



Sunshine and the Grumpy Groundskeeper (The Callahans of Elk Ridge #1)

Author: *Susanne Ash*

Category: Historical

Description: She's sunshine and spontaneity. He's grumpy and prefers trees to people. Too bad she keeps getting lost in his woods.

Children's book author Daisy Harper came to Mountain Laurel Lodge for one reason—to find inspiration for her next big adventure story. The only problem? She has zero survival skills, a tendency to wander off-trail, and an overly enthusiastic Yorkie mix named Rascal who causes chaos wherever he goes.

Enter Rowan Callahan, the lodge's brooding, no-nonsense groundskeeper. He prefers solitude, routine, and not rescuing city girls from the wilderness. But when Daisy's editor—a longtime lodge guest—pulls some strings, Rowan gets roped into keeping an eye on her.

She's too chatty, too cheerful, too impossible to ignore.

He's too gruff, too guarded, too ridiculously handsome for her own good.

And the more time they spend together, the harder it is to deny their growing attraction—especially when one misty mountain evening leads to an unforgettable kiss.

But Daisy isn't here to stay. She has a book to finish, a career to chase, a life waiting for her back home. And Rowan? He learned a long time ago that people always leave.

Unless, of course, she can convince him that sometimes, the best love stories are the ones you never see coming.

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Chapter One

Daisy

"This is it, Rascal. Our grand adventure begins here."

My tiny Yorkie mix gives me his signature unimpressed glance from the passenger seat, which honestly feels a bit judgmental coming from someone wearing a pink argyle sweater. I check my reflection in the rearview mirror of my car, adjusting the messy bun I'm trying to convince myself looks artistic rather than chaotic. The ribbon-festooned notebook on my dash catches my eye, filled with half-formed story ideas and character sketches that still don't feel quite right.

"Don't give me that look," I tell Rascal. "Mountain Laurel Lodge is exactly what we need. Fresh air, majestic views, adorable woodland creatures..." I trail off as a rather large deer bounds across the gravel drive ahead. "See? The universe agrees with me."

The lodge rises before us like something out of a fairy tale, all weathered wood and stacked stone, with morning mist still clinging to the mountains behind it. Pink mountain laurel blooms line the walkway, and rocking chairs dot the wraparound porch. It's perfect. Exactly the kind of place where a children's story about a brave little forest friend could come to life.

I grab my messenger bag, decorated with perhaps a few too many enamel pins of woodland creatures, and clip Rascal's leash to his harness. "Ready to be inspired?"

He sneezes, which I choose to take as enthusiasm.

The woman who greets us at the front desk has silver hair and kind eyes that crinkle when she smiles. "You must be Daisy Harper. I'm Evie Callahan. Welcome to Mountain Laurel Lodge."

"Thank you for having us." I hoist Rascal higher in my arms as he tries to investigate a potted plant. "I hope the pet policy is still in place?"

"Of course, dear. Though you might want to keep him close on the trails. We've had quite a few rabbit sightings lately."

My writer's brain immediately starts spinning tales about brave bunnies and their forest adventures. I fumble for my notebook, nearly dropping Rascal in the process. "That's actually perfect. I was hoping to do some trail walking today, you know, for research."

"Research?" Evie's eyes sparkle with interest as she hands me an old-fashioned key attached to a wooden tag.

"I'm writing a children's book." The words still feel strange in my mouth, like admitting to a dream I'm not quite sure I deserve. "About forest animals and friendship and..." I gesture vaguely at the stunning view outside. "All of this."

"How lovely." Evie's smile grows warmer. "The Maple Cabin should be perfect for you then. It's just past the activity center, with a lovely view of the wildlife trail."

An hour later, having changed into what I hope passes for hiking attire—leggings with tiny foxes printed on them, an oversized sweater, and the only boots I own that aren't strictly decorative—I stand at the trailhead with Rascal and my trusty notebook.

"Okay, buddy." I consult the trail map I grabbed from the welcome center. "We need to follow the blue blazes, whatever those are, and we'll end up at something called

Eagle Point. Easy peasy."

Rascal tilts his head at me.

"Don't start. I've read three different hiking blogs this morning. Plus, we have snacks." I pat my bag. "And my phone has full bars. We're practically survivalists."

The trail starts out well-marked, winding through towering pines and patches of wildflowers that have me stopping every few feet to scribble notes. Rascal trots along happily, only occasionally getting tangled in his leash when particularly interesting leaves catch his attention.

It's when we reach the first fork that things get interesting.

"Blue blazes," I mutter, turning in a circle. "Blue blazes, blue blazes... Rascal, do you see any blue blazes?"

My dog is too busy investigating a fascinating clump of moss to offer an opinion.

I pull out my phone to check the trail map again, only to find the signal has apparently decided that two bars is more than enough for a city girl in the woods. The path to the left looks well-traveled, which seems promising. Or was it the right path we were supposed to take?

"Left," I decide firmly. "Adventure awaits to the left."

Twenty minutes and three more "definitely correct" turns later, I'm starting to think adventure might be overrated. The trees all look the same, the path has narrowed to barely more than a game trail, and I'm fairly certain we've passed that distinctive boulder at least twice.

"Okay, don't panic," I tell Rascal, who seems completely unbothered by our predicament. "This is like writing. Sometimes you have to get a little lost before you find the right story." I flip open my notebook, because if I'm going to be hopelessly lost in the woods, I might as well get some material out of it. "Picture it. A plucky young rabbit, searching for adventure, who meets a wise old something."

A twig snaps behind me.

I whirl around, nearly tripping over Rascal's leash, to find myself face to face with what can only be described as a mountain man. Tall, broad-shouldered, and wearing enough flannel to supply a lumberjack convention, he regards me with an expression that suggests I'm the strangest thing he's seen in these woods. Given the amount of mud on his boots, he's probably seen a lot.

"Oh! Hello." I wave my notebook like a makeshift white flag. "I don't suppose you know where the blue blazes went?"

He stares at me for a long moment, then at Rascal, who has naturally decided this intimidating stranger is his new best friend, and finally at my fox-printed leggings.

"You're about half a mile off the marked trail," he says finally, his voice rough like he doesn't use it often. "In the completely wrong direction."

"Ah." I try for a winning smile. "Would you believe I meant to do that? You know, for research purposes?"

One dark eyebrow lifts slightly. "Research?"

"I'm writing a children's book about forest animals and friendship and..." This explanation sounded much better in Evie's cozy lobby. "Never mind. I don't suppose you could point me back toward civilization?"

Instead of answering, he crouches down to scratch behind Rascal's ears. My traitor of a dog melts into the attention like he's found his soulmate. "Your dog's wearing a sweater," the stranger observes, and I swear I catch a hint of amusement in his tone.

"It's his adventure outfit," I defend. "And you're wearing enough flannel to upholster a couch, so maybe we shouldn't judge each other's fashion choices?"

That actually gets me something close to a smile. Just a quick quirk of his lips, there and gone so fast I might have imagined it. He straightens up, and I realize just how much he towers over me. "Come on, city girl. Trail is this way."

"I have a name, you know. It's Daisy."

He glances back at me, those hazel-green eyes unreadable. "Rowan."

"Like the tree?"

"Like the tree."

And just like that, I'm following a stranger through the woods, my dog prancing happily between us, while my writer's brain spins tales about grumpy forest guardians and lost travelers. Not exactly how I planned to start my great mountain adventure, but then again, the best stories never go according to plan.

"So," I venture, after five solid minutes of hiking in silence, "do you often rescue helpless city girls from certain doom, or am I special?"

Rowan glances back at me, expression caught somewhere between exasperation and reluctant amusement. "You weren't in danger. You were lost."

"That's debatable. I read this romance novel once where the heroine got lost in the

woods and had to be saved by a mysterious mountain man who turned out to be?—"

"I'm not mysterious," he cuts in. "I work here."

"Aha!" I dodge a low-hanging branch he holds back for me. "So you're not a hermit living alone in a cabin, spurning society and nursing old wounds?"

He actually stops walking at that, turning to face me with those striking eyes. "What kind of books are you reading?"

"The good kind." I grin up at him, oddly delighted by the way his jaw ticks. "Though I have to say, you've got the whole brooding mountain man aesthetic down pat."

Rascal chooses this moment to tangle himself thoroughly around Rowan's legs, apparently trying to ensure his new favorite human can't escape. I bite back a laugh as Rowan carefully untangles the leash, his big hands surprisingly gentle with my ridiculous dog.

"Your dog needs training," he mutters.

"Rascal is perfectly trained. For the city." I watch as my dog immediately proves me wrong by trying to chase a squirrel, nearly faceplanting into a tree. "He's adapting."

"Like owner, like dog." Rowan catches me as I stumble over a root, his hand warm and steady on my elbow. He quickly lets go, but I can still feel the imprint of his touch. "You do know those aren't hiking boots, right?"

I glance down at my boots, which okay, might be more fashion than function. "They're boots! They're boot-shaped."

He makes a sound that might be a laugh or might be a sigh of despair. "You shouldn't

be out here alone. These trails aren't for beginners."

"I had Rascal."

"Your sweater-wearing dog who's currently trying to befriend a chipmunk?"

Sure enough, Rascal has his nose pressed to a hollow log, tail wagging furiously. I scribble quickly in my notebook. Brave forest friend makes unexpected allies...

"Are you taking notes?" Rowan sounds incredulous.

"Research, remember? This is perfect material. The grumpy forest guardian helping the lost traveler find her way..."

"I'm not—" He cuts himself off, running a hand through his already disheveled dark hair. "You need proper gear. And a real trail map. And maybe a basic understanding of wilderness survival that doesn't come from romance novels."

"Are you offering to teach me?" The words slip out before I can stop them, and I swear I see a flush creep up his neck.

"No," he says firmly, but there's something in his voice that makes me think he's trying to convince himself as much as me. "I'm telling you to stick to the marked trails. Near the lodge. With other people. There are group hikes."

We emerge from the trees near my cabin, and I'm almost disappointed our adventure is ending. "But then how would I get my research done? My editor's expecting a story about forest friends and woodland magic."

"Find a different story." He whistles sharply, and Rascal bounds over like he's been doing it his whole life. Traitor.

"Can't. The woods are part of me now." I spread my arms wide, spinning in a little circle. "I've been transformed by my near-death experience?—"

"You were half a mile from the lodge."

"—and now I must commune with nature to complete my artistic vision."

He hands me Rascal's leash, and I try not to notice how his calloused fingers brush against mine. "Please don't commune with nature without a guide."

"That sounds like an offer to me, Mr. Mysterious Mountain Man."

"It's a warning." But there's that ghost of a smile again, gone so quick I almost miss it. "And it's Rowan."

"Well, Rowan," I hug my notebook to my chest, feeling oddly bold, "thanks for the rescue. Even if you're not the reclusive hero of a romance novel."

He shakes his head, already turning to leave. "Stay on the marked trails, Daisy."

I watch him disappear back into the trees, his flannel shirt fading into the shadows of the forest. Rascal whines at his departure, and I scratch behind his ears consolingly.

"I know, buddy. But look on the bright side." I open my notebook, already filling with ideas. "I think we just found our story's grumpy forest guardian."

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Chapter Two

Rowan

"Absolutely not."

I cross my arms, leaning against the maintenance shed where I was peacefully organizing equipment before Liam tracked me down. The morning sun filters through the pines, promising another clear day perfect for working on the back trails. Perfect for avoiding chatty guests with their ridiculous dogs and even more ridiculous story ideas.

"Come on, Row." Liam gives me his best older-brother look, the one he perfected after Dad died. "It's a simple request."

"Then you do it." I grab my work gloves, fully intending to escape to the far side of the property. "You're the one who's good with guests."

"I'm needed at the lodge. Besides," he adds with infuriating logic, "you're the one who knows these trails better than anyone. Even Connor."

"That's because I maintain them. Alone. The way I like it."

"Janet McKenzie specifically asked for our help." Mom's voice makes me freeze halfway through gathering my tools. She appears in the doorway of the shed, morning light catching the silver in her hair. "You remember Janet?"

Of course I remember Janet. She used to slip me extra cookies in the lodge's restaurant when I was hiding from guests as a kid, letting me read in the quiet corner booth until I was ready to face people again.

"The editor," I say, already knowing I'm fighting a losing battle.

"Daisy's editor," Mom confirms, her eyes twinkling in a way that makes me immediately suspicious. "She's been coming here for twenty years, Rowan. When she mentioned her newest author was struggling with inspiration..."

"Mom."

"...and needed someone who really knows these mountains..."

"Mom."

"...well, I couldn't say no." She steps into the shed, straightening my flannel collar the way she has since I was small. "Janet helped us through some rough times after your father passed. Those retreat bookings she sent our way kept the lodge going that first winter."

I close my eyes, already feeling my resolve crumbling. "The woman doesn't even have proper hiking boots."

"Then teach her what she needs." Mom's hand rests on my cheek, and I lean into it despite myself. "You used to love sharing the magic of these mountains, remember? Before..."

She doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't have to. Before Dad died. Before I retreated into the quiet work of maintaining the trails. Before I decided it was easier to keep my distance from everyone except family.

"She thinks she's in a romance novel," I mutter, which makes Liam snort.

"I saw her notebook," he says. "Covered in woodland creature stickers. And that dog of hers tried to chase one of the garden rabbits this morning."

"Rascal," I say without thinking, then catch Mom's knowing look. "The dog," I clarify quickly. "Its name is Rascal."

"Mhmm." Mom examines a rack of hiking poles. "You know, Janet mentioned Daisy's been having trouble with confidence lately. Bad breakup. Ex told her writing children's books wasn't a 'real' career."

"That's not my problem."

"No," Mom agrees mildly. "But you've always been good at helping lost things find their way. Remember that baby deer?"

"I was twelve, Mom."

"And you sat with it for hours until its mother came back." She selects a hiking pole, tests its weight. "You've got a gentle heart, Rowan Callahan, no matter how much you try to hide it under all that flannel."

"She's going to get herself hurt out there," I protest, but it's weak and we all know it.

"Then keep her safe." Liam claps me on the shoulder. "Show her the right trails. Teach her what she needs to know." He pauses. "And maybe try using more than three words at a time?"

I glare at him. "I can be social."

"Sure you can, little brother." He grins. "That's why you're hiding in the maintenance shed at nine in the morning."

"I'm not hiding. I'm working."

"Of course you are." Mom holds out the hiking pole. "Janet says Daisy needs about two weeks of research. That's all we're asking. Show her the safe trails, answer her questions about the local wildlife, make sure she doesn't wander off a cliff while writing about talking squirrels or whatever it is she's working on."

"Two weeks?" I take the pole, already resigned to my fate. "That's fourteen days of keeping a city girl with no survival instincts alive in the wilderness."

"Look at it this way," Liam says, clearly enjoying this too much. "It'll give you plenty of chances to practice your people skills."

I send him a look that would wither most people, but he just laughs. Oldest brothers are immune to that sort of thing.

"She's having breakfast on the terrace," Mom says, patting my arm. "I told her you'd meet her there at ten to discuss a research schedule."

"You what?"

"And I made sure the kitchen packed extra muffins." She rises on tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "Your favorites. The blueberry ones."

"That's playing dirty, Mom."

"I prefer to think of it as using all available resources." She heads for the door, then pauses. "Oh, and Rowan? Try to smile occasionally. It won't kill you."

I watch them go, Mom's arm linked through Liam's, their heads bent together in conversation. Through the trees, I can make out the lodge's terrace, where a figure in another ridiculous sweater is sharing her slice of quiche with a certain sweater-wearing dog.

Two weeks.

I check my watch. Forty-five minutes until I have to attempt civil conversation with the walking disaster who thinks she's wandered into one of her romance novels.

Maybe I can convince her to write about something safer. Like butterflies. Or rocks.

Ten o'clock finds me standing at the edge of the terrace, watching Hurricane Daisy organize what appears to be the contents of a craft store across one of our rustic wooden tables. Colored pens spill from a woodland-themed pencil case, sticky notes flutter in the morning breeze, and at least three notebooks—all decorated with different forest animals—compete for space with her half-eaten breakfast.

"You're early!" She beams up at me like I'm a gift the universe has personally delivered. "I was getting my research setup ready."

I eye a stack of what appear to be romance novels with suspicious-looking mountain men on their covers. "Research?"

"Oh, these?" She blushes slightly, tucking them under a notebook covered in cartoon bears. "Background material. For atmosphere."

Rascal, who's been dozing in a patch of sunlight, perks up at my arrival. He bounces over, tangling himself in the legs of three different chairs before reaching me.

"Traitor," Daisy mutters as I automatically bend to scratch behind his ears. "He

usually takes days to warm up to people."

"Dogs are good judges of character." I straighten up, trying to ignore how her answering smile makes something warm unfurl in my chest. "We need to go over some basics before I let you anywhere near the trails again."

"Let me?" One eyebrow arches challengingly. "I don't actually need permission to walk in the woods, you know."

"No, but you do need a guide if you want to access the private trails." I tap the trail map spread across her table. "The ones with the best wildlife viewing spots. The ones you won't find on public maps."

She practically bounces in her seat. "There are secret trails?"

"Private," I correct, but she's already scribbling in one of her notebooks.

"The mysterious guardian of the forest protects ancient pathways..." she mutters as she writes.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking notes! This is perfect for my story. The grumpy forest spirit who?"

"I'm not a forest spirit." I drag over a chair, trying to maintain my last shred of patience. "I'm the groundskeeper. And you need proper gear before we go anywhere."

Daisy looks down at her current outfit. She's wearing another oversized sweater, this one with tiny embroidered mushrooms, and what appear to be leggings covered in constellations. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Everything." I pull out the list I made earlier. "You need real hiking boots. Moisture-wicking layers. A proper daypack with emergency supplies. A compass?—"

"I have a phone."

"Phones die. Batteries fail. Electronics aren't reliable in the backcountry."

"Backcountry?" Her eyes widen. "That sounds intense."

"It's what's beyond the marked trails." I try not to notice how the morning light brings out gold flecks in her hazel eyes. "Where the real wildlife is. Where you'll actually see the kinds of interactions you want to write about."

She leans forward eagerly, and a strand of hair escapes her messy bun. I resist the inexplicable urge to tuck it back.

"Like what?"

"Like deer teaching their fawns to forage. Fox kits playing. Bears?—"

"Bears?" Rascal's head pops up from where he's been investigating my boots.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them." I pause. "Usually."

She narrows her eyes. "Are you messing with me?"

"Would I do that?"

"Yes," she says immediately. "You absolutely would. You've got that look."

"What look?"

"That barely-there smile that means you're secretly laughing at the city girl." She props her chin on her hand. "I'm very observant, you know. It's a writer thing."

I force my expression back to neutral, ignoring the way my lips want to curve up. "Are you going to let me teach you about wilderness safety or not?"

"Fine." She pulls out a fresh notebook—this one decorated with owls—and uncaps a pen topped with a fuzzy pompom. "Teach me, O Wise Guardian of the Secret Trails."

"Private trails."

"That's what I said." She grins. "And I promise to take excellent notes. Even if you're not actually a mysterious forest spirit."

"I'm not mysterious anything."

"Says the man who literally emerged from the woods to rescue me yesterday."

"I was marking trail boundaries."

"Mhmm." She actually winks at me. "That's exactly what a mysterious forest guardian would say."

I should be annoyed. I am annoyed. But something about her infectious enthusiasm makes it hard to maintain my usual wall of gruff indifference.

"First rule," I say firmly, trying to get us back on track. "Always tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back."

She scribbles in her notebook, then holds it up to show me a doodle of what appears to be a very grumpy bear wearing flannel. "Like this?"

"Are you actually taking notes, or just drawing me as woodland creatures?"

"Both?" She adds a little trail marker to her doodle. "I'm a visual learner."

I drag a hand down my face. "This is going to be a long two weeks."

"Oh, come on." She nudges my boot with her impractical shoe. "Think how boring your day would be without me to rescue."

"Peaceful," I correct. "The word you're looking for is peaceful."

But she's already moved on, sketching what might be Rascal chasing a squirrel while simultaneously adding another sticky note to her research pile. Her energy is exhausting. And absolutely not endearing. At all.

"Second rule," I say, mostly to distract myself from the way she bites her lip when she's concentrating. "Proper gear is non-negotiable."

She looks up through her lashes. "Does this mean we're going shopping?"

"This means I'm taking you to the activity center to get properly equipped before you break an ankle in those..." I gesture at her current footwear.

"They're boots!"

"They're fashion statements with delusions of grandeur."

That startles a laugh out of her, bright and genuine, and something in my chest tightens. This is exactly what I don't need. Two weeks of sunshine and chaos disrupting my carefully ordered world.

"Fine," she says, gathering her explosion of research materials. "Lead the way, Grumpy Bear."

"Don't call me that."

"Would you prefer Mysterious Forest Spirit? Guardian of the Ancient Paths? Flannel-Clad Protector of?—"

"Rowan," I cut in. "My name is Rowan."

She falls into step beside me, Rascal prancing between us. "For now," she says with another of those dangerous smiles. "But I reserve the right to upgrade you to forest guardian status in my book."

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Chapter Three

Daisy

"And that one?" I point to a brilliant orange flower peeking through the morning mist. "Please tell me it has a dramatic name. Something like Dragon's Breath or Sunset's Kiss."

"Butterfly weed," Rowan says, not breaking his stride.

I scribble in my notebook, adding a quick sketch. "That's disappointingly practical."

"Plants don't care what we call them."

"Says you." I hurry to catch up, which is harder than it should be in my new hiking boots. They're sturdy and sensible and completely adorable, even if Rowan rolled his eyes at the pale purple laces I swapped in this morning. "Everything deserves a little magic."

He glances back at me, and I swear I catch a hint of amusement in those forest-green eyes. "Even butterfly weed?"

"Especially butterfly weed." I flip to a fresh page, already imagining the possibilities. "Maybe it's actually a rare flower that only blooms when brave little butterflies complete their first solo flight."

Rascal yips in apparent agreement, straining at his leash to investigate yet another

fascinating bush. I've already filled three pages with potential woodland characters inspired by his adventures.

"You're anthropomorphizing again," Rowan says, but there's less grump in his tone than yesterday.

"Big word for this early in the morning." I catch up to him at last, slightly out of breath. For someone who claims he's just here to keep me alive, he sets a pretty demanding pace. "And yes, I am. It's kind of my job."

He stops so suddenly I nearly run into him. "There's movement in those bushes. Watch."

I follow his gaze to where the undergrowth rustles slightly. A moment later, a small head pokes out. It's a groundhog, its whiskers twitching as it surveys its domain.

"Oh," I breathe, frantically flipping pages. "Oh, he's perfect. Look at his little face! He needs a name. And a backstory. Maybe he's the mayor of the woodland council, all proper and important..."

"You're going to scare him," Rowan whispers, but he doesn't move away when I inch closer to his side for a better view.

"Gordon," I decide. "He looks like a Gordon. Very distinguished. Probably wears a waistcoat and pocket watch when humans aren't looking."

The groundhog sits up on its haunches, and I swear it's giving me the same exasperated look Rowan usually wears. Then it spots Rascal and darts back into its burrow.

"Gordon's shy," I note, adding detail to my sketch. "Probably because he's carrying

the weight of all woodland governance on his tiny shoulders."

A sound suspiciously like a choked laugh comes from beside me. When I look up, Rowan's face is carefully neutral, but his eyes are dancing.

"What? You don't think groundhogs can be mayors?"

"I think," he says, starting down the trail again, "that you should focus on where you're putting your feet instead of making up political systems for rodents."

I follow him, adding a little top hat to Gordon's portrait. "You know, for someone who claims to dislike whimsy, you sure know a lot about these woods. Like a real-life field guide." I gasp as inspiration strikes. "Oh! You could be the mysterious narrator in my book! The voice of the forest, guiding young readers through?—"

"No."

"But—"

"Absolutely not."

"You wouldn't have to do anything," I wheedle, skipping ahead to walk backward in front of him. "Just share all your woodland wisdom. Like how you knew that cardinal was building a nest yesterday, or how you can tell which mushrooms are friendly..."

"Mushrooms aren't friendly or unfriendly. They're just funghi." But his lips twitch slightly. "And you're about to trip over that root."

Strong hands catch my elbows as I inevitably stumble. For a moment, we're close enough that I catch the scent of pine and something spicy. His soap, maybe. He steadies me but doesn't immediately let go.

"Thanks," I manage, suddenly very aware of how solid he is. "My hero."

He drops his hands like I've burned him. "You need to watch where you're going."

"Hard to do that when there's so much to see." I gesture at the forest around us, dappled in morning light. "Look at this place. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

"It's a normal forest."

"Nothing about this is normal." I spot a cluster of tiny purple flowers and dart over to investigate. "Everything here has a story. Like these little guys. They're definitely fairy tea cups."

"Wood sorrel."

"Boring. They're definitely fairy tea cups." I touch one delicate bloom. "Used for midnight ceremonies under the full moon..."

When I look up, Rowan's watching me with an expression I can't quite read. It's softer than his usual grumpiness, almost wistful.

"What?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "You really see magic in everything, don't you?"

"Don't you?" I stand, brushing dirt from my knees. "I mean, look around. How can you walk these trails every day and not see the stories?"

He's quiet for a long moment, and I wonder if I've finally pushed too far past his gruff exterior. But then he says, so quietly I almost miss it, "Mom used to say the same thing."

Something in his tone makes my heart squeeze. Before I can ask, a flash of movement catches my eye.

"Oh! Was that a rabbit? Quick, we have to follow it! It might be late for a very important date..."

Rowan groans, but he's already adjusting our course to track the rabbit. "You're exhausting, you know that?"

"You love it," I say without thinking, then feel my cheeks heat. "I mean, you know, for research purposes."

"Research. Right." Is it my imagination, or did his ears just turn pink? "Try to keep up, city girl. And stop naming the local wildlife."

"Never," I declare, already sketching the rabbit's potential tea party attire. "Every creature needs a name. Even grumpy forest guardians who pretend not to believe in magic."

This time I definitely hear him laugh, just a quick huff of amusement, but it feels like victory. Rascal barks happily, as if celebrating my success in cracking Rowan's facade.

"Come on," he says, but the grumpiness sounds forced now. "There's a clearing ahead where we sometimes see deer."

"Ooh, perfect! I need to interview some of Gordon's constituents about his mayorial policies..."

"Daisy."

"Yes, O Serious One?"

He looks skyward like he's praying for patience. "Try not to fall into any more holes while politically polling the wildlife."

"No promises!" I sing-song, already imagining the deer's elaborate voting system. "But that's why I have you, right? My very own wilderness guide and walking field guide and?—"

"And someone who's seriously reconsidering his life choices," he mutters, but I catch that ghost of a smile again.

"You know what this clearing needs?" I tap my pen against my notebook thoughtfully. "A fairy ring. You know, those circles of mushrooms where magical creatures dance under the moonlight?"

"What it needs," Rowan says with exaggerated patience, "is for you to stay on the path I showed you."

"But the lighting is so much better over there." I point to a patch of sunlight dancing through the leaves. "Perfect for sketching. And Rascal wants to explore too, don't you buddy?"

My dog's already straining toward the inviting grass, tail wagging hopefully. Before Rowan can protest, I follow Rascal's lead, picking my way through what looks like perfectly innocent undergrowth.

"Daisy." Rowan's voice carries that special tone of exasperation he seems to reserve just for me. "That's not?—"

The ground suddenly turns squishy under my new boots. "Oh!" I take another step

and feel the earth give way. "Definitely not solid!"

"That's what I was trying to tell you." Rowan's already moving toward us, looking thoroughly done with my existence. "It's a seasonal creek bed. The ground's still saturated from?—"

Rascal chooses this moment to spot something fascinating in the bushes. He lunges forward, yanking the leash from my surprised grip. I wobble, arms windmilling, and then?—

"Eep!"

Strong arms catch me as my feet slide out from under me. For a brief, mortifying moment, I'm pressed against Rowan's chest, my hands clutching his flannel shirt while my boots make sad squelching noises in the mud.

"Are you physically incapable of following directions?" He steadies me but doesn't immediately let go, probably because I'm still swaying like a drunk penguin. "Or do you just enjoy testing my reflexes?"

"Would you believe me if I said this was for research?" I try for an innocent smile. "You know, experiencing nature up close and personal?"

He makes that sound that's half groan, half laugh. "The only thing you're experiencing is mud. He looks over my shoulder and sighs heavily. "Your dog is tangled in brambles."

Sure enough, Rascal's managed to weave himself into what looks like the world's most complicated macramé project, his leash creating an impressive web through thorny bushes. He gives us his best 'I regret nothing' expression, tail still wagging.

"Oh, sweetie." I take a step toward him and nearly slip again.

"Stay." Rowan's command freezes me in place. "Don't move. At all. Let me handle this before you both end up requiring actual rescue."

I watch as he carefully picks his way through the boggy ground, moving with an ease that makes me deeply jealous. He reaches Rascal and starts gently working him free, those big hands impossibly careful with my tiny dog.

"You're kind of good at this," I observe, unable to help myself. "The whole rescuing thing. Very heroic. Like a rugged mountain version of a knight in shining?—"

"If you finish that sentence with 'armor,' I'm leaving you both out here."

"Flannel," I amend, grinning. "I was going to say flannel."

He shoots me a look that probably sends bears running for cover, but I notice he's still being incredibly gentle as he untangles Rascal's leash from the brambles.

"There should be a warning sign," I say, partly to distract myself from how attractive his competence is. "You know, 'Beware of Deceptively Squishy Ground' or 'Here There Be Mud' or?—"

"There is a sign." He points to a marker I definitely didn't notice earlier. "And a clearly marked path. Which you ignored."

"In my defense, the light really is better over here."

"The light." He finally frees Rascal, who immediately tries to chase a butterfly. "You left the safe, dry path for better light."

"I'm an artist! Light is important for capturing the magic of the forest. Why are you looking at me like that?"

His expression is caught somewhere between disbelief and resignation. "I've known you for exactly three days, and I've already had to rescue you from getting lost, falling down a ravine, and now drowning in mud. How are you still alive?"

"Luck and charm?" I offer brightly. When his frown deepens, I add, "And apparently a very dedicated wilderness guide with excellent reflexes?"

He mutters something that sounds suspiciously like a prayer for patience. "Back to the path. Now. And this time, try to remember that nature isn't actually a storybook setting. It's real, and occasionally dangerous, and—are you writing this down?"

I pause in my frantic scribbling. "Sorry! It's just that the way you said that was perfect. All growly and protective. My readers will love it when the forest guardian warns the young animals about?—"

"I'm not going in your book."

"You kind of already are." I hold up my sketch of a particularly grumpy-looking bear wearing flannel and hiking boots. "See? I captured your essence perfectly."

For a moment, I think I've finally pushed him too far. But then I catch it. That tiny quirk of his lips that he tries so hard to suppress.

"The path," he says firmly, holding out his hand to help me back to solid ground. "Now."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Forest Guardian, sir!" I salute with my pen, then promptly stumble again as my mud-caked boot slides.

He catches me—again—with a sigh that seems to come from his very soul. "Two weeks," I hear him mutter. "I have to keep her alive for two weeks."

"That's the spirit!" I chirp, secretly delighting in the way his eye twitches. "Though I should warn you, I haven't even started on the chapter about nighttime forest adventures yet."

The look of horror that crosses his face is absolutely worth the lecture about proper trail etiquette that follows. Besides, I think as I add a little more detail to my grumpy bear sketch, he's kind of adorable when he's being all serious and protective.

Not that I'll tell him that.

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Chapter Four

Rowan

The early morning quiet of the maintenance shed is usually my sanctuary. Today, it's failing miserably at its one job. I'm trying to focus on repairing trail markers, but my mind keeps wandering to ridiculous sketches of bears in flannel and the way certain hazel eyes light up at the sight of every single woodland creature.

"There you are."

I look up to find Mom in the doorway, holding two steaming mugs. The scent of her signature hot chocolate—the real kind, with melted dark chocolate and a hint of cinnamon—fills the small space.

"I'm working," I say, but I'm already clearing space on my workbench.

"I can see that." She sets down the mugs and picks up one of my finished trail markers, running her fingers over the freshly painted blaze. "Though I notice these are for the east trail. Near Daisy's cabin."

"Those trails needed maintenance."

"Mhmm." She perches on my work stool, wrapping her hands around her mug. "Like the steps to her cabin needed reinforcing yesterday? And the path to her favorite sketching spot needed clearing this morning?"

I focus very intently on my work. "It's my job."

"Of course it is, sweetheart." Her tone is gentle in a way that makes me want to escape into the woods. "Just like it was your job to leave those hiking guidelines on her porch? With the wilderness safety manual?"

"She's going to get herself killed," I mutter, but it sounds weak even to my ears.

"She reminds me of someone, you know." Mom takes a sip of her chocolate. "Another dreamer who saw magic in these mountains. Who used to name all the animals and make up stories about them."

"I was eight."

"You were beautiful." She touches my arm, and I finally meet her eyes. "You still are, when you let yourself be."

I set down my tools with a sigh. "Mom..."

"I know, I know. You're all grown up and serious now. The practical son. The reliable one." She gestures at the perfectly organized shed. "But honey, not everyone needs to be practical all the time. Some people see the world differently. And that's not a bad thing."

"It is when they're wandering off trails and trying to interview groundhogs."

"Ah yes, Gordon the Mayor." Her eyes twinkle. "Liam told me about that. Said it was the first time he's heard you laugh in months."

"I didn't—" I stop at her knowing look. "It wasn't a laugh. It was a sound of exasperation."

"Right." She picks up one of my trail markers again. "You know, these are different from your usual ones. More detailed. Almost artistic."

I don't tell her I spent extra time on them after Daisy mentioned having trouble following the standard blazes. That I added more distinctive shapes and brighter colors, thinking about how her face lights up at anything vibrant or whimsical.

"They're just markers."

"And that collection of wildflower guidebooks you borrowed from the library? Light reading?"

Heat creeps up my neck. "She needs to know which plants are safe."

"And the fact that you spent an hour with Rascal this morning, working on basic trail commands?"

"That dog is a menace to himself and others."

"That dog adores you." She sets down her mug. "And his owner seems pretty fond of you too."

"Mom." Warning creeps into my tone.

"I know, I know. You're not interested. You've got your walls up nice and high after what happened with?—"

"Don't."

She sighs. "Rowan, sweetheart. Not everyone leaves."

"Heather did." The words come out before I can stop them.

"Heather," Mom says carefully, "was never meant for mountain life. She made that very clear when she took that job in the city."

"After promising she loved it here. After saying she understood what the lodge meant to us." I grab my tools again, needing something to do with my hands. "After making me think..."

"Not everyone sees magic the way Daisy does," Mom says softly. "Some people just see trees and dirt and a life that's too quiet for them. But some people..." She gestures out the door, where Daisy's bright laugh carries from somewhere near the garden. "Some people see exactly what you used to see. Before you decided it was safer not to look."

"I have work to do."

"Yes, you do." She stands, pressing a kiss to my temple like she did when I was small. "But maybe it's not the kind you think."

She's almost to the door when I blurt out, "I made him a sweater."

She turns back. "What?"

"Rascal. He was shivering this morning when Daisy brought him out for his walk. I found an old baby sweater in the lost and found. Modified it a bit." I duck my head, fighting a smile at the memory of the tiny dog's excited wiggling as I fitted it on him. "It's practical. For safety. Can't have him getting sick and making Daisy worry..."

When I look up, Mom's giving me that soft look that makes me feel about five years old again.

"Don't," I warn.

"I didn't say anything." But her smile says plenty. "Though I did notice you used the purple yarn. The color Daisy said was her favorite when she was admiring my knitting yesterday."

"Pure coincidence."

"Of course." She pauses at the door. "You know, some people are worth lowering those walls for. Even if it's scary. Even if you're not sure they'll stay."

Late afternoon finds me hauling lumber to a small clearing off the east trail, definitely not thinking about how Daisy's face lights up every time she spots wildlife. The fact that this happens to be where deer often graze in the early morning is purely coincidental.

"That's an interesting project."

I nearly drop the boards at Connor's voice. My brother leans against a tree, looking far too amused for my comfort.

"It's maintenance," I mutter, resuming my work on what will eventually be a small viewing blind, carefully positioned to be unobtrusive while offering clear sightlines to the meadow.

"Maintenance, huh?" Connor pushes off the tree to help me position a beam. "You know, if Daisy needs help with wildlife observation, that's kind of my department. I could take her out on one of my guided tours."

The board I'm holding creaks under my suddenly tight grip. "She's fine."

"She tried to follow a deer yesterday, Row."

"Which is why I'm restoring the old blind." I focus on securing a joint, refusing to acknowledge the heat creeping up my neck. "Safe distance. Clear sight lines. Proper precautions."

"Right." Connor hands me another board. "And the new butterfly garden outside her cabin? That's for safety too?"

"The lodge needs more pollinator-friendly areas."

"And the detailed trail markers you spent hours on?"

"Regular maintenance."

A delighted laugh carries through the trees, followed by excited barking. We both turn to see Daisy in the distance, crouched down with her notebook as she watches a family of rabbits. She's wearing that ridiculous sweater covered in tiny foxes, and Rascal's sporting his new purple outfit, and I'm definitely not noticing how the late afternoon light catches the gold in her hair.

"You know," Connor says carefully, "I really could take over showing her around. It's literally my job, little brother. Let you get back to your actual maintenance work."

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intend.

"No?"

"She's..." I search for a reasonable explanation that isn't 'I don't want her looking at the woods with anyone else.' "She's already built a rapport with me. Plus, I have a good feel for what she's looking for. Changing guides now would be inefficient."

"Inefficient," Connor repeats, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "That's what we're calling it?"

I shoot him a glare that would send most people running. Connor just grins.

"You know what I think?" He picks up another board, helping me angle it into place. "I think you like that she sees these trails differently. That she makes up stories about every animal she spots. That she's got our practical groundskeeper building wildlife blinds and planting butterfly gardens..."

"If you have time to stand here theorizing, you have time to help me finish this properly."

"Sure." Connor's voice softens. "But Row? She's good for you. I haven't seen you this invested in anything since..."

"She's only here for two weeks," I cut in, driving a nail with perhaps more force than necessary.

"Maybe." Connor steps back to survey our work. "Or maybe some people are worth building wildlife blinds for. Even if you're not sure they'll stay."

"You've been talking to Mom."

"I've been watching my brother come alive again."

I'm saved from responding by more excited barking. Through the trees, I can see Daisy spinning in a patch of sunlight, arms spread wide as butterflies dance around her new garden. She looks like something from a fairy tale, all joy and light and impossible dreams.

"Shut up," I tell Connor, who hasn't said anything but is radiating smugness.

"Didn't say a word." He starts gathering his tools, then pauses. "But if you change your mind about the guided tours..."

"I won't."

"Yeah," he says with a knowing smile. "That's what I figured."

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Chapter Five

Daisy

"O kay, I'm ready to be serious." I adjust my new hiking boots, making sure the practical purple laces are double-knotted. "Teach me your woodland wisdom, O Wise One."

Rowan's expression does that thing where he's trying not to smile but can't quite help it. "Are you actually going to listen this time? Or are you going to run off chasing squirrels with your dog again?"

"That was one time!" I protest. "And it was a very distinguished-looking squirrel. Probably Gordon's chief of staff or something..."

"Daisy."

"Right. Sorry. Being serious now." I straighten my shoulders and give him my best attentive student look. "Trail blazes. Important safety things. No squirrel chasing."

He studies me for a moment, like he's trying to gauge my sincerity. Something in my expression must convince him because his stance softens slightly.

"Think of trail markers like..." He pauses, then says, "Like chapters in a story."

My head snaps up. Did Rowan Callahan just use a writing metaphor?

"Each blaze tells you what's coming next," he continues, leading me to the trailhead. "Two stacked marks mean the trail's about to change direction. A single mark means you're on the right path. Think of them as..." Another pause. "Like punctuation for the forest."

"Punctuation for the forest," I repeat softly, something warm unfurling in my chest. He's speaking my language.

"This one here." He touches a blue mark on a tree. "What's it telling you?"

I step closer, actually looking at the mark instead of just assuming it's decorative like I usually do. "It's angled? Like it's pointing right?"

"Good." There's approval in his voice that makes me stand a little straighter. "And what does that mean?"

"That the trail turns right?"

"See?" His lips quirk up. "You can do this when you're not distracted by making up political hierarchies for the local wildlife."

I stick my tongue out at him, but I'm already scanning for the next marker. "There! Another blue one. But this one's straight up and down."

"Which means?"

"Keep going straight?"

He nods, and I actually feel proud of myself. Who knew there was a whole secret language written on the trees?

"Show me more?" I ask, and something in my tone makes him really look at me.

"You're actually interested in this."

"Of course I am. It's like..." I wave my hands, trying to find the words. "It's like the forest is telling us a story. We just have to learn how to read it."

For a moment, Rowan's quiet. Then, so softly I almost miss it, "That's exactly what my dad used to say."

Oh.

Before I can respond, Rascal lets out an excited yip. A deer has appeared on the trail ahead, watching us with gentle curiosity.

"Don't move," Rowan whispers, scoping up Rascal. For once, I'm not thinking about chasing after the wildlife. I'm watching how still Rowan becomes, how his presence somehow both commands attention and fades into the forest. The deer holds his gaze for a long moment before gracefully disappearing into the undergrowth.

"That was amazing," I breathe.

"You're learning." He sounds pleased. "Yesterday you would have tried to interview it about local government."

"Well, I'm sure it had very important opinions about forest infrastructure," I say primly, but I'm grinning. "Seriously though, how do you do that? Become so still?"

"Practice." He starts walking again, but his pace is slower, more deliberate. "It's about respect. Understanding that we're guests here. That everything in these woods has its own story, even without us making up tales about them."

I scribble quickly in my notebook, not character ideas this time, but actual notes about trail reading and forest etiquette. When I look up, Rowan's watching me with an expression I can't quite read.

"What?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "You're full of surprises, city girl."

"Good ones, I hope?"

Something flickers in his eyes, but before he can respond, I spot another trail marker.

"Oh! This one has two marks, but they're offset. Does that mean...?"

"Trail junction ahead," he confirms, and if his voice is a little rough, I pretend not to notice. "Want to try leading for a while? See if you can follow the story?"

"Really?"

He gestures ahead. "Show me what you've learned."

I take the lead, Rascal trotting happily beside me, actually staying on the trail for once. Every few minutes, I find myself looking back at Rowan, making sure I'm reading the signs correctly. Each time, he gives me a small nod that feels like victory.

"You know," I say as I correctly identify another marker, "for someone who claims to dislike whimsy, you're pretty good at making this magical."

"I don't dislike whimsy," he says quietly. "I just forgot how to see it for a while."

Something about the way he says it makes me want to hug him, but I'm pretty sure that would send him running for the hills. Instead, I focus on the next marker,

determined to prove I can learn his language while teaching him to remember mine.

After all, the best stories have both structure and magic. Maybe trails do too.

"I can't believe I read that whole section of trail correctly." I'm practically bouncing as we reach the overlook, still high on my newfound trail-reading abilities. "I'm basically a forest expert now. A trail whisperer. A?—"

"Don't push it." But Rowan's tone lacks its usual gruffness. "You did do better than I expected."

"Such high praise." I pull out my notebook, settling on a fallen log. "Really though, thank you for teaching me. Want to see how you've inspired my story?"

He hesitates, and for a moment I think he'll refuse. But then he sits beside me, carefully leaving space between us. "Show me."

"Okay, so there's this young rabbit who's learning about forest paths from a wise old bear..." I flip through my sketches, very aware of his warmth beside me.

The first drops hit my notebook before I register the darkening sky.

"Storm's coming." Rowan's already standing, scanning the area. "We need to find shelter."

I barely have time to stuff my notebook in my backpack before the sky opens up. Summer rain pours through the canopy, surprisingly cold, and Rascal lets out an indignant yelp.

"Here." Rowan catches my elbow, guiding me toward a rocky overhang. We duck under just as thunder rumbles overhead.

The space is cozy. I'm suddenly very aware of how close we're standing, how Rowan's hand is still on my arm, how he smells like pine and rain and something spicy I can't quite identify.

"Your notebook's getting wet," he says softly.

I look down to where water is indeed seeping through my bag onto my precious story notes. "Oh no?—"

"Let me." He carefully takes the notebook, his hands steady as he helps me separate the damp pages. "We can salvage it if we act fast."

We work in silence, but I'm hyper-aware of every brush of his fingers against mine, every shared breath in our small shelter. Water drips from his dark hair, trailing down his neck, and I find myself following the path with my eyes.

"Here." His voice is rougher than usual as he hands me the last page. Our fingers touch, and neither of us pulls away immediately.

Something shifts in the air between us.

Rowan's eyes meet mine, and I forget about the rain, the thunder, everything except how the green in his eyes has darkened to forest shadows. His free hand moves, almost like he's going to brush back the wet strands of hair clinging to my cheek.

Rascal chooses this exact moment to shake himself vigorously, spraying us both with dog-scented water.

"Rascal!" I sputter, but I'm laughing, the tension broken but not forgotten.

"Your dog," Rowan mutters, but there's no heat in it. He's watching me with that

unreadable expression again, the one that makes my heart do complicated things.

"Sorry about your shirt." I gesture at the wet flannel now decorated with muddy paw prints where Rascal's leaning against him.

"I've had worse." His voice is still rough around the edges. Then, surprising me, he reaches out and does tuck that strand of hair behind my ear, his touch whisper-soft. "There was a leaf."

"Oh." Is it my imagination, or do his fingers linger for just a moment? "Thanks."

The rain starts to ease, but neither of us moves. There's something fragile in the air, like we're both aware that something's changed but aren't quite ready to acknowledge it.

Finally, Rowan clears his throat. "We should head back before the next wave hits."

"Right. Yes. Good idea." I gather my somewhat-salvaged notebook, very conscious of his presence as he helps me with my bag.

We walk back in comfortable silence, broken only by Rascal's happy splashing through puddles. Every so often, our hands brush, and each time feels deliberate in a way it hadn't before.

Before we reach my cabin, Rowan says quietly, "Your story."

"Hmm?"

"The one about the rabbit learning the trails." He keeps his eyes ahead. "I'd like to hear the rest sometime."

My heart does a little skip. "Really?"

He nods once, and I swear I catch the ghost of a smile.

"Well then," I say, hugging my damp notebook to my chest, "I guess we'll have to go hiking again tomorrow. For research purposes, of course. So I can finish it."

"Of course." This time I definitely see the smile, small but real. "Purely educational."

"Purely," I agree.

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Chapter Six

Rowan

The loose shutter isn't my problem. It's for Max to fix.

I can hear it banging in the morning breeze as I check the trails near Daisy's cabin. It's not part of my morning maintenance route. I don't need to investigate the sound of wood hitting wood, or the frustrated muttering that follows.

I make it exactly ten steps past her cabin before I turn back.

"Come on, you stubborn thing." Daisy's balanced precariously on a wooden chair she's dragged outside, trying to reach the shutter with what appears to be a soup ladle. "Just... stay... put..."

"What are you doing?"

She startles at my voice, wobbling dangerously. Before I can think, I'm there, hands steadying her waist as she regains her balance.

"Oh! Hi." She beams down at me like I'm a pleasant surprise rather than a grouchy interruption. "I was trying to fix this. It kept banging all night, and I didn't want to bother anyone, and I found this ladle in the kitchen drawer..."

"Get down."

"But I almost had it!"

"Daisy." My hands are still on her waist. I realize this at the same moment she does, judging by the slight catch in her breath. "Please get down before you fall and crack your head open."

"My hero," she says with a grin, but she lets me help her down. "Always saving me from myself."

"Someone has to." I'm still standing too close. I should step back. I don't. "Why didn't you just report the loose shutter? We have someone to deal with this stuff."

"I didn't want to be a bother." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, a nervous gesture I definitely haven't noticed before. "Besides, I almost had it."

"With a soup ladle."

"I was being creative!"

I catch myself almost smiling and quickly turn to examine the shutter. "Let me fix it properly."

"You don't have to?—"

"I know." The words come out softer than I intend. I clear my throat. "Go do whatever it is you do in the mornings. Chase butterflies. Interview squirrels. I've got this."

She disappears inside, but moments later, the cabin door opens again. "I brought you coffee. And company."

Rascal bounds out to supervise my work, his purple sweater slightly askew. The coffee, when I take it, is exactly how I like it. Black, no sugar. I have no idea how she knows that.

"The shutter's not the only thing that needs attention," she says, settling on the porch steps with her ever-present notebook. "The screen door sticks sometimes, and there's this weird creaking sound when?—"

"Why didn't you tell the front desk any of this?"

She shrugs, suddenly very interested in her coffee cup. "I told you. I didn't want to be a bother."

Something in her tone makes me really look at her. "Who made you feel like you were a bother?"

"What? No one. I just..." She traces the rim of her cup. "My ex used to say I was too much. Too chatty, too dreamy, too..."

"Too what?"

"Impractical." She attempts a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "He said my writing was just a hobby I needed to grow out of."

My hands tighten on my tools. "Sounds like a fool."

That startles a real laugh out of her. "Rowan Callahan, did you just defend my impracticality?"

"No." I focus on the shutter, ignoring how her laugh warms something in my chest. "I just hate people who dim other people's light."

The words slip out before I can stop them. When I glance back, she's watching me with an expression that makes it hard to breathe.

"I'm going to check that screen door," I say quickly. "And then you're going to tell me about every single thing that needs fixing. No more soup ladle repairs."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" she asks.

"The only adventure you need right now is learning to file a maintenance request," I grumble, testing the door's hinges, too aware of her presence behind me. "Like a normal person."

"Where's the fun in that?" Her voice is closer now, and I can smell her jasmine shampoo. "Normal is boring."

"Normal keeps you from falling off chairs while attacking shutters with kitchen utensils."

"You're kind of sweet, you know that?"

I fumble my screwdriver. "I'm practical."

"Mhmm." I can hear the smile in her voice. "That's why you carved little animals into my trail markers?"

"I didn't—that's not—" I turn to find her grinning at me. "Those are standard trail blazes."

"With tiny rabbits and deer worked into the designs? Very standard."

"Do you want your door fixed or not?"

She mimes locking her lips, but her eyes are dancing with mirth. I turn back to my work, trying to ignore how the morning sun catches the gold in her hair, how her presence makes the air feel charged with possibility.

The door doesn't really need much work. I find myself checking everything anyway—the hinges, the latch, the weather stripping. Anything to stay in her orbit a little longer.

"There," I say finally, running out of things to fix. "Try it now."

She does, the door opening smoothly. "My hero," she says again, but this time it's soft, sincere.

"Just doing my job." But I'm still standing too close, still caught in the gravity of her smile.

"Rowan?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you. For fixing things. For not making me feel like..." She gestures vaguely. "Too much."

Words stick in my throat. Before I can untangle them, Rascal squeezes between us, demanding attention.

"I should go." I gather my tools, needing to escape before I do something stupid like tell her she could never be too much. That she's exactly right. That she makes these woods feel more magical than they have in years.

"See you for our research hike later?"

I make the mistake of looking at her. She's backlit by morning sun, Rascal cradled in her arms, hope bright in her eyes.

"Yeah," I manage. "Later."

"Earth to Rowan." Liam's voice cuts through my thoughts. "You planning to eat that pot roast, or keep rearranging it?"

I blink down at my plate, realizing I've been pushing the same piece of meat around for the past five minutes. The family dining room buzzes with its usual chaos. Connor describes his latest hiking tour, Declan argues with Jameson about proper marshmallow roasting technique for tomorrow's bonfire, and Mom watches us all with quiet amusement.

"He's been like this all day," Connor says, reaching for another roll. "Barely heard a word I said about the new trail markers."

"I heard you." I didn't.

"Really?" Connor grins. "So you're okay with me taking over Daisy's trail orientation?"

My head snaps up. "What?"

"There it is." Liam laughs. "Mention Daisy and he suddenly remembers how to pay attention."

"That's not—" I stab at my pot roast with more force than necessary. "I was thinking about maintenance schedules."

"Sure you were." Connor's eyes dance with mischief. "That's why you spent an hour

this morning fixing a five-minute shutter problem."

Heat creeps up my neck. "How did you?—"

"I have eyes, little brother." He grins. "And you're not exactly subtle when you're building things for pretty writers."

"I wasn't building anything. It was routine maintenance."

"And not Max's job?" Liam asks innocently. "Last I heard, he was still in charge of maintenance."

"Don't you have actual work to do?" I cut in. "Like running this place?"

"This is more fun."

I turn to Mom for help, but she's hiding a smile behind her water glass. Traitor.

"You know," Declan pipes up, "she really liked those berry scones this morning. The ones you specifically asked me to make?—"

"That was for all the guests."

"Right." Declan nods solemnly. "All the guests. Which is why you wanted to know if they were her favorite kind, and if I could make extra?—"

"I'm done." I push back from the table, but Mom's hand on my arm stops me.

"Sit," she says softly. "Let your brothers have their fun. They only tease because they're happy for you."

"There's nothing to be happy about."

But I sink back into my chair, trying very hard not to look out the window where I can see Daisy on the terrace, sketching in the evening light. She's wearing that ridiculous sweater with the tiny mushrooms, and Rascal's curled up in her lap. She's probably writing more stories about woodland mayors and fairy rings and...

"Oh, he's got it bad," Connor stage-whispers.

"Shut up."

"Make me."

"Boys." Mom's voice holds a warning, but her eyes are soft when she looks at me.

"Leave your brother alone. He'll figure it out in his own time."

"Figure what out?" But the words taste like ash because I already know.

I know it in the way my chest tightens when she laughs. In how I keep finding excuses to check the trails near her cabin. In the way I've memorized how she takes her coffee. One sugar, too much cream, usually half-forgotten somewhere while she chases her latest story idea.

"She's only here for another week and a half," I say, more to myself than them.

The table goes quiet. Mom's hand finds mine under the table.

"Row..." Liam starts.

"Don't." I push back from the table again, and this time no one stops me. "I've got work to do."

Through the window, I can see Daisy showing something in her notebook to Rascal, her whole face lit up as she presumably reads him her latest story. She's sunshine and chaos and everything I can't afford to want.

"She's not Heather," Mom says quietly.

"No." I grab my work gloves. "She's worse. At least Heather was honest about not wanting this life." I swallow hard. "Daisy makes me wish for impossible things."

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Chapter Seven

Daisy

"The writing's going really well." I curl up in my favorite spot near the butterfly garden, phone pressed to my ear. "Rowan showed me this amazing clearing where deer come to graze, and the way they move through the morning mist is just perfect for the scene where?—"

"Rowan again?" Janet's knowing tone makes me pause mid-sentence. "That's the fourth time you've mentioned him in this call alone."

"Is it?" I watch a monarch butterfly dance through the flowers he planted. The ones that just happened to appear outside my cabin. "He's been helping with research."

"Mhmm." I can practically hear Janet's smile. "And how's that going? Besides the apparently fascinating groundskeeper?"

"He's not—" I catch myself. "The research is great. I've learned so much about the woods and the animals and..." I trail off, realizing I'm about to mention Rowan again.

"Your voice changes when you talk about him," Janet observes gently. "Gets all soft and nervous. Like you're trying not to smile."

"That's not—" But my reflection in my phone screen betrays me. I am smiling. "He's just been really helpful."

"Daisy." Janet's voice softens. "I've known you since you were teaching third grade and sneaking writing time during recess. I know that tone."

"What tone? There's no tone."

"The same tone you used to get talking about your dreams of writing. Like you're afraid to want something too much."

I pull my knees to my chest, watching Rascal chase leaves in his purple sweater. "It doesn't matter. I'm only here for research. Ten more days and then..."

"And then what?"

"And then I go back home. Finish the book. Do the publicity circuit you've lined up." My throat feels tight. "Everything we planned."

"Plans can change."

"Janet—"

"I'm just saying, I haven't heard you this excited about anything since before Derek told you writing children's books wasn't a 'real career.'"

The memory of Derek's dismissive tone still stings, but not as much as it used to. Not since Rowan looked at my sketches of Gordon the Mayor and actually smiled. Not since he started carving tiny animals into trail markers just to make me laugh.

"The lodge is having a bonfire tonight," I say instead of addressing her point. "I thought I might read some of the new pages, get feedback from the guests."

"Now that's the Daisy I remember." Janet's smile is back. "The one who used to read

to her class with all the funny voices. Before you started doubting yourself."

"I don't doubt?—"

"You do. Ever since Derek. But something's different now." She pauses. "Or someone."

"He carved animals into trail markers for me," I whisper, like a confession. "He pretends to be all grumpy and practical, but he makes the magic feel real."

"Oh, honey."

"I know." I press my forehead to my knees. "I know, okay? I know I'm only here temporarily. I know he's got walls up higher than these mountains. I know this isn't..."

"What if it could be?"

"What?"

"What if it could be more?" Janet's voice is gentle.

My heart stutters. "Janet..."

"Sometimes the best stories aren't the ones we plan." A pause. "Your deadline's not set in stone, you know. If you needed more time for research."

I watch another butterfly land on the flowers Rowan planted.

"I should go," I say. "Need to get ready for the bonfire."

"Daisy?" Janet's voice stops me before I hang up. "Don't let Derek's voice in your

head convince you that you don't deserve a little magic. In your writing or your life."

I end the call and flop back onto the grass, staring up at the mountain sky. Rascal abandons his leaves to curl up beside me, his purple sweater a testament to all the ways Rowan pretends not to care.

"I'm in trouble, buddy," I tell my dog, who responds by licking my chin. "Big, grumpy, flannel-wearing trouble."

In the distance, I hear the solid thunk of an axe. Rowan's probably chopping wood for tonight's bonfire, being all competent and capable and pretending he doesn't notice how I watch him when he works.

Ten more days.

I press my hands to my eyes, trying to silence the voice that sounds suspiciously like Janet asking "what if?"

Because "what if" is dangerous. "What if" makes me notice how the sun catches green and gold in Rowan's eyes. How his rare smiles feel like secrets meant just for me. How these mountains are starting to feel more like home than my city apartment ever did.

"Come on." I scratch Rascal's ears, trying to shake off the weight of realization. "Let's go get ready for the bonfire. Maybe we can convince your favorite grumpy human to actually sit with us tonight instead of lurking in the shadows."

The fire crackles, sending sparks dancing into the twilight sky. Lodge guests gather around with mugs of hot chocolate while I watch Rowan methodically stack firewood in the shadows, precise and careful even in this simple task. He moves like someone used to staying just outside the circle of light, of warmth, of connection.

"Who wants to hear about the time Dad accidentally set his boots on fire trying to impress Mom?" Connor settles onto a log with his guitar, grinning as the guests lean forward eagerly.

"That's not how it happened," Evie calls from where she's helping little Emma make the perfect s'more. "He was trying to prove he could juggle fiery marshmallow sticks."

"Because you said wilderness guides should be coordinated," Liam adds with a laugh.

"And romantic," Evie's eyes twinkle. "Though I'm not sure third-degree marshmallow burns were quite what I had in mind."

The guests laugh, and Connor launches into the full story, complete with dramatic guitar accompaniment. I notice Rowan pause in his work, just for a moment, at the mention of his father. There's something soft in his expression, visible even in the flickering light.

More stories follow. Jameson tells about the time they found a bear cub in the activity center. A honeymooning couple shares their engagement story. Even shy Mr. Peterson from the corner cabin offers a tale about his first camping trip.

"What about you?" Connor nods to me during a break between songs. "Got any stories to share?"

I clutch my notebook tighter. "Oh, I don't know..."

"Please?" Emma pipes up from her spot by the fire. "Mom says you write children's books. I love stories!"

In the shadows, Rowan has gone very still.

"Well..." I flip through my pages. "I have been working on something new. About the forest."

"The one about the rabbit?" Connor's eyes flick to his brother. "And the grumpy bear who helps her?"

Heat creeps into my cheeks. "It's still pretty rough."

"Those are the best kind of stories," Evie says gently. "The ones that are still finding their way."

Something about her tone gives me courage. I begin reading, telling them about the little rabbit who keeps getting lost until a quiet bear teaches her to read the forest's secret language. As I read, I feel Rowan drift closer, like he's being pulled against his will.

"Some animals said she didn't belong in the woods," my voice catches slightly. "That she should stick to safer paths, more sensible dreams..."

"Like writing children's books?" Emma asks innocently.

I swallow hard. "Yeah. Like that. My ex... he used to say I was silly for thinking I could make a career of it. That I should focus on more practical things."

"He sounds boring," Emma declares, making the adults chuckle.

"He was practical," I admit. "But sometimes practical isn't enough. Sometimes you need a little magic too."

"Like the bear shows the rabbit?" Emma's totally invested now.

"Exactly like that." I chance a look at Rowan, finding him watching me with an intensity that makes my breath catch. "Sometimes the best teachers are the ones who seem gruff on the outside but know exactly when to be gentle."

I finish the story, and there's a moment of perfect silence before the applause starts. As the night deepens, guests begin drifting away. Emma's mother has to practically drag her from the fire, promising they can buy my book when it comes out.

Eventually, it's just me, Rowan, and Rascal curled up in his purple sweater. Connor shoots us a knowing look as he packs up his guitar, but mercifully says nothing.

"You didn't make the bear too grumpy, did you?" Rowan settles beside me, close enough that our shoulders brush.

"Just grumpy enough." I lean slightly into his warmth. "Though he has his soft moments."

The fire pops and crackles in the silence that follows. When I shiver, Rowan wordlessly drapes his jacket over my shoulders.

"I used to love these stories," he says finally, staring into the flames. "When Dad would gather everyone around the fire, tell tales about the lodge, about the mountains..." He trails off. "After he died, it was easier to stay away. To stick to the trails where things made sense."

"And then Heather came along?" I ask softly, remembering snippets of conversation I've caught around the lodge.

He tenses slightly, then relaxes. "Connor tell you about her?"

"No one had to. I've heard how people talk about you, how worried they've been

since she left." I pull his jacket tighter. "The way they light up when they see you teaching me the trails."

"I'm not... it's not..." He runs a hand through his hair. "The trails are simpler. Trees don't expect anything from you. They don't pretend to love the quiet only to complain about the isolation later. They don't..."

"Leave?"

His breath catches. "Yeah."

Rascal chooses this moment to wiggle between us, settling half in my lap, half in Rowan's. The simple comfort of it seems to unlock something in him.

"She said she loved it here," he says quietly. "The lodge, the mountains, the life we could build. But she loved the idea more than the reality. When she realized I wouldn't leave for a 'real' career in the city..." He shrugs, but I can feel the tension in his shoulder against mine.

"Some people don't understand that different dreams can be just as real," I say, thinking of Derek's dismissal of my writing. "That sometimes the quiet paths lead exactly where you're meant to go."

"Even if those paths are marked by trail blazes with tiny carved animals?"

I bump his shoulder. "Especially then."

He's quiet for a long moment, absently stroking Rascal's ears. "Your story about the rabbit finding her place in the woods..."

"Yes?"

"It's good. Really good." His voice is rough. "And your ex was an idiot."

Warmth blooms in my chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." His hand finds mine in the darkness. "Some people don't know magic when they see it."

We sit in comfortable silence as the fire dies down, neither mentioning the countdown hanging over us. Nine more days suddenly feels like both forever and not nearly enough time.

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Chapter Eight

Rowan

The forest feels different at night. Quieter, more intimate, like the darkness itself is a secret shared between those brave enough to walk through it. Moonlight filters through the trees, casting silver patterns on the trail ahead as I lead Daisy back to her cabin.

Rascal is sound asleep in my arms, his tiny body warm and trusting. I've never understood people who talk to their pets like children, but I'm beginning to see the appeal as his little snores punctuate the night's silence.

"I think you've officially been adopted," Daisy says softly beside me. "Never seen him sleep that deeply with anyone but me."

"He must be tired from chasing moths all night." But I adjust my hold to keep him more comfortable, and she notices, a small smile playing at her lips.

We walk in comfortable silence for a while, the moonlight making her skin glow almost silver. She's still wearing my jacket, the sleeves falling past her fingertips. Something about that sight does strange things to my chest.

"Your family tells great stories," she says finally. "The one about your dad and the marshmallow juggling..."

"He was always doing stuff like that." The memory aches less than it used to.

"Making us laugh, turning everyday things into adventures."

"He sounds wonderful."

"He was." I step carefully over a root. "After he died, Mom kept the traditions going. The bonfires, the stories. But it wasn't the same. I started spending more time on the trails."

"And Liam stepped up to run things?"

"He was already working with Dad on the business side. I was the kid who liked to explore."

"So you became the groundskeeper instead."

"Eventually." I hesitate, then admit, "Not right away. I actually left for a while after high school. Thought maybe there was something more out there."

She looks up, surprised. "You did? Where did you go?"

"College. Environmental science. Made it almost a year before I realized I was miserable." I shrug. "Too many people. Too much noise. Too far from..."

"From home," she finishes softly.

I glance at her. "You get that?"

"More than you know." She kicks at a pine cone on the path. "I love teaching, and I love writing, but the city never quite felt right. Too many people rushing around, never really seeing each other. Never looking up at the stars or noticing which way the wind blows."

"But your life is there. Your career."

"My apartment is there," she corrects. "My stuff. But I've never felt like I belonged, you know? Derek used to say I had my head in the clouds instead of focusing on 'real life.'"

"Sounds like an idiot," I mutter, and she laughs.

"That's twice now you've called him that."

"If the boot fits..."

Her shoulder bumps mine, warm even through my jacket. "It's just that I've always been the dreamy one. The impractical one. The one who needs to 'grow up' and stop seeing magic everywhere."

"There's nothing wrong with seeing magic." The words come out before I can stop them.

"No?" Her voice is so hopeful it hurts.

"No." I adjust Rascal, who sighs contentedly in his sleep. "My dad used to say the people who see magic in ordinary things are the ones who make life worth living."

"I think I would have liked your dad."

"He would have loved you." I can picture it so clearly. Dad drawing out her stories, encouraging her sketches, probably helping her construct fairy houses in the garden. "He used to make these elaborate trails for us with clues and riddles. Hide treasure for us to find."

"Is that why you carve animals into your trail markers for me?"

I almost stumble. "I don't—that's not?—"

"It's okay." Her hand brushes mine, just for a moment. "Your secret's safe with me. Though Gordon the Groundhog Mayor is very honored to be immortalized in wood."

Despite myself, I smile. "The rabbit was better."

"You have a favorite?" She sounds delighted.

"No."

"Liar." She's grinning now, I can hear it in her voice. "The mighty groundskeeper has a soft spot for tiny carved rabbits."

"The mighty groundskeeper has a soft spot for—" I catch myself just in time.

"For?" she prompts, stepping closer.

For you, I don't say. For the way you laugh at your own jokes. For how you make up backstories for every animal you see. For the way you've somehow made these familiar trails feel new again.

"For sleeping dogs who don't ask too many questions," I say instead, nodding at Rascal.

She smiles, moonlight catching in her eyes. "For what it's worth, I never fit in anywhere either. Not really. Not until..."

Her voice trails off, but I hear the rest anyway. Not until here. Not until this lodge,

these mountains.

Not until you.

We're approaching her cabin, and I feel time slipping away too quickly. Each step brings us closer to goodnight, to tomorrow, to the reality that she leaves in just over a week.

"Rowan?" Her voice is soft, hesitant.

"Yes?"

"Do you ever wonder if the places where we don't fit... maybe they're not our places? Maybe we're not the ones who need to change?"

The question hangs in the night air between us, more honest than anything I've heard in years. I think about Heather, how she tried to change me, change the lodge, change everything to fit her idea of what life should be. How I started believing maybe I was the problem.

"Maybe," I say finally. "Or maybe we're just looking for the place that fits us as we are."

Her hand finds mine in the darkness, her fingers slipping between mine like they belong there. And maybe they do.

"Maybe we've already found it," she whispers.

I don't answer. I can't. Because the moonlight is making her hair shimmer like silver, and she's wearing my jacket, and her dog is snoring softly against my chest, and everything about this moment feels too big, too important to trust with words.

We reach her cabin door, the porch light casting a warm circle in the darkness. I realize I'm still holding Rascal, his tiny body curled trustingly against my chest. The thought of handing him over, of ending this moment, makes something in me resist.

"I should probably..." I nod toward the sleeping dog.

"Right." Daisy steps closer, and suddenly the space between us feels charged with possibility. As she reaches for Rascal, her fingers brush against mine, lingering longer than necessary.

The dog stirs, blinking sleepily as he's transferred from my arms to hers. For a moment, we're so close I can smell the woodsmoke in her hair, see the flecks of gold in her eyes.

"Would you like to come in?" she asks softly. "I could make tea. Or coffee. Or hot chocolate with those little marshmallows..."

I should say no. I should thank her politely and retreat to the safety of my solitude. Instead, I hear myself say, "I should probably get going."

But I don't move.

"Probably," she agrees. But she doesn't move either.

We stand there in the porch light, searching for reasons to extend this moment. I find myself noticing details I'll carry back to my empty cabin. How the light catches on her lashes, the small smile playing at the corners of her mouth, the way she's still wrapped in my jacket like it belongs on her shoulders.

"You can take it back," she says, catching my gaze. "Your jacket."

"Keep it." The words come out rougher than I intended. "It's still cold."

"Such a gentleman." She shifts Rascal to one arm and reaches up with her free hand, her fingers lightly brushing my collar as if straightening it. "Always taking care of everyone but yourself."

Her touch sends a current through me, awakening things I've kept dormant for too long. "Daisy..."

"I know." Her voice drops to a whisper. "You didn't ask for this. For me barging into your quiet world with my chaos and my talking dog and my fairy tales."

"That's not?—"

"But here's the thing, Rowan Callahan." Her eyes meet mine with surprising intensity. "I think your world had room for a little chaos all along. Just like my stories needed a little groundedness. We just didn't know it until now."

Everything shifts in that moment. The world tilts on its axis, recalibrates around this truth I've been fighting since she first got lost on my trails. My carefully constructed defenses crumble under the weight of her simple understanding.

"I'm leaving in nine days," she whispers, the reminder like a physical ache between us.

"I know."

"And I'm still the impractical dreamer who talks to animals."

"I know that too."

Her free hand comes to rest against my chest, right over my heart. "And you're still the grumpy groundskeeper who pretends not to believe in magic."

"I never said I didn't believe in magic," I murmur, my hand covering hers, holding it against my heart. "Just that some trails lead places you don't expect."

Something shifts in her expression—hope and fear and longing all mingled together. "Rowan?"

I don't answer with words. Instead, I close the last breath of space between us, my free hand cupping her cheek as I finally, finally stop fighting what's been building since that first day in the woods.

When our lips meet, it's like coming home to a place I didn't know I was searching for. Soft at first, a question more than a demand. Then deeper as she sighs against my mouth, the hand on my chest curling into my shirt as if to anchor herself.

I pour everything I can't say into the kiss—how she's awakened parts of me I thought were gone forever, how her laughter has become my favorite sound, how terrified I am of the countdown hanging over us.

When we finally break apart, her eyes flutter open, bright with something that looks dangerously like joy.

"Oh," she breathes, and somehow that single syllable contains multitudes.

Reality crashes back. Rascal squirms between us. Part of me knows that this can only lead to goodbye. And the armor I've built against precisely this kind of vulnerability goes back up.

"I should go," I say, but my hand betrays me, still cradling her cheek.

"You could stay." Her voice is tentative, hopeful. "For a little while."

For a moment, I'm tempted. But the fear is too strong, the memory of Heather's departure too fresh. "I can't."

Understanding softens her expression. "But maybe someday?"

"Maybe." It's more honesty than I've allowed myself in years. "Daisy, I?—"

She presses her fingers gently to my lips. "It's okay. I get it."

And I think she does. This woman who sees stories everywhere, who names the forest creatures and believes in magic. She sees me too, walls and all, and doesn't turn away.

"Tomorrow?" she asks, and it's more than a question about our hiking plans.

"Tomorrow," I confirm, stepping back before I can change my mind. "Sleep well."

"You too, forest guardian."

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Chapter Nine

Daisy

S unlight streams through the cabin window, catching dust motes that dance like tiny fairies in the golden beams. I stretch languidly, still wrapped in Rowan's jacket from last night, the fabric carrying the scent of pine needles and woodsmoke. My lips tingle with the memory of our kiss, and I press my fingers to them, almost afraid the sensation will vanish if I acknowledge it too directly.

"He kissed me, Rascal," I whisper to my dog, who's curled at the foot of the bed. "Grumpy, gorgeous, forest-guardian Rowan Callahan actually kissed me."

Rascal lifts his head, giving me what I choose to interpret as a "well, obviously" look before settling back down.

"Don't give me that. You thought he'd never crack that stoic exterior." I swing my legs over the side of the bed, but don't stand immediately, savoring the moment. "Though I notice you had no problem falling asleep in his arms. Traitor."

The morning feels different somehow, charged with possibility. I pad to the small kitchen area, starting the coffee maker that's become part of my lodge routine. Eight days left, and somehow this place already feels more like home than my apartment ever did.

The thought sends a jolt through me. Eight days. Just over a week until I'm supposed to return to my real life, my career, my?—

My laptop pings with an incoming email. Janet's name in the subject line draws me over immediately.

Daisy! AMAZING NEWS! Call me when you get this!

I open it with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

Fantastic development! BookWorld wants to feature you as their Spotlight New Author for the fall season. We're talking prime placement in all 40 stores nationwide, a major launch event at their NYC flagship with Olivia Lee (yes, THAT Olivia Lee!) hosting. This is HUGE, sweetie! They love the forest friends concept and want to position you as the exciting new voice in children's literature.

Events team needs confirmation ASAP to start planning. Launch would be three weeks after you get back to the city. We'd need to hit the ground running with promotional materials, author photos, and final manuscript polishing as soon as you're back. I've scheduled meetings for your first day back.

This is everything we've worked for! Call me! Janet

I sink into a chair, the email swimming before my eyes. BookWorld. Olivia Lee. National spotlight. Everything I've dreamed of, everything I've worked for, presented in neat, exciting paragraphs that should have me dancing around the cabin.

Instead, all I can think is eight days .

Rascal nudges my hand, sensing my mood shift. I scratch his ears absently.

"This is good news, buddy. Great news. Dream-come-true news." But my voice sounds hollow even to my own ears.

I should call Janet immediately. I should be sending champagne emoji and exclamation points. Instead, I close the laptop, promising myself I'll respond after coffee. After I've had time to think.

A gentle knock at the door startles me. I quickly set the laptop aside and answer it, finding Evie Callahan standing on my porch with a basket of muffins, her silver hair catching the morning light.

"Good morning, dear. I thought you might enjoy some blueberry muffins. Still warm from the oven." Her eyes crinkle warmly, then fall to Rowan's jacket still wrapped around my shoulders. "Though I see you're staying plenty warm already."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "Oh! I—we—it was cold last night, and?—"

"Breathe, honey." Her eyes dance with amusement. "I'm teasing. May I come in? I've brought coffee, too." She holds up a thermos. "Though it looks like you've already got some brewing."

"Please." I step back, suddenly aware of my rumpled appearance. "Sorry about the mess. I was just..." What? Daydreaming about your son? Panicking about an email? Both?

Evie settles at my small table, pouring coffee for us both while I place her muffins on a plate.

"Actually," she says, her tone casual but her eyes watchful, "I had another reason for stopping by. Janet called the lodge this morning, looking for you. She seemed quite excited about something and a little concerned when she couldn't reach you."

I freeze with a muffin halfway to the plate. "Janet called you?"

"She and I go back twenty years, dear." Evie stirs honey into her coffee. "She's been coming to the lodge since before Rowan was born. When she couldn't reach you, she called to make sure everything was alright."

"I got her email," I admit, sinking into the chair opposite her. "About BookWorld."

"She mentioned something about that." Evie's smile is genuine, maternal in a way that makes my heart ache a little. "It sounds wonderful."

"It is. I mean, it's everything I've worked for. A major launch, national exposure, Olivia Lee..." I trail off, my enthusiasm faltering as I hear myself speak.

"But?" Evie prompts gently, her eyes kind.

"But nothing. It's amazing." I fiddle with my coffee cup. "I should be ecstatic."

"Should be," she repeats, and there's no judgment in her voice, just quiet understanding. "And yet you haven't called her back."

Our eyes meet, and I see knowledge in hers. More than understanding. Insight.

"It's complicated," I finally say.

"Because of my son?" The directness is softened by her gentle tone.

My gaze drops to Rowan's jacket still wrapped around my shoulders. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to a mother who knows her son better than he knows himself." She reaches across the table to cover my hand with hers. "And who recognizes the look of someone who's found something unexpected."

"I don't know what I'm doing, Evie," I confess, the words tumbling out. "Eight days ago, I would have been dancing around this cabin at Janet's email. Now I'm..."

"Torn," she supplies when I falter.

"Yes." The admission is both a relief and a weight. "Is that crazy? I've known Rowan for barely a week."

"Time isn't always the best measure of what matters." She breaks a muffin in half, offering me part. "Sometimes we recognize what feels like home right away."

I accept the muffin, grateful for the moment to collect my thoughts. "He told me about Heather last night."

Surprise flickers across Evie's face. "Did he?"

"Sounds like she left because she couldn't handle the isolation, the quiet life here," I say carefully, watching Evie's reaction.

She sighs. "Heather loved the idea of mountain life more than the reality. She wanted Rowan to be different. More ambitious, more worldly. When he wouldn't change, she left."

"And now he thinks everyone will leave," I finish quietly.

"Not everyone. Just anyone he might let himself care about." Her gaze is steady, compassionate but unflinching. "And now here you are. You are bright, creative, full of life. Everything these mountains need. Everything he needs."

"For eight more days," I whisper.

"Is that all it can be?" There's no judgment in her question, just gentle curiosity.

"I don't know." I press my fingers to my temples. "My life is in the city. My career, this opportunity, everything I've worked for."

"Dreams are funny things," Evie says, watching Rascal as he positions himself strategically between us, hoping for fallen crumbs. "Sometimes they change when we aren't looking. Sometimes they grow to include things we never expected."

"Or people," I add without thinking.

Her smile deepens. "Or people."

We eat in companionable silence for a moment. Finally, I find the courage to ask, "What would you do?"

"Oh, honey, I can't answer that for you." She pats my hand. "But I can tell you what I did when I faced something similar. When James—Rowan's father—and I were first married, I had a job offer in Atlanta. Office manager position at a prestigious school. More money, more opportunity, more everything."

"But you didn't take it."

"No. But not because James asked me to stay. He actually encouraged me to go." She smiles at the memory. "He said he'd follow me anywhere, even to the city he hated, if that's what would make me happy."

"What made you stay?"

"I realized something important." She brushes muffin crumbs from her fingers. "The job was amazing. But it wasn't what made my heart feel at home."

My phone buzzes with a text message. Rowan's name appears on the screen, and my heart does a ridiculous little flip.

Trail to the hidden waterfall today? Meet at 10?

"You should answer him," Evie says, eyes twinkling as she rises. "He's probably been composing that simple message for twenty minutes. My son has many talents, but casual texting isn't one of them."

I laugh despite myself. "I still don't know what to do, Evie."

"I know, dear." She gathers her basket. "About Janet. She did ask me to remind you to call her. But she also said, and I quote, 'Tell her to take a breath before she decides anything. The mountains have a way of changing perspectives.'"

I stare at her, surprised. "Janet said that?"

"She knows you well." Evie pauses at the door, glancing at Rowan's jacket still wrapped around me. "Whatever you decide, make sure it's what will bring you joy, not just success. They're not always the same thing."

After she leaves, I sit for a long moment, looking between my phone and my laptop. Eight days suddenly feels both infinitely long and heartbreakingly short.

Waterfall sounds perfect. See you at 10. I type, then add, Rascal says to bring treats. I say to bring a sense of adventure.

The reply comes faster than I expected.

Both covered.

I close my eyes, clutching the phone to my chest like a lifeline. Janet's email remains unanswered, a blinking cursor waiting for a response I'm not ready to give. But I do send her a quick text:

Got your email. Amazing news. Need a little time to think. Call you later today.

Ten o'clock finds me waiting at the trailhead, nervously smoothing my clothes and wondering if one kiss changes everything or nothing at all. Rascal prances at my feet in his purple sweater, blissfully unaware of human complications.

"Act normal," I tell him. "Whatever that means."

When Rowan appears through the trees, my heart does that ridiculous flip again. He's dressed in his usual flannel and work boots, hair slightly damp like he's just showered, and there's a new tension in his shoulders that wasn't there before. He carries a small backpack and a walking stick that he hands to me.

"Morning." His voice is gruff, but his eyes linger on mine a beat longer than usual.

"Morning." I accept the stick, our fingers brushing. The familiar spark is there, stronger now that we know what it means. "So, hidden waterfall?"

"If you're up for it." He glances at my boots. I'm wearing proper hiking boots, though I've replaced the laces with sparkly purple ones. "It's a bit of a climb in places."

"I've been practicing my trail reading," I say, aiming for our usual teasing tone. "Haven't fallen into any muddy creeks for at least three days."

Something that might be a smile tugs at his lips. "A new record."

"I'm very accomplished."

Rascal chooses this moment to get his leash completely tangled around both our legs, effectively binding us together. I laugh nervously, bending to fix it just as Rowan does the same. Our heads bump gently.

"Sorry," we say in unison.

"I've got it." His hands are sure and steady as they work on the leash, though I notice a slight tremor when his knuckles brush my calf.

"Thanks."

When we're free, an awkward silence falls. So much for acting normal.

"Ready?" He gestures to the trail.

"Lead the way, Forest Guardian."

He gives me a look, but there's warmth in it. As we start hiking, I search for our usual rhythm, the comfortable banter that's become my favorite part of these mornings.

"So, this waterfall. Is it guarded by woodland creatures? Do I need a secret password? Will Gordon the Mayor be there to give us the key to the forest?"

"It's just a waterfall, Daisy." But his tone has softened.

"Nothing is ever just anything." I follow him up a steeper section of trail. "Not in these mountains."

He glances back at me, something unreadable in his expression. "No. I guess not."

We hike in more comfortable silence after that, Rowan occasionally pointing out trail

markers or interesting plants. I notice he's leading us on a path I haven't seen before, one without the usual blazes.

"Are we on a secret trail?" I ask, ducking under a low branch.

"Private trail," he corrects, but there's that ghost of a smile again. "One most guests don't know about."

"But you're showing me?"

He doesn't answer directly. "Watch your step here. The rocks can be slippery."

The trail narrows, winding between ancient trees whose branches create a green canopy overhead. Birds call to each other, and occasionally small creatures rustle in the undergrowth. Rascal, to my surprise, stays dutifully on the path, only occasionally straining toward particularly interesting scents.

"You've been training him," I realize, watching my usually chaotic dog navigate the trail with newfound purpose.

Rowan's ears redden slightly. "Basic commands. For safety."

"Of course. Safety." I hide my smile. "Not at all because you secretly adore my ridiculous dog."

Before he can defend himself, Rascal spots something and barks excitedly, pulling so hard on his leash that I stumble forward. Rowan's arm shoots out, steadying me against his side. For a moment, we're pressed together, his warmth seeping through my sweater.

"Sorry," I murmur, not moving away. "He's still a work in progress."

"Aren't we all." His voice is low, intimate in a way that makes my skin tingle.

The moment stretches, charged with everything we're not saying. Then Rascal barks again, breaking the spell.

"We're almost there," Rowan says, releasing me reluctantly. "Just around this bend."

I follow him through a natural archway formed by two leaning trees, and then suddenly—magic.

A small clearing opens before us, cradled by ancient trees. A waterfall cascades down moss-covered rocks into a crystal-clear pool, sending rainbows dancing through the mist. Wildflowers dot the edges of the clearing in bursts of purple and gold.

"Rowan," I breathe. "It's beautiful."

"That's not all." He leads me to the far side of the clearing where, nestled among the trees, stands a small structure. It takes me a moment to realize what I'm seeing. It's a wildlife blind, perfectly positioned for viewing both the waterfall and the clearing.

As we get closer, I can see the details. It's not just a simple blind. It's a tiny studio, its design clearly inspired by the sketches in my notebook. A comfortable seat at just the right height for drawing. A small shelf for supplies. Even a tiny window positioned to capture the perfect view of where animals would drink from the pool.

But it's the little touches that steal my breath. The shelf has compartments sized exactly for my different notebooks. The seat has a cushion in my favorite shade of purple. And hanging from a small hook is a jar of the peppermint tea I mentioned loving once, in passing, days ago.

"When did you..." I can't finish the sentence, too overwhelmed by what this

represents.

"Been working on restoring it for about a week." He shrugs like it's nothing.

I run my fingers over the smooth wood, feeling the care in every joint, every detail.
"You carved animals into the beams."

Tiny rabbits, deer, foxes, and yes, even a distinguished-looking groundhog peer out from the wooden supports, each rendered with surprising delicacy.

"Just some simple designs," he says, but his eyes watch my reaction carefully. "For atmosphere."

"This is..." I swallow past the lump in my throat. "No one's ever made anything like this for me before."

Derek's voice echoes in my memory: When are you going to grow up and get a real job? These animal stories are cute, but they're not a career, Daisy.

Rowan's quiet voice pulls me back. "You see things others don't. The magic in these woods. Seems only fair they give you a place to capture it."

Our eyes meet, and suddenly we're not talking about the blind anymore, or the woods, or my sketches. We're talking about something neither of us is ready to name, but both feel with startling intensity.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He nods once, his expression softening in a way I'm beginning to recognize as uniquely mine. "Want to try it out?"

I settle into the seat, which fits me perfectly. Rascal immediately curls up in the small sunny patch beneath the window, as if this space was made for him too. And maybe it was.

"How did you know exactly what I needed?" I ask as Rowan leans against the doorframe, watching me explore the small space.

"I pay attention," he says simply.

Three words that encompass so much. How he notices which wildflowers make me pause on the trail. Which tea I drink in the afternoon. How I hold my notebook when sketching. Three words that stand in stark contrast to everyone who told me to be different, more practical, less dreamy.

"Rowan." His name comes out like a question.

He moves closer, until he's kneeling beside the seat, eye level with me. "Daisy."

The way he says my name—like it's something precious, something special—breaks the last of my resistance. I reach for him just as he reaches for me, and this time when our lips meet, there's nothing hesitant about it.

His hand cradles my face, thumb tracing my cheekbone with a tenderness that makes my heart ache. I grip his flannel shirt, pulling him closer, trying to memorize every sensation. The softness of his lips, the faint taste of coffee, the gentle strength in his hands.

When we break apart, his eyes are darker, more intense than I've ever seen them. "This is..." He struggles for words.

"Complicated?" I offer.

"I was going to say unexpected."

"Good unexpected or terrifying unexpected?"

"Both." His honesty is endearing. "I don't do this, Daisy."

"You don't fall for city girls who talk to groundhogs?"

A real smile now, transforming his face. "Something like that."

The moment stretches between us, full of possibility and fear in equal measure. I should tell him about the email, about Janet, about the countdown that feels both more important and less significant with every passing second.

Before I can find the words, Rascal apparently decides we've had enough serious conversation. He jumps up, somehow manages to step directly into the small jar of pencils, then panics at the rattling sound and bolts straight into Rowan's lap, pencils flying everywhere.

"Rascal!" I lunge for him, overbalancing and sending us all sprawling in a tangle of limbs, fur, and art supplies.

I land half on top of Rowan, who has somehow managed to catch both me and my ridiculous dog. For a moment, we freeze in the absurdity of the situation. The dignified groundskeeper flat on his back, a yapping Yorkie on his chest, and me sprawled inelegantly across his legs.

Then he laughs. Not a chuckle or a snort, but a real, deep laugh that I feel rumble through his chest. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

"Your dog," he manages between laughs, "is a menace to society."

"But you like him anyway," I say, not moving from my position.

"I like his owner more." The words slip out naturally, but their impact silences us both.

Carefully, I shift until we're side by side on the floor of the small blind, Rascal now contentedly settled between us as if this whole disaster was his plan all along. Maybe it was.

"I still have to leave in eight days," I say finally, the words painful but necessary.

"I know." His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining.

"And I have to get back to my place. My life."

"Hmm."

"And we barely know each other."

His thumb traces patterns on my palm. "Don't we though?"

The question hangs between us, profound in its simplicity. Because in some ways, he's right. He knows how I take my coffee, which flowers make me stop to sketch, how I talk to animals when I think no one's listening. And I know how he moves through the forest, the rare beauty of his genuine smile, how gentle his hands can be despite their strength.

"What are we doing, Rowan?"

"I don't know," he admits. "But I'd like to find out."

Chapter Ten

Rowan

I lose myself in the rhythm of preparing seedling trays, my fingers working methodically through the rich potting soil. The repetitive motion helps quiet my mind, gives me something tangible to focus on instead of the memory of Daisy's lips on mine, the way her eyes lit up when she saw the wildlife blind, how perfectly she fit against me when we fell.

Seven hours since I left her at her cabin, and I still can't shake the feeling that something fundamental has shifted. Like tectonic plates moving beneath seemingly solid ground.

Eight days. That's all we have left. Eight days until she returns to the city, to her real life. Whatever this is—this connection, this pull between us—it has an expiration date. I know this. I've known it from the start.

So why did I build her that blind? Why did I kiss her again? Why am I carefully labeling these mountain laurel seedlings with her name when I should be reinforcing the walls around my heart instead?

"There you are."

I look up to find Mom in the doorway of the garden shed, her silver hair catching the late afternoon light. I didn't hear her approach, too lost in my thoughts and the quiet work of my hands among the soil.

"Just getting ready for spring planting," I say, though these particular seedlings aren't part of our regular lodge landscaping and we both know it.

"Mm-hmm." She steps into the shed, eyes traveling over the neat rows of trays, pausing on the ones I've just labeled. "Mountain laurel for the east trail overlook? The one where Daisy likes to sketch?"

"It's good for erosion control." But my ears burn as I tamp down another seedling into its tray.

"Of course." She settles on a stool near my workbench, her casual posture betrayed by the intent look in her eyes. The one that always preceded difficult conversations when I was growing up. "Beautiful morning for a hike. Did Daisy enjoy the waterfall?"

So that's where this is going. "She did."

"And the blind you built her? That's quite a gesture, Rowan."

I focus on measuring the next piece of wood, avoiding her gaze. "It's not like I built it from scratch. That old thing needed restoring for quite some time."

"Practical." She nods sagely. "Like the carved animals and the tea shelf built to her exact height?"

I set down my tools with a sigh. "Mom."

"I had an interesting call this morning," she says instead of pushing further. "From Janet, Daisy's editor."

Something cold settles in my stomach. "Oh?"

"She was quite excited about some opportunity for Daisy. Something about a major bookstore chain featuring her as their spotlight new author." Mom's voice is carefully neutral, but her eyes never leave my face. "Apparently there's a big launch event planned in New York. With some famous children's book advocate hosting."

The cold spreads through my chest. "Sounds like a big deal."

"It is. National promotion, events at forty stores across the country. The kind of opportunity most new authors only dream about." She pauses. "The kind of opportunity that would mean a lot of time in the city. Travel. Publicity."

"Good for her." The words taste like ash. "She deserves it."

"She does." Mom watches me carefully. "Janet mentioned they need her back promptly for meetings, photo shoots, planning sessions. The works."

Each word is another nail in the coffin of whatever foolish hope had started growing this morning. Of course Daisy has to go back. Of course she has this amazing career waiting. Of course what we shared, whatever it might be becoming, can't compete with a dream come true.

I pick up the sandpaper again, needing something to do with my hands. "Did she tell you anything else?"

"Just that Daisy seemed conflicted when she finally called back." Mom's voice softens. "Janet's known her for a long time. Says she's never heard her sound so torn about what should be the easiest 'yes' of her career."

Hope flares briefly, painful in its intensity, before common sense extinguishes it. "She'd be crazy to turn down an opportunity like that."

"Would she?"

"It's her dream, Mom. Her career. Everything she's worked for."

"Dreams can change, Rowan. They can expand to include new things. New people," she says.

I think of Heather, how she promised these mountains were enough, how quickly that changed when reality set in. "Not everyone is built for this life. The isolation, the quiet, the distance from everything."

"Daisy seems to love it here."

"For two weeks." The bitterness in my voice surprises even me. "It's easy to love something when you know it's temporary. When it's an escape, not reality."

Mom is quiet for a long moment. When she speaks, her voice is gentle but firm. "Is that what you think? That what she feels for the lodge, for you, is just a vacation romance?"

I don't answer directly. "Did you know she thought I was a mysterious forest hermit when we first met? Like something out of one of her romance novels."

"And now?"

"Now she knows I'm the groundskeeper. That this—" I gesture around the workshop, the tools, the practical reality of my life, "—is what I am. Day in, day out. No mystery, no romance. Just trails and maintenance and quiet."

"And you think that's not enough for her?"

"I know it's not." The certainty feels like lead in my veins. "You said it yourself. She has this amazing opportunity. National promotion. Famous hosts. The spotlight. Everything she deserves."

"That doesn't mean she can't also have?—"

"What, Mom?" I cut her off, the fear making me sharp. "A long-distance relationship with the guy who fixes trails? Weekend visits to the middle of nowhere? How long before that gets old? Before she realizes she's missing out on her real life to visit some mountains and a man who doesn't fit in her world?"

"Oh, Rowan." The disappointment in her voice stings more than anger would. "Is that really what you think of her? Of yourself?"

I look down at my hands, calloused and rough from years of working the land. "I think she deserves her dream. And I think I've been down this road before."

"Daisy isn't Heather."

"No." I swallow hard. "She's more. More talented, more special, more... everything. Which means she has even more to lose by being tied to someone like me, to a place like this."

Mom stands, coming to place her hand on my cheek the way she did when I was small. "You're doing it again, honey. Deciding the ending before the story's even been written."

"I'm being practical."

"You're being afraid." She holds my gaze, unwavering. "And you're making choices for her without even giving her a voice."

The truth of it hits like a physical blow, but I can't afford to acknowledge it. Not with the countdown hovering over us, not with the reality of her amazing future waiting in New York, not with the memory of Heather's growing resentment still fresh despite the years between.

"It's better this way," I say finally. "Better to end it before it really begins. Before either of us gets hurt worse."

"Is it?" Mom's hand drops away. "Are you really protecting her, Rowan? Or just yourself?"

Night has fallen by the time I move to the maintenance shed. The physical labor isn't enough to quiet my mind, so I tackle the most grueling task I can find. The strain in my muscles is a welcome distraction from the storm in my head.

I'm hefting a chainsaw onto a high shelf when Liam appears in the doorway, silhouetted against the outdoor lights.

"Bit late for inventory," he says, stepping inside and shutting the door against the night chill.

"Needed to get done." I don't look at him, focusing instead on arranging tools with military precision.

"Interesting timing." He leans against the workbench, watching me with the patient, assessing gaze that's served him well as lodge manager. "Especially since Connor mentioned seeing you and Daisy looking pretty happy at the waterfall blind this morning."

My hands tighten on the wrench I'm holding. "That was this morning."

"And now it's evening, and you're rearranging tools that have been fine for months." He crosses his arms. "Word gets around, you know. About Daisy's big opportunity in New York."

"Good for her." I shove a box of spare parts onto a shelf with more force than necessary.

"That's it? 'Good for her'? After spending a week building her that blind? After whatever happened between you two that had Connor saying he's never seen you smile like that?"

"Drop it, Liam."

"No." He straightens, all pretense of casualness gone. "Not this time. I watched you shut down after Heather left. I'm not watching you do it again before Daisy's even gone."

The mention of Heather ignites something hot and painful in my chest. "This is different."

"How? Because from where I'm standing, it looks exactly the same. You getting close to someone, then building walls the second things get real."

"She has a life in the city." I slam a drawer shut. "A dream job. A major book launch. Everything she's ever wanted."

"And that automatically means she can't want anything else?"

"Don't be naive." I turn to face him finally, anger simmering just below the surface. "You think she's going to give up national promotion and some celebrity book champion to, what? Live in a cabin and watch me fix trails?"

Liam's expression hardens. "What I think is that you're not even giving her a choice. You're deciding for her, just like you always do."

"Because I know how this ends!" The words burst out louder than I intended. "City people always leave, Liam. They love the idea of mountain life until the reality sets in. The isolation. The distance from everything. The limitations."

"Daisy isn't Heather."

"No, she has even more waiting for her in the city than Heather did." I turn back to the tools, unable to face the sympathy in his eyes. "At least Heather only had a job offer. Daisy has her dream career taking off."

"So you're just going to push her away before she can leave? Real mature, Row."

"I'm being realistic." My voice is bitter even to my own ears. "You think someone like Daisy belongs here? Someone whose head is full of fairy tales and talking animals? Someone who needs art supplies and book launches and city connections?"

Liam is quiet for a moment. When he speaks, his voice is carefully controlled. "Is that really what you think of her? That she's just some flighty city girl who can't handle real life?"

The truth is a knife between my ribs. Of course that's not what I think. Daisy is the most genuine person I've ever met. Her whimsy isn't frivolous, it's how she sees beauty in everything. But admitting that means admitting what I'm losing, and I can't bear that pain.

"What I think doesn't matter." I shove another tool into place. "What matters is reality. And the reality is that in a week, she'll be gone. Back to book signings and launch parties and everything she deserves."

"And you're not going to fight for her? For whatever it is you two have?"

"We don't have anything." The lie tastes like acid.

Liam laughs, the sound harsh in the small space. "Right. That's why you spent hours carving animals into trail markers. Why you fixed that wildlife blind for her. Why you've smiled more in the past two weeks than in the past two years."

"It was a mistake." Each word is a stone I stack between myself and the truth. "Getting involved with someone. I knew better."

"So what's your plan? Avoid her for the next week? Pretend this morning never happened?"

The question hits too close to home. That's exactly what I've been considering. Retreating to the far corners of the property, sending Connor to handle her research needs, hiding until she's gone and I can lick my wounds in peace.

"If I have to."

"Coward." The word drops like a hammer.

"What did you say?" I turn slowly, anger rising to replace the fear.

"You heard me." Liam doesn't back down. "You're a coward, Rowan. Too afraid to even try because you might get hurt again. Too scared to admit that you care about her."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I? I was there after Heather left, remember? I watched you shut everybody out,

throw yourself into the trails, pretend you were fine when we all knew you weren't."

"And now you think I should set myself up for that again?" My voice rises. "With someone who has even more reason to leave?"

"I think you should at least be honest. With her, and with yourself." Liam steps closer. "She deserves that much."

"What she deserves is better than being tied to someone who will never fit in her world." The truth beneath my fear slips out before I can stop it. "Better than having to choose between her dreams and... and whatever this is."

"So you're making the choice for her. Deciding that your world and hers can't possibly overlap."

"They can't." I slam my palm against the shelf. "People like Daisy don't end up with people like me, Liam. Not in real life. They go back to their careers and their cities and their success. And they should."

"People like Daisy?" Liam's voice is dangerously quiet. "You mean people who see magic in everyday things? Who make you laugh? Who look at you like you hung the moon? Those kind of people?"

The accuracy of his description is like salt in an open wound. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. You mean people who scare the hell out of you because they make you want things you're not sure you can have."

I have no defense against that truth, so I retreat to anger. "I'm ending it. Before it goes any further. Before she has to be the one to do it."

"And if she doesn't want to end it?"

"She will." The certainty in my voice masks the terror beneath.

Liam shakes his head, disappointment etched in every line of his face. "You know, for someone who spends his life maintaining gardens and trails, you sure are hell-bent on destroying this one."

"It's better this way." I turn back to my tools.

"No, it's not." Liam moves toward the door. "It's just easier."

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Chapter Eleven

Daisy

I wake up feeling lighter than I have in months, maybe years. The morning light streams through my cabin window, highlighting Rascal's tiny paw prints on the floor and my hastily discarded clothes from yesterday. My notebook sits open on the table, filled with sketches from the wildlife blind.

Seven days until I'm supposed to leave. But what if I didn't? What if I stayed? Not forever, maybe, but longer? Janet's words echo in my mind. The deadline isn't set in stone. Sometimes the best stories aren't the ones we plan.

The thought sends nervous butterflies swarming in my stomach. I reach for my phone, smiling at the memory of Rowan's text from yesterday. Surely he'd be up by now, probably already maintaining some trail or fixing something for someone else.

No response to my good morning text. Odd, but he's never been much for technology.

An hour later, showered and dressed in my best hiking outfit, I set out to find him. The morning air is crisp, full of possibility as I check his usual spots—the maintenance shed, the east trails, even the wildlife blind where we shared that perfect moment yesterday.

No Rowan.

"Have you seen your son?" I ask Evie when I finally duck into the lodge's main

building.

"He's working on the north property line today. Some fence repairs that couldn't wait," she says, her eyes not meeting mine.

The north property is the furthest from my cabin, from the wildlife blind, from everywhere I might naturally encounter him. The realization sits like a cold stone in my stomach.

"Is everything okay?" I force brightness into my voice.

Evie's gentle hand on my arm tells me I'm not fooling anyone. "You should ask him that, dear."

The trek to the north property takes almost an hour, Rascal trotting dutifully beside me, occasionally looking up as if to ask why we're venturing so far from our usual paths.

"Hey, stranger!" I call, when I spot him. "You're a hard man to find today."

He straightens slowly, and even from a distance, I can see the change. His shoulders are set in a stiff line, his face a careful mask that reminds me of our first meeting.

"Daisy." No smile. No warmth. Just my name, flat and neutral.

"I was hoping we could talk." I approach, Rascal running ahead to greet him. For once, Rowan doesn't bend to scratch his ears. "About yesterday. And about what happens next."

"What happens next is you finish your research and head back to New York for your book launch." His tone is matter-of-fact, almost rehearsed. He turns back to the fence

post, hammering with unnecessary force.

"How did you know about that?" I stop a few feet from him, suddenly unsure.

"Mom mentioned it." He doesn't look at me. "Janet called the lodge. Sounds like an amazing opportunity. Everything you've worked for."

The distance in his voice is worse than anger would be. "It is, but I've been thinking?—"

"Don't." The hammer pauses mid-swing. "There's nothing to think about."

"Rowan, what's going on?"

"Yesterday was a mistake." The words fall like stones between us. "I got caught up in the moment. We both did."

The air leaves my lungs in a rush. "A mistake?"

"We come from different worlds, Daisy." He finally looks at me, his eyes deliberately empty. "You've got this amazing career taking off. National book tour. Celebrity endorsements. Everything you deserve."

"And that automatically means there can't be anything between us?" My voice catches, betraying the hurt his words inflict.

"Be practical." He turns back to the fence. "You belong in the city with your career. I belong here with my trails. Yesterday was nice. But it doesn't change reality."

"Reality." I echo the word, feeling something crack inside me. "And what reality is that, exactly?"

"The one where you leave in a week. The one where your life is book launches and publicity tours and city lights. The one where this—" he gestures between us, "—was never going to be more than temporary."

"You don't know that." I step closer, desperate to find the Rowan from yesterday, the one who carved animals into my trail markers and built me a perfect creative space. "We could figure something out. I could stay longer, or?—"

"Don't." His voice hardens. "Don't throw away everything you've worked for because of one kiss."

"Is that what you think I'd be doing?"

"I think you're getting swept up in mountain magic. In fairy tales about forest guardians and talking animals." His words cut like he intends them to. "But real life isn't a storybook, Daisy."

I search his face for any sign of the man who held me yesterday, who looked at me like I was something precious, who seemed to understand the way I see the world. There's nothing but cold resolve in his expression.

"So yesterday meant nothing?" I hate the tremor in my voice. "The wildlife blind, the kiss, everything we shared was what? Killing time until I leave?"

"It meant that I forgot, for a moment, that some differences can't be bridged. That was my mistake."

"Differences?" I repeat, anger starting to burn beneath the hurt. "What differences, Rowan? The fact that I see magic in these mountains? That I write children's books? That I come from the city?"

"All of it." He sets down his hammer, finally giving me his full attention. His voice is calm, detached, like he's explaining trail safety to a stranger.

Tears burn behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. "You don't get to make that choice for me."

"I'm being realistic." His jaw tightens. "Something you might want to try."

The barb lands exactly as intended. This is Derek all over again.

Except this hurts worse, because Rowan was supposed to be different. He was supposed to understand.

"I thought you saw me," I whisper. "Really saw me."

Something cracks in his expression, just for a moment. "Daisy?—"

"No." I back away, the hurt crystallizing into something harder, sharper. "You've made yourself perfectly clear. It was a mistake. Message received."

The cabin walls close in around me as I mechanically fold clothes into my suitcase. Each item represents a day I thought I was building something real. Each notebook a collection of moments that now feel like fiction.

"I can get you in for meetings tomorrow afternoon," Janet says through the phone I've wedged between my ear and shoulder. "But honey, are you sure? You still had a week left for research."

"I have everything I need." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears.

"Did something happen with?—"

"No." I cut her off, unable to hear his name. "I'm ready to get back to real life."

Janet's silence speaks volumes. "I'll email your itinerary," she finally says.

I work methodically, efficiently, refusing to linger on memories. The wildlife sketches go into a separate folder. His jacket, returned to the lodge office with a brief note of thanks. Each action another brick in the wall between then and now.

Until I find it.

The tiny purple sweater, perfectly sized for Rascal, made with such care by hands that just hours ago pushed me away. I sink to the floor, the soft yarn clutched against my chest as the dam finally breaks. Rascal whines softly, pressing his warm body against my side as I sob.

"It was real," I whisper to no one. "I know it was real."

But real isn't always enough.

Morning comes too quickly and not quickly enough. Evie meets me at the lodge as I check out, her eyes soft with understanding I can't bear to acknowledge.

"You don't have to leave, dear," she says gently.

"I do." I hand her the cabin key, our fingers briefly touching. "Thank you for everything. The lodge is magical."

"The lodge will be here." The weight of her words encompasses more than timber and stone. "Whenever you're ready to return."

I nod, not trusting my voice. She presses a small package into my hands.

"For the journey," she says. Blueberry muffins, still warm.

Packing the car feels strange after my time here. Rascal settles reluctantly in his carrier, sensing the wrongness of our abrupt departure. I make one final sweep of the cabin, then load the last of my bags.

As I close the trunk, something pulls my gaze toward the eastern trail. The path that leads to the wildlife blind. To his gift that now feels like a monument to what might have been.

That's when I see him.

Rowan stands at the edge of the trees, partially hidden like the forest creature I once thought him to be. Our eyes lock across the distance. For one breathless moment, I think he might come to me. That he might fight for what we found in these mountains.

He doesn't move.

I slide into the driver's seat, hands shaking on the steering wheel. In the rearview mirror, his figure grows smaller as I drive away. The mountains that felt like home just days ago now loom in my mirrors like monuments to another life I almost had. Ahead lies New York, success, everything I worked for before I knew what else I might want.

The book will be published. Children will enjoy the adventures of forest friends and a brave little rabbit who learns to read trail markers. It will be everything I dreamed of.

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Chapter Twelve

Rowan

The wildlife blind stands empty, abandoned like the foolish hopes I built along with it. Three days since Daisy left, and I've avoided this place like a wound too fresh to touch. Now I stand in the doorway, staring at the space where she once sat, sketching forest creatures and weaving magic from ordinary things.

A sheet of paper flutters in the light breeze—one of her drawings, forgotten. A groundhog wearing a tiny vest. Gordon the Groundhog Mayor. I carefully pick it up, my fingers tracing the lines she drew with such joy.

I did the right thing. I know I did. So why does doing the right thing feel like tearing out a piece of myself?

"I thought I might find you here."

Mom's voice startles me. I quickly fold the drawing, tucking it into my pocket.

"Checking for maintenance issues." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears.

"Of course." She steps inside, her eyes taking in the small touches I'd added for Daisy. "It's beautiful, Rowan. A perfect gift."

"It doesn't matter now."

"Doesn't it?" She settles onto the small bench, patting the space beside her. When I don't move, she sighs. "You've been working yourself to exhaustion for three days. Avoiding everyone."

"I've been busy." The excuse sounds pathetic. "There's work to do."

"There's work to hide behind, you mean."

Before I can respond, footsteps approach outside. Liam appears, his expression a mixture of concern and determination.

"Intervention time?" I ask bitterly.

"If that's what you want to call it." He leans against the doorframe, blocking my escape route.

"I'm fine."

"You're miserable," Mom counters gently. "And too stubborn to admit you made a mistake."

"The mistake would have been letting it go further." I turn away, unable to bear the sympathy in her eyes. "She has her book launch, her career taking off. Everything she's worked for."

"So you decided for her," Liam says. "Without even giving her a choice."

"There was no choice to make." I run a hand through my hair, frustration building. "We're from different worlds. She needs?—"

"What exactly do you think she needs?" Mom interrupts. "Because from where I'm

sitting, what she needed was someone who saw her magic and didn't try to change it. Someone who built her spaces to create instead of telling her to be more practical."

Her words hit too close to the conversation with Daisy, to the hurt in her eyes when I pushed her away.

"It wouldn't have worked."

"You mean you were too afraid to try." Liam's voice lacks its usual judgment, replaced by something like understanding.

"I was being realistic." The defense sounds weaker each time I use it.

"No, sweetheart." Mom reaches into her bag, pulling out a bound manuscript. "You were being afraid."

I recognize it immediately. It's a copy of Daisy's book draft, the pages she'd been working on during her stay. The cover shows a small rabbit and a bear standing at a fork in a trail.

"She left this behind," Mom says, holding it out to me. "Or maybe she left it for you. I'm not sure."

Reluctantly, I take it, opening to a random page. The illustrations punch the air from my lungs. There's the bear teaching the rabbit to read trail markers, to find safety in the forest, to trust that some paths, though difficult, are worth taking.

"Read the dedication," Mom says softly.

I flip to the front page, where Daisy's handwriting flows across the paper:

For the forest guardian who taught me that the most magical trails are the ones we're brave enough to follow, even when we can't see where they lead.

Something cracks inside me, a wall I've built so carefully finally beginning to crumble.

"You became the very thing you feared most," Liam says quietly. "The one who leaves."

"I didn't—" But I did. Not physically, but in every way that mattered. I closed the door before she could walk through it. I abandoned what we might have had because I was too afraid to risk the pain of losing it later.

"She was never just another guest, son." Mom touches my arm gently. "And you know it."

The truth I've been fighting crashes through my defenses. "I've been falling for her." The words, finally spoken aloud, hang in the small space.

"We know." Liam's smile holds no triumph, only relief. "The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"It's too late." Even as I say it, something rebellious stirs in my chest. "She's gone."

"Gone, not vanished." Mom stands, taking the manuscript from my hands and opening it to the last page—an illustration of the bear standing alone at a crossroads, looking lost. "Some stories aren't finished yet."

"She's meeting with her publisher tomorrow," Liam adds. "Some big planning session for the BookWorld promotion in Manhattan."

"I called Janet," Mom adds.

"Manhattan." The word itself represents everything I'm not—urban, sophisticated, bustling with ambition and opportunity.

"Terrifying, isn't it?" Mom's eyes twinkle with understanding. "A place with no trail markers, no familiar paths."

"I wouldn't even know how to find her."

"I have her address." Mom pulls out a slip of paper, clearly prepared for this moment. "And the publishing house information. Janet said they'll be meeting all day, planning the launch that's coming up in a few months."

I stare at it, the neat handwriting mapping a route to another world. To her world.

"What would I even say?" The question emerges more vulnerable than I intended.

"The truth might be a good start." Liam pushes off from the doorframe. "That you were wrong to tell her to leave. That you're sorry. That you love her."

"And if she doesn't want to hear it?"

"Then at least you tried." Mom tucks the paper into my shirt pocket, right next to Daisy's forgotten sketch. "Which is more than you can say right now."

They're right. Of course they're right. I've spent my life maintaining the grounds and trails, ensuring safe passage for others while refusing to step off my own carefully marked path.

"I need to pack." The decision crystallizes. "And book a flight."

Mom's smile blooms like mountain laurel in spring. "Already done. You leave in three hours."

"You were that sure I'd come around?"

"No." She cups my cheek like she did when I was small. "But I was sure you'd regret it forever if you didn't try."

New York City is too loud, too bright, too crowded. Taxi horns blare as I study the address on the hotel slip for the tenth time, double-checking I'm heading in the right direction.

The Plaza Hotel looms ahead, impossibly grand against the backdrop of Central Park. I pause on the sidewalk, my hiking boots and flannel shirt marking me as clearly out of place among the suits and designer dresses flowing through the revolving doors.

This is madness. What am I doing here? Chasing a woman I pushed away through a city I don't understand to say... what, exactly?

The truth, Mom had said. Start with the truth.

The lobby gleams with marble and gold, making the lodge's rustic elegance seem quaint by comparison. The woman at the reception desk eyes my outdoorsman appearance with professional wariness.

"I'm here to see Daisy Harper," I say, my voice rough from disuse during the flight. "She's a guest."

"I'm afraid I can't give out information about our guests, sir."

Of course. What did I expect? That I could just waltz in and find her, like spotting a

deer on a familiar trail?

"Could you at least let her know Rowan Callahan is here?" I try again. "From Mountain Laurel Lodge?"

The receptionist's perfectly shaped eyebrow lifts slightly. "One moment, please."

As she reaches for the phone, movement by the elevator catches my eye. Daisy emerges, dressed in a simple blue dress that somehow makes her look both professional and utterly herself. Her hair is pulled back, her expression tired but composed as she checks something on her phone.

She hasn't spotted me yet. I could still leave, spare us both the aftermath of my mistakes. But then she looks up, scanning the lobby, and our eyes lock across the polished expanse.

Time suspends as shock registers on her face, followed by confusion, hurt, and something else I can't quite name. She doesn't approach, but she doesn't flee either, frozen in place as I cross the lobby toward her.

"Rowan?" My name on her lips carries a universe of questions. "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you." The carefully rehearsed speech evaporates, leaving only raw honesty. "I made a terrible mistake."

Her expression hardens. "Which one? Pushing me away or following me to New York?"

"The first one." I swallow hard. "Definitely the first one."

A businessman bumps past us, breaking the moment. Daisy glances around the busy lobby.

"We can't do this here." She gestures toward a quieter corner with plush seating. "Although I'm still not sure we should do this at all."

I follow her, aware of the space between us and the rigid set of her shoulders that used to relax around me.

"How did you even find me?" she asks once we're seated.

"Janet told Mom about your meetings. Mom gave me your hotel information." I hesitate. "I'm sorry for just showing up like this. I should have called, but I was afraid..."

"Afraid of what?"

"That you wouldn't want to talk to me. That you'd hang up. That you'd be right to do so."

Something in her expression softens slightly. "I had back-to-back meetings all day. Might not have answered anyway."

"How did they go?" I ask, genuinely wanting to know despite the more urgent matters between us.

Surprise flickers across her face at the question. "Really well, actually. BookWorld is excited about the forest friends concept. If the launch goes well, they're offering a multi-book contract."

"That's amazing, Daisy. You deserve it."

"Do I?" Her eyes search mine. "Because the last time we spoke, you made it pretty clear my dreams were impractical fantasies."

The deserved jab hits its mark. "I was wrong. So wrong." I lean forward, willing her to believe me. "I said those things because I was terrified."

"Of what?"

"Of this." I gesture between us. "Of caring about someone who had every reason to leave. Of not being enough to make you want to stay."

Her eyes widen slightly. "So you pushed me away first? Before I could leave on my own?"

"It sounds ridiculous when you say it out loud."

"It is ridiculous." But the ghost of a smile touches her lips. "And incredibly frustrating."

"I know." I take a breath, gathering courage. "The truth is, I fell in love with you, Daisy. With your stories and your kindness and the way you see magic in everything. And it scared the hell out of me."

She's very still, her expression unreadable.

"I convinced myself it was better to end it cleanly than risk watching you realize the mountains weren't enough. That I wasn't enough." I meet her gaze steadily. "I was a coward."

"Yes, you were." Her voice is soft but firm.

"I don't expect you to forgive me. I just needed you to know the truth. That nothing about what we shared was a mistake." I pull her forgotten sketch from my pocket, smoothing its creases before holding it out to her. "It was the most real thing I've felt in years."

She takes the drawing, her fingers tracing the lines of Gordon the Mayor. "You kept this?"

"I found it in the blind after you left." The memory of those empty days twists in my chest. "I missed you. Every day. Every trail. Every moment."

Her expression softens.

"I had meetings all day with publishers," she says, changing direction. "About marketing plans, tour schedules, follow-up books."

My heart sinks. Of course. Her career is taking off, just as she deserves. "That's wonderful."

"It is." She looks down at the drawing, then back at me. "And you know what I realized sitting in those meetings?"

"What?"

"That I can write from anywhere." Her eyes hold mine, steady and sure. "That the best stories I've ever written came from sitting in that wildlife blind you built me."

Hope flickers, dangerous and fragile. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that before you showed up here, I was already thinking about moving to Elk Ridge." She says it so simply, so matter-of-factly, that for a moment I'm sure I've

misheard.

"You... what?"

"The publishers don't care where I live as long as I can make it to New York occasionally for meetings. I can do most of my work remotely." A small smile forms. "And it turns out I do my best writing surrounded by mountain magic and grumpy forest guardians."

"But your life in Charlotte..."

"I'm not planning on going back to teaching." She leans forward slightly. "Besides, the lodge felt more like home in two weeks than my apartment has in two years."

The hope expands, threatening to crack my ribs. "Even with me pushing you away?"

"Especially with you pushing me away." She shakes her head. "Because it showed me how much it hurt to leave, even when I thought you didn't want me there."

"I do want you there." The words rush out. "More than anything."

"Do you?" Her eyes search mine, still cautious. "Because I need to know this isn't another moment you'll regret when reality sets in. When my chaos disrupts your ordered world or when my career needs attention."

"I flew to New York City—a place that terrifies me—and tracked you to a hotel fancier than anywhere I've ever been, wearing hiking boots and flannel." I gesture to myself, to the incongruous picture I must make in this elegant setting. "If that's not commitment to disruption, I don't know what is."

That earns a real smile, one that reaches her eyes. "It is pretty convincing."

I reach for her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "I love you, Daisy Harper. Your chaos, your magic, your talking animals. All of it. And I'm sorry it took losing you to realize I'd rather have a messy, complicated future with you than a safe, empty one without you."

Her fingers curl around mine, warm and forgiving. "You hurt me."

"I know."

"You'll need to make it up to me."

"Every day," I promise. "For as long as you'll let me."

"That might be a very long time." Her eyes shine with something I haven't dared hope for. "Because it turns out I love you too, Rowan Callahan. Even when you're being a stubborn, frustrating mountain man."

"Especially then?" I ask, echoing her words.

"Especially then." She squeezes my hand. "Though I reserve the right to remind you of this moment the next time you try to make decisions for both of us."

"Fair enough." I bring her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "So what happens now?"

She stands, tugging me up with her. "Now you kiss me properly, forest guardian. And then we figure out the rest together."

I pull her close, marveling at how perfectly she fits against me, at how the chaos of New York fades when she's in my arms. Her lips meet mine in a kiss that feels like coming home and embarking on an adventure all at once.

When we break apart, her eyes are bright with tears and laughter. "I can't believe you came to New York."

"I'd go anywhere for you." The truth is simple now that I've stopped fighting it. "Even if there are no trail markers to follow."

"We'll make our own," she says, her smile holding all the magic I almost convinced myself wasn't real. "That's what we do best."

As we leave the hotel hand in hand, the city suddenly seems less overwhelming. Still not my natural habitat, but fascinating through Daisy's eyes as she points out details I would have missed—the pattern of light through buildings, the resilient tree growing through concrete, the stories written in every face we pass.

I don't know exactly what our future looks like. How we'll balance mountains and cities, solitude and publicity, her whimsy and my practicality. But for the first time, the unmarked trail ahead doesn't fill me with fear.

It fills me with possibility.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:23 pm

Daisy

The autumn air is crisp and golden, the sun casting a warm glow over Mountain Laurel Lodge's wraparound porch. The sweet scent of cinnamon and baked apples drifts from the kitchen. It feels like home.

I sit on a wooden bench near the stone fireplace, my newest children's book open in my lap. Around me, wide-eyed kids sit cross-legged, clutching copies of the story, while their parents linger nearby, sipping cider and smiling at the scene.

Rascal, sprawls lazily at my feet. For once he's behaving, at least until someone isn't looking.

"And that's when Gordon the Mayor realized that sometimes, the bravest trail to follow is the one you make yourself," I read, turning the page to reveal the final illustration—a distinguished groundhog and his forest friends gathered around a map, creating their own path through the woods.

As I read aloud, the laughter and quiet gasps of the children fill the crisp mountain air. I gesture animatedly, letting myself get lost in the rhythm of the words, my heart full in a way I never expected.

From the edge of the porch, I feel him before I see him.

Rowan Callahan leans against one of the lodge's wooden beams, arms crossed over his chest, watching me. Still gruff, still reserved, but he's here.

And he's watching me like I hung the stars.

My throat tightens, but I smile as I reach the final lines of the story. The kids burst into applause, some running up to get their books signed, others asking about Rascal, who still looks like an angel instead of the chaos-causing fluffball he truly is.

I chance another glance at Rowan.

He gives me that quiet, unreadable look. The same one he had when I first got lost in his woods.

But there's something different now.

Something softer.

Something that tells me that even if I lose my way again?—

He'll always find me.

Inside the lodge, warmth and laughter fill the air as the Callahan family gathers around the long dining table. The usual post-dinner chatter is in full swing, with Declan sneaking an extra serving of dessert, Jameson swapping stories about guest activities, and Liam looking mildly concerned about the noise level.

I settle beside Rowan, Rascal curling up at my feet. Under the table, Rowan's hand finds mine, his calloused fingers intertwining with my own in that quiet way that still makes my heart skip.

Across the table, Evie Callahan clears her throat.

"Since we're all here," Evie begins, folding her hands atop the table. "I have an

announcement."

The conversation quiets.

Liam, ever the responsible eldest, straightens. "What kind of announcement?"

Evie waves a hand. "Oh, nothing dramatic, dear. Just that I've decided it's time to step back from the bookkeeping. It's tedious, and quite frankly, I'm too old to be fussing over spreadsheets and numbers when I could be enjoying my tea and meddling in all of your love lives instead."

I bite back a laugh as Declan chokes on his coffee.

Jameson whistles low. "So you're hiring someone?"

"I am," Evie says lightly.

Liam frowns. "You never let anyone else handle the numbers."

"Well, I never had the right person." Evie's eyes twinkle. "But I believe I've found someone who will do just fine."

Rowan raises a brow, exchanging a glance with Nolan.

"Who?" I ask, now curious about what Evie is planning. I've learned that her innocent smile usually hides schemes that somehow work out perfectly in the end.

Evie simply smiles. "You'll see."

As the family conversation shifts, I hear Declan groan from across the table.

"What now?" Rowan mutters.

"The corporate retreat," Declan grumbles. "The one starting next week."

I tilt my head. "Why do you sound like someone just told you the kitchen is out of butter?"

Declan gives me a flat look. "Because a bunch of business executives in suits are about to descend on my kitchen, and I'll have to pretend I care about their gluten-free, dairy-free, fun-free preferences."

Jameson laughs. "Ahh, the joy of hospitality."

I hide my grin, but something about Declan's tone makes me curious.

"Who's in charge of this retreat?" I ask.

Declan scowls into his coffee.

"Some CEO," he mutters. "A workaholic. Juliette Sinclair."

I don't miss the way Evie suddenly looks way too amused.

"Well," I say, trying to sound innocent, "maybe she'll surprise you."

Declan rolls his eyes. "Doubt it. Corporate types are all the same. Efficiency and quarterly earnings reports and no room for anything spontaneous."

Rowan squeezes my hand under the table, and when I look at him, that rare half-smile plays at his lips. We both know a thing or two about assumptions and unexpected connections.

As the night winds down and he walks me back to my cabin, Rascal trotting ahead on the moonlit path, Rowan pulls me close.

"Happy?" he asks simply.

I look up at the stars above the mountains, at the trail ahead illuminated by soft lights, at the man who finally let me find my way into his heart.

"Happier than I ever thought possible," I tell him truthfully.

Thank You for Reading Sunshine and the Grumpy Groundskeeper !

I hope you loved Rowan and Daisy's story as much as I loved writing it! Their journey was just the beginning—because the Callahan family has plenty more romance in store.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:23 pm

Rowan

The first snow of winter dusts the mountain peaks, a thin white blanket that transforms the familiar landscape into something new yet eternal. Dawn breaks over the eastern ridge, painting the snow-kissed trees in shades of gold and rose as I make my final check of the wildlife blind.