your turn," I say, passing the bottle back. "What don't I know about you?"

She thinks for a moment. "I hate my job. Hated it," she amends. "Digital marketing for companies selling things nobody needs. It paid well, but every day felt like selling little pieces of my soul."

"What would you rather do?"

"Write," she says without hesitation. "Stories, articles about places like this. Real things for real people." She takes another drink. "My ex thought it was a stupid dream."

Something hot flares in my chest at the mention of her ex. "He sounds like an idiot."

She laughs, but there's an edge to it. "Kyle was very practical. Very logical. Very boring, looking back."

"How long were you together?"

"Three years. He dumped me the week after I got laid off. Said he 'wasn't ready for this level of instability.'" She makes air quotes, rolling her eyes. "Translation: he wanted the successful girlfriend, not the one facing setbacks."

"His loss," I say quietly.

Our eyes meet across the small space between us, and something shifts in the air. The bottle passes back and forth a few more times. The whiskey loosens my tongue, lowers walls I've kept firmly in place for years.

"I was engaged once," I hear myself say. "Eight years ago."

Phoebe straightens, clearly surprised. "What happened?"

"She got a job offer in Toronto. Big opportunity." I stare into the fire. "I couldn't leave the mountains. Especially not then, with Dad just gone and the store needing someone to run it. She couldn't stay. So."

"I'm sorry," she says softly.

I shrug. "It was the right decision for both of us. She's some big-shot executive now. Married with kids."

"Do you regret it? Not going with her?"

I consider the question honestly. "No. Would have been miserable in a city. Would have resented her eventually. Better this way."

"But you never found anyone else?"

The question should feel invasive, but somehow doesn't. "Hard to meet people up here. Harder to let them in once you do."

"Is that why you tried to sleep on the floor that first night? Why you said sharing the sleeping bag wasn't a good idea?"

"Partly," I admit. "Getting involved with someone temporarily is asking for trouble."

She tilts her head. "Am I temporary, Aiden?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with implications. The smart answer is yes.

She's a city girl who inherited a cabin. She'll fix it up, maybe use it occasionally, and eventually sell it. She doesn't belong here. Not really.

But the truth is more complicated.

"I don't know," I say finally.

She studies me for a long moment, then sets the bottle aside and moves toward me. Graceful despite the whiskey, she settles into my lap, her thighs straddling mine.

"Neither do I," she whispers, her face inches from mine. "But I know I want you. Again. Now."

Her mouth finds mine, tasting of whiskey and desire. My hands move to her hips automatically, pulling her closer. The kiss deepens, turns hungry. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging slightly in a way that sends heat straight to my groin.

"I've been thinking about this morning," I murmur against her neck. "On the porch. What you did."

She pulls back slightly, a mischievous smile playing at her lips. "Did you like it?"

"Like is too small a word." I run my thumbs along the strip of exposed skin where my shirt has ridden up on her. "Never had anything like that before."

"Really?" Her eyes widen slightly.

"The cold air, the steam, you on your knees in the snow..." I shake my head. "It was fucking incredible."

A pleased flush spreads across her cheeks. "I'm glad. I wanted to make you feel good."

After everything you've done for me."

"You don't owe me anything," I say firmly.

"I know. That's not why I did it." She kisses me again, softer this time. "I wanted to."

Something about her phrasing triggers a thought. "Has no one ever wanted to make you feel good?"

Her slight hesitation tells me everything. "Kyle wasn't big on... reciprocating. Said it wasn't his thing."

Anger flares, hot and sudden. What kind of selfish prick accepts pleasure without giving it in return? The thought of her giving without receiving ignites something primal in me.

"His loss," I growl, lifting her suddenly and laying her down on the hearth rug. "My gain."

She looks up at me, eyes wide and dark in the firelight. "What are you doing?"

"Something I've been wanting to do since this morning." I settle between her legs, running my hands up her thighs. "Going to show you what it's like when someone wants to make you feel good."

I unbutton her jeans slowly, giving her time to stop me if she wants. Instead, she lifts her hips, helping me slide them down her legs. Her panties follow, leaving her lower half bare in the warm glow of the fire.

"You're beautiful," I tell her, meaning it. The sight of her spread out before me, my flannel shirt barely covering the tops of her thighs, is the most erotic thing I've ever

seen.

I take my time, pressing kisses to her inner thighs, feeling them tremble under my lips. She watches me, her breath coming faster as I move higher, closer to where she wants me.

When I part her folds and I finally taste her, she gasps, head falling back, hands clutching at the rug beneath her. I work her slowly, deliberately, learning what makes her moan, what makes her hips rise to meet my mouth.

"Aiden," she breathes, one hand moving to tangle in my hair. "God, that feels amazing."

I hum against her, the vibration making her buck.

Her thighs quiver as I slip a finger inside her, then another, curling them to find the spot that makes her cry out. I work her with my mouth and hand in tandem, relentless in my pursuit of her pleasure.

"Look at me," I command softly.

Her eyes flutter open, finding mine over the expanse of her body. The connection is electric—her watching me worship her, me seeing the pleasure build in her expression.

"You're so responsive," I murmur against her sensitive flesh. "So perfect."

Her breathing quickens, her internal muscles clenching around my fingers. She's close. I increase the pressure, the speed, driving her toward release. I breathe her in. So musky and hot, dripping down my beard.

"Let go," I urge. "Come for me, Phoebe."

She shatters with my name on her lips, her body arching beautifully as pleasure courses through her. I don't stop, working her through the peak and into aftershocks that have her gasping, until she finally pushes at my shoulders, too sensitive to take more.

I move back up her body, gathering her trembling form against me. Her face is flushed, her eyes half-lidded with satisfaction.

She reaches for my belt, but I catch her hand. "Tonight was about you."

"But you're—"

"I'll survive." I smile, pulling her closer. "Wanted to make it about you. Just you."

She studies my face in the firelight, something soft and wondering in her expression. "Why?"

Because I think I'm falling in love with you. The thought comes unbidden, shocking in its clarity.

"Because you deserve it," I say instead, the safer truth. "Because I wanted to show you how it should be."

She curls against my chest, suddenly looking younger, more vulnerable. "No one's ever put me first like that."

The admission breaks something open inside me. I want to find every person who's ever made her feel secondary and teach them the meaning of regret. Instead, I hold her tighter, let the fire warm us both.

"Their mistake," I whisper into her hair.

We stay like that for a long time, tangled together on the hearth rug, the fire crackling beside us. Outside, the night deepens, stars appearing in a sky cleared by the storm. In here, something else is growing—something I'm not ready to name, something that scares me more than any blizzard.

Because when the roads clear and the world intrudes again, she'll have choices to make. And loving a mountain means accepting its permanence. I am rooted here, like the pines that have weathered countless storms.

The question is whether she's just passing through or planting roots of her own.

I'm afraid to ask. More afraid of the answer. So I hold her instead, pretending this moment could stretch into forever, knowing all the while that nothing in these mountains is guaranteed.

Except change. And loss.

And the certainty that snowmelt always comes, revealing what was hidden beneath.

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seven

Phoebe

Morning comes with sunlight breaking through the patched windows, transforming the cabin into something almost magical. I stretch languidly, my body pleasantly sore from yesterday's work and last night's... activities. Beside me on the makeshift bed, Aiden sleeps soundly, his face relaxed in a way it never is when he's awake.

Less than forty-eight hours. That's all it's been since I first walked into his store. How is it possible to feel so connected to someone in such a short time?

Maybe it's the circumstances—survival situations have a way of stripping away pretenses. Or maybe it's just him—solid, steadfast, unexpectedly tender beneath that gruff exterior.

I trace the line of his beard with my finger, careful not to wake him. Last night revealed layers to this mountain man that I never expected. His confession about his engagement, his revelations about books and philosophy, the way he focused completely on my pleasure with no expectation of his own.

Kyle never once put me first like that. Three years together, and he always made me feel like I was asking for too much. Two days with Aiden, and I feel special.

It's crazy. I barely know him.

The distant sound of an engine breaks through my thoughts. Aiden stirs immediately,

years of living in isolation having honed his senses.

"Someone's coming," he says, voice rough with sleep.

We dress quickly and make our way downstairs. Through the front window, we see a large truck with a plow attachment making its way up the newly cleared road. Behind it is a tow truck.

"Jake," Aiden says. "My brother."

I feel a strange pang of disappointment. Rescue means returning to reality. To separate lives.

Aiden opens the front door as the trucks pull up. A man who could only be his brother jumps down from the plow truck—similar build, similar features, but clean-shaven and with an easy smile that suggests he does it more often.

"Sorry for the wait!" Jake calls, trudging through the snow. "Cell towers just came back online this morning. Mom's been worried sick."

"We've been fine," Aiden replies, stepping aside to let his brother in.

Jake's eyes land on me, and his grin widens. "So I see." He extends a hand. "Jake Calloway. Search and rescue, mechanic, and this grumpy bastard's much more charming brother."

I laugh, shaking his hand. "Phoebe Hartley. New cabin owner and damsel in distress, apparently."

"Max's niece, right? Heard you inherited the old place." He looks around, whistling low. "Got your work cut out for you."

"She can handle it," Aiden says, surprising me with the confidence in his voice.

Jake raises an eyebrow, glancing between us. Something unspoken passes between the brothers.

"Right," Jake says. "Well, roads are mostly clear now. Got your truck out of the ditch, too. Battery's dead, but we jumped it. Should get you back to town no problem."

"Thanks," Aiden says.

"And I can take a look at your car in town," Jake tells me. "Probably just the cold killed the battery."

Reality crashes in. My car. Town. Vancouver. The life I left behind just days ago.

"Great," I manage. "Thank you."

An awkward silence falls. Jake, clearly sensing the tension, clears his throat.

"I'll, uh, wait outside. Take your time." He gives his brother a significant look before stepping out.

When the door closes, Aiden and I stand facing each other. The easy intimacy of moments ago feels suddenly fragile.

"So," I say, aiming for casual, "civilization returns."

He nods, his expression unreadable. "You'll be able to get back to Vancouver now. If that's what you want."

Is it what I want? Two days ago, I'd have said yes without hesitation. Now...

"I still have a cabin to renovate," I hedge.

"Right." His gaze drops. "It'll take work. Might want to hire someone local."

"Are you offering your services?" I attempt a teasing tone, but it falls flat.

"If that's what you want," he repeats, still not meeting my eyes.

I step closer, frustration building. "What do you want, Aiden? You keep asking what I want, but you haven't said a word about what you want."

His eyes lift to mine, something raw and vulnerable in them. "What I want doesn't matter. You have a life in Vancouver. Friends, opportunities. Things you won't find here."

"That's not an answer."

He runs a hand through his hair, agitation breaking through his usual stoicism. "What do you want me to say, Phoebe? That I want you to stay? That these two days have been more real than anything I've felt in years? That I'm falling for you despite knowing it's crazy?"

My heart stutters. "Is that true?"

"Yes." The admission seems torn from him. "But it doesn't change the facts. You don't belong here."

"Don't tell me where I belong," I shoot back, suddenly angry. "My whole life, people have been telling me what I should want. My parents, my ex, my boss. Everyone has an opinion about what's best for Phoebe."

I move closer, poking his chest for emphasis. "You know what I had in Vancouver? A job I hated that doesn't exist anymore. An apartment I couldn't afford without that job. An ex who dumped me the minute things got tough. Friends who were mostly work acquaintances." My voice catches. "Nothing that felt like this."

He stares at me, hope and doubt warring in his expression. "Like what?"

"Like I matter. Like I'm seen. Like I'm more than just... convenient."

His hands come up to cup my face, his touch surprisingly gentle for such a large man. "You matter, Phoebe. You're the least convenient thing that's ever happened to me, and I've never been more grateful."

I laugh through the tears I hadn't realized were falling. I cover his hands with mine. "I want to stay, Aiden. Not just to fix the cabin. I want to see where this goes. Between us."

The hope in his eyes strengthens. "It won't be easy. Small town life is different. Winters are hard."

"I'm tougher than I look." I smile up at him. "Besides, I have a sexy mountain man to keep me warm."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "What about work? Writing, you said."

"I can write anywhere. Better here, maybe. Real stories about real things, like I wanted."

"You'd really stay?" There's still disbelief in his voice. "For me?"

"For us," I correct. "For the chance to build something real. I've spent my whole life

playing it safe, following the expected path. Look where that got me." I gesture around the cabin. "Maybe it's time to try something crazy."

"Like falling for someone after two days in a blizzard?" His smile grows more confident.

"Exactly like that." I rise on tiptoes, pressing my lips to his. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Aiden Calloway. It's completely insane, and I don't care."

He kisses me then, deep and thorough, pulling me tight against him as if afraid I might disappear. When we finally break apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

"I love you," he says simply. "Have since you walked into my store and started ordering me around."

I laugh. "I did not order you around!"

"You kind of did." His expression grows serious again. "Stay. Please. Not just for now. For good."

The enormity of what he's asking—what I'm considering—should terrify me. Abandoning my familiar life for a mountain town and a man I've known less than a week. It's reckless, impulsive, possibly foolish.

And yet, it feels more right than anything has in years.

"Yes," I whisper. "I'll stay."

The joy that transforms his face is worth any risk. He kisses me again, lifting me off my feet in his enthusiasm.

A knock at the door interrupts us. "Uh, guys?" Jake's voice calls. "Not to rush the moment or anything, but it's supposed to snow again tonight. We should probably head out while the roads are clear."

Aiden sets me down, but keeps an arm around my waist. "Ready to face civilization?" he asks.

I look around at the battered cabin that brought us together, the scene of our unexpected love story. It needs work—a lot of work—but I can see its potential now. Just like I see the potential in us.

"Let's go," I say. "We have supplies to buy."

He raises an eyebrow. "We do?"

"Definitely." I grab my coat, suddenly energized. "This place isn't going to renovate itself. And I've decided to stay, so I want it to be perfect."

The smile that spreads across his face is like sunrise breaking over the mountains—slow, warm, and full of promise.

Outside, Jake is leaning against his truck, trying to look like he hasn't been eavesdropping. He straightens when we emerge, eyebrows rising at our clasped hands.

"So," he says, a knowing grin spreading across his face. "Should I tell Mom to set an extra place for Sunday dinner?"

Aiden shoots him a warning look, but I just laugh. "I'd love to meet your mother."

As we climb into Aiden's truck, I take one last look at the cabin. Two days ago, I saw

it as a disaster, a mistake, maybe even a burden. Now I see it as the beginning of something I never expected to find.

Sometimes you have to get lost to find where you're supposed to be. Sometimes a wrong turn leads to the right place. And sometimes, a freak April blizzard can change your life in the most wonderful way possible.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

One Year Later...

One year. Sometimes it feels like a lifetime, other times like the blink of an eye.

The familiar chaos of Sunday dinner at Mom's house swirls around me—laughter, overlapping conversations, the scent of roast beef and potatoes. Jake arguing with our cousin Thomas about some fishing spot they both claim to have discovered. Mom fussing over Phoebe, insisting she take the most comfortable chair despite Phoebe's protests that being pregnant doesn't make her needy.

And Phoebe. My wife. Six months pregnant with our child. Still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

She catches me staring and winks, her hand resting on the gentle swell of her belly. My chest tightens with a now-familiar ache—this overwhelming love that blindsided me in a blizzard and hasn't loosened its grip since.

Mom beams at me. She's been different since Phoebe came into our lives—happier, more at peace. Having a daughter-in-law who genuinely wants to learn her recipes and hear her stories has given her new life. And she's determined to get the rest of us paired off, too. She says, "Jake was telling me about that nice new kindergarten teacher he met."

Jake flushes slightly. "I was just being neighborly, Mom."

"Very neighborly," Thomas teases. "Considering you offered to help with the classroom renovation. Since when are you a carpenter?"

"Shush," Jake mutters his breath, his ears going red.

The conversation flows on, but I notice Jake's distraction, the way he checks his phone more than usual. Interesting.

Phoebe nudges me under the table, raising an eyebrow in Jake's direction. I nod slightly—she's noticed too. We've gotten good at these silent communications, reading each other with barely a glance.

", Mom calls from the kitchen, "can you and Phoebe get the ice cream from the freezer downstairs? I forgot to bring it up earlier."

"Sure, Mom." I stand, offering Phoebe my hand.

"I can manage stairs," she says with mock indignation, but takes my hand anyway.

The basement is Mom's domain—part storage, part cold cellar, part laundry room. The old chest freezer hums in the corner, surrounded by shelves of home-canned vegetables and preserves.

The moment we're alone, Phoebe's demeanor changes. She presses me against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, her eyes glinting with mischief.

"We have about five minutes before they start wondering where we are," she whispers, her hands sliding down my chest.

"What are you—"

Her fingers find my belt, deftly unbuckling it. "Shh. Let me."

My brain short-circuits as she sinks to her knees, tugging my jeans down just enough to free me. Blood rushes south so fast I feel dizzy.

"Phoebe," I hiss, glancing up the stairs. "My entire family is right above us."

"Then you'd better be quiet," she says, looking up at me with that wicked smile that still makes my heart stutter. "Consider this practice."

Before I can protest further, her warm mouth engulfs my hard cock. My head falls back against the wall with a thud, a groan escaping before I can stop it. My hand instinctively tangles in her hair, not guiding, just needing the connection.

Every coherent thought evaporates as she works me with practiced skill, knowing exactly how to bring me to the edge without pushing me over. A year together has taught her my body as thoroughly as I've learned hers.

The danger of discovery only heightens everything—the wet heat of her mouth, the sight of her on her knees, the gentle swell of her belly visible beneath her sweater. My pregnant wife is sucking my cock, still insatiable, still surprising me when I least expect it.

"God, Phoebe," I whisper, watching as she takes me deeper. "The things you do to me."

She hums in response, the vibration sending shockwaves through my system. Her hands aren't idle—one grips the base of my shaft while the other caresses my thigh, nails lightly scratching sensitive skin.

The pressure builds, my control fracturing. I'm on the verge of coming when footsteps creak on the floor above us.

"You guys find it?" Jake's voice calls down the stairs.

Phoebe pulls back just long enough to call, "Looking for the right flavor! Give us a minute!" Her voice is impressively steady, betraying none of what she's doing.

Then her mouth is on me again, movements more urgent now. The message is clear: time's up. She wants me to finish.

I bite my lip hard, fighting to stay silent as she brings me right to the edge. Her eyes meet mine, dark with desire, and she takes me deep one final time. The sight undoes me completely.

Release hits like an avalanche, white-hot pleasure cascading through me. She swallows everything, maintaining eye contact in a way that's both filthy and unbearably intimate.

When she finally pulls away, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, I'm still struggling to remember how to breathe.

"Got it!" she calls up the stairs, grabbing a random container from the freezer. She turns back to me with a satisfied smirk. "Better tuck yourself in, mountain man. Your mom's waiting for her ice cream."

I adjust my clothing with shaking hands, still dazed. "You're going to be the death of me."

"But what a way to go." She stretches up to kiss me, letting me taste myself on her tongue. "Consider that a preview of tonight."

"My turn next," I promise, voice low and rough. "Fair warning."

Her eyes darken. "I'm counting on it."

We make our way back upstairs, Phoebe looking entirely too innocent as she presents the ice cream to my mother. No one seems to notice anything amiss, though Jake gives me a curious look when I nearly drop the stack of bowls Mom hands me.

Throughout dessert, I can't keep my eyes—or my hands—off Phoebe. My fingers find her knee under the table, sliding higher along her thigh until she shoots me a warning glance that promises retribution later. Her body has changed with pregnancy, curves fuller, skin glowing. I find myself constantly amazed by her—not just her beauty, but her strength, her adaptability, her joy in building our life together.

A year ago, I'd resigned myself to solitude, convinced no woman would choose this mountain town, this simple life. Then a blizzard brought Phoebe Hartley to my door, upending everything I thought I knew about myself and what I wanted.

Now she's Phoebe Calloway, my wife, the future mother of my child. She's transformed Max's broken-down cabin into a charming vacation rental that's booked solid through next summer. She's breathed new life into the store with an online shop featuring local artisans. She's made friends in town, joined committees, and become as much a part of Darkmore Mountain as the peaks themselves.

And somehow, impossibly, she seems happy here. With me.

The drive home is peaceful, Phoebe's hand resting on my thigh, her head against my shoulder. My cabin—our home now—comes into view as we round the final bend. The transformation is remarkable, thanks to a woman's touch.

But the best changes aren't physical. They're in the sound of her laughter echoing through rooms that were once silent. In the garden she's planted out back. In the nursery we prepared together, waiting for our child.

As we pull up to the cabin, I cut the engine and turn to her. "That stunt in Mom's basement was playing dirty, Mrs. Calloway," I tease.

She grins, unrepentant. "You loved it."

"I love you," I correct, placing my hand on her rounded belly. "Both of you."

Her expression softens. "We love you too." She guides my hand to the left side of her stomach. "Feel that? She's kicking."

The flutter beneath my palm still amazes me every time. Our daughter. We're having a little girl in three months.

"Strong, like her mother," I say.

"Stubborn, like her father," Phoebe counters.

I help her from the truck, unable to resist pulling her against me for a kiss that quickly deepens. Her body has changed, but my desire for her hasn't wavered—if anything, it's intensified. There's something primal about seeing her carry my child, something that makes me want to worship every new curve, every stretch mark, every change that marks her as mine.

"Inside," she murmurs against my lips. "Unless you want to give the wildlife a show."

"Wouldn't be the first time," I remind her, thinking of several memorable encounters in the woods surrounding our home.

She laughs, pulling me toward the door. "True. But I distinctly remember being promised a turn."

I scoop her into my arms, ignoring her squeal of surprise. "I always keep my promises."

I pull her closer, marveling at how completely this woman has changed my life. How a freak April blizzard brought me the one thing I never thought I'd find in these mountains.

Home isn't just a place. Sometimes it's a person. Sometimes it's the family you build

together. Sometimes it's a cabin that once seemed broken beyond repair, transformed by love and hard work into something beautiful.