



The Mountain Man's Heat (Blue Mountain Burn: The Firefighters of Hartley Ridge #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Rescuing her dog thrusts her into my life. My heart is determined to keep her there.

Hudson

The moment I see Iris Andrews running across my front yard in the middle of the night during a wild mountain storm, I know my life is about to change. She's feisty, with gorgeous curves, and the heart of a kitten. I want her.

And with the way she looks at me, maybe she wants me to.

The problem? She's a big-city girl, and I'm the captain of a small-town fire brigade. We live in different worlds.

I try to resist my aching need for her, but when the storm forces us together, I don't know how long I can.

And then she touches me

An Instalove Short Romance Read with 100% HEA.

Total Pages (Source): 14

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Chapter One

Hudson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Turns out, she moved to Australia instead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hmm, maybe I pushed them too hard tonight?

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

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

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

“Alright, alright.” I strip off my T-shirt and toss it at Tony, who catches it with a grin

and lobs it straight back to me. Snatching it out of the air, I snort. “My shout at the pub next?—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake shakes his head. “No idea.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Naked.

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

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

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

With nods, Jake and Tony leave.

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

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

Especially if Mrs. Andrews hears about it.

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Chapter Two

Iris

“ He’s just like a kitten, she says,” I mutter, lugging my aunt’s colossal mutt—what is he?

Part bear, part yowie?—down the stairs of her mountainside cottage.

If Aunt Lily wasn’t in hospital in Sydney, over sixty kilometers away, I’d dump Archie on her lap and have a chat with her about the stereotypical behavior of kittens.

“ Just scratch him behind the ears, and he’ll be putty in your hands , she says.

Just give him some roast chicken, and he’ll snuggle right up in his beanbag and watch TV with you , she says. ”

In my arms, Archie—who I do adore with my whole heart—is whimpering and trying to lick my face and crawl over my shoulder all at the same time.

He misses Aunt Lily. Has since I arrived yesterday to housesit for her while she’s undergoing her heart bypass surgery.

But no amount of scratching behind the ears or chicken or Netflix has calmed him tonight.

The second that first distant rumble of thunder—so faint I dismissed it as a gust of

wind in the trees outside—filtered into Aunt Lily’s home, Archie turned into a lump of quivering fear who tried to first hide behind the toilet, then hide under my armpit, and then hide under the sofa.

Thankfully, the distant storm is going away. I think. I hope.

If I can get Archie to settle down again, maybe on the sofa he most definitely can’t fit under, I’ll be able to finish my last assignment for my Diploma of Screen and Media in Specialist Makeup Services and submit it on time. Even if I must do it one handed while I scratch behind Archie’s ears.

“How ‘bout we finish watching the movie, Arch?” I say. Well, grunt, really. I’m five foot four, and Archie is over one hundred and ten pounds.

God, I hope I don’t miss a step and fall.

I’m totally alone up here, my phone service is patchy at best, and Aunt Lily has no landline.

She’s an incredible artist but has zero time for people.

“Who doesn’t love watching Jason Statham punch bad guys? ”

Probably a lot of people, but those people aren’t my people. Jason Statham punching bad guys is my therapy of choice after losing my receptionist job—which I didn’t like but needed—when I turned down my boss’s not-at-all subtle or professional advances.

As soon as Aunt Lily is back home and able to look after herself, I’ll need to return to Melbourne and find another job. Preferably one without a handsy boss.

Outside, thunder rumbles again. Archie whines and writhes in my arms, and I grimace. It's not going away. It's getting closer. Damn it.

"C'mon, Arch," I murmur, doing my best to stroke his back as I finally reach the bottom step still on my feet. Yay. "We've got this, mate."

He wriggles in my arms. Licks my cheek.

"We've got?—"

A crack of thunder detonates above us and I scream.

Archie twists from my hold and thumps to the floor.

"Oh, Arch," I croon, crouching down to him. "It's okay, it's only?—"

Another crack of thunder, louder this time. I glance up at the ceiling and frown.

"Damn, that was close," I say and look back to Archie.

My stomach drops.

He's gone.

I jolt to my feet. "Archie?"

A flash of black movement catches my eye down the hallway leading to the back of the house. Crap. Where's he going?

"Archie!" I run after him.

The storm, clearly deciding to be my current archnemesis, parks its angry butt

overhead and releases its rage. At least, it sounds that way. The foundations shake. My stomach seems to vibrate. The lights flicker.

No, no. Don't you dare.

Thankfully, they don't. The last thing I need is a blackout.

I hurry after Archie, stare locked on what little glimpses I catch of him as he tries to escape the storm's noise. He's careening off the walls and furniture, getting closer to the back door.

It's closed, of course. And locked. I'm not an idiot.

I'm a twenty-two-year-old female alone in an isolated—albeit luxuriously rustic—mountainside cabin.

Archie can't get out. But he can injure himself.

He's a big dog. A strong dog. I don't want him breaking his head ramming into the door. "Archie! Sit!"

Archie doesn't sit. Archie disappears around the corner.

"Sit!" I shout, breaking into a sprint. "Sit!"

The world outside turns white with a flash of lightning. A deafening crack of thunder follows straightaway. I slap my hands to my ears—holy shit, is the storm attacking the house?—and then groan as the lights die without even a flicker.

"Shit!" I ground out, squinting into the blackness enveloping me. "Shit."

A dull whacking sound floats from the back of the house. No whimper or yelp though, just that dull thump. “Archie?” What did he hit?

The only response I get is the thunder, wind, and rain lashing the world outside.

I burst forward, waving my hands in front of me in the dark. “Damn it, Archie. You better be?—”

I slam into the door. Thankfully, my hands hit first, breaking my momentum just enough to stop my head striking the solid wood with all the force of my panic.

“Archie?” I call, rubbing my forehead. That’s going to leave a bump. “Archie?”

The lights flicker back on, and my stomach sinks as I stare at the Archie-size dog door in the back door, the flap swaying back and forth a fraction. Either from the wind or from being moved by a mastiff-size force.

My gut tells me it’s the latter.

“Shit,” I mutter, fling the door open, and run out into the storm.

I am so dead.

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Chapter Three

Hudson

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I eye the ceiling lights. Are they staying on this time?

The storm is hammering Hartley Ridge and the mountains, but so far, there have been no reports of lightning-strike fires or property damage.

A couple of flickering power failures, no doubt some downed trees, and maybe flash flooding down in the valley where Blue Mountain Creek cuts through the terrain, but no fires.

Wild wind and sheets of rain batter the house. Thunder and lightning fight for dominance of the night. I'm tempted to grab a beer, toe off my boots, flick the lights off, and settle back to watch nature's temper tantrum through my living room window.

Instead, I grab a water, leave my boots on, and stand at the window.

As much as I'd like to relax, I need to be ready in case?—

Something black darts across the small patch of cleared area I call a front yard. An animal of some sort, spooked by the storm, no doubt. Too big to be a possum or wombat, but not bounding like a kangaroo.

Someone's pet? A dog?

Lightning cuts the sky, illuminating Mrs. Andrews's bullmastiff running across my yard, tail tucked, ears flat.

Ah, crap.

" Archie! " a voice screams, a split second before thunder detonates above, and the lights die again.

Crap!

Lightning peroxides the night outside, and my gut knots.

A young woman sprints through the rain after the dog, her face etched in fear, her wet hair and clothes plastered to her body.

For a heartbeat, the base male part of me notices lush curves and full breasts under the drenched fabric of a white T-shirt and an arse made for squeezing wrapped in wet denim shorts, and then I get a grip on my lust and bolt for my door.

"Hey!" I launch myself from my front verandah, attempting to shield my face from the stinging rain with a hand. "Hey!"

" Archie! " she yells, ignoring me. Whoever she is, she's steady on her feet. Scared, yes—terror laces her shout—but agile. She's not stumbling or staggering about in the lashing weather. " Archie! Come! "

I catch up to her at the edge of my yard, where my property becomes dense scrub, trees, and vegetation. "Hey?" I grab her elbow. God, her skin is so cold. She's shivering. How long?—

She yelps, spins around, whacks my chest with a balled fist, and yelps again, eyes wide as she stares up at me, shaking her hand. The top of her head barely reaches my chin. “What are you made of? Brick?”

I blink.

And then she turns and heads for the bush again. “My aunt’s dog is scared of the storm,” she yells over her shoulder. “He got out of the house, and I need to find?—”

Lightning strikes the ancient gum tree towering over all the others to the left of my house. Exactly the direction she is facing.

Splintering wood flings out from the struck trunk. Sparks arc through the air.

The woman squeals, throwing up her arm, and I grab her, pulling her into my body. Protecting her.

At least, trying to.

She bucks and shoves free, glaring up at me.

“Let me go, you idiot,” she shouts. The night almost hides her face, but fierce fury, not fear, burns in her eyes.

And, oh shit, my body is already aching for hers.

God, she felt so right in my arms, pressed against my body.

She waves an arm at the bush and smoldering tree. “I’ve got to find my aunt’s?—”

A large black shape streaks out of the bush and launches itself at the woman’s back

and slams into her.

She falls into me, her face mashing into my chest, her hands grabbing at my biceps.

Archie propels off her, a barking black missile of chaos, and before I can think, I fling the woman to the side by one arm and grab Archie's collar—one of those thick, studded leather types—with my other hand.

“Gotcha,” I burst out as his weight almost wrenches my shoulder out of its joint.

Lightning illuminates the relief flooding the young woman's face, and then we're plunged back into darkness. She scrambles past me, reaching for Archie. She scoops him up and hugs him to her amazing breasts, kissing the top of his head.

In an unsettling second of sheer clarity, I realize I've never been more jealous of a dog.

Ever.

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Chapter Four

Iris

Stranger danger was drilled into me growing up. My mum—God love her—tried to be a helicopter parent before helicopter parenting was a thing. She'd freak out now if she knew I was inside a strange man's home, dripping wet and miles away from the rest of the world.

At least Archie's here to protect me. Ish. He's curled up in a shivering ball on my feet, covered by a blanket the strange man—whose name I still don't know—gave me after I finished drying Archie off with a towel.

Shifting on a wooden dining chair, I grimace as my shorts and underpants squelch. I am so wet. And not in the exciting way. Although, if I'm being honest, based on the fleeting glances I've allowed myself of the man who came to my aid, being wet in the exciting way is entirely possible.

He looks like he could be Chris Hemsworth's body double, just with darker hair and stubble I bet would feel like sinful heaven scraping against my inner?—

Oh my God. Stop it, Iris. He has to be at least fifteen years older than you, and no way is someone that hot not already attached.

A drip of water trickles down the bridge of my nose, tickling my nostril, and I scrub it away with the back of my hand.

I'm shivering. After drying Archie, I attempted to dry myself with the other towel my stranger gave me, but my clothes are still sodden.

And my feet ache. I took off after Archie so quickly I didn't stop to think that running through the bush in cheap-arse slides wasn't ideal.

I need to get back to Aunt Lily's place and get out of my wet clothes. Maybe have a hot bath. Maybe allow myself a little self-love as I picture my stranger.

My stranger? My?

"Here," his deep, slightly husky voice rumbles above my head, and maybe I am wet for the exciting reason. That voice... Heart thumping in my ears, I look up.

He's standing before me, a steaming mug in his hand.

"You need to warm up," he says, extending the mug.

The distinct aroma of tea fills my lungs as his gaze locks with mine.

There's something in his brown eyes, an intensity that sends a shiver through me.

I want to squeeze my thighs together. How did I go from being scared and angry over Archie to horny as hell over...

"What's your name?" I ask, the question falling from me on a scratchy croak.

A muscle knots in his jaw. "Hudson McKinney." He places the tea on the table at my elbow. "I'm the captain of the Hartley Ridge fire brigade."

"You're a firefighter?" My head fills with images of him in one of those firefighter

charity calendars, the kind where the firefighters are all half naked, cuddling a cute puppy or kitten. The sensitive nub of my clit aches for attention.

“Thank you for grabbing Archie,” I reply. Reaching down, I give my aunt’s dog—still on my feet under the blanket—a soft pat. The storm is fading. Only the occasional rumble of thunder peppers the night now, distant and almost half-hearted. “My aunt would kill me if anything happened to him.”

“You are Lily Andrews’s niece, then.” A small smile creases the corners of his lips. “The one from Melbourne?”

I frown. “Yes. That’s me. Iris Andrews. Have I been the topic of conversation?”

“Not really.” He flicks a look at Archie and then at me. “You didn’t want the blanket?”

I smile down at my aunt’s dog. “I don’t want him getting cold.”

The man’s low chuckle is like a caress feathering my skin, and my nipples pucker. I need to get out of here before I embarrass myself and ask him to—

An old landline phone attached to the kitchen wall bursts into ringing life, and for a moment, I almost laugh. I used to have my mobile set to the retro ringtone, but it’s so much more invasive and demanding in actuality.

“‘Scuse me,” he says with a dip of his head. “I’ve got to get that.”

He strides over to the phone and plucks the handset from the cradle, the muscles of his broad back, shoulders, and arms coiling and flexing as he does so.

I swallow. Stick a semi-naked Hudson McKinney on the cover of a charity calendar,

and it would sell out within the hour.

“What’s up?” he says into the phone.

Whoever’s on the other end says something, and he frowns and narrows his eyes. “Okay, that’s not exactly awesome news, but if we have a problem tonight, you can handle it, right?”

His gaze roams my face for a heartbeat, and he half turns away, running a hand through his hair. It’s still damp from coming to my aid. In fact, his shirt and jeans are damp as well.

Guilt ribbons through me, and I let out a sigh. If I’d been more prepared, Archie wouldn’t have escaped, and Hudson wouldn’t have needed to face the storm to help me. I don’t usually need rescuing. He must think I’m an idiot.

As soon as the storm passes—hopefully, any minute now—I’ll take Archie back to Aunt Lily’s place. Preferably via the road I’ve driven on once, and not through the bush like our last wild descent. If Hudson will drive us there, that is.

“No worries,” he says into the phone, returning his attention to me. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He hangs up, studies me for a second, and then he crosses back to the table, pulling out the chair at a right angle to mine and sitting down. “There’s a tree down at the bottom of Kissingpoint Road,” he says. “A big one. Impossible to pass. I hope you don’t need to get into town tomorrow?”

I shake my head. “As long as I can go up...” Giving him a sheepish smile, I pat Archie again. “Speaking of, would you be okay driving me and Archie back to my aunt’s place? I think it’s only a few minutes up the mountain from here, yes?”

He dips his head. “Can do. Give me a sec, and I’ll bring my truck around to the front so you don’t have to run too far in the rain.”

Before I can tell him that’s not necessary—perhaps the rain will cool my blood?—he’s gone from the kitchen, out the back door, into the dark.

Archie lifts his head as the door closes. He rises to his feet with a low growl barely a few seconds later as the door swings back open.

Hudson walks back in, expression unreadable, new beads of water clinging to his dark hair. His gaze locks with mine, and rubbing at the back of his neck, he lets out a choppy laugh. “As it turns out, lightning didn’t just hit that one tree.”

I blink.

“My truck got hit as well. Front windscreen has been shattered, and two tires are melted.” His jaw knots. “It seems we’re not going anywhere tonight.”

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Chapter Five

Hudson

She's stuck here. With me. In my home. For the night.

This is a problem.

Because every time I look at her, I want to peel the wet clothes from her body and give her so much pleasure she never wants to leave.

Five minutes ago, I hurried out of the kitchen with the muttered pretense of getting her a blanket. Five minutes of hiding out in my bedroom. Pacing.

I've never been as affected by a woman as I am by Iris. The moment her gaze connected with mine out in the storm, I wanted to haul her to my body and protect her, comfort her, give her all my strength...

Scrunching up my face, I rub the back of my neck and suck in a slow, deep breath.

"Get it together, McKinney," I mumbled, shaking my head as I snatch up the blanket on my bed, a patchwork quilt my sister made me before she moved to the UK to study media and communications.

Each little shape of material makes up a six-by-six image of her smirking face.

"You see so much heat, big brother," she'd said, lobbing the blanket at me, "I figured

you'd like to sleep with something ultra cool. ”

Striding back into the kitchen, heart thumping, I force my expression to be indifferent and hold out the folded blanket. “Wrap yourself in this, and I’ll make you another cuppa.”

She looks up from patting Archie, and an invisible fist punches me in the gut.

Her lips are blue, and shivers wrack her body.

“You’re freezing,” I state, hurrying over to her.

Of course, she is. She’s been in wet clothes for who knows how long, and I’ve got the air-con blasting in a futile attempt to defeat the humid summer storm temperature. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“A little,” she replies, the words dissolving into a laugh peppered with the click of chattering teeth. She gives me a shaky smile. “I mean, I’m a little freezing, not you’re a little idiot. There’s nothing little about you.”

Tight heat floods my body.

“You need to get out of your clothes,” I blurt out, dumping the blanket on the table and reaching for her upper arm.

I’ve almost curled my fingers around it when I stop and jerk my hand back.

She’s not a victim in a burning house. I have no right to touch her, not even to help her to her feet.

Especially after declaring she needs to undress.

Because hell, what I wouldn't give to help her remove the wet clothes from her exquisite body? Exploring her exposed skin with my lips and teeth and?—

Enough. Get your shit together.

A strangled chuckle squeezes from me, and I take a step back. “That came out wrong.” I shake my head. “I didn't mean to sound so...” Sighing, I give her a sheepish smile. “I meant you need to warm up, and your wet clothes aren't helping.”

She laughs, and my blood runs hotter. I could listen to that throaty laugh for the rest of my life. “I knew what you meant.” A flash of dimples on either side of her lips sends my hot blood south. “And you're right. I do.”

For a crushing beat, our stares lock. And then she flicks a look behind me. “Umm...”

I frown over my shoulder and realization hits me. “Shit.” I throw her another sheepish smile. “Yeah, I'll leave you alone. In fact, I'll go get you some dry clothes. You okay with a pair of my track pants and a T-shirt?”

“Totally okay.” Her dimples tease me again, and I'm in trouble.

I want to press my lips to them. I want to bury my hands in the damp curls of her hair and kiss her dimples and then her lips and the side of her neck and the curve where it becomes her shoulder and the little dip at the base of her throat and—

“Done,” I say. I need to get a grip. She's probably nervous enough about spending the night here with a strange man. The last thing she needs is said strange older man behaving like a horny Neanderthal. Without another word, I pivot on my heel and start to stride out of the kitchen.

“Hudson?”

Her soft voice clamps around my heart like a vice, and I turn back to her, my pulse pounding. She's standing, and even from here, I can see she's still shivering. And that her nipples are pebbled. "Iris?"

"Thank you," she says, reaching for the blanket on the table. "I'm sorry to be an inconvenience."

With a low chuckle, I shake my head. "I'm a firefighter, remember? Saving damsels in distress is part of the job."

One of her eyebrows lifts, and her lips twitch. "So I'm a damsel in distress, am I?"

Letting a grin play with my own lips, I scratch at the stubble on my jaw. "Now that I think about that punch to the chest you gave me out in the storm...maybe damsel in distress isn't accurate."

Her lips split in a wide grin. It's playful and cheeky, and my cock responds. "I'll let you have it," she says, a light gleaming in her eyes. "Because you did save me from needing to tell Aunt Lily I lost Archie."

At his name, Archie rises to his feet, tail wagging.

She gives his side a gentle pat, and I love how her hair tumbles over her shoulder, like a cascade of chocolate curls that skim the full curve of her breast.

"It was an impressive blow," I say, trying to distract myself from the sight. I fix my attention on her face instead. Damn, her eyes are beautiful, a light hazel green that seems to hold me prisoner. "Do you box?"

"Ha. No." Her dimples flash again. "My brother is a TV and film stunt coordinator. I grew up learning how to fight—well, stage fight—and tumble."

Tumble.

A heady image of her on my bed fills my head, the sheets tousled around her limbs as if she's been moving around in it with someone— me —and a low, almost guttural growl rumbles deep in the back of my throat.

Archie pricks his ears.

Iris blinks and hugs the blanket with my sister's face on it to her chest. "Plus," she says, her voice husky, uncertain, "my fight or flight reflex is permanently stuck on fight these days."

If that's not a warning, I don't know what is. "I'll get those dry clothes for you," I state with a nod. "And leave you in peace."

And with that, I hurry out of the kitchen.

I pride myself on discipline and control—you can't be a firefighter without either—but Iris Andrews ignites an elemental desire in me that I'm struggling to contain.

How the fuck am I going to survive the night knowing she's under my roof?

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Chapter Six

Iris

My fight or flight reflex is permanently stuck on fight these days? What the hell was that? Why did I say that?

Because it is?

Biting back a sigh, I give Archie a wobbly smile. “Turns out when your boss hits on you, Arch, you don’t just lose your job, you also end up punching the really hot firefighter trying to help you because you’re so jumpy you don’t know when you are being helped.”

Ears pricked, Archie tilts his head to the side.

With a soft chuckle, I scratch him behind his ear. “And now I’ve probably destroyed any chance of getting to know the really hot fire?—”

“I hope these will be okay?”

Hudson’s deep voice jerks my head up, and my breath catches. He’s walking back toward me, his attention on the folded items of clothing he’s carrying, and my whole body reacts to the sheer masculine force of him.

Stealing the chance to check him out, I devour the sight of his broad shoulders, his impressive pecs, and his sculpted lats.

His damp T-shirt still clings to his body, and a part of me wants to stop him in his tracks, throw the clothes in his hands aside, strip him naked, and show him just how appreciative I am for his help.

It has nothing to do with him helping you. There's something about him that pushes all your buttons. Admit it.

It's not just the sexual ones though. I can't help but imagine being looked after by Hudson every day of my life. What would it be like to care for him in return.

A soft whimper hitches in my throat as my pulse quickens.

He lifts his head, his gaze locking with mine, and my sex constricts.

He's barely a few steps from where I'm standing clutching the patchwork blanket he gave me, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body. Smell the cleanness of him.

Biting my lip again, I shuffle back a step.

He frowns. "Everything okay?"

The concern in his voice squeezes my heart. Oh, I could fall in love with this mountain of a man, this firefighter with the looks of an A-list movie star, and the body of a Greek god.

I could fall in love with him right this very moment. And my stupid heart would never recover.

"Yeah." I nod, reaching for the clothes. "Just cold."

Hot more like it.

“Of course.” A choppy chuckle falls from him. “Sorry. Would you like another cup of tea? I’ll make it for you while you’re changing. Or a coffee? Hot chocolate? I’m good at hot chocolates.”

“I’d love a hot chocolate,” I say. Why does my voice sound like a husky breath?

His face splits in a smile. “Excellent. Two hot chocolates coming up.” He spins on his heel and crosses to the kitchen counter.

He stops and turns back to me. “Probably should tell you where you can change. First door on the right down the hallway is the spare room. It’s the gym home office junk room.

I call it the Bermuda Triangle. Who knows what’s in there?

My bedroom is the door after that. Either is fine.

” An unreadable expression flickers over his face. “Both can be locked from the inside.”

My heart thumps up into my already tight throat. “Thank you. But I trust you.”

And I do. Which makes no sense, given he’s a total stranger. But then...is he? I feel safer with him than any person I’ve met. And Archie likes him. Aunt Lily told me Archie doesn’t like anyone. But Archie likes him.

His gaze holds mine, a question in it I’m sure I’m imagining.

What would happen if I removed the small space between us? If I slid my palms up his exquisite chest, cupped his face in my hands, drew his head down to mine, and kissed him?

“I won’t be long,” I murmur, ducking my head and moving past him. Archie follows, nails clicking on the floorboards.

I want to look back as I leave. I want to see if he’s watching me. But if he is, I’m not sure what I would do. Instead, I hasten my pace, almost running along the hallway. I open the first door I see and throw myself into...

His bedroom.

Breath shallow, I stare at the king-size bed in the center of the room. Breathe in the scent of him. “Oh...”

Archie slips past me, and before I can stop him, he jumps onto the bed, bum up in the air, tail wagging. “Archie,” I groan, closing the door behind me and crossing the room. “Off. Hop off.”

Archie wags his tail some more, lets out an excited woof, and bounds around in a tight, playful circle.

Great. It looks like I’ve climbed on Hudson’s bed and performed some kind of haka on it.

Or had wild monkey sex on it?

For my own peace of mind, I turn my back on it—I’ll straighten it up later—and peel off my damp T-shirt and shorts. Pausing for a moment, I consider my damp bra and G-string and then strip them off as well.

Cool air licks at my bare skin, and my nipples pucker hard. I’ve never undressed in a man’s room before. An excitement throbs between my thighs. My clit tingles.

For a wicked moment, I imagine being brave enough to open Hudson's door and call him down to me.

And then, cheeks burning, I grab the shirt he gave me and tug it over my head.

His scent permeates my breath as the fabric caresses my face, my boobs, the tops of my thighs. The shirt is too big for me, almost a loose minidress in length, and yet I've never felt sexier.

What is wrong with me?

I snatch up the track pants and yank them on. They're way too long. Plus, they sit so low on my hips, the waistband brushes my pubic hair.

Better than nothing on my legs at all.

I bend over, roll the hem a few times so my feet are free, and then, clawing my hair out of my face, turn to Archie.

He's asleep in the middle of Hudson's bed, curled in a ball, tail over his nose. After the scare he had, I don't want to wake him, but if I leave him here, I'll have no buffer, no distraction from the intensity of the potent response I'm feeling for the firefighter. It'll just be me and Hudson.

My pulse pounds hard, and with a roll of my neck, I head for the door.

Sans Archie.

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Chapter Seven

Hudson

A hot pressure curls around my chest and sinks down into my groin. Iris dressed in my old brigade T-shirt and track pants is every sexual fantasy I never knew I had.

“Hot chocolate,” I say, holding out a mug shaped like Batman’s cowed head. Another gift from my sister.

Her lips curl, and my heart trips over itself. “Are you a Batman fan?”

I grin. “What male isn’t?”

“Who’s your favorite? Keating, Bale, or Affleck?” she asks, taking the mug from me. Her fingers brush mine, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from sucking in a sharp breath. Not just at her touch, but also because of her Batman knowledge. Is it possible to fall in love so quickly?

“I should warn you,” she continues, a playful glint in her eyes, “there is a wrong answer.”

I laugh. “West.”

With a giggle, she lifts the mug to her lips, and I watch her take a sip. Yeah, I’m fucked. I was jealous of Archie earlier, and now I’m jealous of a Batman mug. “So...” she says after licking her lips. “Can you do the Batman dance?”

“The Batusi?” I chuckle and then proceed to perform—badly—the dance from the 1960s Batman TV show. “Hell yeah.”

She bursts out laughing, puts her hot chocolate down, and joins me. Swaying her incredible hips side to side, she holds my gaze as she swipes her fingers across her eyes, dancing to non-existent music.

Christ, I’m in trouble. I want to haul her to my body and make her mine.

Then do it.

We do the absurd dance in perfect sync for moment, our chuckles mingling.

“Dare I ask how you know that?” she asks when we eventually stop.

“I grew up watching the show with my grandfather,” I reply, leaning my arse against the kitchen counter. “He was a geek back when they were still called nerds.” A warm beat of love swells through me. “He was Hartley Ridge’s longest serving firefighter when he retired.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.” Her lips curl as she reaches for her hot chocolate and raises the mug to her mouth. “So knights in fire-resistant synthetic run in the family?”

I beam. “You could say that. Although Dad was an arson investigator in Sydney for years before he retired and came back here.”

“Was?”

“Unfortunately, he died two years ago. I’m the only McKinney in Hartley now.” Pain sheers through me, but I ignore it. Bored with retirement, Dad became a volunteer firefighter and died when a bushfire he was fighting encircled him. My mother never

recovered. Maybe I didn't either.

Sympathy etches her face. "I'm sorry."

"It's all good. My sister comes back from time to time. She lives in London. Plus, there's a memorial plaque for Dad at the station and a photo of him and my grandfather in the office, so it's like they're still here. I'll show you tomorrow, if you like? After breakfast?"

A stillness falls over her, and I swallow. I've just implied we'll still be together in the morning. That instead of taking her and Archie back to her aunt's place as soon as possible, we'd be eating together and then venturing into town.

As if on a date.

"I mean—" I begin.

"I'd like that," she says, her voice soft. She takes a sip of hot chocolate and then frowns. "By the way, Archie is asleep on your bed. I'm sorry about that."

A hot pulse fills my cock, and a rush of pleasure heats my blood. She changed in my bedroom. The thought of her taking off her clothes near my bed...

"It's okay." I let out a chuckle. "You'll find out for yourself later how comfortable it is."

She blinks.

I scrunch up my face. "I mean, when you share it later. With Archie. Not me." I drag my hands down my face, shake my head, and give her a sheepish grin. "Can I just start this whole conversation again? I'm failing at it spectacularly."

“Oh no.” The edges of her eyes crinkle as she laughs. Her dimples flash again. “I’m enjoying it too much.”

I snort.

“But no.” She shakes her head. “You don’t need to give up your bed for me. I can sleep on the sofa. I’m used to couch surfing. You might have to sleep with Archie, though. I got the feeling he’s not moving.”

The thought of her sleeping rough stirs a dark tension in me.

A powerful need to protect her, keep her safe forever, give her a bed— my bed...

forever—tightens my chest. I want to tell her she never has to couch surf again.

I want to know why she needs to? “I tell you what,” I say instead, “when it comes time for sleep, I’ll paper-rock-scissors you for the right to the bed. ”

Lips twitching, she narrows her eyes. “Hmm...”

“Trust me.” I grin.

With a soft chuckle, she nods. “Okay.”

She takes another sip. I watch her. Her eyes find mine. Holds them. I swallow.

“Thank you,” she says, the words almost a whisper.

“For?”

“For not asking why I couch surf.”

My throat thickens. “If there is anything I can do to help?—”

“I’m a full-time student,” she says, tucking a strand of ringlets behind one ear.

“Film and TV special effects makeup. Tuition fees are ridiculous, and accommodation in Melbourne isn’t cheap.

Plus, the rental market is ludicrous at the moment.

And I...” She pauses, and an unreadable tension falls over her.

“I had to leave my job a little while ago. So I crash out on friends’ sofas.

” She shrugs. “It’s not ideal, but it’s okay. ”

“Have you thought of moving north?” I ask before I realize I’m saying it.

She grows still, glancing over her shoulder. “I hope it’s okay I put my wet clothes in the bathroom?”

A prickling heat crawls over my scalp, and I force out a relaxed laugh, even as I’m a knotting mess of guilt and self-disgust inside. Whatever charged energy I think is between us, it’s not. She’s making it very clear. I’m being a creep.

I need to control myself.

“It’s okay,” I reply with a loose smile. I make a show of checking my watch. “In fact, given the time?—”

“I’m not tired,” she murmurs, shaking her head. “I...”

She takes a step toward me. Licks her lips.

A hot, tight pressure clamps around my chest. My balls suddenly ache. “You what, Iris?”

She takes another step to me. Bites her bottom lip this time and slowly, slowly reaches out and brushes her fingers over my jaw. “I this , Hudson,” she whispers and rises up onto tiptoe, and touches her lips to mine.

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Chapter Eight

Hudson

With a growl into her mouth, I haul her to my body, one hand on her incredible arse, the other fisting her wild hair at the back of her head. Her soft curves press to me in intoxicating perfection, and my cock pulses, demanding to be inside her sweet heat.

Fuck, I want her. Want to claim her. Take her. Brand her as mine.

Steady , a little voice shouts in my head. Steady .

Tearing my lips from hers, I suck in a choppy breath and stare down into her upturned face.

“Iris,” I rasp, squeezing the sublime swell of her butt cheek.

“From the second I saw you, I wanted you. On a level that’s almost primitive.

I can’t promise I’ll be gentle, but I do promise I will give you so much pleasure you?—”

She silences me with a hungry kiss, hands cupping my face. Rolling her hips, she grinds the soft curve of her sex to my trapped erection, and my head swims as blood surges to my already engorged cock.

Another growl vibrates deep in the back of my throat, turning into a moan of

concentrated lust as she anchors her arms at the back of my neck and jumps and wraps her thighs around my hips.

The heat of her spread pussy kisses my cock through our clothes, and I squeeze both of her arse cheeks, holding her there. No fucking way am I letting her go.

Balling a fist in the hair at my nape, she pulls my head back, her gaze finding mine. Lust burns in her eyes, and my cock responds, a thick, impatient spasm that's borderline painful. "Fuck me, Hudson," she says. "Please? I don't want you to be gentle. I just want you. Inside me. Now."

Harder than I've ever been, and my soul ablaze with desire, I lower us both to the floor. No way am I wasting time carrying her to my bedroom. The rug in front of the fireplace is thick lambswool, and besides, I don't want to disturb Archie.

I lay her on her back, brace my hands either side of her head, and nestle myself between her spread thighs. I thrust my cock, still imprisoned by my jeans, against the softness of her sex.

"Yes..." she moans, locking her ankles at the small of my back and rolling her hips. "Do that."

I dry hump her again.

Her eyes flutter closed, pleasure etching her face as she sucks in quick, shallow breaths. Her nails score my back through my shirt, igniting an inferno of need in me I know I have no control over.

Taking my weight on one hand, I plunge my other one up under her shirt and capture the full heaviness of her breast. Squeeze it. Maul it. Pinch its puckered nipple.

“Oh God,” she gasps, arching into my humping thrusts. “Oh God, I think I’m going to come already!”

“Yes,” I growl, pinching her nipple again. “Fucking come for me, baby.”

A shudder wracks her body, her hips buck, and her nails claw across my shoulders. “Oh God, Hudson...”

Unable to hold on any longer, I shove myself onto my haunches. “I need you naked, Iris.” I hook my fingers under the waistband of the track pants I gave her barely a few moments ago, holding her gaze. “Once I tear my clothes from your body, I won’t be able to control myself.”

“Fuck control,” she says, eyes hot.

With a raw chuckle that is more a growl, I yank my trackpants from her and take possession of her sweet pussy with my mouth. Lick her clit. Flick it with my tongue. Suck it. Nip it with my teeth. Lick it again.

She gasps, her hands in my hair, holding my head and mouth exactly where she wants them. “Don’t stop,” she instructs on a whispered breath. “Don’t stop.”

Gripping her hips, I fuck her with my tongue. Her taste is ambrosial. Addictive. How the hell do I not taste her every day now?

Her thighs clamping my head, she comes again, her hips bucking upward. I lap at her release, losing myself in the soft sounds of pleasure she’s making, and then, as her fingers slip from my hair, I lever myself backward and to my feet.

She stares up at me. She’s naked, but there’s nothing shy or ashamed about her. Splayed before me, she is confident and aware, and I am dangerously close to losing

my heart to her and not caring.

Sucking in a long, slow breath, I spread her thighs wider with my feet and—as she watches me—strip off my clothes.

“Oh God,” she whispers as my cock, finally free, juts upward. She bites her bottom lip and meets my stare again. “Hurry. Please, I need you inside me. Now.”

The begging request pushes me over the edge.

I position myself between her thighs, my hips pressed to hers, my cock parting her wet pussy lips.

I pause, grasping for an iota of control.

“Iris?” I ground out, aching to embed myself in her heat.

“Protection? I’m clean, but I can... Condom? Do you want me to put on a?—”

“I’m on the pill.” She stares up at me, her chest rising and falling with quick, ragged breaths. “And I want to feel you .” Her eyebrows knit. “If that’s okay? If you trust me?”

I trust her. I more than trust her. I think I’m fucking in love with her.

In one fluid stroke, I sink into her. Bury myself to the balls in her wet tightness.

She throws back her head, biting her bottom lip again, her pants rapid and shallow, her nails raking my back. Her inner muscles envelop my length, squeezing each thrust I slam into her.

We move together, our rhythm in sublime harmony. And as I feel the soles of my feet and the base of my spine begin to tingle, her body tightens more around me. “I’m going to...” she cries on a breath. “Hudson, I’m going to?—”

She bucks her hips upward, and I erupt inside her, my release quaking through me and into her.

Our orgasms claim us as one, and as one, we come down together, our sated bodies slicked with sweat, our limbs entwined.

“Wow,” she whispers, gazing up at me as I gently brush a curled strand of her hair from her face. “Seriously... Wow.”

I chuckle, brush my thumb over her bottom lip, and then brush my lips over hers. “So,” I whisper back, not wanting to withdraw from her body. “Were we both quiet because we didn’t want to wake Archie?”

Her dimples flash at me. “I think so. Aren’t we amazing?”

“The perfect team,” I murmur with my own smile.

She gazes into my eyes, and for a moment, I think she’s going to say something else. Something...significant.

I think I love you, Hudson? Is that what you want her to say?

My chest squeezes. No one falls in love so quickly, but that’s exactly what a part of me wants. The part that doesn’t care my job puts me at risk every day. The part that doesn’t remember watching my mother’s grief over Dad’s death. The part that doesn’t remember almost being destroyed by it.

That part of me. The part that swore I'd never do that to someone. Never put them through that pain. That love wasn't for me.

The terrified part.

"The perfect team," she murmurs back as my cock finally slips from her. She rolls onto her side, wriggling her arse. "Wanna see if we make the perfect spoon as well?"

Heart hammering, my breath falling from me a low chuckle, I lower myself to my side and snuggle her into my body.

We do.

"The perfect spoon," I whisper against the back of her neck, tugging her closer.

What the hell do I do now?

Be scared and alone forever? Or face your fear like you would a fire?

I don't know. I don't fucking know.

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Chapter Nine

Iris

Something wet and warm slides over my cheek as something warm and bright washes my face.

Archie.

Sun.

Scrunching up my face, I wave my arm in languid flaps. “S’okay, Arch,” I mumble.

Behind my ear, someone lets out a low snoring grunt at the exact moment my brain registers the warm, rugged, naked body spooning me from behind.

The perfect spoon...

My heart smashes up into my throat, and I open my eyes to squint up at Archie. He’s standing on the floor at my head and gives me a doggy grin, tail wagging.

You had wild monkey sex with Hudson last night. Oh boy.

Behind me, Hudson makes a soft, sleepy sound—part breath, part mumble—and rolls over. His butt rubs against mine, as if to remind me how incredible it is.

Liquid lust pours through me, a carnal, base response to the highly intimate contact,

and a whimper of need falls from me. No louder than a breath.

Archie tilts his head, watching me.

Okay, time to move.

If I stay here, I'll roll over and turn myself into the big spoon. And if I do that, I may as well open my chest and give Hudson McKinney my heart. Surviving the one-night stand is already going to be tricky. Cuddling after? I'd have no hope.

Ha. You fell in love with him the second he did the Batman dance. Admit it.

I did. And I don't know what to do about it.

Tell him?

No. That's lunacy. He'd laugh. Or think I was crazy.

Inching away from him, I try to coax Archie backward with a wave. He takes it as a sign to let out a playful woof and licks my face.

Throwing caution to the wind, I flatten myself to the rug, complete the most woeful push-up in existence, and scramble to my feet, bare boobs bouncing.

Archie lets out a single, playful bark.

"Shh," I admonish, cupping my hands over my breasts. Why am I embarrassed about a dog seeing my boobs?

On the floor, Hudson lets out another one of those sleepy mumbling groans.

I allow myself a heartbeat to look at him, to admire the sheer masculine perfection of his form, the sexy tousle of his hair, the wicked shadow of his stubble, and then I tiptoe from the room, heading for the bathroom.

Archie follows, running into Hudson's bedroom as I pass the door.

Damn it. I don't want to go in there. I might just curl up in his bed and declare I'm there to stay.

After last night, maybe he'd like that?

No. Last night was amazing and surreal, but we were both caught up in the power of the moment, the force of the storm, the adrenaline of the situation. That's all.

What if...

I snatch my clothes—now kind of dry—from the towel rail and yank them on. After cleaning my teeth with my finger and some stolen toothpaste from Hudson's tube, I attempt to curtail the chaos of my hair, give up, and hurry out of the bathroom.

What-ifs don't happen in real life.

They might. If you gave them a chance.

The thought licks through me, and I pull in a deep breath. Could I?

Maybe? What's the worst that could happen?

Heart thumping, I stop at Hudson's bedroom door. "Archie?"

Archie's on the bed again, bum up, tail wagging.

“Archie,” I whisper, crossing to him. “You have to stop trashing Hudson’s bed.”

I bend down at the foot of it and scoop up the patchwork quilt Hudson gave me last night from the floor. “Look what you did,” I scold softly, shaking it out. “I hope it’s not a special...”

Trailing off, I frown at what I didn’t see last night.

A woman’s face in the quilt. Made up of tiny little squares.

Hudson has a quilt with a woman’s face on it.

A tight lump thickens my throat, and I study it. Who is she? A celebrity? Or his...

Wife? Girlfriend? Surely not?

Mouth dry, I scan the room.

There. On the bedside table. A small frame.

Ignoring Archie, I walk around the bed and pick it up. My stomach is in knots.

In the photo, Hudson’s giving a piggyback ride to the woman on the quilt.

He’s laughing up at her, the love in his eyes palpable.

She’s stunning. Slim, long-limbed, long blonde hair, sun-kissed skin.

Perhaps only a few years younger than him.

Exactly the type of woman someone like Hudson would be with.

Not like me. Short-arsed, big-hipped, untamable hair, barely in my twenties, studying for a career that probably won't exist soon thanks to AI.

The knot in my stomach lurches, and I return the frame to the bedside table, eyes burning.

Whoever she is, they look genuinely happy together.

I refuse to believe he's just cheated on her with me.

Everything in my heart tells me he wouldn't do that...

but when it comes down to it, we're still just two strangers who shared a powerful connection during a moment of forced proximity.

That powerful connection isn't love. It isn't game-over-we're-together-for-ever-now.

It isn't Mr. and Mrs. Hudson and Iris McKinney.

It was— past tense—two people have amazing, soul-shaking sex.

If I don't leave now, I will probably do something stupid like convince myself it is more, that Hudson and I are the definition of love at first sight, regardless of who the woman in the photo and on the blanket is.

And I can't let myself do that.

"C'mon, Arch," I whisper, turning to my aunt's dog. "We have to go."

As if sensing my apprehension, Archie jumps off the bed, liquid-amber eyes locked on me. He trots out of the room, nails clicking on the floorboards.

I hope to hell the noise doesn't wake Hudson up.

Chapter Ten

Hudson

“What is your problem, McKinney?”

Jerking my stare from the station house’s computer monitor, I narrow my eyes at Jake as he strides into my office.

“I’m busy, Conroy,” I say. “These reports aren’t going to write themselves.”

He snorts, stopping on the other side of my desk and crossing his arms over his chest. “Mate, you’ve been staring at the screen without moving for the last thirty minutes.”

“It’s called contemplating.” I grab the mouse and jerk it around the mouse pad.

The cursor flies over the screen, and it dawns on me I have no fucking clue what report I’ve been attempting to write.

Since waking up to find Iris and Archie gone from my home this morning, my brain seems to have shut down.

“It’s called sulking,” Jake shoots back.

“You’ve been a bear with a sore tooth all day.

You yelled at Gibbo this morning for making a cup of coffee wrong.

His coffee. I'm pretty certain Gibbo knows how he likes his coffee.

"He puffs out a breath and shakes his head.

"He and Riggs have a bet going you struck out on Tinder. If that's the case, suck it up, mate.

If it's something more serious..." Worry creases his forehead, and he uncrosses his arms. "It's not something more serious, is it?

I haven't just torn you a new one after you've been told you have cancer, have I? "

"No." I shake my head and release a shaky sigh, an invisible band squeezing my chest. "Nothing like that." Swiping at my mouth, I shake my head again and grunt out a wry laugh. "I think I've fallen in love with Lily Andrews's niece."

Not think. Know.

Jake's eyebrows shoot up. "You what? The one from Melbourne looking after her house and dog?"

An image of Iris fills my head. Of her dimples creasing the edges of her lips, her eyes twinkling with playful mirth as she questions my taste in Batman and dances the Batusi with me to no music...

"Yeah." I huff. "That one."

"When the hell did you have time to do that?"

"Archie got loose in the storm. I helped her catch him."

His eyebrows lift higher. “The storm last night?” A grin spreads over his face. “Well, that explains the abrupt nature of our call last night. I interrupted you getting some a?—”

“Don’t,” I growl.

He stops. Studies me. And then he lets out a soft grunt.

“Shit, Hudson. You’re serious? As long as I’ve known you—what?

Four years?—you’ve never been in an actual relationship.

I mean, I know you’re no pure virgin, but you’ve scorned the idea of letting anyone truly get close to you, especially since your dad died.

I’ve watched more than one woman try to change your mind only to give up brokenhearted. And yet, after one night with...”

“Iris,” I supply, my heart thumping faster at her name.

“After only one night with Iris, you’re hooked?” He laughs. “You never do things half-arsed, McKinney. I’ll give you that. It’s about bloody time love smacked you in the face. I’m happy for you, mate.” Pausing, he frowns. “So what’s with the grumpy attitude?”

I claw my hands through my hair. “Because she left. With Archie. Sometime after the storm while I was still asleep on the floor.”

Jake narrows his eyes again. “Did she leave a note?”

The hole in my chest twists tighter as my mind picks over—for the umpteenth

time—the Post-it I found on my kitchen counter this morning.

Hudson,

Thank you for saving Archie last night. And for your hospitality. Your floor is very comfortable.

Iris

I snort. “Yeah.”

“And? Did she tell you to stay away from her?”

“No.” I picture the drawn smiley face. Her generation use emojis differently to mine. Did that smiley face mean something I don’t understand? “But she didn’t ask me to breakfast.”

“Maybe she doesn’t like breakfast?”

A wry chuckle falls from me. “Not helping, Conroy.”

He lets out his own chuckle. “Mate, I am the last person to confess to being an expert at relationships and love. Do you think the pair of you have a connection?”

Hell fucking yeah.

I nod. “I do.”

“And you haven’t heard from her today?”

“No.” My gut clenches. “But the second I read the note, I wanted to head up the

mountain. If for no other reason than to see if she's okay." I throw up my hands. "But doesn't that make me a creep? Shit, I've been out of the dating game for so long I don't know the rules."

"I tell you what the rules are." Jake arches an eyebrow. "Rule number one is make sure everyone is safe."

"Hate to tell you this, Conroy, but that's the first rule of the station house."

"Yep." He points at me. "You drill it into us every shift and callout. And right now, the day after a storm that caused some pretty severe destruction here on the mountains, can you tell me if Iris Andrews is safe? Do you know?"

I stare at him.

"Go see if she's okay, mate." He shrugs those massive shoulders of his. "If she is but wants nothing to do with you, you'll at least know you lost your heart to a one-night stand." Sympathy and mirth twist his lips. "And if that's the case, we'll get drunk together. My?—"

The phone on my desk rings. Not the one for reporting fires, but the office phone.

Jake answers it. "Hartley Ridge Fire."

A faint voice comes through the connection, little more than a whisper of indistinct sound from where I'm standing. His eyes snap to me.

"Yeah, he's here," he says, voice neutral. Guarded.

I hold out my hand, waiting for the phone. Probably Mr. Dutton on Acacia Avenue complaining about the live music at the pub across the street from him. The old coot

is the biggest killjoy in town.

“Sure,” Jake says into the phone. Is he trying not to smile? “I can do that.”

I wriggle my fingers. “Give it to me.”

“Alright,” he says. “Take care.”

He hangs up, folds his arms over his chest, and looks at me.

“Who was it?” I ask. “What’s going on?”

A grin splits his face. “How quickly can you get to Lily Andrews’s place? Cause there’s a certain young woman from Melbourne up there who really wants to talk to you in person. Said something along the lines of the biggest mistake she’s ever made in her entire life is leaving you this?—”

I jolt to my feet and bolt out of my office.

“This morning,” Jake calls behind me.

The last thing I hear as I sprint to my motorbike is him shouting, “Have fun.”

Chapter Eleven

Iris

Staring at my phone, I bite my bottom lip.

I am never impulsive. Okay, maybe sometimes, but usually only about whether to eat ice cream for breakfast. The answer is always yes, BTW. And I wasn't impulsive about the call I just made.

I'd spent every second of the climb back up the hill to Aunt Lily's place thinking about Hudson.

Every second of cutting up all the branches littering her driveway and front yard thinking about how wonderful he made me feel.

Every second of raking up twigs and leaves and dealing with the aftermath of the storm thinking how every time he'd smiled, I'd smiled as well.

Every second finishing my assignment for class—now woefully overdue—imagining Hudson relaxing on the sofa next to me.

Every second bathing Archie in Aunt Lily's oversized tub thinking about how amazing it would be to share the tub with Hudson.

I'd even burnt my toast because I'd been completely preoccupied berating myself about being a coward by running away.

So no, making the phone call hadn't been impulsive.

I just hadn't planned to blurt out to a complete stranger that I wished I'd never left Hudson's side. Of course, I hadn't planned anything after making the call. Who knows what would have come out of my mouth if Hudson had answered?

I love you? Marry me? Adopt a dog with me? Be with me until we're both ancient?
All of the above?

If nothing else, I should have at least asked who the woman in the photo was, right?

Skin prickling with an agitated impatience, I put my phone on the dining table and turn to Archie.

He looks back at me. Wags his tail.

"So..." I swallow. "I don't actually know what happens now, Arch.

" A heavy pressure wraps my chest. Good grief, that note...

"Should I go into town? Kind of just wander back and forth in front of the fire station on the off chance he might see me and not want to throw rocks at me? Then I could ask him about the woman. I mean, I need to know, even though my heart tells me he's not a cheater. Oh, God, what am I doing?"

Archie tilts his head to the side, pricks his ears, and tilts his head back the other way.

I sigh out a snort. "Assuming I can, of course. Maybe the tree is still down across the road. I haven't heard any chainsaws today. Have you?"

Archie wags his tail and trots off, heading for his beanbag in the living room.

“Great chat, Arch,” I call after him.

Chest still tight, I rub at my elbows, look around myself, and puff out another sigh. I have to do something. “I’m going to have a shower,” I declare.

Archie wriggles deeper into the beanbag. He’s clearly done with my drama.

I stomp to the bathroom, strip, glare at my naked self in the mirror, and blast the cold water on. If this doesn’t shock some sense into me, nothing will.

Sucking in a breath, I step under the water and let out a yelp as the doorbell rings.

Archie barks, a continuous stream of who-the-fuck-is-there barks, and even from the shower, I hear his nails scraping against the floor as he runs to the door.

“Archie!” I bellow, killing the water and reaching for a towel at the same time. “Job done, Arch,” I shout, wrapping my wet self in the towel as I hurry through the house. “Job done! That’s enough.”

He’s at the door, sniffing at its bottom, tail wagging.

“Coming,” I call to whoever is on the other side of the door. “Coming.”

With a quick check to make sure the towel corner is tucked firmly in place and the towel itself is doing its best impersonation of a strapless dress, I open the door.

Hudson.

He’s standing on the other side of the mesh screen door looking at me.

“Oh,” I whisper.

He takes a look over me, his nostrils flaring, and lets out a choppy breath. “You took off this morning.”

A lump settles in my throat. “I did. Sorry.”

“Why?”

The lump grows thicker. “You have a blanket with a woman’s face on it.”

He frowns and then chuckles, shaking his head. “That’s my sister. She has a peculiar sense of humor. Especially when it comes to gift-giving.”

I blink. “Sister?”

“Yeah.” He rubs at the back of his neck. “Is that really the reason?”

I grimace. “Yes. Mainly. I don’t trust easily. And my old boss turned out to be a creep. And I was scared...”

He draws in a slow breath. “Of me?”

Swallowing, I bite my lip. “No. Yes. No. I...I was scared I’d lost my heart to you. So I ran.”

Gaze locked on mine, he presses his hands to the doorframe and leans a little towards me. “Iris, just so we’re clear, I’ve fallen in love with you, and if you open this door right now, I will show you just how fucking much.”

My heart smashes into my throat. Heat sweeps over me. My nipples harden, pushing against the towel.

“Archie?” I say, without breaking eye contact with Hudson. “On your bed.”

Archie, perhaps the best wingdog in the world, trots away from my side. I have no clue if he’s heading for his beanbag. I can’t look away from Hudson.

Body aching for the mountain man on the other side of the threshold, I unlock the screen door.

Nostrils flaring again, Hudson pulls it open, removes the small space between us, and cups my face with his big, strong hands.

Brushing one thumb over my bottom lip, he lowers his head to mine.

“I never wanted a relationship,” he murmurs, his breath kissing my lips.

“And then you ran through the storm and into my life.”

My eyes flutter closed for a pounding heartbeat, and then I smile up at him, sliding my hands up his broad chest. The rapid beat of his heart under my palm turns my blood hot.

He’s as affected as I am. “Ask me again if I’ve ever considered moving north,” I whisper, tangling my fingers in the hair at the back of his head.

“Have you ever considered moving north?” he asks, kicking the door shut behind him. “To Hartley Ridge?”

I tug his head down to mine. “Hell y?—”

His lips crush mine before I can finish. He drags his hands down my back, tugging the towel off as he does. It pools at my feet as he grabs my arse and lifts me up. I lock

my legs around his hips.

Tearing his lips from mine, he gazes into my eyes. His heart thumps against my breast, a pounding rhythm in perfect harmony with my own. “Fuck, you are amazing,” he murmurs. “Marry me?”

Concentrated joy rushes through me, and I smile, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Yes.”

He lets out a low growl and draws me closer, his hands squeezing my butt cheeks. “Today?”

I laugh. “Hell yeah.”

Hudson

“The Fire and Rescue New South Wales Medal for Conspicuous Bravery, awarded only for acts of the most striking bravery by a firefighter in circumstances of extreme peril, goes to Hudson McKinney.”

Raucous clapping breaks out in the Sydney Town Hall’s ballroom as the spotlight finds the table where the Hartley Ridge brigade are all sitting.

Puffing out a breath, I turn to Iris—in the chair beside me, her fingers threaded through mine—and give her a lopsided smile.

“Do I really have to go up on stage and accept this?” I whisper.

Lifting an eyebrow at me, she smooths her other hand over the beautiful swell of her belly, gives it a gentle tap, and says, “Hey, if I can face putting heels on tonight when seven months pregnant with twins, you can go up on stage and receive the highest honor a firefighter can get.”

“Get your arse up there, McKinney,” Jake orders on my other side. “Before I go up and accept it for you.”

I laugh, lean forward, brush a kiss over Iris’s lips, and then make my way to the stage.

The clapping grows louder.

Waving a quieting hand, I nod at the state premier and receive the medal he presents to me. The bushfires last season were the worst Australia had ever experienced, but every day out fighting the blaze, the one person who kept me going was Iris.

Turning, squinting into the spotlight, I take a deep breath and let it out with a shaky chuckle. “We don’t become firefighters for medals,” I say. “Although I’m not going to turn this one down.”

A relaxed laugh rumbles through the hall.

“But,” I say, with a grin, “I am going to share it with my crew.”

From my table, Hartley Brigade bursts out in cheers.

“And,” I continue, “with my wife, Iris. Two years ago, she said yes the day after I saved her aunt’s dog during a storm. She is my reason for breath.”

The spotlight swings to Iris, and she smiles at me, her hands on the pregnant swell of her belly.

For the last two years she’s been working as a make-up artist on Sydney’s highest-rating breakfast TV show, but she’s about to begin the next stage of her life, our life.

“I love you, Hudson,” she calls out. “And this is very impressive and romantic, but I think there’s something you should know. ”

I frown.

The hall falls quiet.

“I think,” she continues, slowly rising to her feet, a sheepish grin pulling at her lips,

“my water just broke. Sorry. Bad timing, I know.”

I blink. And bolt from the stage.

God, I love my life.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:08 am

Jake

Shifting my butt on the bar stool in the closest pub I could find to Sydney Town Hall, I study the medal nestled in purple velvet in its presentation box. It's impressive.

Probably not as impressive as the twin girls Iris is most likely giving birth to at this very moment, but still impressive.

Does Hudson even know he tossed it to me as he reached her side back in the ballroom? Probably not.

I'll give it back to him at the hospital tomorrow. Along with the two biggest teddy bears I can find for his new baby girls.

"That's the kind of medal that could get you laid," a craggy voice utters in front of me.

Lifting my head, I cast an askew look at the elderly man drying a beer glass on the other side of the bar. "Not mine," I tell the publican. "It's my captain's. He's with his wife. She's giving birth."

The man raises wiry salt-and-pepper eyebrows. "So it's the kind of medal that could get you a wife?"

He flicks a look to my left, and I take a quick glance at the absolutely stunning woman in a skin-tight red minidress sitting two stools down the bar. As if aware of my attention, she meets my gaze and smiles.

“Not in the market for one,” I say, returning my attention to the publican. “Love isn’t for me, mate.”

Isn’t it? Or are you just too scared to let anyone in?

He tuts, shakes his head, and flips the dishcloth over his shoulder. “Damn shame.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t have fun, though. Right?” I grin. Closing the medal box, I slide it across the counter to him and straighten from my stool. “Look after that for me, will you?”

And with that, I turn to the woman in red.

No strings attached fun is exactly what I need. The only thing I need. And no way is that ever changing.

Hudson is determined to make his and Iris’s first wedding anniversary one to remember.

Secluded waterfall? Check. Skinny dipping?

Check. He wasn’t prepared, however, for what Iris has planned.

Check out the exclusive very steamy bonus epilogue, FREE when you subscribe to my newsletter. Get it here .

After a heroic rescue draws international attention, Hartley Ridge firefighter Jake Conroy is desperate to get out of the public eye.

His home halfway up Talisman Peak is isolated and private.

So who the hell is the gorgeous woman running up his driveway with a camera in her hand, and why does he instantly want to throw her on his bed?

Get The Mountain Man's Need , Blue Mountain Burn: The Firefighters of Hartley Ridge, Book Two here .

Keep reading for a first chapter preview.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:08 am

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

Jake

“How’s the hero going?”

Sandwiching my phone between my ear and shoulder, I snort at the chuckled question and search the bowels of my fridge for the block of cheddar I know is in there somewhere. “Yeah, yeah, Gibbo,” I say, moving aside a tub of Greek yoghurt. Nope, no cheese. “You’re a funny bastard.”

Tony Gibson laughs. Through the phone connection, faint beeping mingles with other familiar background sounds. He’s down in the Hartley Ridge station house, most likely with his feet on his work counter, drone or laptop on his lap.

Meanwhile, I’m dripping sweat after finishing a five-mile cross-country run, searching for my normal post-workout snack and wondering when the hell I’ll be able to return to work.

Paid or not, voluntary leave isn’t my idea of fun.

There’s only so much you can do when you’re hiding out in your home on the side of the steepest peak in the Blue Mountains in the dying days of summer, trying to stay out of the public eye.

“If it helps,” Tony says, “only one reporter came looking for you today. And only two, what are they called? Pappo? Pap something. They were hanging around Kelly

Park again.”

Scowling, I give up searching for the cheese and close the fridge. “Paparazzi,” I growl. “Fantastic. I can’t believe they haven’t gotten bored of me yet.”

“Well, you did save the world’s most famous actress’s son from drowning in the Kanangra Falls swimming hole.” Tony laughs out a breath. “What did you think was going to happen?”

With a grunt, I snatch up my water bottle and head for my bathroom.

“I thought I’d save a little boy struggling in the water, give his parental units a chat about how fucking icy the Kanangra Falls water is all year round, no matter how hot the day is, and get back to my jog.

It was my day off. I wasn’t being a hero. I was just?—”

“Being who you are,” Tony finishes, the laugh still in his voice. “We know this, mate. But you’re big news. Even more so because apparently, she dedicated the Oscar she won last night to you.”

Stopping mid trek to the bathroom, I drop my head and scrunch up my face. “Wow. Okay, I’m honored, but damn, Hartley Ridge will be inundated with ghouls again now.”

“Reporters, Conroy,” Tony corrects. “They’re not all bad.”

I grimace. “Sorry, mate. I forgot.” His sister is a journalist for one of Australia’s highest-rating current affairs programs. Shaking my head, I claw my hand through my hair and continue to the bathroom. “See? I’m a wanker, not a hero. I’m not worth anyone’s attention, let alone the media.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, you’re a wanker, but you’re a nice wanker, and you never complain when I ask you to swap shifts, so no apologies needed.”

He’s right. The job is what drives me. Which is why being hounded by photographers and journalists is pissing me off.

A clutch of them turned up at a callout last week.

Kept getting in the way. Hence me taking some leave while I wait for some other poor sap to hook their attention.

Surely some other celebrity somewhere will do something stupid soon, right?

“Anyways,” he continues, a wry note entering his voice, “the point of this call is to fill you in on the Oscar shout-out. Riggs mentioned you’re not one for a lot of TV, so I thought I’d give you a warning, just in case you find a stranger or two lurking around your place.”

With my own wry snort, I enter the bathroom and toe off my running shoes. I hope no one is stupid enough to track me down at my home. Nice wanker or not, I’d lose my temper. “All good, mate. Thanks for the heads up. Appreciate it.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” He laughs again. “Y’know, they wouldn’t hound you like this if you weren’t such a pretty boy. The camera loves you.”

“Ha!” I bark out, turning to look at myself in the bathroom mirror. My ex used to say the same. “Now you sound jealous.”

“Not even close, Conroy.” Another laugh. “Take care up there, okay? If the town gets swarmed with ghouls, I’ll let you know. Unless they’re all cute. Then I’m not telling you shit.”

With a snort, I shake my head. “Later, mate. Keep me posted.”

I disconnect the call, toss my phone onto the counter, strip off, and turn on the cold water. It wouldn’t matter if any of them were steal-your-breath stunning, I’m not in the market.

Right now, all I want is to be ignored. It took me long enough to lick my wounds after discovering it wasn’t me my ex was interested in but the Instagram hits of dating “July” from the Firefighter calendar. Dealing with the public attention now is getting on my last nerve.

God help anyone who comes looking for me.