



Summer with the Mountain Man (Mountain Man Summer #16)

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Category: Romance

Description: She doesn't belong here. But my heart tells me she belongs with me.

Luca

My heart is off-limits. All I want is to return to my small home town high in the mountains and protect it from the blazing Australian summer fire season. And then a gorgeous American tourist arrives in town and tries to save a lizard in the middle of a wind storm.

Riley Diaz is everything I've ever wanted. Saving her was easy. But how the hell do I let her go, especially when she looks at me with a heat to rival the summer?

An Instalove Short Romance with 100% HEA.

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Chapter One

Riley

“Plan C,” I murmur, taking in the little village on the other side of the grimy window the bus has delivered me to.

Plan A had been to van-life around Australia for six months with Hugh, my friend and fellow computer science graduate, who’d hinted enough times we were destined to be together I thought I was in love with him.

Plan B, lasting a mammoth twenty minutes, involved my desperate hope his sudden return to Minnesota—two days after arriving in the country—was nothing more than an elaborate prank. But no. Apparently, his girlfriend—who I had no idea even existed —was four months pregnant! Jerk!

Plan C involved me finding whatever income I could after said jerk sold the van to buy his plane ticket back to the US. No way in hell was I going back with him. I might be heartbroken, but I’m not stupid.

Which brings me to the tiny town of Hartley Ridge, ninety minutes west of Sydney, high up in a region called the Blue Mountains.

The bus rumbles to a halt opposite an empty park, the swings and slide devoid of movement.

I’m not surprised. It’s the middle of the day, and it’s so freaking hot outside that even

the inside of the air-conditioned bus feels like a furnace.

No one in their right mind would bring their kids out to play today.

“This is you,” the driver calls over his shoulder as the door clunks open.

Hooking my backpack over my shoulder, I stand. “Bye, everyone,” I chuckle to the empty seats around me. It seems Hartley Ridge isn’t a high-destination location in Australia.

Maybe that’s why I got the house-sitting job so easily?

Heat blasts into the bus as the door opens, and I suck in a breath, my heart pounding.

Five days ago, I was in Minnesota. There was snow everywhere, and I was ready to begin what I thought would be an adventure worthy of a rom-com, the Netflix kind where the hero and heroine are secretly in love with each other but won’t admit it.

Four hours ago, I was standing on a sidewalk in Sydney, dumbstruck and alone, without anywhere to stay or anything to drive.

And now I’m here.

“You okay, miss?” Concern laces the driver’s voice, and I realize I’m hovering at the open door, gripping my backpack’s strap like it’s a lifeline and I’m a clueless astronaut about to launch myself into open space.

“Yeah.” I give myself a shake. “Just acclimatizing. Sorry.”

He snorts. “You’ve come to Australia during one of the worst heatwaves in history. No one’s acclimatized to that, not even the locals. Make sure you drink lots of water

and stay out of the sun as much as you can.”

Tears prickle the backs of my eyes. Since Hugh abandoned me, I’ve refused to cry.

I’m a computer engineer, after all, having just graduated from the University of Minnesota.

I don’t cry. I find answers, solutions. But the bus driver, who didn’t utter a word for the whole ninety-minute trip, just managed to punch me in the heart.

“I will,” I croak with a smile. “Thanks.”

I step out of the bus into an oven. Heat bakes up from the sidewalk through the soles of my Vans.

“Definitely not in Minnesota anymore, Toto,” I murmur. I don’t have a Toto. Dogs weren’t allowed on campus, but my plan is to adopt a rescue mutt, a big one rejected by everyone else, on returning to the US. After getting a job, that is. And a place to live.

Hugh always laughed at that plan. One more red flag I clearly missed.

With a hiss of airbrakes, the bus trundles away, revealing the street on the opposite side of the park. There’s a small library, a vet clinic, what looks like an art and craft gallery, a fire station, and a café called Ranger’s Brew.

The café is my destination. The owners of the house I’m sitting for have left the house and car keys with the café owner, along with a list of instructions.

Movement beside the café catches my eye. The fire station roller door is opening. Two men—firefighters?—duck out from underneath it as it rises, shouting something

I can't hear to a tall man striding along the sidewalk toward them.

His impressive frame is wrapped in faded denim jeans and a snug blue T-shirt, his shoulders are broad, and his legs are long. He's clutching a black jacket in one hand, and a cherry-red motorbike helmet swings from the other.

A tight ribbon of appreciation unfurls through me. If nothing else, Hartley Ridge has some fine-looking members of the male species.

Dragging my gaze from the man—damn, he's fine—I cross the park. By the time I enter the café, all three of the men have disappeared into the station house.

Ignoring the whisper of disappointment at not seeing the man with the helmet up close, I smile at the elderly woman behind the counter.

"Hi. I'm Riley Diaz. I'm house sitting the Whitmores' place while they're away. They told me they left keys and instructions for me here?"

The woman squints. "Do you have ID?"

I pull out my passport and driver's license and show them to her.

She studies me. "American, are you?"

Gee, what gave it away? I smile wider. "I am. Born and bred. This is my first time in Australia."

"Make sure you wear a hat when you're outside," she says, plonking a set of keys and an envelope on the counter. "And stay hydrated. And don't walk around outside in the evening without shoes on. It's funnel-web mating season, and those bastards are on the hunt for some action."

I blink.

“Oh, and watch out for snakes.”

“Umm...” What have I got myself into?

She taps the keys. “The Whitmores left their paddock basher for you to drive. It’s parked around the corner. The number plate is HQT-42A. You can’t miss it.”

“Their what?”

“Ute.” She frowns. “Like a pickup, just...not.”

Oh, that completely clears it up. Maybe this was a bad idea. I’m not scared of trying new things, but I’m already feeling like I’m in a different world. Will I be able to survive the culture shock?

Stop it. Suck it up, buttercup. You’ve got this.

The elderly woman purses her lips. “Why don’t I make you a flat white and then draw you a mud map, show you how to get up there?”

A what? And a what ?

She narrows her eyes at me. “You do know how to drive a manual, right?”

Oh hell, I’m in trouble.

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Chapter Two

Luca

“When did you get back?” Damon Riggs grips my hand in a fierce shake. “You here for long?”

I flick my big brother a look. “You didn’t tell them?”

Ethan shakes his head, grinning. “Only the captain knows.”

Riggs tosses a curious look between us and then settles it on me. “Knows what?”

“Luca’s back for good,” Ethan answers, clapping me on the shoulder. “Decided the big smoke isn’t for him and came home.”

My gut clenches. It’s as close to the truth as I’ll let Ethan go. Truth is, there are too many cars in Sydney. And I’m slammed with a memory every time one rushes past. My brother knows the real reason I’m back, but he’s keeping my PTSD to himself.

“Had to come back,” I declare with a laugh. “I feared you buggers would let the whole town burn down if I didn’t.”

After two years based at Station 001 in the heart of Sydney, here I am back in the Ridge. I’m okay with it. So okay that I placed a deposit on a cabin up on Talisman Peak this morning. I’m done being elsewhere. Hartley Ridge is home.

Riggs snorts. "You've picked the right time to return. This heatwave is stirring up all sorts of trouble. Got suspicious spot fires popping up all around the place. We can do with all the hands we can get."

"Happy to be here." I slide a look past the engine and out through the open roller door.

Where did she go?

An image of a woman flitters through my head. I saw her getting off the bus from Sydney as I was climbing off my Ducati. Her long hair, the burnished copper of sunsets, and her exquisite curves had caught my attention.

"Do you need a brushup on anything?" Riggs asks, dragging my thoughts away from those curves. "I know fighting fires in Sydney is a little different from fighting fires up here."

"Let me go dump my stuff at Ethan's place first." I arch a grin at my big brother. "You don't know this yet, but I'm crashing on your sofa for a while."

He groans. "Great. With how loud you snore, I'll never get any sleep."

"At least you'll have a decent meal for a while," I shoot back. "You can't cook to save yourself."

Riggs rolls his eyes. "I forgot what you two are like together."

Ethan tosses me his keys. "Here. Watch out for Reggie when you get there. He's got free range of the house today."

"Reggie loves me," I say. Reggie, Ethan's pet cockatoo, does indeed love me. "I

might go buy him a treat from the café before I head up there. Does Doreen still make those muesli cookies?”

“Yep,” Riggs confirms.

Ethan groans again. “You’re going to spoil my bird, aren’t you?”

“Hey, who else am I going to shower my affections on?”

An image of the woman from the bus tickles my mind again, but I ignore it. I’m back in the Ridge to get my shit together. To try to address the PTSD from the car accident that almost killed me three years ago.

The accident that did kill?—

I shut the memory down, grip Ethan’s keys, and start for the door. “Gotta go.” I don’t like being around people when my brain tries to make me relive that accident.

Footsteps follow, and Ethan catches up with me on the sidewalk. “You okay?”

I stop, dragging a hand through my hair. The sun blasts down on us, an indifferent torturer. “Yeah. Just my brain not being my friend. Being back here is what I need. It’ll help.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He doesn’t look convinced. But he’s always been my biggest protector.

When the driver of the car that slammed into me on the outskirts of the Ridge three

years ago tried to run away after being freed from his wrecked car with the Jaws of Life, Ethan not only took him down, he dragged him back to the accident and made him watch Riggs and Jake Conroy cut me out of mine.

He narrated the procedure in graphic detail, including the carnage caused by a part of my car piercing my ribcage.

“He put you through hell,” Ethan had said when I was told about it in the hospital. “So I put him through hell as well.”

He studies me now for a heartbeat and then nods. “Take your time. Reggie will be happy to see you.”

I stand motionless as he heads back into the station house, then I pull in a slow, deep breath of hot air and turn and head for Ranger’s Brew. I might grab a biscuit or two for myself as well. Perhaps a cup of tea, a biscuit, and the sounds of the bush are all I need to calm my mind?

Or maybe a distraction?

The image of the woman from the bus fills my head again, bringing with her an unexpected pressure in my groin. Just as the unmistakable sound of grinding gears gouges at the quiet air.

I wince in sympathy for the poor car whose gearbox is being tortured and watch Ivan Whitmore’s old Ford coupe utility come bunny-hopping around the corner.

On the wrong side of the road.

What the hell?

“Hey?” I shout, watching the ute shudder and jerk forward. I throw a look down the street. Thank God, there’s no one else on the road. Who the hell is behind the wheel? I look back at the ute, squinting into the glaring sun bouncing off its side window.

“ Hey! ” I shout louder. Whoever is driving has to be giving themselves whiplash. “ You’re on the wrong side of the road! ”

“Damn it.” Dorreen rushes out of the café, stare fixed on the ute. “I knew I should have reminded her we drive on the left side of the road here.”

The ute coasts to a lurching halt, sitting like a rusted lump in the middle of the right lane, gears grinding.

Down the block, a bright-green Honda Civic turns onto the street, heading—in the correct lane—on a collision course with Whitmore’s ute. My stomach clenches. Cold sweat breaks out over my skin. “Get out of the?—”

The ute bunny-hops again and again. Just as the green Honda hits the horn, the ute swerves into the left lane and, with a gun of the engine, zooms away, giving me a teasing glimpse of copper-red hair behind the wheel.

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Chapter Three

Riley

There is a scaly lizard the size of an iguana lying on the railing of the Whitmores' front porch when I finally find their home.

It doesn't move when I get out of the car—sorry, the ute—and climb the porch stairs. Instead, it regards me with aloof disdain as I inch slowly past it. The last thing I want is for it to run away. Or worse, run at me.

It's still there baking in the blazing afternoon sun after I explore the expansive, modern house. Whoever the Whitmores are, they're wealthy. Or up to the eyeballs in debt. It's still there when I go to bed, lazing in the evening heat.

Maybe it's a pet? Although it wasn't mentioned in the instructions.

I toss and turn for most of the night, stretched out under the bedroom ceiling fan, the thermostat set to cool. My stupid mind returns not to Jerkwad Hugh, but to the tall man with the amazing shoulders I'd seen yesterday.

Is it possible to fall in lust at first glimpse?

At daybreak, I give up trying to sleep. My body clock is completely confused.

I pour a tall glass of apple juice from the Whitmores' well-stocked fridge and wander out onto the front porch.

Sure, I'm only wearing panties and a tank top, but the weather is too hot for clothes.

Besides, the house has no neighbors. It's surrounded only by trees and bushes.

There's a slight scent of smoke in the air, but maybe that's what summer mornings in Australia smell like? The view is breathtaking. Three weeks staying here? I'm not going to complain. Maybe my trip Down Under is taking a turn for the bet?—

The lizard scurries across the porch behind me, claws scratching on the wood, long spiky tail whipping side to side, lashing my bare ankle.

I scream. Jump. Juice splashes everywhere.

I lock my stare on the reptile, heart pounding as it freezes at the end of the porch, eyeing me with its front legs pressed to the wall.

Its belly is a rusty red, like dried blood, and my stomach drops.

Oh no, is it injured? Shit. What if I was meant to do something with it last night, and I didn't?

“Just...stay there, Mr. Lizard,” I whisper, creeping back into the house. If I can catch it with a towel and put it in a box, I can take it to the vet clinic I saw beside the fire station.

And maybe see Mr. Oh-So-Fine while you're there?

I grab a fluffy towel from the linen cupboard, find a large cardboard box in the laundry full of old newspapers, dump the papers out, and hurry back to the front porch.

I open the door like there's the chance a bomb will detonate if I do it too loudly, creep out, deposit the box on the floor, and tiptoe toward the lizard, holding the towel like a net.

It watches me. Motionless.

Yeah, that definitely looks like dry blood on its belly.

A foot away from it, I cast the towel.

It bolts halfway up the wall, down again, straight at me, over my feet, down the steps, onto the path.

I snatch up the towel and follow. "Stop," I shout, bare feet slapping on the hot path, stare tracking the lizard's frantic flee. "Let me help you!"

It runs across the grass onto the driveway just as a large, red Landcruiser drives up.

I scream, waving my arms, thrashing the towel above my head, leaping in the air. Anything to get the driver's attention and make sure they don't run over the injured lizard.

The 4x4 skids to a halt, and the driver's door is flung open—there's some kind of emblem on it—just as the lizard executes a sharp ninety degree turn and heads for the front porch again.

I stumble to a halt, lungs burning, chest heaving, and stare at it as it scales the railing and flattens itself in the sun.

"Err..." a deep male voice rumbles to my right, and I whip my head around. My stare locks with the man standing beside the 4x4. He's studying me like I've grown an

extra head. “Everything okay?”

Mr. Oh-So-Fine.

Up close, he’s the stuff of every sexual fantasy I’ve ever had. At least six foot three, a body built for power and strength, with sculpted muscles and broad shoulders and lean hips and... Oh my God, am I staring?

The morning’s sun discovers us, heating my bare limbs. How much boob am I showing right now? I was jumping up and down a lot, and this tank top wasn’t designed for aerobic activity.

He runs eyes the color of the ocean over me, and my nipples bead even as shame crashes through me. I’m almost naked and far from skinny, and I was staring at him like he’s the dessert menu.

“The lizard!” I blurt out, heat pooling in my cheeks as I turn and point at the lizard on the porch.

The lizard looks back at us.

“What about it?” he asks. The deep timbre of his voice licks through my body like a caress. “It’s a water dragon. They’re everywhere up here. Especially with Moonstone Lake being just behind the Whitmores’ back fence.”

I blink. There’s a lake?

An image of Mr. Oh-So-Fine emerging from cool water, dripping wet and wearing only a pair of black boxer briefs, flashes through my head.

“It’s injured,” I say, trying to ignore the flush of raw lust the image awakens in me.

“There’s blood all over its belly. I was going to catch it and take it to the vet, but now you’re...”

I trail off as he crosses to the front porch, his attention fixed on the lizard. The lizard cocks its head at him. “Do you mean this red patch?” he asks, one foot resting on the bottom step, elbow resting on his knee as he points at the lizard.

I slowly approach. The lizard didn’t run when he approached, but maybe it doesn’t like non Australians? I draw to a halt beside Mr. Oh-So-Fine—damn, he smells good, like clean soap and leather and nature—and frown at the lizard. “Yes. It’s blood, right?”

A low chuckle rumbles from him, relaxed and far too sexy for my state of mind. “Those are markings. All adult water dragons have them.” He turns his blue eyes on me, the edges crinkling with mirth. “It’s normal. Not injured at all.”

I stare at him and then bury my face in the towel. “I am such an idiot.”

“Gorgeous one, though,” he murmurs so softly I’m not sure I heard him correctly.

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Chapter Four

Luca

Fuck. Did I say that out loud?

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I drag my stare from the gorgeous redhead American berating herself and scowl at the water dragon.

Two hours ago, the Bureau of Meteorology sent out a high-wind warning, forecasting destructive gusts. In Hartley Ridge, during a dry summer and an intense heatwave, that spells possible danger. It's bushfire season dialed up to eleven.

I don't officially rejoin the team until Monday, but no way was I going to sit on my arse doing nothing while the team preps for what might hit.

I'd headed up into the local mountains and peaks to warn the Airbnb guests, campers, and anyone on the various hiking trails scattered around the area.

I'd needed something to distract my brain from thinking about the gorgeous redheaded American. Saving tourists fit the bill.

Hudson had suggested I check in on the house sitter at the Whitmore place, and my cock had flooded with hot interest. Doreen had told me exactly who was house-sitting for the mayor: the gorgeous redheaded American who'd driven the Whitmores' old ute on the wrong side of the road yesterday.

I'd almost told Hudson to send someone else. I wasn't back in the Ridge to fall in lust with a tourist. But then he'd said he had to go because there was an issue with the engine's water pressure valve, and saying no because I was horny felt pathetic.

Fuck, I wish I'd said no.

No, you don't.

Unable to stop myself, I return my gaze to the young woman.

She's looking at the water dragon, chewing on her bottom lip.

My cock throbs. It's like I'm looking at the very definition of a sexual goddess.

Is she aware how fucking incredible she looks half naked, hair a wild copper tumble of waves falling around creamy bare shoulders, tits almost bursting from a tight black tank that stops an inch above a belly button I want to explore with my tongue.

Fuck, is that some ink on the curve of her hip?

Some kind of math equation? Brief little black panties that I want to rip from her body, and lush thighs I want to feel pressed either side of my head as I make her come over and over again with my mouth.

A raw groan vibrates low in my chest.

She looks back at me, her jade-green eyes unreadable. "So," she says, her American accent like aural Viagra, flooding my cock with more blood, "you're saying everything is okay?"

Everything is far from fucking okay. I want to throw this woman over my shoulder,

carry her into the mayor's house, and make her mine. Brand her flesh with my mouth. Pump her sweet pussy full of my?—

“Well,” I growl, “the lizard is, at least.”

She licks her bottom lip, making me want to groan again, and then narrows her eyes at me. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

Your future husband.

“Luca Cormack.” I hold out my hand. “I’m with the Hartley Ridge fire brigade.”

“Hi,” she says. I’m Riley Diaz.” A hot breeze plays with her hair, tousling it around her face as she slips her palm into mine. A jolt of electricity shoots up my arm and sinks into my groin.

With a soft breath, she withdraws her hand and takes a step back from me. “And you’re here because...”

As if to answer for me, a sudden hot gust blasts us from the west, whipping dirt and dust up around us in a frenzied whirly wind.

The goddess yelps, trying to protect her face with her hands. “Ow, I’ve got something in my eye,” she cries, eyes squeezed tightly.

Around us, the wind roars through the leaves in an almost deafening howl.

“Let me help you inside,” I say, raising my voice over it.

“What?”

“Let me—” I shake my head. “Just trust me,” I shout and scoop her up in my arms.

She yelps again, a faint laugh in the sound, and clings to me. “Oh my God, really?”

“Really,” I state, taking the steps up to the porch two at a time.

I hit the landing just as the wind dies.

Arms still wrapped around my neck, she squints at me, lips twitching. “This is some meet cute.”

The wind blasts at us both again, like an invisible, smoldering wrecking ball.

“Let’s get you inside,” I say, adjusting her in my arms to open the door.

My body is sparking with base male hunger at the soft warmth of hers nestled against my chest. She smells divine.

Feels divine. If I drop my head, I could claim her mouth with mine, tease her tongue, bite her lip.

I could press my mouth to the swell of her amazing tits spilling over her neckline and mark her flesh so no other man could mistake she’s taken.

I carry her across the threshold at the exact second a splintering crack rises over the wailing wind.

She flinches, curling closer into my chest, her arms tight around my neck, her face burying under my chin. “What was that?”

“Tree down somewhere,” I answer, cock throbbing. “Big one.”

“The lizard?” she says, her voice a husky breath.

“Will be okay,” I reply with a smile as I kick the door shut behind us and move deeper into the house. Fuck, I could fall for this woman.

She lifts her head as we enter the living room and meets my gaze, her eyes shining with an emotion that stirs something elemental in me.

Desire. Need.

Connection.

I return her feet to the floor, holding in a groan as her body slides down mine. I want to grab her arse, yank her hips to mine, and kiss her. Instead, I let my hands slip from her waist and take a step back. Putting distance between us.

“I think I need to go wash my eyes.” She half turns away. “I’ve definitely got dirt in them.”

And before I can reply, she rises up on tiptoe and brushes the quickest of kisses on my lips. “Thank you,” she whispers and then hurries from the room without looking back.

“You’re welcome,” I growl, shoving my balled fists into my pockets.

How the hell am I going to keep my fucking hands off her?

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Chapter Five

Riley

When I return to the living room, eyes washed, dressed in my denim cutoffs and a soft, loose button-up, Luca is gone. With how long I took to come back out, he probably thought I was trying to stay away from him and left.

I was trying to stay away.

I didn't want to merely give him a quick kiss before fleeing to the bedroom; I wanted to wrap my legs around his hips, my arms around his neck, and make love to his mouth.

Given that twenty-four hours ago I thought Hugh was the only one for me, I needed to get a grip on my body and my heart.

Still, disappointment curls through me as I take in the empty room. I wonder if I will see him again while I'm?—

The front door opens, and Luca steps through it.

My breath catches, and I bite my lip to stop the moan of appreciation falling from me. "You're still here," I say instead.

His gaze finds mine as he rubs the back of his neck. "I'm going to be here for a while longer, it seems."

An excited heat flutters in my stomach. “Why?”

“That big tree we heard falling down?” He shoves both hands in his pockets. “It’s across the driveway.”

I swallow. “Oh.”

“You’re stuck with me for a while. At least until I can clear it.” He lets out a chuckle. “Whitmore isn’t much of an outdoorsy bloke, but I’m pretty certain he’ll have a chainsaw somewhere.”

Before I can stop myself, I take a step toward him. “Would you like something to eat first?”

His stare holds mine for a heartbeat, a muscle in his jaw bunching, and he smiles. “How ‘bout I make you a traditional Aussie breakfast?”

I smile back. “Are you going to try to make me like Vegemite?”

His smile turns playful. “Trust me.”

I do. How could I not? My heart is telling me this powerful firefighter is everything I’ve ever wanted. “I’m Riley, by the way,” I say.

“Riley,” he echoes, and my body flushes with heat at the way my name sounds on his lips.

He does make Vegemite on toast. He assures me, as he’s moving around the Whitmores’ kitchen preparing it, that there’s an art to the perfect Vegemite on toast experience. I laugh, loving his relaxed calm and humor. It’s so different to Hugh or any other guy I’ve interacted with.

Placing the plate of toast on the table in front of me, along with a coffee he calls a flat white, he drops into a seat and grins. “Trust me,” he says again.

Dubious, I pick up one black-smeared triangle and risk a small bite.

“Oh God,” I protest, laughing and dropping it back onto the plate. “How do you Aussies eat this stuff?”

“More for me then.” He chuckles, sliding the plate over and taking a large bite from the same piece. He grins at me, chewing.

I wonder if it tastes better on his lips?

“Have you been in Hartley Ridge for long?” I ask, needing to distract myself.

“Born and bred,” he replies, standing. “Let me make you something else? Scrambled eggs?”

“What about PBJ on toast?” I ask, admiring the way his muscles coil and flex as he moves.

“PB what?”

With a laugh, I push myself from the chair. “Allow me.”

He rests his hip on the counter and watches me, hands back in his pockets. “So how does a gorgeous American end up in a tiny mountain town in Australia?”

Gorgeous. He called me gorgeous.

“Part foolishness, part bravado,” I confess, reaching for the bread.

“I came to Australia with someone I thought was meant to be my future...” I stop.

Flick him a look. The intensity of his gaze licks heat through the junction of my thighs.

“And then I realized he wasn’t,” I continue, putting four pieces of bread into the toaster.

“I needed a way to make money and a place to stay, so I took the first thing I found, which was house sitting up here.”

“Enjoying it so far?”

“It’s definitely an adventure.” I meet his gaze again. Swallow. Ache for his hands on my body. “Enjoying it more every minute.”

His chest swells. His stare drops to my lips.

I part them, a soft breath falling from me.

Kiss me. Please. Kiss me. Take me. Make love to ? —

His phone rings with a loud trill, and we both jump.

“I’ve got to get this,” he mutters, putting distance between us with a small backward step as he pulls his phone free.

“That’s okay,” I mumble, heat prickling over my scalp.

The toaster pops, and I grab the hot, crusty slices and start slathering them with peanut butter.

There's a potent pull between us. I can feel it, and I'm positive he can as well.

But is he fighting it like I am? Or am I imagining it?

Am I aching for something that's not there at all?

I've just been burnt by one guy. The last thing I need is to lose my heart to another.

Especially one who lives on the opposite side of the world.

PBJs made, I take one, give Luca a quick glance, and hurry from the kitchen.

I need some distance. I think.

The back door leads me to a pebbly path that winds a short distance through some dense bush to the edge of a small but stunning lake. What did Luca call it? Moonstone Lake? Can I swim in it? Are there crocodiles this high up? I take in the serenity, realising the wild wind has gone away.

"Everything okay?"

Luca's deep voice caresses me from behind, and I look over my shoulder, my body responding as he draws near. I smile and nod. "Didn't want to eavesdrop."

He stops beside me. "It was only my brother. He's also a firefighter with the Ridge. I was meant to check in with him." His gaze drops to my lips. "I got a little distracted."

Kiss him!

I fix my stare on the calm lake. "This is beautiful. Exactly what I wanted to see when I left the US."

“Why did you leave?” he asks. My nipples harden at the deep huskiness of his voice.

I shrug. “I graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in computer science and wanted to travel, to see something beyond my part of the world. Experience life.” Unable to stop myself, I lift my gaze to him again.

He’s looking at me with raw emotion burning in his eyes. It shears through me, flooding my sex with tight heat. He wants me as much as I want him.

“Surrender to new adventures,” I whisper.

His nostrils flare, and he reaches up and feathers his fingertips along the line of my jaw. “Let me help you with that,” he murmurs before lowering his head and capturing my lips with his.

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Chapter Six

Luca

She opens to my kiss, her tongue seeking mine, her arms wrapping around my neck. Hot need engulfs me, an inferno I can no longer fight. I rake my hands down to the small of her back and yank her hard to my body.

Moaning, she tangles her hands in my hair and rolls her hips, grinding to my engorged cock. I tear my lips from hers, marking her neck with hungry kisses. She's soft and warm and responsive in my arms, and my cock throbs.

"Please, Luca," she rasps, her hands tugging at my shirt.

I lift my head and stare down into her eyes. They're clouded with passion, and her lips are red and glistening from my kiss. "Please what, Riley?"

She claws her nails down my back, rolling her hips again. "Make love to me. Now. Here. Please?"

"Oh, gorgeous," I growl, my blood hot with desire as I move my hands to the top button of her shirt. "I want you so fucking much I'm not sure I will be able to control myself."

She fists her hands in my hair again, a devilish heat in her eyes. "Fuck control."

Groaning, I strip her shirt from her body, devouring the intoxicating sight of her in

nothing but a white lacy bra and denim shorts. I tease her nipples through the lace with my fingers, pinching their puckered tips before sucking them into my mouth.

She holds my head to her breasts with fierce fists, guiding me from one nipple to the other.

Releasing one with a pop, I straighten, and chest heaving, stare down at her. Waiting. Giving her a moment.

She reaches for my waistband, tugs me back to her, and captures my lips with hers.

We strip each other, our hands wild, impatient.

I take a moment to lay my discarded clothes on the grass, an impromptu blanket, and then tug her down to me.

She settles astride my hips, running her gaze over me.

A soft frown dips her eyebrows as she notices the scar over my ribcage, and she feathers her fingers over it, but doesn't ask, instead lifting my hands to her breasts.

I lose myself in the fullness of her tits, feasting on each one, my hands roaming her back, her arse, her hips, her arse again.

My cock demands her wet heat, jutting up between our bodies.

She shoves me onto my back and feathers her fingers over its swollen tip.

A bead of pre-come leaks from me, and she pulls in a shaky breath, watching it.

"If you don't want to..." I become motionless. I want her on a level I've never

experienced before, but it has to be on her terms.

Lifting her eyes to mine, she lets out a soft laugh. “Luca, I’m terrified.”

My throat constricts. I reach up and brush my knuckle along her jawline. “That’s okay,” I murmur, my heart pounding. “This is so fast. If you’ve changed your mind...”

She laughs again, shaking her head, her hands splaying over my chest. “No. I haven’t changed my mind. I just...” She shrugs, a soft smile curling her lips. “What if once is not enough?”

Cupping the back of her head, I sit up and trail my thumb over her bottom lip. “Riley, who said only once was even an option?”

She gazes into my eyes, and I feel her like she’s already in my soul. In my heart.

Exactly where I want her to be. With me.

“Do you have a condom in your wallet?” she whispers, her thighs gripping my hips as she lifts a fraction off my lap.

“I don’t.” Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I’m on the pill,” she says, her wet folds kissing my erection. “And I trust you.”

I study her. My whole world is shifting. Changes. “Even after I made you try Vegemite on toast?” I ask, my voice husky.

“Even after that,” she says on a breath.

Holding her stare, I smooth my hands down to her hips. “In that case...” Guiding her, I align her pussy over the throbbing crown of my cock and impale her on my hard length. Showing her exactly how much I trust her. And how much I want her.

“Yes,” she cries out, taking me to the hilt, her hands tangling in my hair. Her spine bows, thrusting her amazing breasts forward, and I take possession of one, kneading it with urgent need, pinching its nipple even as I pump up into her.

“So tight and hot and wet,” I ground out, my blood like liquid mercury.

“Riley, your pussy is made for my cock.” I ravish her throat, the side of her neck, sucking, nipping, moving to her lips.

Our tongues battle, a feverish mating echoed by my powerful thrusts.

Her inner walls envelope me, and, wanting to give her the most pleasure she’s ever experienced, I slide one hand down between our bodies and roll my finger over her swollen clit as I suckle on one of her nipples.

“Oh God!” She bucks into my hips, her nails clawing at the backs of my shoulders. “I’m going to... I’m going to?—”

Her pussy contracts around my cock, pulsing constrictions that detonate my own release.

I bury my face in the side of her neck, a raw groan tearing from me as my seed fills her.

We come down together, bodies locked, skin slicked with sweat, until she slumps against me, her cheek on my chest. I trail my fingertips over her back, loving the way she fits to me. “That—” she pants “—was incredible.”

“You’re incredible,” I murmur. “Spend the rest of your life with me?”

She chuckles, lifts her head, and drops a kiss on my lips. “Hmm, tempting...”

More than tempting. I want her in my life forever.

The morning sun peeks over the treetops, hitting us with its summer force, reminding me we’re buck naked, and Riley’s skin is creamy and flawless and not used to Australian rays. “Swim with me?” I ask.

She casts a look at the lake. “There’s nothing in there that will eat me?”

“Not in there,” I reply. “Unless you count me, but I can’t hold my breath for that long.”

She laughs, wriggling on my lap, her sex still impaled on my cock—which is already growing stiff again. “Goddamn it, Luca Cormack,” she murmurs, resting her forehead on mine. “I could...”

Instead of finishing, she slips off me, stands and stretches, and then raises her eyebrows. “Last one in is a rotten?—”

She bolts for the water.

I scramble to my feet and chase her, catching her before she hits the lake’s edge, scooping her up, and flinging her over my shoulder.

I bring her to a multiple orgasms in the lake, her legs locked around my hips, my fingers inside her, finding all her sweet spots.

When we finally emerge, I know with my entire being she is mine. I’ve fallen for her.

Completely

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Chapter Seven

Riley

Have I fallen into an alternate dimension?

Maybe I fell asleep on the bus to Hartley Ridge, and I'm existing in some kind of wonderfully torturous dream where I've never been happier?

A dream where a man like Luca—wonderful and strong and kind and funny—keeps looking at me like I'm the most precious thing in his world.

This can't be real, right? Surely it's impossible to fall in love so quickly. It hasn't even been a day. And yet the clenching of my heart and the quickening of my breath every time Luca looks at me...

I'm in love with him.

Oh, boy. This is not what I'd planned.

"What are you going to do with your degree?" he says as we sit together on the banks of the lake under a massive gum tree that shades us from the sun.

I'm nestled between his legs with my back to his chest, and the muscular strength of his body is stirring a craving in me I'm not sure I'll ever sate.

Even now, I want to strip our clothes off, straddle his hips, and impale myself on his

very impressive cock again.

Instead, I trail my fingertips over the back of his hand where it rests loosely over my left breast, and close my eyes. “I’ve had a couple of offers back home,” I say. The thought of not being here with Luca twists a knot in my stomach. “But I’m not sure about them.”

“Headhunted by tech bros?” he asks, a shallowness to his chuckle.

“Something like that.” I shake my head, wanting to lose myself in the waves of contentment rolling over me. “None of them were appealing enough for me to cancel my trip here, though.”

“Or to make you want to go back?”

“No,” I reply. “Why would I ever want to leave here?”

His heart thumps against the back of my head, and I bite back a curse. I’m getting carried away. Losing myself in a fantasy life with Luca is one thing, but giving voice to it? He’ll think I’m crazy.

Turning and twisting onto my knees between his legs, I grin at him. “With all the killer spiders and snakes and Vegemite, how could I even think of leaving?”

He rolls his eyes and snorts. “You hurt my little Aussie heart, Riley Diaz.”

Yeah, I’m never going to get tired of hearing him say my name.

Riley Cormack sounds nice, as well.

Oh, for Pete’s sake, mind, shut up!

Dropping back onto my butt, I settle back between his legs again. He draws lazy patterns along the line of my collarbone with his fingers, the gentle tickle beading my nipples.

I gaze out at the day, tracking the path of a bird—maybe an eagle?—as it glides high over the lake’s still surface. It didn’t take long for the heat to dry our skin and hair, but there’s a breeze that wafts over us from the water from time to time, bringing with it a cool kiss.

Perhaps I didn’t fall asleep or into an alternate dimension? Perhaps I died, and this is Heaven?

“So any family back home?” His question rumbles against my head.

“An older sister I rarely speak to,” I reply. “And Mom and Dad, but they moved to Florida and are enjoying the retiree life.”

“So people really do that?” He chuckles. “I thought that might be just something TV and movies make up?”

“What about you?” I twist my head enough to look up at him. Damn, he’s a good-looking man. “Family? Apart from your brother?”

A stillness falls over him. “No. Mum and Dad are both gone. Dad when we were both young—he was a cop and was killed on the job—and Mum to breast cancer last year. I...” He pauses.

“I was engaged three years ago, but my fiancée was killed in a car accident that...” Another pause. A shaky breath falls from him.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” I say, covering his hand with mine. My heart

squeezes for him. I thought my family life was harrowing, what with our different political opinions. To lose almost everyone, including the person you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with...

See? His heart's off-limits, Diaz. The last thing he needs is you going all OTT on his ass.

"Nah," he murmurs, his fingers resuming their gentle caresses on my skin.

"It's all good. For some reason, it doesn't hurt as much telling you about it.

The accident almost killed me as well. I've had a lot of physical therapy in Sydney, and have only just returned to the Ridge.

Needed to come home to mend." He lets out another ragged breath.

"I'm a little broken. But I'm getting better. Especially since I met you."

How do I not open up my chest and give him my heart? How do I walk away from him after this?

Getting back onto my knees, I place my hands on his shoulders and gaze into his eyes. "Luca," I whisper. "If it helps, I will try Vegemite again."

He throws back his head and laughs, snagging my waist with his hands and pulling us both back to the ground.

I kiss him.

Because I have to. Like I have to breathe.

But the knot in my stomach, the one that had twisted tightly on the word fiancée , tightens more.

If I don't get control over my heart, am I just setting myself up for heartache again?

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Chapter Eight

Luca

I hadn't meant to pour out my heart to her.

I was trying to be subtle, trying to discover if her line of work could allow her to live in Australia, and then I went and blurted out all about my accident and Jade's death, and fuck, I must sound like a weak-arse baby.

I'm pretty certain she only kissed me to shut me up.

And yet she's still kissing me. And I'm kissing her back. I'm already addicted to her lips, her mouth on mine, her smell. Her body pressed to mine.

Without tearing my lips from hers, I wrangle with the buttons of her shirt and peel it from her body. Seek out the fly of her shorts.

She helps, her lips and tongue still mating with mine, and then she moves her hands to my fly.

With a fumble of hands and arms and legs, we're naked, and without a word, I pull her onto my lap, burying my cock into her wet heat with a single thrust.

I want to spend the rest of my life making love to her. Giving her orgasm after orgasm. Giving her pleasure, making her feel cherished, wanted, loved.

Fuck, I love her.

We come together, her body taking every drop of seed I pump into her, our gazes locked.

As the pulses of her inner walls slowly fade, I nibble a line of soft kisses up to her ear.

Stay with me forever , I want to whisper.

“You are incredible,” I whisper instead.

Gutless. I’m gutless.

She tangles her hands in my hair, her pussy squeezing one last time. “So are you,” she murmurs back.

Getting dressed a few moments later, we keep looking at each other. There’s a question in her eyes I want her to ask. Is it the one I’m feeling in my heart? Or am I deluded? Maybe. But this connection between us is powerful. I’m sure of it.

I take her hand as we begin walking back to the Whitmores’ house. She smiles up at me, entwining her fingers in mine and bumping her shoulder to my biceps. “So,” she says, lips curling, “what’s your favorite movie?”

“Oh, that’s a tough one.” I pull a face. “I think I’m meant to say something like The Godfather or Gladiator .”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Meant to?”

“Y’know, the whole macho-male thing?”

Her lips twist. “I see.”

I grin. “But if you chucked me on a desert island with only one movie to watch, I’d have to pick... Hmm... Mamma Mia .”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “No. It would be either the first Star Wars movie or Batman Begins .”

“You’re a geek?”

“Probably.” I nudge her shoulder back. “Your turn.”

“ Oppenheimer .” She nods. “Although anything by Christopher Nolan is required viewing. So I approve of your Batman Begins .”

The thought of curling up on a sofa with Riley tucked into my body as we binge a Nolan movie marathon sends a warm ribbon of aching joy through me. How do I make it happen?

We continue walking hand in hand, falling between relaxed and contented silences and chatting about the bush, Australia, anything and everything.

She takes a shower while I make lunch—roast chicken and salad subs—and when she struts into the kitchen naked and asks me if I’m hungry, I abandon the food, spread her out on the dining table, and lose myself in her sweetness, her thighs soft against my ears, her hands tight in my hair.

We’ve just finished eating—food, this time—and are sitting in the living room, our legs stretched out together on the chaise, the air con cooling our skin but not my

desire for her, when my phone bursts into life on the coffee table.

“Whatever you’re doing, brother,” Ethan says when I answer it, an urgency cutting the words blunt, “stop and get your arse to the station. We’ve got a fire on the south side of Mount Kissingpoint, and it’s threatening Lily Andrew’s studio.”

Detangling myself from Riley’s arms, I shove myself from the sofa. “Okay, I’ll be there in twenty.” If I speed. Thank God, I came up in the brigade’s 4x4. It’ll be tricky, but I should be able to get around the down tree. With some luck and skill.

“Everything okay?” she asks, worry swimming in her eyes as she looks up at me.

“Everything is perfect,” I tell her, dipping to brush a kiss on her lips. “I’ve gotta go be a firefighter.”

Her eyebrows knit, and then she nods. “Okay.”

I hurry for the front door even as the desire to stay burns through me. But I have to go. It’s what I do. Who I am.

Opening the door, I turn to tell her I’ll be back ASAP. And the words die on my lips.

She’s still sitting on the sofa, head in her hands, shoulders hunched. “Why did you do that, Diaz?” The granite floors of the Whitmores’ house reverberate her whispered words to me, and a cold knife stabs into my chest. “How could you be so stupid?”

Gut clenching, I step through the door and close it.

Well, fuck.

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Chapter Nine

Riley

Standing on the Whitmores' front porch, I gnaw at my bottom lip. The sun is ablaze, sitting low in the western sky, its intensity shrouded in a smokey haze.

Dusk is settling in. Birdsongs I don't recognize waft on the hot air.

I'd watched the smoke billowing into the sky throughout the afternoon, picturing Luca fighting the fire, worrying about him even as I kept telling myself he's going to be okay. This is what he does.

Sometime before four, as my friend the lizard lazily wandered up onto the porch to scale the railing and regard me with its trademark indifference, the smoke stopped rising, leaving only the haze.

Relief had swept through me.

Firefighters: 1. Fire: 0.

I hope.

It's been two hours since then. Two hours without Luca returning. Two hours of hoping he's okay. Of telling myself he is. Two hours of pacing the porch, the house, the porch again. Replaying every minute of him being in my life, from when he first arrived to when he left.

Reliving those minutes made me all too aware that I've never felt more connected to someone.

It's not possible to fall in love with someone so quickly, but I'm doing a damn good job of trying. And that, in itself, is the problem. Losing my heart so quickly after it's just taken a beating from Hugh?

I questioned my sanity as Luca was leaving for the fire, and I'm questioning it now.

But no matter how many times I tell myself I'm reading it all wrong, that I'm not in love, and Luca isn't interested in me for more than just sex—wild, amazing, soul-searing sex—his question keeps whispering through my fraying mind: Spend the rest of your life with me?

I cast a look at the lizard pancaking in the late sun on the railing that's a few feet away. "Was he serious?"

The lizard ignores me.

I snort. "Yeah, it's a stupid question. I'm an idiot. Right?"

Nothing from the lizard.

"You're not really helping me, little dude," I complain, smiling at my own woefulness.

What do I do? Wait for Luca to come back and then tell him how I feel? Or when he comes back, do I pretend it was just a one-night—well, one-morning stand? If he comes back?

Oh God, I'm spiraling.

Somewhere in the bush, a kookaburra laughs, and I puff out a sigh. Seems this whole country is enjoying my confusion.

The unmistakable burr of a chainsaw rises up from down the hill, and my heart slams up into my throat. Is it Luca? He mentioned the fallen tree before he went to the fire. How did he get past it? Drive around it? Over it? Is it him cutting up the tree now?

Hurrying back inside, I yank on my sneakers, give my hair a quick comb with my fingers, check my breath in my palm—still toothpasty fresh—and head down the driveway.

Rounding a bend, I see the gum tree lying across the driveway. Its broken, twisted roots reach into the air, dirt clinging to them. A tall man with broad shoulders and lean hips wields the chainsaw, cutting into the wood, his back bunching against the strain.

I quicken my stride, a smile stretching my lips before I can rein it in. I'm going to tell him. Screw it. A life lived in fear is a life half lived. That's a quote from something, a movie, maybe? I can't remember, but it's true.

"Luca," I call when the roar from the chainsaw falls silent. I reach out to touch his back, and he turns.

"G'day," a middle-aged man says, wiping at his forehead with the back of his gloved hand.

Sweat drips from his weathered face. "You must be the American." He removes his glove with his teeth and shoves his hand out to me.

"I'm Baz Lundgren, the Ridge's arborist. Luca Cormack sent me up here to clear the driveway for you.

Said you probably didn't want to be stuck in the mayor's house forever. ”

Luca Cormack sent me...

A prickling cold crawls over my skin. Sinks into my chest.

Luca didn't come back. He stayed away. From me.

“Hi,” I say, taking Baz's hand. I feel like I'm talking through a funnel. My voice sounds fuzzy, far away. Oh God, Luca didn't come back. I lost my heart to a man, and he didn't come back.

Of course he didn't. No one falls in love in less than a day. Only idiots do that.

Baz frowns as I drop his hand. “You okay? You look like you're going to pass out.” He flicks his frown at the sky. “It's bloody hot today, and the sun's being a real bastard.”

“I'm okay,” I reply, forcing a smile to my face. Where did the smile go I couldn't contain earlier? Oh, that's right. It vanished along with my pride and heart. “Can I get you some water?”

“Yeah, nah.” He shakes his head and tugs his glove back on. “I'll be done soon, and then you can get out. Give me another fifteen, if that's okay?”

“That's fine.” How am I even speaking? I feel like I'm being suffocated in a blanket of hot cotton wool. “Thank you.” I turn and head back up the path, the wail of the chainsaw following me.

The lizard watches me climb the front steps. I ignore it.

I open the door, and cool inside air slips around my hot face and limbs just as my phone vibrates in the pocket of my shorts.

Without stepping inside, I snatch the phone out and stare at the text on the screen, my throat squeezing shut.

Hugh

I miss you, Riley. I'm sorry. Please call me. I want you in my life. Somehow. I'm sure we can make it work.

I burst out laughing.

Oh, for fuck's sake. I really am an idiot.

The one man I want nothing to do with anymore is crawling after me, and the man I want everything to do with has already passed me off.

I turn to the lizard. "I'm going home, little dude. Back to Minnesota. To hell with relationships. Take it from me, they just aren't worth it."

Chapter Ten

Luca

“What’s going on, brother?”

I look up from scratching the back of Reggie’s feathery neck and frown at Ethan. Reggie—displeased with my sudden lack of attention, or perhaps because his owner has entered the room—skreiches and bounces up and down on my knee, bright-yellow comb flaring on top of his head.

“Fucking fire !” he squawks, comb flaring. “Fucking fire! ”

Ethan rolls his eyes and dumps himself into the armchair opposite me, frowning at his cockatoo. “I’m never going to forgive Riggs for teaching him that.”

I snort and return to scratching Reggie behind his neck again. “Want me to teach him something new while I’m here?”

Ethan turns his frown to me. “You didn’t answer my earlier question. What’s going on?”

“Listen, mate ,” Reggie squawks, bouncing on my knee again. “Fucking fire. Listen, mate. ”

Shoving himself to his feet, Ethan slides his hand under Reggie, lifting him from my leg.

“Listen, mate,” he says to the bird as he walks across his living room to deposit Reggie onto his free-fly perch—a thick gum tree branch that bends at a rambling right angle that’s attached to a heavy block of ironbark. “Time to zip it for a bit.”

“ Zip it, zip it! ” Reggie cries before attacking one of the various parrot toys hanging from the ceiling above the perch. “ Fucking fire .”

Laughing, I shake my head. “I’ve missed that bird.”

Ethan returns to the armchair, drops into it, and then leans forward, elbows on knees, stare locked on me. “Again, what’s going on?”

Gut clenching, I give him a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about scowl. “Nothing.”

He grunts. “Luca, I love you. You’re my brother. But you’re a woeful liar.” He gives me a soft smile. “PTSD getting to you? I know seeing the American almost run into Mrs. Harrington’s Honda shook you up a bit.”

The American.

An image of Riley straddling my hips shears through me, and I draw in a choppy breath.

Ethan frowns. “Okay, that’s not a stressed breath. That sounds more like regret.” He narrows his eyes. “Where were you today? When I called about the fire?”

“ Fucking fire! ” Reggie squawks from his perch. “ Zip it, zip it! ”

Ethan points at him. “Zip it!”

Reggie goes back to attacking one of his toys.

Ethan levels an expectant stare at me. Waits.

Swallowing, I drag my hands through my hair and slump back into the armchair. “I was up at the Whitmores’.”

“Hudson sent you up there early this morning. Why were you still...” He trails off. “Oh. The house sitter? The American?”

A wry laugh falls from me, and I nod. “The American. Riley Diaz.”

“So you spent the day up there with her?”

“I did.”

He studies me. “Do I want to know how you spent the day?”

I snort.

“Fucking fire!” Reggie contributes, bobbing up and down on his perch. “Fucking fire!”

Ethan lets out a breath, scratches the back of his neck, and fixes me with an unwavering look.

“Okay, I want to ask you something. I’ve wanted to for a while but haven’t.

Probably should have. How are you going?

” He holds up a palm. “I mean, I know the move back here is part of your recovery, but I also know since Jade’s death, you’ve kept everyone at arm’s length, even me.”

I frown.

“And that’s okay,” he continues, his smile easy, “because I know after what you went through, you were in a raw place. But how are you going? I don’t want you going through life on a merely superficial physical existence.

Just disconnected sex with strangers. Emotional connection is important, Luca.

I don’t want you to forget about your heart. ”

“See, that’s the problem,” I say, a wry laugh straining my voice. “It’s my heart that’s causing me grief right now.”

He narrows his eyes again. “The American?”

“The American,” I echo. “I know it’s bloody ridiculous to even think it, given I only met Riley this morning, but I think I love her.”

He blinks.

I snort. “I do. I spent the day with her, and yeah, some of it was sex—the most amazing sex I’ve ever had in my life—but most of the day was just being with her, existing with her, getting to know her.” I shake my head. “Since the accident, I’ve felt dead inside. Like I have no reason to be here.”

“Jesus, Luca,” Ethan murmurs, eyebrows knitting. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I came home.” I shrug. “That was as loud as I could be. But when I met Riley up there at the Whitmores’ place trying to save a water dragon that didn’t need saving?—”

“Let me guess.” A smile twists Ethan’s lips. “She saw the red belly and thought it was blood?”

I laugh, and warmth flows through me. “She did. When I met her, something happened inside me. Something fell away from my heart, or maybe my heart started beating again. I don’t know.

I just know being with her, talking with her, holding her hand...

I was alive. And I haven’t felt that way for three years. ”

Ethan frowns. “Does she know this?”

I grimace. “No. Maybe. I don’t know. I didn’t tell her. I mean, who falls in love that quickly?”

He grunts. “It’s been known to happen from time to time. Especially here in the Ridge. Do you know how she feels?”

I sigh. “I thought... I got the feeling she felt the same.”

“So why are you here now sitting in my living room, patting my bird, instead of being with her?”

“I heard her call herself stupid when I was leaving to head to the fire,” I say, scowling at my feet. “Asking herself why she’d just... I don’t think she knows I heard.”

Ethan’s eyebrows shoot up. “Is that it? You’re here moping when you don’t even know what she was talking about?”

“What else would she be talking about?” My gut clenches. “We spent the day

together and she called herself stupid.”

He throws up his hands. “Brother, I know I’ve been gentle with you since the accident, but you’re being a wanker right now.

You have no fucking clue what was in her head.

No fucking idea what she was talking about.

For all you know, she was calling herself stupid for not cancelling her Netflix subscription before she left the US. ”

I level my scowl at him. “I don’t think that was?—”

“But you don’t know ,” he cuts me off, leaning forward, stare direct. “And you’re too scared to find out. You spent the day with her, you slept with her, and what? You haven’t been anywhere near her since you left?” He shrugs. “Maybe Reggie is the only creature worth your love.”

I stare back at him.

“Luca,” he says, voice gentle, “you fight fires for a living. Now try something even more scary—hope.”

“ Listen, mate ,” Reggie squawks. “ Listen, mate .”

Chest tight, I straighten to my feet.

Hope.

Fuck, I hope I haven’t fucked everything up.

Chapter Eleven

Riley

My lizard is gone.

Sighing, I run my gaze over the empty railing, devoid of a reptile I've grown stupidly attached to.

Is this what my trip to Australia has been condensed to? Becoming attached to the unobtainable?

"Good grief," I mutter, dropping down onto the porch's top step and looking up at the sky. "I'm pathetic."

A blanket of stars stretches overhead, more than any I've seen at night before. I would have enjoyed getting to know those stars. And the nature here. And the beaches. And the people...

One particular person.

Gritting my teeth, I return my attention to my phone.

There are two flights leaving from Sydney tomorrow that I can afford.

And by afford, I mean I won't be eating much after the food on the plane, and I'm going to have to beg my sister—or maybe my parents—for some money when I get

back to Minnesota. At least until I find a job.

Maybe I should text Hugh?

“Good grief,” I mumble again, letting my head slump forward and my phone drop to the step between my feet, ticket unbought. “Stupid Luca Cormack, not wanting me. Stupid me, falling in love so quickly. Stupid lizard, not hanging around and being my friend.”

A hot breeze flows over me, tousling my hair and tugging at my shirt.

Lifting my head, I close my eyes and turn my face into it. It truly didn’t take me long to grow used to the smell of eucalyptus on the air. It’s so different from back home.

Home. Where is home? Not with my sister. Not with Mom or Dad. So where?

With Luca. I felt at home with him. I felt cherished with him.

“Damn it.” I shove myself to my feet, skin prickling with perspiration. I need to stop thinking about him. I need to cool off.

I turn to head inside and stop. Change my mind.

It’ll be a strange kind of emotional torture, given what he and I did in it, but I’m going to go swim in the lake instead.

Arriving at the lake, my breath catches in my throat. It’s stunning, a silver expanse of still calm reflecting the moon’s glow. It’s just waiting for me to jump in it.

I walk to the water, stripping off as I go. My shorts, my shirt, my bra, my panties.

The cool water licks around my ankles, my knees, my thighs. I let out a little gasp as it kisses my pussy, followed by a soft moan as the memory of Luca's tongue down there teases me. No, haunts me.

I am never going to be able to forget him.

When the water circles my waist, I take a deep breath, pinch my nose, and drop under the surface.

Wait. Was that someone calling my name?

Planting my feet on the silty bottom, I stand and turn to face the bank.

There, on the edge of the water, is a tall, dark shape. A silhouette.

One branding indelibly into my soul.

My heart smashes up into my throat.

“What are you doing?” Luca calls.

“Saving a lizard,” I call back.

He tilts his head. “Are you sure?”

I laugh. “No. I was actually trying to wash away the memory of an annoying Australian firefighter who I fell in love with.”

“Why wash the memory away?”

“Well, he didn't come back. I thought he didn't want me the way I wanted?—”

I stop shouting as Luca walks into the lake, clothes and all.

My heart thumps faster, and I lower myself down to my knees until my chin skims the surface. I watch him stride toward me, his body large and powerful, his hands creating tiny wakes behind him as his fingers trail across the water.

“The way you what?” he says, stopping in front of me, towering over me.

“The way I wanted him,” I whisper, eating him up with my eyes.

He gazes down at me, the moon’s reflection in the lake casting him in a pale, muted glow. “You want me?” A rough huskiness scratches his voice.

I nod. “Do you want me?”

Reaching out, he gently brushes the back of his knuckle across my cheek. “I love you, Riley. I think I fell in love with you the moment you worried about the lizard out in the windstorm. But I thought you regretted being with me. I thought... When I was leaving this afternoon, I heard you...”

He stops.

I frown.

“I heard you,” he repeats, that scratchiness to his voice thicker. “I heard you questioning what you’d done. Calling yourself stupid.”

A wave of relief washes through me. With a soft laugh, I straighten to my feet, wrap my dripping arms around his neck, and press my wet body to his. “For falling in love with you so quickly. How the hell can I leave Australia when I love you so much and you’re here?”

He smooths his arms around my waist, draws me closer to his hard frame, and lowers his head until our foreheads touch. “How about you don’t leave? How about you stay here with me?”

“Forever?” I whisper.

“Forever,” he says back.

“Can we get a pet lizard?” I ask, lips curling. “And a dog?”

“Absolute—”

I kiss him before he can finish. Because when your life is about to truly start, why wait even another second?

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am

Luca

I drop the Vegemite on toast onto a plate, grab some strawberries from where they're rinsing in a colander, and make my way from the kitchen to the room at the back of the house.

Indy, the largest mutt the rescue shelter had, pads along beside me, tail wagging.

On the way, I toss a look at the large bioactive vivarium in the living room.

Empty. Riley must have Irwin with her.

"Snacks," I announce, stepping into the study that looks more like a high-tech computer lab.

As soon as the Australian government approved Riley's work visa, she landed a job.

It turns out my girl is phenomenal at what she does.

And what she does allows her to work from home. Which is also phenomenal.

Swiveling her chair, Riley grins up at me. "Just in time," she says, reaching up to give Irwin—perched across the length of her shoulders—a scratch under his scaly neck. "Someone was getting hungry."

"Someone, eh?" I cock an eyebrow at the water dragon. Not the one from Whitmores' place, it's illegal to make a wild animal a pet, but one Riley picked as a baby to

celebrate her visa.

Now eighteen months old, Irwin rules the house. Well, as much as a lizard can. I wonder how is he going to handle the changes coming in six months.

Placing the plate in front of Riley, I bend down and brush a kiss over her rosy lips, brushing my hand over the swell of her belly. “I love you,” I say, not for the first time today. I’ve told her every day since I met her. And I still can’t tell her enough.

She smiles into my words, tangles one hand in my hair, and kisses me back. “I love you too.” Shifting on her seat, she plucks a strawberry from the plate, takes a bite, and then offers the rest to Irwin. Who regards it with utter disdain before biting it from her fingers.

“So,” I say, perching my butt on the edge of her desk and crossing my ankles. “We’ve got the house in the mountains, we’ve got the babies on the way—” twins “—we’ve got the best pets in the world—thank you, Indy and Irwin. What do you think we should do next?”

Smiling up at me, Riley shrugs. “I don’t know. Fly to Mars?”

I grin. “Or we could do this?” I say and lean over to remove one of the triangles of Vegemite toast I know she will never eat or touch.

On the plate sits a two-carat solitary diamond engagement ring.

Riley grows still. Stares at it. Stares at me. Stares at it again.

“What do you reckon?” I ask, sinking down onto one knee beside her. Indy sits beside me, tail thumping against my ankle. “Will you marry me, Riley Diaz?”

Teeth catching her bottom lip, she picks the ring up, looks back at me, and slips it onto her left ring finger, Irwin watching the whole time. “Absolute?—”

I kiss her.

Because that’s how you start the next new stage of your life.

Without fear.

Thanks for reading Summer with the Mountain Man .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am

Blue Mountain Burn: The Firefighters of Hartley Ridge, Book One

Hudson

I shuck out of my heavy fire-resistant jacket, hang it on its hook on the station house wall, and turn back to face my second-in-command. “That’s it for the night, Jake.” I drag my hands through my hair and puff out a chuckle. “I owe the crew a beer.”

Bushfire season in Australia is always rife with charged anticipation for firefighters, but here in the Blue Mountains...

Well, when you live in the most mountainous region in the country, dense with eucalyptus forests, cut with plummeting gorges and towering craggy peaks, the bushfire season is a special kind of hell.

As captain of the Hartley Ridge Fire Brigade, I ensure our weekly Monday-night drill sessions get us prepped to perfection.

“Just one?” Jake says, arching an eyebrow as he toes off his boots. “Oi, Gibbo,” he calls over his broad shoulder. “The captain’s forgotten he lost the Whitlam bet.”

Ah, crap. He’s right. I bet that Brady Whitlam, the longest-serving member of the brigade, would move to the States after he met a girl over there last Christmas.

After the nightmare fire season we had before he flew over there, I thought we’d lose him to a life outside the brigade.

Turns out, she moved to Australia instead.

Right now, Brady was on paternity leave, taking his new role as a proud dad to his baby son very seriously.

He's a braver man than I. Being in a relationship? Being a father? Hell no. Not when my life is at risk every time there's a callout. I wouldn't do that to anyone.

“What's this?” Tony Gibson, the brigade's RPAS specialist, wanders into the station house's changeroom, toweling down his damp hair.

The crew's resident tech geek and drone operator looks like he should be on the stage of a bodybuilding competition.

He lets out a low chuckle, slinging his towel over his shoulder. “The captain forgetting he lost a bet?”

I run a quick look over them both. They look exhausted. Still alert and charged up, but exhausted. Now that I think of it, the rest of the team looked the same as they were all heading off.

Hmm, maybe I pushed them too hard tonight?

I put them through a series of hazmat and compressed air foam system drills.

But with the weather bureau issuing a storm warning ninety minutes after we started, the last thing we needed was being outside if it hit.

An aerial ladder platform, rain, and lightning don't mix well.

“Alright, alright.” I strip off my T-shirt and toss it at Tony, who catches it with a grin and lobs it straight back to me. Snatching it out of the air, I snort. “My shout at the

pub next?—”

Thunder shatters the air in a deafening crack. Tony and Jake run appraising looks over the ceiling as the station house rattles.

“And we’re done,” I state. “Get home before this hits. All of us have mountain roads to drive up, and I don’t want to have to come save your arses if you get stuck somewhere.”

Jake snorts. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve seen that truck of yours.”

“Hey, don’t knock the Beast.” I laugh.

“The Beast is a relic,” Tony declares, pulling on his T-shirt. “There’s a reason you ride a motor?—”

More thunder destroys Tony’s jab at my mode of transportation. We all duck, reflexes and instincts kicking in.

“Get going,” I say. “Hopefully, the storm is all noise, and we won’t have to get the engine out.”

Jake nods. “Stay safe.” He smacks the back of his hand to Tony’s shoulder. “C’mon, Gibbo. I just remembered you parked that monstrosity of a pickup behind me.”

“Stay safe, Chief,” Tony says, slinging his laptop bag across his body.

Thunder grumbles overhead. In the distance, lightning splits the darkness, flashing through the station house’s open engine doors.

I frown. “Out of interest, do either of you know who’s looking after Mrs. Andrews’s place while she’s in hospital? And her dog?”

Jake shakes his head. “No idea.”

“I heard her niece was flying up from Melbourne.” Tony adjusts the strap of his bag. “I hope she knows how to handle Archie.”

“Me too.” Picturing the massive bullmastiff Lily Andrews spoils rotten, I make a mental note to check in on the old artist’s place before returning to work tomorrow morning.

The small town of Hartley Ridge is, despite its name, situated in an almost-as-small valley, surrounded by Mount Kissingpoint, Talisman Peak, and—in typical Australian ironic fashion—Bushrangers Flat, the craggiest, steepest mountain in the Hartley area.

The town is a slice of Australian history, established by freed convicts in the early 1800s and growing little since then.

It’s picturesque, laid-back, and a mecca for artists and artisans.

Lily Andrews, a sculptor with a massive Instagram following, lives high on the side of Mount Kissingpoint—a mile above my own place.

I like her a lot. Even if she is constantly trying to get me to model for her.

Naked.

More lightning bleaches the night in jarring pulses, followed by angry rumblings.

“Go.” I wave toward the street. “Get some downtime. Just in case.”

I don’t need to finish the sentence. Everyone knows I mean any strikes could start a fire.

With nods, Jake and Tony leave.

Stealing a moment, I stand in the open garage door beside the engine and watch the storm. It's definitely bearing down on us, and it looks pissed. God, I hope it loses steam before it reaches us.

And I hope to hell Mrs. Andrews's big-city niece does, in fact, know how to handle Archie. Otherwise, there will be a terrified bullmastiff running scared in the Kissingpoint bush, and no one in Hartley's Ridge has the stamina to deal with that.

Especially if Mrs. Andrews hears about it.

The Mountain Man's Heat

(Blue Mountain Burn: The Firefighters of Hartley Ridge , Book One)