



# Wild Skies (Rugged Loners #3)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** I've longed for my handsome professor all semester. He's stared at me too.

And up high on this mountain, the college rules seem far, far away...

I didn't mean to cause any trouble when I signed up for this field trip. There were no ulterior motives, I swear.

I just wanted to get out into the mountains, breathe the fresh air, and see a meteor shower. And, okay, to see my gorgeous professor close up; to hear his deep voice and feel his eyes on me again. That too.

But I never guessed how intense this craving would be. How much I'd pine for him. How badly I'd long for each stolen touch.

And the professor has fought these feelings for months, but his resolve is crumbling too.

So when I crawl into his tent after midnight, we'd better keep quiet... or all hell will break loose.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

One

Maren

One month ago

The lecture hall is packed full of people, with rows and rows of glowing laptop screens. The gym bro on my left is on a sports news site; the bookish girl on my right is bidding on a collectible stuffed toy on eBay. All around, people murmur and sip coffee, lazily checking their emails.

As soon as the door opens and our astronomy professor strides inside, raising a hand to the audience, the laptop screens all switch to blank documents. Fingers hover over keyboards, ready to type.

It's 8am on a Thursday, but Astronomy 101 always draws a crowd—even if ninety percent of the students have giant take-out coffee cups wedged beside their laptops. They're yawning, but they're here.

“Morning, everyone.”

Tall, dark-haired and handsome, the professor gives a crooked smile as he steps behind the podium.

He's dressed in dark gray pants and a white button-down shirt, with the sleeves rolled up his forearms and the collar undone.

He's fit, with broad shoulders and a muscled chest obvious beneath the shirt fabric.

Like Clark Kent retired from journalism and got contacts.

"Before we get started."

The professor's voice is low and smooth.

Decadent. The kind of voice you might hear narrating a luxury chocolate commercial.

And when he speaks, everyone in the lecture hall sits up a tiny bit straighter, me included.

My heart pitter-patters underneath my thin blue sweater, and I squeeze my pen tight.

Correction: Astronomy 101 doesn't draw this big a crowd at 8am every Thursday. That's all Professor Gregory Carter. The man is magnetic.

"As of today," the professor says, scanning the first few rows of students, "sign ups are open for the spring break astronomy field trip. We'll be heading up into the mountains for the Thelseid meteor shower.

It's forecast to be a real display this year.

We'll be taking high powered telescopes, recording equipment, the whole nine yards, and with any luck, we'll come back with valuable data and some great memories. "

Excited whispers breeze across the lecture hall, everyone elbowing each other and grinning. My teeth dig into my bottom lip—hard.

I want to be on that trip.

I need to be on that trip.

Not to see a Thelseid meteor shower, though that would be cool. No: to spend time with Professor Carter, and see what he's like away from campus. To soothe the low ache that started in the pit of my stomach the very first time I laid eyes on him.

To quiet the instinct that whispers in the back of my head that Professor Carter is mine.

Listen, I'm not deluded. I realize that a world famous professor would never want me back. To him, I'm nothing. No one. A lowly, anonymous student... albeit one he stares at sometimes.

But for the last few months, this restless feeling has only gone away when Professor Carter is near, and I want to see how I'd feel close-up. Whether the instincts would quieten down, or if they'd scream louder instead.

Hm. Maybe I'm a masochist.

"A few words of warning, though."

The professor's gaze is calm as he scans along each row of students, making his way steadily up the lecture hall. It's almost like he's looking for someone. Nerves and excitement squirm in my belly at the thought.

"This isn't a luxury trip. We'll be camping in the wilderness. There are snakes and bears and wolves in the area."

The girl on my right lets out a tiny squeak of fear, sinking down on the bench. Some of the grins around us start to fade.

“We’ll have to carry all our equipment for a mile over rocky terrain to get to the mountain peak,” he goes on.

“We’ll do that round trip almost every night.

It will be hard work, and everyone on the trip must contribute.

” The professor gives another crooked smile, still scanning the rows.

“Telescopes are heavy. I can’t carry it all alone. ”

On those shoulders? I bet he could.

“For those who are still interested, there’s one more warning. This is real camping, on a rudimentary site. There are basic facilities and hot showers, but there will be no phone signal or WiFi for the full two weeks.”

The gym bro next to me sighs and sits back. All across the rows in front, students are whispering again and shaking their heads—but not all of them. There are still plenty like me, sitting bolt upright and hanging on Professor Carter’s every word.

My fingers flex around my pen. Oh, god.

What if I don’t get on this trip? What if I spend the whole of spring break here, lonely and miserable on campus? Missing a man who probably doesn’t even know my name?

Just then, the professor’s gaze scans along our row, passing over student after student... then stops on me, like it always does.

My breath goes still in my lungs. Out of the corner of my eye, the eBay bidder shoots

me a weird look, but I don't care. I only care about one thing right now. One man.

Professor Carter is looking straight at me, his gaze intense and probing. And when he speaks, it's like he's talking just to me—brushing my hair aside to murmur in my ear. Beneath my clothes, my skin flushes hot, and it takes everything in me not to squirm.

It's always like this when Professor Carter looks at me, seeking me out in the middle of his lectures.

Why does he do it? Does he feel this—this energy crackling between us too? Or am I imagining it, blowing things out of proportion in my head?

“Despite all that,” the professor says, holding my gaze, “I hope you will all still consider applying for the field trip. A meteor shower is a wonderful thing to experience firsthand. Life-changing, even.”

No fear. As soon as this lecture ends, I'm gonna snatch up my backpack and vault over these desks. In my head, I'm already parkouring the whole way down the lecture hall, flipping and somersaulting like a badass in order to be the first to put my name on the list.

Hey, a girl can dream. Especially when a handsome older man looks at her like that—like she's a vanilla frosted cupcake in a bakery window, and he hasn't tasted sugar in a long, long time.

I give a shy smile.

The professor clears his throat and looks away, addressing another row. “Alright, let's get started with today's class.”

Is that a faint blush on his handsome cheekbones? It's hard to tell from all the way up

here.

But one thing is for sure: if I don't get a place on this field trip, I'll explode.

\* \* \*

Fifty minutes later, the lecture hall buzzes with loud conversation as we file out of our rows in a steady shuffle.

Despite my parkour daydreams, I'm stuck inching my way out behind gym bro, clutching my backpack straps with clammy hands.

My laptop and notebooks for the rest of the day's classes weigh heavily on my shoulders, making my bra strap dig into my collarbone.

The trip won't be first come, first served, right?

That wouldn't be fair on the students at the back, and Professor Carter is famously firm but fair.

Even so, tension knots my belly tighter and tighter as we all trudge slowly down the steps, and by the time I reach the front of the lecture hall and join the long line to put my name down for the trip, my shoulders are bunched up around my ears.

It's noisy and hot, and I desperately need to dig out my water bottle, but my body is too tense to move beyond shuffling forward with the line.

Because... what if the professor doesn't pick me?

Or what if he does , but then he barely looks at me for the whole trip? What if this insane fixation of mine has been one-sided this whole time? What then?

Gah.

Maybe I should walk away. Maybe I should march myself over to the student wellness center and ask for therapy instead. That would be smarter.

“Here you go.”

That familiar low voice makes my pulse spike and my chin jerk up. I’m at the front of the line already? But I’m still freaking out!

“Do you need this?” Professor Carter wiggles the pen he’s holding out, and like a dumbass, I finally take it. No word of thanks. No acting normal. I’m too starstruck, being this close to my crush.

And lord, he looks good close up.

Professor Gregory Carter is in his late thirties, with dark hair, navy blue eyes, and the kind of jaw line you could use in place of a ruler.

Standing with only one desk between us, I can see a few details that were lost farther away—stuff like the very fine lines at the corners of his eyes, and the slight bump in the bridge of his nose, and the dark chest hairs just barely peeking out of his open collar.

Another thing I realize for the first time, staring at this man like a weirdo: Professor Carter has a butt chin. You know, one of those manly chin dimples that looks like a butt? How did I not see it all those times I stared moon-eyed at his staff page on the college website?

For a wild moment, all I want to do is reach out and press my thumb into that divot. My hand balls into a fist around the borrowed pen.



“You just need to put your name and college email for now,” the professor says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I’ll send out a group message by Friday letting the lucky few know.”

My lips press together as I write my name and email. Even though I take all my class notes by hand, suddenly my handwriting is all wobbly and childlike. The back of my neck itches as I feel the professor’s gaze on me once again.

“Maren,” he says quietly, tilting his head to read my name. The faint smile he gives me is here and gone in a flash, so quick that maybe I dreamed it. “Now there’s a beautiful name.”

“Th-thank you,” I whisper, handing back the pen. My stomach knots in anticipation when the professor reaches for it, but sadly, our fingers don’t brush. I’ve gotten this close, but I still haven’t felt the heat of his skin.

Duh.

And I never will. God, this insane daydreaming can’t be good for me. Who am I kidding? I should scratch my name off that list and drop out of this class. I should find someone else to crush on, a guy my own age, and stop pining after the world famous astronomy professor. I should—

A throat clears behind me. Cheeks flaming, I hurry out of the way.

When I reach the door to the lecture hall, I can’t help it. I look back.

And find the professor’s steady gaze on me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Two

Greg

P resent day

It was a huge mistake to bring Maren Olsen on this trip.

That became clear three days ago, as all the chosen students filed onto the bus idling outside the campus library.

All the others grinned sleepily at me from the center of their neck pillows, or reached out for a lazy fist bump as they turned and climbed up the bus steps.

A few of the girls giggled together when I smiled at them, but there was nothing I couldn't ignore.

Then Maren reached the front of the line, bundled up in a red knitted fisherman's sweater against the spring chill. Her backpack looked enormous where it balanced against her slender shoulder, and her blonde hair was damp from a shower and combed back into some kind of elaborate braid.

And... Christ.

A single look at her, and my stomach plummeted. My skin grew tight and hot, and my pulse started cantering in my throat.

Maren blushed and smiled up at me.

And a vicious headache began to squeeze my skull.

Oh, I greeted her calmly and waved her onto the bus along with the rest of the students, but I knew right then when we hadn't even left campus: this was a mistake. A disastrous error of judgment.

Because Maren Olsen makes me want to pound my chest, sling her over my shoulder, and steal her away like a goddamn caveman. To toss away my reputation and career in order to sink between those creamy thighs, rutting away at her like a wild animal. To make her mine.

Yeah. I'm losing my mind—the part of me that has never, ever let me down before. For a supposedly smart man, I've set myself one hell of a trap, because I've wanted this girl all semester... and now she's dangerously near.

So now I have eleven more days in close proximity with Maren Olsen. Eleven more days where I need to keep my unacceptable feelings under wraps, and remember that I am a professor while she is a student.

Eleven days of bumping into Maren around our small campsite, and hearing her soft voice laughing and chatting with the others. Eleven nights of knowing that she's sleeping nearby, possibly shivering in her sleeping bag, our bodies separated by only a few feet and two flimsy tents.

Fuck.

“Hey, Professor Carter? Is this the right camera for tonight?”

Inhaling sharply, I drag my attention back to the present moment.

We're at our campsite partway up the mountain, our brightly colored tents pitched in a loose circle around a central fire pit.

A few of the students have gathered around our bus where it's parked over by the treeline, right before the road turns to dusty, uneven rock.

We're storing the expensive equipment in the vehicle, though God knows any thieves that schlepped all the way up here to steal our gear would have earned it.

"Let me see."

My hiking boots thud against the packed earth as I stride across the campsite. It's surreal being around my students in jeans and a flannel shirt, but I suppose it would be even stranger to hike up the mountain each night in a suit and tie.

A young guy called Rex with bushy brown hair that always looks recently electrocuted holds up a camera for me to inspect when I reach their small group. When he switches it on to show me the display, the battery pulses red.

"That's the one. Don't forget the tripod, too, and the spare charger packs. We want to get steady shots through the night."

"Got it."

The Thelseid meteor shower usually lasts around ten days, and it's forecast to start tonight. It won't be anything too bombastic on night one, with the show just getting started, but we're not gonna miss a single second of it.

"Professor?"

A soft voice at my side makes my heart lurch. Schooling my expression, I turn to face

the cause of my now daily headaches.

“Yes, Maren?”

She’s in a baggy gray t-shirt, dark leggings and hiking boots, and she’s still somehow the most tempting thing I’ve ever seen. Especially when she blushes prettily and gives me a nervous smile.

“I’ve packed up our food supplies and bear-proofed the camp. Once everyone’s ready, we can head out.”

The breeze teases at a few escaped strands of her blonde hair, the rest scraped back into another neat braid. With the pink-tinged sunset, those strands glint like pale gold.

What I’d give to tug out that hair tie and sink my fingers into those soft strands; to lay Maren down and spread her hair over the pillow in my tent. To send the other students away and have her all to myself, her cries of pleasure echoing around the campsite.

There’s a sharp stab of arousal in my lower belly. Like always, I ignore it.

“Excellent. Thank you.” Turning to the wider campsite, I call out. “Did you hear that, everyone? We’re moving out in ten minutes. Anyone who isn’t ready by then will stay behind.”

A few panicked shrieks float through the mountain air, along with the scuffling sounds of people running around from tent to tent, stuffing supplies into their backpacks. Beside me, Rex curses loudly and starts fumbling the camera into its carry case.

Maren, meanwhile, is serene.

She turns and watches everyone, standing in companionable silence at my side. It's ridiculous to admit, but even having her standing next to me quietly is soothing. My constant pounding headache eases, just a little.

"It's pretty here," Maren says, so softly that I have to strain to catch her words.

Glancing around, I try to see our utilitarian campsite through my sweet student's eyes: the bristling pine trees, standing sentinel all around; the rustling birds in their branches; the pink sky and puffs of white cloud.

The view of the mountains and valleys, dropping away from us with barely any towns or roads to interrupt the wilderness.

I'm so used to being in charge, to seeing everything as a data point or checklist, that I'd almost missed the beauty of our surroundings.

"It really is," I agree.

Campus has never felt further away.

"I've never seen a meteor before." Maren watches the others scurry around camp, nibbling on her plump bottom lip.

"No?"

"Nope." She slides me a wry smile. "I'm a journalism major. To be honest, I took this class because I needed a science credit to graduate. I never expected... well." Maren waves a hand at our campsite, on what feels like the edge of the Earth. "This."

"But you're glad you came?" My question sounds way too urgent.

Like I'm desperate to know; desperate for Maren to want to be here too.

And it would be humiliating, so out of line for a professor to get so intense over a student, except she brushes the back of my hand with her own. Just for a split second, we touch.

Shock travels up my wrist, my arm, all the way to my shoulder like an electric pulse. Standing rigid, I stare out at the mountains and valleys.

Did that just happen?

"Of course," Maren says. "Of course I want to be here."

Christ.

And when she walks away, stepping delicately over tent lines, the back of her neck is bright pink.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Three

Maren

Any hope I had of seeming cool and pretty in front of Professor Carter is dashed by our hike up the mountainside. We set off in a group from the campsite, all sixteen of us carrying swollen backpacks of supplies for the night, snaking our way up the trail as the sun sinks into the valley below.

It's hard work. The path is steep and unforgiving, with ditches and loose rocks that could turn people's ankles.

Our heavy packs throw off our balance, and the mountain wind ruffles up our hair.

By the time we huff and puff our way to our observation point at the peak, everyone is soaked with sweat and breathless, and we all look like we've been lost in the wilderness for days.

Everyone except Professor Gregory Carter, of course. He strolls casually to the front of the group, barely a dark hair out of place and his breathing steady, even though his pack is twice the size of anyone else's.

"Excellent." He spins around and flashes that crooked smile at us all, and suddenly I'm dizzy for another reason. "We'll set up right away before the light fades."

Everyone fumbles off their heavy backpacks and starts pulling out camera equipment, telescopes, and spindly tripods.



My own knees tremble as I bend down to rummage in my pack for the special lenses and filters that will help our observations tonight.

It's getting cold fast, and my fingers are clumsy.

We set up the equipment in a loose circle, all aimed up at the first stars as they wink from the darkening sky. The sun is almost gone now, the horizon glowing pink as higher up, the sky turns navy.

"Coffee," one girl declares, setting out a picnic blanket with a flourish and adding three enormous thermoses, along with a stack of little metal cups. "No falling asleep, people."

Head lamps flick on as the darkness grows, their beams of light zooming around our makeshift camp.

I help to set out little folding chairs and a pile of blankets for if people get cold.

One guy jogs a way down the path, yelling about the call of nature.

Our whole group buzzes with excitement and nerves.

Then, once the equipment is set up and the sun finally slips below the horizon, we huddle around the telescopes, look up at the sky, switch off our head lamps... and wait.

The guy who ran off to pee comes back, uneaten by bears. My nerves ease a tiny bit.

And we wait.

And wait some more.

The girl who set out the coffee station sighs and trudges over there to pour herself a cup. After a whispered exchange, another pair of girls follow. The sound of pouring liquid is amplified by the quiet.

The wide open sky overhead darkens slowly to black, with thousands—no, millions—of stars winking down at us.

Even as the others get restless, whispering together and wandering around our small site, I keep staring up at the sky, frozen with awe.

My eyes go dry from forgetting to blink, and my neck gets stiff.

These stars... this sky...

This view is insane.

We don't get night skies like this back on campus. Not with the light pollution from all those buildings and street lamps. Up here on this mountain peak, we're closer to the stars than I could ever get back home—with nothing around us to block the view.

It's beautiful.

Standing on this mountain, staring up at the galaxies above, I feel... small. Tiny, in fact, but in a good way. Like I'm part of something huge and ancient and mysterious, beyond all worldly comprehension.

"The meteors could be a while yet." The professor's voice is lowered, his words just for me. I feel him come to stand beside me. My pulse registers his presence, picking up speed, and my nerve endings go all tingly beneath my clothes.

It's always like this. As this man gets closer to me, my body goes haywire with

anticipation and longing. She hasn't gotten the memo yet that professors and students don't mix.

"I don't mind." The cold breeze tugs at my hair under I huddle deeper into my sweater, still gazing up. Without turning my head, Professor Carter is just a dark shape beside me—a patch of warmth that blocks the worst of the easterly wind. "Even without meteors, this is beautiful."

He gives a low noise of agreement. Then a hand presses gently against my back, right between my shoulder blades, his warmth seeping through the thick wool of my sweater. He's touching me, and it's innocent but I've forgotten how to breathe. The professor guides me to a nearby telescope.

"Look here."

My boots scuff against the rocky ground as I shift in front of the telescope, lowering my head to look through the eyepiece. At first everything is blurry, but as I twist the focus dial, the universe sharpens into high definition.

"Oh." My voice is wobbly. Overwhelmed. "Oh, wow."

"I know," Professor Carter says. His hand is still on my back, warm and steady. "It can be a lot to take in."

There's so much more up there than I ever realized. So many more stars, whole galaxies that I couldn't see with the naked eye. So much wonder, and I've been tripping around down here, going about my business with no clue of the vast worlds overhead.

The hand on my back rubs in small circles. My teeth dig into my bottom lip, and I try not to pant and fog up the eyepiece.

When I straighten up, I'm glad of the steadying touch on my back. I'm dizzy, kinda lightheaded, and it's instinct that makes me step toward the professor's dark shape. His arms slide around me so naturally, cradling me close to his body like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

My belly swoops, and my chin tilts up. His minty-fresh breath puffs against my cheek, and the professor's arms tighten.

Yes.

He feels it too?

Then a whoop echoes across the mountain, and someone else lets out a small shriek. The other people here, all the dark shapes of the students I had completely forgotten existed, hurry to the telescopes and camera equipment as high above, pale meteors streak across the sky.

Professor Carter clears his throat and lets go of me, stepping back. The sudden gust of mountain wind against my front is freezing cold, seeping right through my clothes to my overheated skin below.

I stare at the dark shape of him. Can't make out his expression, nor his body language. Not when it's this dark, with everyone's flashlights carefully switched off, and only starlight to cast shadows.

"Forgive me," the professor says, so gruff and quiet that I nearly miss it amid all the excited shouts. I shake my head, but I guess he can't really see me either. "You'd better, ah... you should find a telescope, Maren."

Right.

Because that's what we hiked all the way up this mountain for, carrying all this heavy equipment. To see the meteor shower. Not for me to cling to my handsome older professor like a life raft in a storm. Why did I do that? So embarrassing.

"S-sorry." Turning on my heel, I scuttle away as fast as I can in the darkness.

But hey, at least no one can see my cheeks flaming.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Four

Greg

Three days and nights pass, and I keep a careful distance from Maren Olsen for all of them. Whenever I feel her gaze on me up at the viewing point, I stare up at the night sky. Whenever she wanders in my direction at camp, I find an urgent task to do on the bus. It's ridiculous, but it works.

I need to stay away from Maren. I clearly cannot be trusted with her up close, and we still have over a week together on this trip.

Keeping my distance is the only way I won't cross any lines.

"Hey, Professor!"

A soaked football flies at me, water droplets spraying off it as it spirals. I catch it easily from the river bank, then toss it back at the students in the water. Rex jumps for it like a leaping salmon, then crashes beneath the surface with a splash.

Shrieks and laughter fill the air, but my smile feels forced. Unnatural.

Maren is in the river, wearing a pale blue bikini, her blonde hair braided back. She's slender and lithe, with cute little curves and a toned stomach. The sight of her is more wickedly arousing than any fantasy I could dream up.

Two of the male students keep watching her, trying to swim closer and splash her,

coaxing her into playing around.

So far, she hasn't gotten too close to any of them, but it's only a matter of time before they start scooping her up against their bare chests, throwing her up in the air to make her laugh. Wet skin against wet skin.

Teeth grinding, I look away and scan the riverbank instead, waving stiffly at a group of locals on a picnic blanket.

It's an event for the nearest town today—the first big cookout of spring.

Everyone swims in the river then lazes on the bank and eats fresh burgers from the grill.

I brought the students along to mix with the locals and make nice, and to give everyone a break from camp, but now I'm questioning my own sanity.

Maren. In a bikini. With guys her own age panting over her perfect, tight body, trying to mess around with her and get her to flirt back.

Heart pounding, I roll my stiff neck.

“You're not going in?”

One of the local men stops on his way past me on the grassy bank, a little girl perched on his shoulders. The guy is big and bearded, with a deep tan that says he spends most of his hours outdoors—so different from the sun-starved academics back on campus.

“No. I mean—I'd better keep an eye on them.”

It's true. So why does it feel like I'm making excuses?

"Really?" The man turns and squints at my splashing crowd of students, holding his daughter's ankles in a loose grip.

She's up there chattering to herself, tugging on two handfuls of her dad's dark hair.

"Because those all look like grown adults to me. Besides, there are plenty of folks keeping an eye out today. Live a little, man. The water's great. Right, Ellie?"

His daughter blows a raspberry.

I laugh uneasily and nod. "Maybe."

The man pats my shoulder and walks on.

And... it does look inviting—crystal clear and fresh.

Especially with the hot sun beating down on the back of my neck.

It's the hottest day of our trip so far, and the weak, lukewarm showers at the campsite didn't really cut it this morning.

Now my shirt is sticking to my lower back, and my clothes feel itchy and hot.

Should I?

Would it be such a terrible idea?

"Professor Carter," a group of my students call, whooping and climbing all over each other. "You have to get in here!"



Maren doesn't call out to me. After my careful avoidance of her over the last three days, she barely even looks at me. She's facing the opposite bank, sunk down to her shoulders in the water, floating calmly while the others roughhouse.

One of the guys brushes past her again, tugging playfully on her braid, and when Maren glances up at him... she's blushing.

My hands move without instruction from my brain, flicking the top few buttons of my shirt open. Whoops echo from the river, but I barely hear them. There's too much static fuzzing up my brain; too much blood rushing in my ears.

Does Maren like that guy? Tommy, I think his name is. Is she into him?

My shirt drops in a messy pile on the bank, next to a heap of my students' clothes. A cool spring breeze washes over my bare chest, so welcome in the hot sunshine. My boots are next, kicked off unceremoniously as I keep staring unblinking at the river.

Tommy splashes her again, flicking a few droplets right at Maren's nose. She laughs and waves him away, but he's inching closer, hunkered down in the water.

You know, I felt like an idiot when I dressed in swim trunks instead of underwear this morning, but now I'm glad I hedged my bets. My belt buckle clinks, and my pants drop, and then I'm striding across the spongy grass to the water's edge.

"Cannonball!" Rex yells, but I ignore him, slipping into the river with barely a ripple, my teeth gritting at the sudden shock of icy cold.

Goosebumps pebble across my bare skin, and my toes are already prickling and going numb. It's freezing in this river, and it slaps me awake—stops me from prowling over to Maren and Tommy like some territorial animal and tearing them apart.

Instead, gut clenched, I splash river water on my face and try to calm my racing pulse. It doesn't really work, but it's enough to keep me rooted in place, far from Maren and Tommy.

"Heads up," someone calls, then the ball spirals in my direction again.

It slams into my hands, spraying droplets everywhere, and I don't know who threw it this time but I'm so fucking grateful for the distraction.

Maren and Tommy are still swimming near each other, and I can't tell whether she wants him closer or wants him gone.

Christ, I hope she wants him gone. If she makes even the tiniest noise of unhappiness, I'll be over there so fast their heads will spin.

Muscles flexing, I toss the ball into the crowd of students.

On and on we play, throwing the ball back and forth, all of the students so eager for my attention that it would be sweet if I weren't losing my sanity.

All I can focus on is Maren. She's still facing the opposite bank, still floating peacefully while Tommy tries to coax her into playing, and I'm not sure that she even knows that I'm in the water.

Would Maren care? Would she swim over? Or is she done with me after being ignored for three days?

I only did that to protect her from my own shitty self control—but it's hard to remember why that mattered so much right now, with my heartbeat booming in my ears.

Every instinct in my brain, every cell in my body, is in full agreement right now: Maren Olsen is mine.

And Tommy is too close, too bold, too boyishly handsome for me to stand.

My teeth grind together as I catch the ball again, and I'm burning up so much in my agitation that soon I'm gonna heat this whole river into a warm bath.

Finally, after what feels like a geological age, Maren glances back over her shoulder. When she sees me bare-chested in the water, her blue eyes go wide.

And— that is a blush. Hell yes. She's not the faint pink color she went when Tommy tugged her braid, not when she looks at me. Now, my girl is bright crimson red, and it's so fucking cute that I want to slam my head against the rocky river bank.

Maren spins fully to face me. Tommy's still trying to talk to her, but she's not even listening.

Poor guy. I'd feel sorry for him if the territorial animal inside me weren't still growling.

“Professor!”

I catch the ball easily and toss it back without looking, then sink down and start swimming toward Maren. Already, there are a few whispers carried on the breeze; a few weird looks making the back of my neck itch.

But right now, with another guy sniffing around Maren, I don't care.

Self control is overrated anyway.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Five

Maren

I can't believe Professor Carter is in the river, looking like a modern day Adonis with that sculpted chest. All the other guys look young and half-cooked next to him—like puppies beside a full grown dog.

They're jostling for his attention, yelling out and splashing each other, but right now, Professor Carter only has eyes for me.

He swims toward me, head held calmly above the river, powerful arms cutting through the water. And to an outside observer, he probably looks bored right now, his features carefully schooled—but I see the way his jaw clenches when he glances at Tommy. I see the hard glint in his navy blue eyes.

He's... the professor is jealous.

Because of me? Seriously?

This guy just spent three whole days pretending I don't exist, and now he's jealous of Tommy. I will never understand men.

"Hey, professor," Tommy calls out, grinning as he flicks a few more beads of water at my face. "You trying to get Maren here to join in? Because it's an impossible task so far."

My lips press together, and I squint out at the locals lazing on the riverbank, chatting and joking together. The scent of grilling meat floats on the breeze, and someone's plucking at a guitar. They're not bad.

It's a hot, sunny day in the mountains, and we saw more meteors last night. A cute guy from my class is flirting with me in the river, and even if I don't like Tommy that way, it's an ego boost. This should be a perfect moment, but as the professor reaches us, my stomach cramps with uncertainty.

Is he mad at me? Have I done something wrong?

No, a stern voice pipes up in the back of my mind. You haven't done anything wrong. Don't be a doormat, Maren.

My spine straightens.

"I need a word with Maren," Professor Carter says in that low, smooth voice. He spares a crooked smile for Tommy, but the strain around his eyes is still there. "It's about her class assignment."

Tommy blinks and laughs. He waves an arm around the river, showering droplets that sparkle in the sunshine. "Really? Right now?"

Professor Carter nods. "Right now." His tone turns rueful, and his broad shoulders shrug. "I'm getting old, Tommy. If I don't talk to Maren about this now, I'll forget all about it by dinnertime."

Tommy laughs again, commiserating this time. "Shit. Well, I hope I never get old."

Professor Carter frowns and cocks his head. "I rather hope you do."

But Tommy has already gone, winking at me and splashing me one last time before turning and swimming back toward the knot of people playing with a football.

They welcome him with cheers, one guy jumping on him and holding him under for a few seconds.

When Tommy resurfaces, he spits river water in the guy's face and cackles.

"It's like the discovery channel," I murmur, weirdly hypnotized by the sight of the other students messing around together.

I've never been great with big groups of people, always having just a handful of close friends, and envy gnaws at my insides as I watch them all mess around and bond.

How do they do it? They all make it look so easy .

Professor Carter is silent when I turn back to him, watching me from a foot away in the cold water. The gentle current breaks against his muscled chest, the water foaming and lapping at his smooth skin, while goosebumps stand out on his arms.

My belly swoops.

Suddenly, I am acutely aware that neither of us is wearing many clothes.

"Funny," I say at last, my voice sounding kinda strangled, "I handed in my class assignment weeks ago. You already graded it."

"Maren." The professor moves toward me another step, like he can't help it. Like he's been drawn toward me magnetically, even when it means moving against the river current. "I saw you and Tommy."

His navy eyes probe into me, staring right into my soul. If I didn't know better, if I hadn't just been ignored by this man for three days straight, I'd say he looks tortured.

I lift one shoulder, trying to act casual. Like I'm not completely rattled by having him so close and shirtless. Close enough to reach out and touch, and no one would see. "Saw us doing what?"

Another step closer. And this river is icy cold where it runs down off the mountains, but sudden heat spreads through my insides, making me want to pant and fan myself. I feel his heat too, warming the slow-moving water between us.

"Talking," Professor Carter says. "Teasing. Flirting."

He's so freaking jealous right now, and it's a sight to see. Our usually unflappable, put-together professor is unraveling at the seams, his jaw clenched and his eyes strained. His pulse is visible where it taps quickly beneath his jaw.

"Did you see that?" I tilt my head, grinning in the sunshine. "From both of us? Are you sure?"

"Maren."

"Because really, I'm surprised you saw anything, what with how you've been ignoring me lately. I'm shocked you even deigned to look in my direction." And now I'm still teasing, but it's also true. The way this man shut me out over the last few days... it sucked. It hurt.

So maybe he deserves to watch another guy flirt with me in the water. Maybe it feels good to know that someone wants me.

Maybe I'm not sorry at all.

The sun is warm on our bare skin, and the distant guitarist switches to a new song. The mountain breeze ruffles our hair, and right now I'm so glad that we're out here in the wilderness, where I can drag in lungfuls of fresh, crisp air. It's cleansing.

"Maren," the professor says again, quiet and low, just for me.

He sinks an inch lower in the water, like he can hide the intensity between us from prying eyes.

Over his shoulder, we're getting a few curious glances from the other students, but mostly they're too wrapped up in each other to care. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Hearing him say those words... doesn't feel as good as I hoped. My hands wave idly in the water, and I nibble my bottom lip. What is he even sorry for? That hug? Ignoring me afterward? Or charging over here when Tommy dared to flirt with me?

What the hell does this man want ?

He's close enough now that I could put my hands on him beneath the water. I could slide a palm across his chest, his ridged stomach, could dip my thumb into his belly button. Could slide right down beneath the waistband of his swim shorts, and touch my professor where a student never, ever should.

Just the thought is enough to make my stomach twist with need. My thighs squeeze together beneath the water, and I drift closer by another inch, until we're a hand's width apart, both hunkering low in the river, only the tops of our shoulders and our heads showing.

To an outside observer, we could be discussing my class assignment, just like the professor said.



Having a quiet, calm, serious conversation away from the splashes and yells of the other students.

The sun is high in the sky, shining down on all of us, but right now it's like we're alone in the shadows again.

"You," I say, poking the professor's sculpted chest, "need to figure out what you want."

He scoffs, catching my wrist and placing my whole hand against his body. He's so solid, so warm, his heartbeat drumming against my palm, and my nails dig in without permission from my brain.

"Believe me," he says, "that is not the problem here. The problem is that I know exactly what I want, in lurid detail, and I can't have it."

My heart knocks against my rib cage. "Well... not yet."

Heat and hope flash in the professor's eyes, and his thumb rubs against my inner wrist. "Not yet," he agrees, his usually smooth voice gone raspy. "But do you think... after this semester is over, do you think..."

"Yes. "

Can't believe he needs to ask me that. It's so obvious, isn't it? Splashed all over my face like the droplets of river water.

I've pined after this man for months now.

He's starred nightly in my dreams, and I've thought about him while awake too—while idly daydreaming, while walking between classes, while trying and

failing to concentrate on my essays, and yes.

While slipping a hand between my legs and easing the now-constant ache that he started in me.

“Fuck.” The professor closes his eyes for a long moment, still as a statue except for the thumb moving in steady circles against my wrist. “Okay. Okay.”

“Professor Carter—”

“Greg,” he interrupts, opening his eyes. They pin me in place, and I’m helpless. Breathless. “When we’re alone, call me Greg.”

I swallow hard, darting a glance all around us. No one’s watching us right now; no one cares. No one has any idea that my world just turned upside down and shook everything out of place.

The professor wants me too. Greg wants me too. Not just for a forbidden hookup, but for something longer. Something real.

Oh, hell. My thighs squeeze together, slipping past each other, but at this rate I’ll need a solid hour alone in my tent, biting down on my pillow to keep quiet.

I need him, and some of that desperation must show on my face, because Professor Carter— Greg —makes a low noise and reaches out beneath the water.

Blunt fingertips brush against my hip. I jerk and let out a squeak, blushing hotter than the sun, but when he pauses and looks at me, I nod frantically.

“Please don’t stop,” I whisper.

A muscle leaps in the professor's jaw.

Nostrils flaring, he takes a slow, casual glance all around us, but everyone else here is wrapped up in their own world.

Swimming and laughing; splashing and yelling.

Lazing on the riverbank and chewing on burgers.

Plucking guitar strings and manning the grill.

No one can see us with the way Greg's back blocks their eye lines, and the slow-moving current blurs the view below water anyhow.

Only Tommy spots us looking as he climbs up on his friend's shoulders, and he waves and whoops before falling backward into the water. Oblivious.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

“This can’t happen,” the professor says quietly, even as his fingertips stroke up and down my rib cage, my skin tingling madly in their wake. “If we—this is reckless. It can’t happen again. Not until after the semester.”

“Uh-huh.” My body rolls toward his touch, so shameless and hungry beneath the water. “Whatever you say.”

Greg’s laugh is pained. “At least pretend you believe in our self control, Maren.”

“Oh, I believe in it.” We’ve kept our hands off each other for months already, haven’t we? What’s a few more weeks? “Now keep going, professor.”

He gusts out a long exhale, but his hand strokes across my ribs, my stomach, the jut of my hip. For a moment, his fingertips linger at the top of my bikini, nudging at the fabric—until I make a small, desperate sound and they slip inside.

Professor Gregory Carter strokes along my seam with one long, thick finger, gliding easily.

My teeth burrow into my bottom lip, and I’m so worked up already, my breath comes in short pants.

My hips roll forward, chasing his touch, and I grip his wrist in both hands beneath the water, holding him to me.

“Gotta be quick,” the professor says, rough and raspy. “Can’t drag this out for you like I want to, Maren. Not yet. Not yet, but I will soon.”

Half a sob leaves my throat, and I rock against the professor's finger. There's still just one, probing and sliding, touching me with shameless possession. He finds the swollen nub of my clit and zeroes in there, rubbing in tight circles.

"That's it." The professor's eyes are glazed, and he watches me hungrily as I pant and squirm and work myself against his finger.

"Just like that. Fuck, you're perfect, Maren.

Look how pink your cheeks are. Look how badly you need this.

Will you blush this much when I sit you on my cock?

Will you bounce on my lap like I've been dreaming? "

" Mmph ," I moan, too worked up for real words. His fingers are too quick, too clever, so much blunter and thicker than mine. And feeling the professor's starving gaze as he touches me, hearing the primal need in his voice, makes my brain short-circuit and my knees go wobbly.

Not far away in the river, students shriek and splash each other, wrestling in the icy water. The sun beats hot on our heads.

Someone could glance over at us, they could be looking right now, but above the surface, everything looks innocent. Boring, even. While below...

"This is mine," the professor says, hushed and guttural, cupping my pussy and squeezing it for a moment before going back to my clit.

" You are mine, Maren Olsen, and the second this semester is over, I'm going to fucking worship you.

I'm going to make you forget all about Tommy and those other guys your age.

Going to get you addicted to my hands, my tongue, my cock, and ruin all other men for you. Do you understand?"

That already happened months ago, the first time I saw this man step up to the lectern in a crisp white shirt and lilac tie, but whatever. I'm not going to put him off his mission. I'm not a freaking imbecile.

I nod, my vision wavering as Greg's fingers get firmer, quicker on my clit. Sparks shoot along my nerve endings, lighting up my body from the inside, and my muscles tighten up in anticipation. I'm hovering on the edge now, brought to the precipice by the professor's skillful touch.

"Professor," someone calls from the group of students. My chin jerks up.

"Ignore them," he growls, moving to block my view of the outside world. "Ignore all of them. Come for me, Maren. Let me see what that's like."

He's still touching me, stroking in maddening circles. My belly clenches tight, pleasure already gathering like a storm.

"But—"

"Now ."

My limbs lock tight, and my breath seizes in my lungs.

His fingers press on me, merciless and demanding, making my body twitch and writhe, little ripples spreading out on the surface of the water.

I come so hard that my ears ring. So hard that spots float in my vision as pleasure wracks my body in waves, and all the while the professor watches me, darkly delighted.

On the edge of my awareness, another student's voice comes closer.

"Professor, have you ever been in a human pyramid?"

He turns and blocks me from view, while I sink lower in the river, gasping.

"No," he says, so calm and pleasant, "but I'm happy to give it a try."

The students whoop, and right before Greg moves away, he reaches back and brushes his knuckles against my stomach. My body jolts, so desperate for more of his touch already.

Then he moves on, swimming away in the icy water, and I slip below the surface to get a moment of privacy. The freezing water jabs at my face and head like a thousand tiny needles, shocking me back to reality.

Did that just happen?

Did Professor Gregory Carter just make me come in this crowded river in broad daylight?

When I burst back up for air, gasping for breath and slicking my wet hair out of my eyes, I feel his concerned gaze on me. I catch his eye briefly, and he gives me a crooked smile before turning back to the others.

Heart drumming, I swim toward the riverbank. Need to spend the next hour sprawled on a towel, sorting through the knotted tangle of my thoughts.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Six

Greg

It's harder than I could ever have imagined to keep my hands off Maren after our day in the river.

Every spare moment, my brain drifts to the tiny sounds she made; the heat of her body against my fingertips; the way she tensed up and shuddered as she came.

The glint of sunshine against her blonde hair, and the ravenous way she tore into a burger on the riverbank afterward, eating like a starving thing.

Maren is on my mind from dawn until dusk—then in my dreams, too.

I clamber out of my tent in the mornings and stumble to the showers, thinking of Maren.

I sit on the overheated bus each afternoon and check all our equipment piece by piece, thinking of Maren.

Even the nightly meteor shower is barely a distraction, because with each magnificent display, all I want to do is drag Maren to a telescope and hear her reaction.

In short: I'm cooked.

If my beautiful student realizes that fact, she shows no mercy.



Each time she catches my eye across the fire pit, Maren smiles and bites her lip in a way that makes my abs tense with need.

When we all hike up to the viewing point each night, she makes sure to brush past me at least once, our knuckles tingling from the brief contact.

And once darkness falls and we're all anonymous shadows on the mountaintop, Maren seeks me out without fail and presses against me, her back to my chest, both of us staring up at the stars while our pulses go haywire.

To an outside observer, we'd look calm. Completely professional, both watching for the meteors, with nothing amiss.

But each night, the second the scent of Maren's shampoo reaches my nostrils, my cock gets harder than iron—and she feels it. Likes it, too, judging by the way her ass presses back, rubbing against me until I can't barely think straight, every muscle in my body taut with desire.

Then the little minx skips off to chat with the other students and look through a telescope, and I'm left to prowl our site in the darkness, too worked up to speak to another human being for at least twenty minutes.

Being around her like this... stealing glances and teasing each other with brief touches... it's torture. But a torture I crave.

I need more.

It's madness, but I've been smart, measured, sensible for my whole goddamn life. Maybe I'm due a meltdown.

On the last night of our trip, the students throw a mini party at our campsite, hauling

s'more supplies up from town to roast over the fire pit.

They set out crates of beer too, shooting me nervous glances where I'm packing up the equipment at the bus, but I pointedly turn my back and keep working on my checklist.

They can drink if they want. They're all over twenty one, and we're not hiking up to the mountaintop tonight, so they're completely free.

But I won't be joining them. Lord knows I've crossed enough lines this trip already.

Their laughter drifts across the campsite, getting louder and looser as the evening wears on.

Maren joins in, perching delicately on a folding chair between Rex and Tommy and sipping at a bottle of beer, her nose wrinkling with distaste after the first swig.

I stifle a laugh at that, dragging my attention back to my clipboard.

They all chat and joke and yell over each other, bursting into cackles when Rex does an impression of one of the other professors back on campus.

Curiosity immediately snakes through my gut—do they do impressions of me ?

What would that look like? It's not my place to butt in and ask, but I chew over that image as I pack up the last of the cameras and lenses, locking them safely in the vehicle for the last time.

Night falls, owls hooting in the trees around our camp, while the moon hangs waxy and low above the treeline. In the far distance, there's a faint wolf howl.

The students don't hear it. They're too busy drinking and laughing and burning their s'mores, the acrid scent of charred sugar drifting on the breeze.

With all the equipment cataloged for the last time and locked safely away, I stand for a moment in the darkness, outside of the pool of firelight.

What the hell do I do now? I sure as hell can't drink with my students, but I don't want to hang around the fringes of their party like an eavesdropping nanny either.

Blowing out a long sigh, I shove my hands in my pockets—and squint at the dark trees.

We've walked the mountain trails plenty of times by now. I won't wander too far; won't risk getting lost.

With one last hungry glance back at Maren where she's sitting in the glow of the fire pit, I turn and plunge into the trees.

\* \* \*

Three hours later, when I step back on camp, the party is over.

The fire has burned down to embers, glowing red in the fire pit, and the folding chairs are all abandoned, scattered in a loose circle.

Empty beer bottles are grouped together in a pile.

Some tents are lit up from the inside, with shadows moving behind the fabric and giggling, while snores reverberate from other, darker tents.

Inhaling slowly, I stride through the wreckage and pick up the gallon jug of river

water from its spot beside the fire pit. The fire has burned down to embers and it's surrounded by rocks, but you can't be too careful. Not with these mountain winds.

The embers hiss loudly as I douse them, steam billowing up the stars, then I set the jug back down before heading to my own dark tent. My footsteps echo in the quiet.

My tent is set far away from the others—away from the giggles and snores.

Away from the whispered conversations and the stifled moans that say this was a successful party, at least for some.

And I'm glad that I walked up to see the stars for one last night; glad that I gave my students some privacy.

Even if my chest burned with need for Maren all that time. Even if acidic jealousy ate at my gut for the hours I watched the night sky alone, wishing that things were different. That we were not professor and student; that we didn't have to sneak around and keep things hidden.

Wishing that I could have walked to the center of that party and scooped Maren up against my chest, kissing her for everyone to see. Claiming her as mine.

My tent zipper scratches open, and I kick off my boots then crouch down to crawl through the flap. It's a small tent, not especially roomy or fancy, and my sleeping bag is already laid out on the mat.

I turn back to close the zip, then start to lay down—and freeze when I find a warm body already there. My heart lodges in my throat.

“Maren?” I choke out, my voice hushed.

She hums, the sleeping bag whispering against itself as she shifts beneath me. “Who else would it be?” she teases.

Oh, thank god.

“You can’t be in here,” I whisper, but then her hand is on my chest, stroking idly across my shirt, and my heartbeat pounds in my ears. That scent of her shampoo is stronger in this small space. Her warmth seeps through my clothes.

“Come on,” Maren murmurs. “They’re all drunk or asleep. No one will know.”

“You’ve been drinking.” I say it to remind both of us, because already I’m harder than granite, every cell in my body urging me to lay down on top of her, sealing us together. “This can’t happen.”

Maren scoffs. “I had one beer, three hours ago. Less than one, because let’s be honest, beer is gross. I drank like half of it.”

Her hand keeps roaming across my chest, mapping me through my shirt, and Christ, what I’d give to feel her touch me all over. Soft hands on bare skin.

“That still counts,” I grit out. “This can’t happen, Maren.”

She huffs, and the sleeping bag rustles as her hand drops down. We’re both shadows in the dark, both hidden from each other, but even without the benefit of sight, I can feel her stiffen up. Can feel her mood turn bleak.

“So that’s it?” Her voice is so quiet, I can barely hear it, even from this close. “A few sips of beer and we can’t do anything ? You don’t want me here at all?”

The silence spreads between us, so awkward that my teeth ache. But when Maren

sighs and starts to move, shifting around me to reach for the tent zipper, panic spikes and I stop her with one hand on her shoulder.

“No.” She’s so delicate beneath my touch; so warm and soft and perfect. Fuck. “No, that is not what is happening here. I always want you near, Maren. Even if we’re not... even if we were just talking, or lying together in silence. I always want you there. Never doubt that.”

Something tells me that the giggly conversations taking place in the other tents across the campsite are very different. Much lighter, less strained, with fewer tortured undertones. Less risk of someone getting fired, too.

But hey, Maren and I have wanted each other for months now. There’s a lot of baggage piled up between us; a lot of craving that has gone unsatisfied for too long.

Would it be the worst thing if she stayed a while? I won’t... do that with her. Not here, not in this cramped little tent when I can’t even see her expressions.

But perhaps I’m being too strict with us both. Especially on our last night in the wilderness, halfway up this mountain, in a moment as fleeting as the meteor shower.

“Maren?” I whisper.

She hums, softens beside me, the tip of her nose tracing a tickly path up my throat. Her breath puffs against my overheated skin. My hand trembles against her shoulder.

“Fuck,” I say, giving in. I guide her to lay back down, to stretch out on my sleeping bag, before lowering myself over her.

It’s been months and months of craving this young woman, and my self control has worn thin.

Ducking my head, I find her lips in the dark.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Seven

Maren

I wake up with tender lips, a dry throat, and a hard body pressed behind me.

It's early, and birds chatter in the treetops, calling out to each other like they've done every morning at dawn. The muted, blue-tinged light that comes before sunrise seeps through the tent. The unfamiliar blue tent, definitely not my own shabby green one.

Oh, shoot.

"Greg," I hiss, elbowing the body behind me in the ribs. The professor lets out a sleepy grunt, then tugs me closer and starts to kiss my throat. It feels so good, so natural, but that's no consolation when panic is rising in me like floodwater. I elbow him again. "Greg. Wake up."

It's funny: I can feel reality set in. Can feel the man behind me realize where we are and what we've done: that we've accidentally fallen asleep together in his tent while the other students are nearby.

The professor goes from relaxed to rigid in the space of a few seconds, his arm around my waist turning wooden.

"Maybe they're still asleep," I whisper.

His strained breaths puff against my ear.



“Unzip the tent,” I urge him, my own stomach curdling with nerves now. “Poke your head out and check if the coast is clear.”

Maybe this doesn’t need to be a big deal. Maybe I won’t cost this incredible man his career.

God, how could we be so careless? How could I be so dumb as to sneak into his tent in the first place? It seemed like such a good idea last night, when the fire was crackling and everyone’s spirits were high. Last night, it was like we all lived in a different world. A different reality.

But this morning, the harsh light of day is building outside the tent, and there’s no escaping this: I’ve put everything at risk. Greg hasn’t even said a word to me yet, just gone rigid with horror, and I don’t blame him.

Last night, this man kissed me for hours, wrapping me in his arms like he’d never found anything so precious before. He groaned and sighed and rocked against me with frustrated hunger, but refused to go any further. Protecting me from that stupid half-a-beer.

Now there are deep shadows under his eyes as he sits up, and his normally perfect hair is all ruffled. The professor casts one dread-filled glance in my direction, then tugs the tent zipper up slowly. I hold my breath as he peels back the tent flap and peers out.

For a moment, there’s no reaction. His shoulders are tense and bunched up, still clad in the plaid shirt he wore last night, and his jaw is tight.

Then navy eyes flick in my direction, and the professor gives a terse nod.

“Quickly,” he says, voice low.

My limbs have never scrambled into action so fast. I'm clumsy as a newborn calf, kicking over a battery-powered lantern and a water bottle in my hurry to exit the tent. Greg doesn't touch me as I launch past him out into the clearing; he just holds the tent door open for me in strained silence.

Out in the cool morning air, the other tents are quiet and still. Well—mostly. Someone is snoring like a chainsaw, the sound blending strangely peacefully with the birdsong, while voices drift toward the campsite from the direction of the showers.

Legs trembling, I lurch away from the professor's tent to stand in a less incriminating spot. The zipper scratches closed behind me.

"Hey," Rex calls when he steps through the trees, his wild hair damp but not tamed at all by a shower.

There's a towel slung over his shoulder, and beside him, Tommy's scrubbing at his own damp head and grinning at me around the fabric.

They both look bright and clean, way too lively for two guys who drank practically a whole crate of beer between them last night. "Maren! M-Dog."

I smile weakly and wave. There's no good reason for me to be standing in the middle of camp, hair mussed and still in my clothes from last night, but either these guys don't notice that fact or they're too cool to care.

"Ready to head home?" Tommy asks, flipping his own towel over his shoulder.

He grins at me suggestively, but there's no harm in it.

Honestly, if I weren't so head-over-heels for our professor, I might feel a tiny flutter of pleasure at Tommy's attention, but as it is, I really have been ruined for all other

men.

“Yup,” I rasp. Sunrise is really breaking now, with golden rays of light spearing through the trees. It’s so beautiful on this mountainside that my chest aches with longing, and it’s crazy, but part of me wants the impossible. The ridiculous .

I want to stay a while longer. With Greg.

“First thing I’m gonna do when we’re back on campus?” Rex says, strolling past toward his tent. The flap sags open, and his belongings spill out onto the ground in a messy wave. “Get a family size pizza. Double pepperoni with mushroom.”

My stomach growls in approval and Tommy snorts and nudges me as he walks past.

“Atta girl. Let me know if you’re ever hungry for something else, Maren.”

I press my lips together and force a smile.

The professor’s tent behind me is deadly silent.

I linger for another minute once the boys are back at their own tents, pretending to watch the birds rustling around in the treetops, but Greg doesn’t come out.

He clearly doesn’t want to risk it; doesn’t want to be seen with me so early in the morning.

Or maybe he’s had enough of me for one day, after kissing me into a breathless muddle all night and finding me still there in his tent come morning, an unwelcome guest. Or hell, maybe he’s fallen back to sleep, unbothered and oblivious.

And I know it’s smart and reasonable to keep his distance, but my stomach still sinks

as I finally trudge to my own tent to start packing. It's lonely as I crouch down and tug open my own zipper, the morning breeze cool on my cheeks.

Sneaking around was fun last night. Hushing each other and laughing softly; stifling our desperate sounds.

Rolling around in that small space on the professor's sleeping bag, limbs entwined and hearts pounding.

It was like something from one of my daydreams. Honestly, I still can't believe he wants me back.

But in the harsh light of morning, as I stuff wrinkled clothes into my backpack... it doesn't feel great being someone's dirty little secret.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Eight

Greg

Maren is quiet on the bus ride home. The others all blast music and sing along at the top of their lungs, or spin around in their seats to flirt with the passengers behind them.

They're jubilant—our trip has been successful, we saw the Thelseid meteor shower and collected prime recordings and data, and not only that, but we've had barely any interpersonal drama. Even their hangovers seem mild.

But Maren sits alone, silent and thoughtful, her plump mouth pursed as she stares out of the window. She's so beautiful, my chest aches.

My gaze tracks to her incessantly, watching her in the rear view mirror, but there's nothing I can do to check on her while I'm driving. All I can do is worry, forcibly yanking my attention back to the road. Focus.

She's fine.

I'm sure she's fine.

Never mind the hurt in her eyes when I rushed her out of my tent this morning before dawn. Never mind how terribly I handled that whole thing, too muddled by sleep to recognize that I was behaving like an ass. My gut sinks like a stone at the memory.

I've never felt as helpless and ridiculous as I did this morning, crouching in my tent and trying not to breathe too loud. I'm a grown man. A celebrated professor, and this situation has me sneaking around like a reckless teenager.

The bus lurches over a bump in the road and we all sway in our seats, some of the students whooping like they're in a rodeo. I swallow hard, staring dry-eyed at the highway as the sun beats through the windshield. A bead of sweat rolls down my spine.

Maren .

I can't help it. I steal another glance, my gaze drawn to her as inevitably as the moon is tethered to the Earth.

She stares out of the bus window, barely reacting to being jostled by the rough road. Maren's blonde hair is tied back in a fiddly little braid, and her cheeks are pink from the long days of sunshine.

Her mouth is turned down, and her shoulders are slumped. My gut cramps.

She looks sad.

As we drive on, my fingers flex on the steering wheel and I make a silent resolution: this can't go on. It's not fair to either of us.

Maren deserves so much better than this lonely bus journey.

\* \* \*

Eight hours later, the bus pulls into its designated bay on campus.

The handbrake creaks as I yank it on, killing the engine.

The bus ticks audibly as it cools, and I spin to face the students.

They're slumped in their seats, most of them napping from the center of travel pillows.

Maren is sleeping too, her forehead resting against the bus window.

"Okay," I call, stifling a smile as a few of them jerk awake.

They wipe the drool from the corners of their mouths, blinking sleepily as they elbow their neighbors.

Maren wakes too, rubbing at her eyes as murmurs fill the bus.

"We're home, but you're not off the hook just yet, I'm afraid. There's one last task for us all."

A couple of groans break out, but most of them nod, Maren included. They're used to carrying the equipment as a group, after all, and hauling the telescopes and cameras a short way across campus is far easier than a mile up a mountainside. This will be easy after the last two weeks.

"Come on." My seat belt clicks open, slithering across my chest, and my muscles are stiff as I stand. "Once more for luck."

Rex springs to his feet, shaking out his limbs dramatically, and a few others copy him. One by one, the students file off the warm, stale bus to gather with me in the fresh air outside.

It's cold here. The breeze is gentler than in the mountains, blocked by buildings all around, but the sun is weaker too, smothered by a patchy layer of cloud.

Instead of forests and mountain peaks, brick buildings loom in all directions.

Instead of birdsong, the rumble of distant traffic and the faint thud of gym music fill the air.

Usually, when I come back to campus after a stretch of time away, it's a relief. Everything is familiar, everything makes sense. Here, I have the respect of my students and colleagues, and the freedom to research whatever I want in my field. Coming home to that is like slipping into a warm bath.

When I was a lowly grad student, this felt like an impossible dream. And I've never taken my success for granted—not once.

But today, coming back to campus after two weeks away with Maren...

It's claustrophobic. Brick buildings close in on all sides, and blank windows stare down at us, ready to catch me staring at my student for a beat too long.

I'm trapped, a specimen under a microscope, and after glancing at Maren every few minutes on the drive back here, I can't trust myself to even look in her direction now.

Does she care? Is that same hurt swimming in her big blue eyes as this morning? I don't fucking know, and it eats through my insides like acid.

"Alright, let's go." Don't look at her. Don't look at her. "Back to my office, please."

We trudge across campus in a loose cluster, all laden with cases and bags of equipment as well as our own personal backpacks.



Despite the long day of travel and this final chore, the students chat happily and laugh together, their sneakers scuffing against the paved paths.

They part to let a cyclist through, and a few of them make kissy noises at an ugly pigeon pecking by a bench.

My office is on the third floor of the natural sciences building. It's a corner office with big windows and a private bathroom, and someone has clearly been watering my various plants. The students file in obediently, stacking the equipment cases and bags in a pile in the center of the rug.

"That'll do." My smile feels odd, as though my face has forgotten how to make normal expressions, but I am grateful to this group. They're good students, all of them. "Thank you all for the last two weeks. I'll deal with the equipment from here. Go on and settle back into your rooms."

Laughing and jostling each other, they all call goodbye and turn to go—all except the quiet, subdued girl at the back. Maren doesn't look up from the floor as she turns to leave, and Christ, I can't take it for another second.

"A moment please, Maren," I call, my voice calmer than I feel. If she leaves my office looking that sad, I will claw my own eyes out. "I'd like another word about your class assignment."

Finally, she looks up, blue eyes catching mine before they dart away. She nods awkwardly, stepping to one side as the others all leave. A few of them offer fist bumps as they pass her, and Maren smiles weakly as she says goodbye.

Then we're alone. I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. The empty office stretches between us, a seemingly impossible distance.

“Shut the door, please,” I rasp.

Maren turns robotically, doing as I ask.

“Lock it,” I add. “If you—if you’re comfortable with that, I mean.”

Thunk.

The lock clicks into place, then Maren squares her shoulders and turns to face me. Her chin is raised, defiant.

“I know what you’re going to say.” Her voice is soft but clear. “I know I messed up by falling asleep in your tent. I know I put everything at risk for you, and I know you don’t want to do this anymore. I know, professor. You don’t need to say it.”

My heart slams against my ribs, and I shake my head slowly. Is that what she’s been telling herself all day, slowly getting sadder and sadder? Is that why she looks so resigned now, like a doomed woman waiting for the ax to fall?

“Bullshit.”

The word clangs to the ground between us. Maren jolts, her eyebrows shooting up in confusion.

“Bullshit,” I say again, striding slowly around the pile of priceless equipment. I’ll deal with the telescopes and cameras later. I’ll check the bus back in with campus facilities; I’ll collate the data we collected.

Everything can wait except this.

“You think I’m angry at you.” I come to a stop in front of Maren, cupping her jaw

gently. She shudders out a breath and gazes up at me, her eyes swimming with exhausted emotion. “You think I blame you for the fact that we have to sneak around. Listen to me: that is bullshit , Maren.”

She clings to my forearms, swaying toward me like she can’t help herself. Like I knock her center of gravity off balance, just like she does with mine.

“But—”

“I’m tired of this,” I say abruptly, cutting across her.

As far as I’m concerned, there should not be even a tiny kernel of doubt in her mind.

It’s a travesty that I let her doubt us at all.

“I’m tired of acting like what we’re doing is wrong.

Tired of pretending the way I feel is wrong. On Monday, I’m going to quit.”

Maren gasps, starting to shake her head, but I keep talking.

“There are other colleges, sweetheart. Other places for me to work. Believe me, my career will not be an issue. But if I let this go on, if I keep hurting you to protect my job... I’ll break this thing between us before we’ve even begun.”

And I couldn’t stand that. Couldn’t survive that.

Maren is everything, and I’m done hiding that fact from the world.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” The words grate out of me, so sour on my tongue, but I force myself to say them.

This only works if we're both all-in, and she's still blinking up at me, dazed by this new outburst. "Tell me that you don't feel that way, that you don't want me to quit.

Tell me, Maren, and I'll listen. I won't pressure you into anything. "

My student sucks in a slow breath, holds it for a few seconds, then exhales. When she blinks, tears cling to her eyelashes, and her hands tighten on my forearms. We're both dressed in hiking clothes, both still clothed for the wilderness, and it's so alien in my clean-cut office.

"No," Maren whispers. "I want this too."

My heart soars.

"Come here."

I lean down, her arms looping around my neck, and then she jumps up, ass resting on my forearm. Our heartbeats rattle together, chests sealed, and the warmth of Maren's sweet, soft body seeps into my front.

"We're in your office," she hisses, scandalized, as I press her against the locked door. "There are other people in the building. Someone might hear. Or come looking for you."

But her ankles lock behind my back, and my laugh is muffled against her hair. Maren shivers, pressing closer to me despite her words.

"Exactly," I murmur, lining us up so that the rigid line of my cock presses against the damp heat between her legs.

Christ. How many times have I dreamed of this?

Arousal winds through me, tense and torturous, and I grind against her, static buzzing in my brain.

“After tomorrow, we won’t be professor and student anymore, sweetheart.

This is our last chance to break the rules. ”

Her delighted laugh vibrates through my whole body. Stifling a groan, I lick at the pulse point beneath her jaw, reveling in the salty taste of her skin.

“Well, when you put it like that,” Maren says. Her thighs flex, and her body rolls against mine, teasing my shaft through my clothes. My teeth grit together, trapping a tortured growl in my chest.

“You have no idea,” I grind out, ducking down to bite and nibble at her slender shoulder. “No idea how much I’ve wanted this.”

Even now, I’m lightheaded with the sensations of her body against mine. Dizzy with this daydream coming to life. Is this real?

“Oh, believe me, professor.” Maren’s fingers wind through my hair, tugging until my scalp prickles with heat. My head tilts back, my chest heaving. “I have an inkling.”

Then my shy, sweet student yanks my face down to hers—and kisses me so deeply that I come apart at the seams.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Nine

Maren

It's happening. It's happening. Professor Gregory Carter has me pressed against his locked office door, grinding our hips together. He groans against my mouth; slips his tongue past my lips.

It's like one of my daydreams. Better than one of my daydreams, because this is real.

We're both salt-crusted and windblown from two weeks in the mountains, and we both have shadows under our eyes from barely sleeping last night.

Our clothes are scuffed and dusty, and my nose is pink from a light sunburn.

When the professor kisses me deeply, his five o'clock shadow rasps against my cheeks.

I want to live in this moment forever.

"Do you really mean it?" I can't help asking between kisses, hands roaming greedily over his chest, his shoulders, the nape of his neck. He's so strong, so sturdy, so muscular beneath his clothes. "Are you sure?"

Greg gives me a crooked smile without leaning back, his mouth slanting against mine. "Maren," he says, his voice tingling against my lips. "I've never been so fucking sure in my life."

Sparks of pleasure heat my insides, and I clutch at the professor's plaid shirt and suck on his tongue. He groans like a tortured man, rubbing his hips into mine.

God.

Need twists through my belly, my pulse pounding between my legs.

And... that bulge feels awfully large where it's grinding against my core. Intimidatingly large. How the hell am I gonna fit that thing inside me?

The cowardly part of me whispers that I should find out another day; that I should go home and do some research, some prep, some personal grooming. That I should face down my first time like a soldier prepped for war, with minimal risk of embarrassment.

But a far bigger, far louder part of me screams that if I don't feel this man push inside me in the next few minutes, I am going to lose my ever-loving mind. Screw research and game plans; screw shaving my bikini line. He loves me. He's quitting his job for me.

I trust this man with everything.

"Please, professor, I want—"

My fingers are clumsy against his shirt buttons, and I cut off with a huff, leaning back to scowl at the fiddly little discs.

They come apart so slowly, his magnificent chest revealed one tiny sliver at a time.

And I've seen this all before in the river, but the sight still makes my thighs flex around Greg's waist.

“I want... shoot.”

Stifling a laugh, the professor catches my hands and presses them against his bare chest, holding them still. His heartbeat thuds against my knuckles, and he waits for me to meet his gaze before he speaks, mouth curving up with amusement.

“What do you want, Maren? Tell me.”

My throat is dry as I swallow. He watches and waits, so kind and patient.

Why is this so hard to say?

“I want... you know.” My thighs squeeze his waist once more, our bodies brushing together. The professor’s expression doesn’t change, but I feel the way his cock twitches, straining toward me inside his jeans.

“Maybe I don’t know,” Greg murmurs, winding a wispy lock of blonde hair from my hairline around his knuckle. “Maybe I want to hear you say it.”

Arousal simmers in my veins, and the slickness gathering between my thighs is maddening. So distracting, so tickly, so wet.

“I want...” I mumble.

Greg nods, still playing with that escaped tuft of hair. “Go on.”

“I want you to...”

He rolls his neck when I trail off again, inhaling sharply. Like I’m fraying the last shred of his patience, tormenting him too. He tugs lightly on my hair.



“Say it, Maren.”

Oh, god. Here goes.

“I want you to fuck me, professor.” The words tumble out of me, loud and clear in his empty office, and now they’re out there. Can’t take them back, can’t pretend I never said them. My cheeks burn red, but I push on. “I want you to be my first.”

The professor’s nostrils flare at that, and his eyes darken—like it had never occurred to him that I might not have done this before. That I’m untouched.

He can’t speak for what seems like a long stretch of time, though his hips roll against me rhythmically the whole time, his body making its own statements. I cling to his shoulders and grind back, needy and breathless.

“First and last,” the professor says eventually, his voice pure gravel, and then he’s gripping my braid and tugging my head gently back; he’s kissing me with such filthy, shameless ownership that my toes curl in my hiking boots.

I gasp, clinging on for dear life, and yank at the sides of his shirt like I could actually tear the final buttons off with my uncoordinated hands. The professor snorts when he realizes what I’m doing, breaking our kiss only to yank his own shirt open, popped buttons flying across the office floor.

Outside in the hallway, distant voices float past the door.

This building isn’t empty; it’s not even dark outside.

It’s a regular Friday on campus, and the natural sciences building is full of professors and students all going about their day—completely oblivious to the rules we’re breaking in this fancy corner office.

“My leggings,” I whisper, and after frowning down at our bodies, Greg reluctantly sets me down.

He doesn’t step back, though, and keeps me caged against the door as I kick off my boots, shove my leggings down my legs and onto the floorboards, then leap back up into his arms. My ankles cross behind his back once more, and the rough scrape of his jeans against my most sensitive area makes my body flush hotter than an inferno.

“No underwear, Maren.” The professor sounds pained. “Have you been like that all week?”

I shrug, winding my arms around his neck. “Whenever I wore leggings, yeah.”

Greg groans, resting his forehead against mine for a long moment... then he juggles my ass onto his left forearm, and his right hand begins to roam.

My ass cheek: squeezed. My hip: stroked. When those fingers slide along my seam, it’s like the river all over again. Maddening and perfect. I squirm in his hold, biting my lip to stifle my cries, and soon I’m bucking against him, hips rolling to chase his touch.

The professor rubs a thumb over my clit, then presses a single finger inside me. Just to the second knuckle, but this is new. It’s new, and it steals my breath.

“Oh,” I murmur, head flopping down to rest on his shoulder. “Oh. Okay.”

“Feels good?”

That finger works its way deeper, gentle but determined, pressing inside my virgin body. The professor’s low voice reverberates through my whole torso, tingling all my nerve endings, and I nod weakly.

“Uh-huh. So good.”

But how the hell will I ever fit more?

Turns out I should have more faith in biology, because two minutes later I’m fucking myself on two thick fingers, both of them sliding as deep as they can go, hooking inside me to press at my most pleasurable spots.

There’s a faint flush on the professor’s cheekbones, and he’s watching me like I’m a miracle.

Like I’m more fascinating than any meteor shower.

“That’s it,” Greg mutters, twisting his wrist to rub my clit with his thumb. It’s slippery with my arousal, and we both groan at the sensation. “That’s it, sweetheart. Fuck, you’re perfect.”

I mewl, too far gone for words. And when I seize up then shatter in his arms, waves of sensation wracking my body, the professor presses me against the door even harder and kisses me to muffle my cries.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he scrapes out as soon as I float back to myself, pulse racing and cheeks hot.

Greg yanks at his belt and pops the button on his jeans; he yanks his zipper down with unusually jerky movements.

He’s normally so graceful, so elegant, and seeing him overcome with arousal for me is one hell of an ego boost. I laugh faintly and preen in his arms, like I really am the perfect angel he says I am, and not a sweaty, flushed mess.

“Maren.” The head of his cock notches at my entrance, my body already twitching in response. My channel clamps down on nothing, like it’s trying to suck him inside. “Are you sure?”

Am I sure? What kind of crazy question is that?

Every cell in my body has craved this man non-stop since the very first day of class.

I’ve tossed and turned so many nights, feverish with longing, trying to imagine how the professor would feel pressed up against me.

My heart stopped every time he stared at me in the lecture hall, and I nearly went mad with hoping and wishing that he felt the same way.

Now his long, thick cock is pressed against my entrance, and he wants to know if I’ve changed my mind?

“Do it.” My nails dig into the muscle at his shoulders, hard enough to leave little pink half moons on his skin. “ Please , professor. I’ve wanted you for so long.”

He curses quietly, shaking his head, then presses forward. Inch by inch. Stretching me open, claiming my body in a way no one else has. And all the while I pant and squirm and pepper kisses against his chest, his throat, his jaw.

“That’s it,” Greg mutters, hips rocking into mine now. Fucking his way deeper and deeper. “There you are, sweetheart. So tight and wet. Christ.”

Faint noises float from where our bodies join, so primal that I blush even harder. Outside in the hallway, anonymous people walk past, chatting together. Oblivious.

A bead of sweat rolls down my spine, and I arch against the professor’s chest. He’s

all the way inside me now, gripping my hips hard enough to leave fingerprint bruises. I hope he does.

“This,” Greg clips out, fucking me harder now, faster, “is worth any job. Any price. God, Maren, I’d give anything for this. For the way you feel.”

Moaning, I squeeze my thighs tighter around his waist and lean forward to scrape my teeth over his throat. The professor’s skin tastes salty, with the faint scent of pine from our stay in the mountains. Will we ever go back there? Maybe the two of us could go alone and watch the meteors together.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Then lie entwined together in Greg's tent, steaming up the small space until condensation slides down the vinyl walls.

Yeah. That's my new dream.

"So. Good."

I should've known he'd be chatty. This man is a famously good speaker, holding hundreds of students at a time enthralled with his words.

Of course he's talking even now, muttering filthy praise in my ear even as he thrusts between my thighs, stretching my tight channel around his shaft.

And I love it. Love how badly he wants me, how he worships me with his words.

Love the secret promises he makes and the darker threats of possession—threats that aren't scary at all.

I'm his.

And the professor is mine .

And when he slides a hand between our bodies to start rubbing my clit, when he sucks on my throat, and growls against my skin, and fucks me into a trembling wreck... there's nothing else for it. Can't hold out any longer. Can't keep the fireworks inside me from detonating.

I let out the world's tiniest squeak, head thumping back to rest on the door, as a storm of pleasure swirls through my body. My limbs shake and my belly tenses. For a long moment, I stop breathing at all, eyes screwed shut to stop tears from sliding down my cheeks.

Feels so freaking good. So alive.

And the only thing better? When the professor grunts and shoves deeper, his cock swelling before flooding me with wet, sticky heat. It slides down my thighs and drips onto the office floorboards. It makes my chest feel all gooey and warm.

“Oh my god.” After a long beat of silence, I laugh. My voice is all raspy, like I’ve been sobbing into a pillow instead of choking back cries of pleasure. Glancing down at myself, it’s official: I look well-fucked. Flushed and sticky and rumped.

The professor looks down at us too, mouth twisting, then looks up at me and winks.

“Good thing I’m quitting tomorrow.”

Yep. Then we can start the rest of our lives.

\* \* \*

Three years later

The stars spread out overhead, covering the mountains like a sparkly blanket. The night sky is ink-black, and the moon casts a silver sheen on the clearing where we’ve set up our telescope. The wind is cold and scented with pine, but I barely feel it with my husband braced against my back.

“The meteor shower may not start until tomorrow,” he warns for the dozenth time, his

hands stroking up and down my sides through my fleecy jacket. “We could go back to the tent and rest up. Are you tired?”

“Greg, I’m fine .”

Honestly. I’m still in my first trimester, barely showing beneath my clothes, and my husband is already acting like I’m made of glass. It’s equal parts endearing and annoying.

“There’s peppermint tea in the thermos,” he says.

“I know.”

“And I’ve set out some folding chairs in case you need to sit.”

“Yep. I watched you do it.”

There’s a long exhale, then my husband presses his face against my hair. His strong arms wind around me, holding me against his chest, and my brief buzz of irritation melts away.

“Sorry,” he says gruffly, his words tickling my scalp. “I know I’m fussing over you like a mother hen. It’s just...”

“I know.” I pat his hand in the dark, resting my head back against his chest. Already, I regret my briefly snippy mood, because this is our first child. Of course Greg is worried. “But the baby is fine, I promise—”

“No, I know that,” he says, tugging lightly on my braid. “I’ve been to all the appointments. I know our baby is healthy and well. It’s you I’m worried about, Maren. Pregnancy is hard, and you’re going through this for both of us, and Christ, if



I could do it for you I would.”

Pressing my lips together to fight a smile, I gaze up at the stars. They wink down at me, so bright and mysterious.

“I can do this.”

Greg sighs. “I know you can.”

I find his hand again, knotting our fingers together. “But you’re sweet to worry about me.”

His laugh is blunt. “I will always worry about you, Maren. You’re my whole damn world. When I go to sleep, I think of you. When I wake up, I think of you. In lectures, at the gym, while I’m writing up papers—it’s you, you, you.”

Me, me, me. What did I ever do to deserve such devotion from such an incredible man? Well, whatever it was, the feeling is mutual.

I’m as obsessed with my husband these days as the first time I saw him. More obsessed, if anything. Any time my mind wanders at my job in the newsroom, it wanders straight to him.

Every time Greg is away from me, I miss him, and when he’s here, I can’t get close enough. Want to crawl inside his skin.

A meteor streaks past overhead, burning a silver trail across the night sky. We both fall silent, gazing up. My husband’s heartbeat booms against my back, steady and strong.

“I’m glad we came back here,” I confess into the quiet. “Back to where it all started.”

“Not where it started,” Greg corrects, rubbing his cheek against my hair. “I was already long gone for you by the time we went on that trip. But yes, this is where it all changed.”

Between the mountains and the night sky, meteors streaking overhead.

Cupping the small bulge of my stomach, I sigh and melt back against my husband.

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading Wild Skies! I hope you loved it. :)

For more pining in the mountains, check out [Lost in the Wild](#) . I came out here to interview a cryptid. Now he’s carrying me off to his cave.

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Something Sweet](#) . I spend every Valentine’s Day baking cookies for my friends and neighbors. But the bad boy who just moved to town? He’s hungry for something else...

Happy reading!

xxx

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am*

Two hours later, it turns out maps are harder to read in the forest gloom—and paths are harder to follow. What seemed clear as day out on the bare, sunny mountainside is not so obvious in this maze of tree roots and mossy boulders.

“Right.” Spreading the map out against a tree trunk, I squint at the path I marked out in smudgy pencil. Landmarks. I need landmarks. “Right, okay.”

After five minutes, I turn the map ninety degrees to the left.

After ten minutes, I lower the map and let my forehead thunk against the tree.

I’m going to die up here.

I’ll be another statistic; another headline for someone else’s story. A pile of bones and a pair of barely-worn hiking boots, the insides stained brown with dried blood, left up here on the mountain in a sad little mound and picked clean by cougars and squirrels.

Will anyone mourn? Sure, I have casual friends aplenty in the city, and my landlord will notice the missed rent payments, but will anyone really care that I’m gone? What’s it all been for?

A deep sigh drifts through the pine trees.

It takes me way too long to realize that sigh was not my own.

Whirling around, I lose my balance and stagger to the left. A man stands ten feet

away, watching me. He's dressed in a pair of ancient jeans and nothing else, barefoot and bare-chested, and his crossed arms bulge with muscle. A frayed, once-white bandage is knotted around his bicep.

He's dirty and bearded.

His hair is long and matted.

Piercing gray eyes gleam as he frowns.

Wild man.

I beam at the stranger, my brush with death forgotten. "There you are. I knew I'd find you."

The wild man's scowl deepens. He jerks his head back the way I came, and though he doesn't speak, his meaning is clear enough. I should go home already, and stop blundering around on his mountain like a clueless tourist.

"Uh huh, totally, I will absolutely get out of your hair. But first, could you answer a few questions for me? Since I came all this way to interview you and all."

Fumbling my notebook out of my backpack as I talk, I set everything else down and turn to a clean page, pencil poised, then smile brightly at the Wild Man of Starlight Ridge.

He stares back at me, nonplussed.

Wait, does he speak English?

Does he speak, period? What if he was raised by wolves?

No worries. I'm the reigning champion at Daniels family charades.

"So, are you aware of your reputation as the Wild Man of Starlight Ridge? Did you know that last year you made a list of top fifty folktales and urban legends?"

The man stares.

Ookay. No problem. Charade time.

"Did you—" I point at him, "know—" tap my head with my pencil, "you're an official cryptid?" Notebook clutched in one hand, I mime an exaggerated creep through the forest.

The man shakes his head—but not like he's answering my question. More like he's trying to wake himself up from a weird dream.

And you know what? That's a little unfair. I'm not the one who looks like Tarzan dressed in old jeans, but somehow this guy is edging away like I'm loopy, looking all the world like he's about to melt back into the trees.

"Wait, wait, wait! Don't go yet, Wild Man. Seriously, I have so many questions. And—I'm lost!" I add as he half-disappears behind a trunk. "If you leave now, I'll definitely die of exposure or get eaten by a wild animal. Think of the mess."

The man sighs heavily, then comes back out from behind the tree. His gray eyes are narrowed on me, annoyed.

So he does understand me. That makes things easier.

"Okay, next question. What's it like living wild out here? What supplies do you have? Does it ever get lonely? Do you get scared?"

The man prowls closer, moving quietly through the trees. If I wasn't watching him, buzzing with excitement that I've found him, I wouldn't notice him at all. It's like he's one with the landscape, cloaked in natural camouflage, while I blunder around with my stiff boots and rusty backpack.

Hang on, how long has this guy been watching me? He could've been nearby for hours already and I wouldn't have known. At that realization, a shiver runs down my spine, and the breeze feels extra cold on my cheeks.

The wild man reaches my side, bends down to pluck the map from my open bag, then spreads it on the tree beside me again. Taking my pencil, he draws a new path on the map, linking my previous route with some random spot in the forest.

Wow. I went really wrong.

Good thing Denim Tarzan is here, spinning me around by the shoulders. He points between the trees, then shoves the map and pencil into my hand.

"That way," he says, his deep voice rusty from lack of use. "Go now, while you've still got good light. And keep whistling. Make plenty of noise. You should reach the town in four hours."

"I knew you could talk," I tell him, lifting my notebook again. "Please, if you could answer just a few questions—"

"No."

I blink up at the man. He frowns down at me, and he's so much closer now than before. Close enough to feel the body heat radiating off his bare, dirt-streaked chest, and to feel my neck twinge at how much taller he is.

"No?" I repeat, nonplussed.

“No.”

“But I came all this way...”

The wild man jerks his head back and forth, his long, matted hair moving over his shoulders.

It’s some shade of brown, but it’s hard to tell when he’s caked in a thin layer of dirt.

There’s a faint blood stain on his bandage, but it looks old.

“I didn’t ask you to do that,” he says. “I don’t owe you shit, alright? Now go.”

“But I—”

“Go . And next time don’t come up the mountain unprepared. Don’t come where you don’t belong.”

Though it’s ridiculous, though I know this jerk is right, his words still sting. Inhaling sharply through my nose, I bend down to stuff everything except the map in my backpack.

Ouch. Who is this guy, and how can he hurt my feelings so easily? Why do I care what some mean, dirty cryptid thinks of me? Because... I do. I do care. My chest aches at the thought of this man thinking I’m stupid, and my lungs burn way worse than they did on the climb.

“You don’t know me,” I say quietly, shouldering my pack. “And you shouldn’t judge what you don’t understand.”

Denim Tarzan sneers. “I know enough.”

“Says the man who forgot how to comb his hair.”

Not my best comeback, but I’m tired and hurt and abruptly so, so done with this mountain and everything on it. It’ll have to do. Pine needles crackle underfoot as I turn on my heel.

“Don’t blunder into any bear dens,” the wild man calls after me, his deep voice drifting through the trees.

I flip him off over my shoulder and hike on, sniffing away frustrated tears.