



SILLAS

CAMP MOUNTAIN MAN

KATE TILNEY

SILAS:
Camp Mountain Man #2
by Kate Tilney

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Violet

I don't know how I let my best friend talk me into spending my hard-earned vacation time in the middle of nowhere Alaska. She has some crazy idea about setting me up with one of the guy's at her fiancé's lodge. Or, as she likes to call it, Camp Mountain Man.

But after being burned by the opposite sex more than my fair share, I have zero interest in hooking up with anyone.

That is until I have an awkward confrontation—involving my unmentionables—with the hottest man I've ever seen.

Silas

Every woman I've loved before has left me. So I've made a life for myself here in the Alaskan wilderness. I never needed anyone else.

Until I get into a tug-of-war match including a gorgeous, curvy lady and a bright red bit of lace. Then, I can't think about anything but her.

Yet I know once I have her, I won't be able to let her go again. I just have to make her see that she can let her guard down with me.

Camp Mountain Man is a series of steamy and short standalone romances about curvy city slickers and the hunky mountain men who protect them in the Alaskan wilderness. Read SILAS if you like fresh starts, adventure, and a romance full of heart. No cliffhangers, no cheating!

Chapter One

Violet

“Remind me again why I let you talk me into this,” I shout as we bump and sway on our descent toward her fiancé’s lodge in the middle of nowhere Alaska.

“I promise you, it’s worth it.” My best friend, Jules, flashes me a bright smile. “When you see the land . . .” —she covers the mouthpiece of her headset and leans toward me — “not to mention the super sexy mountain men waiting for us. You’ll wish we’d come up soon.”

I just shake my head. Clearly falling stupidly in love with a bearded, Brawny-man mountain lodge owner has made Jules lose her mind. I won’t deny that my eyes nearly popped out of my head when I met Noah a couple of weeks ago in Seattle. They happy, newly engaged couple had come down so Jules could properly quit her job and pack up her adorable apartment in the Queen Anne district.

Though I’d never tell her this, I can’t believe she completely changed her life in a matter of weeks. Especially for a man. Then again, Jules hasn’t walked in on two of her boyfriends cheating on her. For her sake, I hope Noah is the real deal.

Which is part of why I agreed to come up to stay with Jules for a couple of weeks. She’s promised to set me up with my own mountain man — no thanks — and show me the plus-size outerwear company she’s building. While I’m curious to learn more about her new company and see her home, I’m mostly here to make sure she hasn’t been recruited for a cult.

Sure, Noah had been every bit a gentleman while he was in Seattle. And I’d be lying if I said my heart hadn’t pitter pattered when I met Hank, the lodge’s cook/pilot. But, in my experience, if something seems too good to be true, it usually is.

In another couple of minutes, the plane hops and bumps to a stop. I release a breath — and my death grip on Jules’s hand — and wait for my stomach to settle.

“Come on.” She unbuckles herself and reaches over to help me with mine. “Let’s go. I can’t wait for you to meet Silas.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I swear. I wouldn’t have said anything about him if I didn’t think you two would hit it off.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me. “He’s the strong silent type. Ex-military. Tattoos. Gorgeous.”

“And you think that’s my type?”

“Isn’t it everyone’s?”

I mean, she’s not wrong about that, is she? “Fair point.”

“I swear I won’t force anything. The time you spend here is yours. Who you spend it with is up to you. But if you happen to decide you’re ready to leave your marketing job at Lady of Leisure so you can come work with me and marry a mountain man of your own . . .”

I give her an affectionate shove and grab one of my bags as Hank pulls open the airplane door. Gratefully, I take the hand he offers to step down. Jules told me about face-planting after her first flight, and I have no plan to follow in her footsteps. Glancing around at the mountains and the large wooden lodge ahead of us, it’s exactly like Jules described it.

I’ll be curious to see if they make any changes with a woman’s touch around here. Not that it needs much. Nature has given the lodge a gorgeous enough setting. I start to tell Jules my first impressions, but she flies by in a blur. My eyes widen as she jumps up into Noah’s waiting arms. I gape for a moment. But who wouldn’t? Noah really is one of the sexiest men alive.

Good for Jules.

Leaving the two lovebirds to—ahem—get reacquainted, I follow Hank toward the lodge. As we walk, I take in the sound of the chirping birds and the rustle of the wind through the leaves. Everything here seems so vibrant. The trees are greener. The sky is bluer. The mountains are taller. I’m not saying the Cascade Mountains back home are any slouch, but this place is really something.

We step inside the rustic lodge and Hank leaves my bags and heads off with little more than a wave. Man, he is ALOOF. Next to him, Noah seems like a regular chatterbox. I reach for one of my suitcases just as someone else does.

“Ooh!” I gasp. Releasing the suitcase, I glance up and into another hard-jawed, bearded face.

Our gazes meet, and my breath catches. His eyes are a rich, velvety brown. His gaze is serious and steady. I wonder what they look like when

he laughs. Not that he seems like the laughing type, with his mouth set in a straight line.

Though I know it's rude, I can't help but check out the rest of him. Dark hair, cropped short enough, it's just longer than a buzz cut. Broad shoulders and strong arms that look like they could carry just about anything. A flannel shirt rolled up to the elbows, revealing a hint of tattoo sleeves.

Tattoo sleeves. Could this be Silas?

It's then I realize my suitcase has fallen over. And popped open, spilling the contents over the hardwood floor.

"Oops. Sorry." At the same time we turn to scoop up the clothes. My cheeks flush as I reach for a red, lacy bra. Our hands meet on the strap. I glance up again. This time, I'm met with the full heat of his stare.

Despite my embarrassment, a warmth spreads through my belly. Oh boy. If this guy keeps looking at me like this, I am going to be in trouble.

Silas

Lifting the lacy, red bit of fabric, it's impossible not to imagine the bra hugging the full chest of the buxom beauty kneeling across from me. It's not a stretch of the imagination to think about how it would look against her smooth, creamy skin as I removed it to cover her with my hands.

My cock thickens in my jeans. Swallowing hard, I hand her the bra and pull back to pick up some less sexy clothing. That's easier said than done. Because even a pair of black leggings looks sexy if you imagine peeling them down this blonde woman's hips.

She's not just any blonde woman. She's Jules's guest. And after Noah put the fear of God in all of us to make sure she has a good visit, I know I'd better be on my best behavior.

Besides, the last thing I need is to hook up with another woman who's just going to leave. I've been that down before. It only spells one thing: disaster.

In another minute, all of the clothes are shoved back into her bag. I pretend not to notice her flushed cheeks. Even though it's cute as hell to see a grown woman blush.

Standing, I offer her a hand to help her up. She places her soft, small hand in mine and a jolt of electricity shoots through me. Whoa. Our eyes meet briefly. She must have felt it too. Once she's up, I shove my hands in my pockets and lean back on my heels.

"You must be Violet."

She nods. "And you must be Silas."

I arch an eyebrow at that. Jules must have given her the rundown on all the guys here. I wonder how she described us. Maybe by the color of our beards? Otherwise, we're all pretty much big guys with beards and flannel shirts.

"I'll show you to your room then."

"Don't I need to check in?"

I shake my head. "You're here as a guest of Noah and Jules."

Her cheeks flush again, and I fight the wave of lust that runs through me. Damn. I don't know what it is about this woman that has me so hooked in just a couple of minutes. Sure, she's adorable as hell with that mess of blonde curls falling over her shoulders. Then there's the dimple in her chin

when she grins, which she seems to do a lot. My hands clench in my pockets just thinking about those curvy hips and that luscious round ass of hers.

It also doesn't hurt that she has the most fucking beautiful eyes I've ever seen. They're so blue, they're almost purple. It makes sense her parents named her Violet.

Clearing my throat, I clench my jaw as I fight the dull ache in my groin. When I'm able, I bend over to pick up her bags.

"So what do you do around here?" she asks as we go up the stairs.

"I'm kind of a handyman, I guess." Because with the exception of Hank, who's appointed himself pilot and cook, the rest of us kind of pitch in to do whatever needs doing. "We all take turns taking out excursions."

"And Jules tells me you mostly cater to city slickers looking to have an Alaskan frontier experience."

My lip twitches at that. "Pretty much."

Some of the guys who come out here—and it is mostly men, to Jules's dismay—know what the hell they're doing. The rest are suits who barely know their way around a fishing pole, let alone a bear or moose. Not that the inexperience stops most of them from trying anything. We have this one dumbshit named Kevin staying now. He's here with a few of his friends, up from San Francisco. The way he talks, you'd think he was fucking Paul Bunyon. But I bet he'd crap himself if he ever came head to head with a bear.

He's not the first of his kind, and he won't be the last. It's a wonder we've never had any major injuries.

When we get to her room, I hand Violet the key. She pushes the door open. Then, turning to look at me over her shoulder in a way that's oddly distracting, she arches a pale eyebrow.

"Aren't you coming in?"

Shaking my head at myself, I follow her inside. With any other guest I would've walked in with no problem. But there's just something about this pretty city girl that makes me feel like I need to scrape my boots on a mat and bow or some shit like that.

Man, I've got to get a grip.

Setting down her bags, I'm back out the door.

"Hey, Silas," she calls out.

I stop at the entrance and turn back and find her sitting on the edge of the bed. “Yeah?”

“I’ll see you around.”

I have another vision of her wearing that red number, and nothing else but skin, sitting just like that with her legs crossed. Cursing at myself, I pull the door closed and head outside to chop some wood. I need to work up a sweat to get thoughts like that out of my head. Nice as they are, I’ve got to get through the next two weeks without tearing this woman’s clothes off and making her mine.

Chapter Two

Violet

Okay, so maybe Jules is onto something with her Camp Mountain Man idea. This place is crawling with men. I'm not just talking about the totally hot bearded beefcakes who run the place. (Though, daaaaaaaammmmmnnnn.) But with a full house of guests in the lodge and the cabins, and Jules and I the only women on the property, a lady could clean up during a couple of weeks in this great wilderness.

Not that all women want a happily ever after like Jules. Though she and Noah are so sweet, I'll probably need to visit my dentist to check for cavities when I get back to civilization.

Still, some of us who have been burned by love, fairy tales, and la-de-da wouldn't mind a week of sexual exploration with one of the mountain men or mountain men wannabes.

A lady would certainly have some options. And, I don't mind saying, I've been scoping out some of my options. There's an investment banker from New York who can fill out a flannel shirt like he's a lumberjack. There's a bachelor party from the Bay area. Their ring leader, Kevin, was pretty flirty with me at dinner last night. Granted, he reminds me of the first boyfriend who cheated on me. But, as mentioned, I'm not looking for a long-term commitment. Just someone to scratch an itch.

Then, of course, there's Silas. Though we've barely said two words to each other since that first day, I find my attention drawn to him often. Those broad shoulders. The scruff on his hard jaw. The hint of tattoos. (Yes, the tattoos. What can I say? Jules had my number.)

There's more to it than that, though I can't quite put my finger on it. I'm drawn to him. But while I've caught him keeping an eye on me, I can't tell if there's anything more to it than curiosity or duty. Still, every time I see that dark gaze, I have to squeeze my knees together.

While Jules and Noah are in Anchorage for a meeting, I'm joining a group of my fellow lodgers for a hiking excursion. Which . . . is not my strongest suit. Ezra, who owns the lodge with Noah, took one look at my

fresh-from-the-box hiking boots and shook his head while he muttered words I couldn't understand.

So, I may be a novice at this, but I'll always be one until I take that first step and try something new.

At least that's what I told myself in the mirror this morning when I was checking to see if this leggings and puff vest combo make my hips look too big. Based on the catcalls I got stepping out of my room (jerks!) I'd say they look just fine.

While Ezra finishes his safety briefing, I notice Silas walk through a line of trees. Again, his gaze falls on mine. I can practically feel my panties twisting.

Kevin draws my attention. "Want to be hiking buddies?"

"Sure." Because, really, why not?

Falling into step next to him, we start out on the trail. My thighs are burning within ten minutes, and I'm having to focus on each breath I take.

"These high altitudes take some getting used to." Kevin offers me a bottle of water, which I accept gratefully. "In a couple of days, you'll be an old pro."

"We'll have to see about that."

He gives me a playful nudge. "I'd always be glad to give you a few private lessons."

Based on the way his green eyes are sparkling, I'd guess he's not offering up hiking lessons. I wait for a flicker of interest, but it doesn't come. I feel nothing, just winded from the walk.

Behind us, Silas clears his throat. "You'll want to be careful going around this bend up ahead. It's a pretty narrow path."

"We'll be fine," Kevin says.

I turn over my shoulder to look at Silas. Which is a mistake. I take my next step without looking and feel the earth shift below me. Turning forward, I see that I've stepped to the edge of the walkway.

I wiggle and wobble. I hold out my hands to grab onto something. Anything. But I only find air.

Someone calls my name as I lose my balance entirely and tumble backward.

Silas

Heart thundering in my ears, I shove Kevin aside to look over the edge.

“Oh thank God.”

Violet is only a few feet below us. She’s pushed herself upright and is wiping dust away from her eyes. Though, in the process, she manages to smudge more dirt over her face. I’d grin if I wasn’t so eager to get down to her and make sure she didn’t break a bone or sustain any internal bleeding.

Grabbing onto a rock, I lower myself down and am at her side in another second. Carefully cupping her face between my big hands, I gaze into her eyes. My breath catches. They’re every bit as stunning as I remember. But they’re also clear. That means she hopefully doesn’t have a concussion.

“Did you hit your head?”

She starts to shake it, but I hold her steady. “You probably shouldn’t move, honey, until we’ve given you a full examination. Is it okay if I look you over?”

She gives a shaky breath. “Okay.”

Tearing my stare away from hers, I run my hands over the rest of her face and feel around the back of her head to make sure there aren’t any bumps or scrapes. My heart pounds like thunder in my chest the whole time. Then, I move to run my hands over her arms. She winces when I touch her left wrist.

I hold it up to inspect it more closely.

“I don’t think it’s broken. But I’d like the doctor to check and make sure you didn’t tear any ligaments.”

Her eyes go wide, and I try to soften my expression. “Don’t worry. The doc is great. And she doesn’t bite.”

Violet gives a tight-lipped grin but doesn’t say anything.

With her go ahead, I lower the zipper on her vest and push it over her shoulders. I swallow hard and ignore the tightening in my lower stomach. I don’t think about how much I’d like to run my hands and mouth over every inch of her bare skin. That doesn’t matter right now. All that matters is that Violet is safe. Sucking in a breath through my teeth, I trace my fingers down the side of her ribs slowly. I watch her face to see if she winces at any of the contact. But she doesn’t.

I finish up the quick examination by checking her legs. She does flinch when I move her right leg.

“My ankle,” she hisses through her teeth. “And my ass. But I don’t think *that* is broken.”

My lips twitch, and I almost smile again. “It’d be a shame if that ass of yours was broken.”

I turn my attention back to her sore ankle.

“Again, I think it’s a sprain. But we’ll want to check and see just how deep it is.” Resting my hands on my thighs, I meet her gaze again. “We need to get you back to the lodge.”

“I’m not sure I can walk.” She gasps. “You aren’t going to have to get a helicopter or anything, will you?”

Now I can’t help but smile. “No, we don’t need to call in the rescue squad. I’ll carry you.”

“Oh, I’m not sure. I’m not a small girl . . .” She trails off and stares down at her feet. That familiar flush darkens her cheeks.

“You’re just right the way you are.” But based on the look she gives, I don’t think she believes me. My jaw ticks. If I was a betting man, I’d guess someone made her feel less than perfect in the past. I’d like to wring that person’s neck. But, again, that will have to wait. Violet needs care.

As carefully as possible, I lift Violet into my arms. I hand her up to Ezra, and neither of us so much as flinch.

Once I’ve climbed back up, I push back Kevin who has offered to help carry Violet.

“I’ve got you, honey,” I say, taking her back into my arms. She gazes up at me with such fear in her eyes, it nearly breaks my heart. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

And as I say the words, I know I don’t just mean right now. For as long as my heart is ticking, I’ll do everything I can to protect this woman.

Chapter Three

Violet

After three days in bed, I'm about to lose my mind. Yet every time I try to leave, Jules or Silas is there to order me back.

Being an invalid hasn't been all bad. It's given Jules and I plenty of time to talk about her new business venture and her upcoming wedding. I have to say, I'm pretty impressed with what Jules has put together in a matter of months. Besides securing investors and manufacturers, she's also found a few buyers willing to put her first line in their stores. And as she talks about it, her face comes alive. It's the same way she looks when she talks about Noah. She's in love. Not just with this man, but with this new life she's building.

I'm both thrilled and—I hate to admit it—a little bit jealous. Don't get me wrong. My life is fine. Sure, I don't necessarily love everyone I work with in the Lady of Leisure marketing department. But I like the work itself.

As for the relationship side . . . I wonder if I'll ever be able to be that happy. Much as I'd like to put my heart out there and trust again, I just don't know if I can. I mean, how do you open yourself up to another man when your last two boyfriends violated that trust?

Though, if I did, I have a pretty good idea of who I'd like to give a shot.

After carrying me back to the lodge, Silas stayed by my side until the doctor came that afternoon. Then, he was back with a food tray. He's also paid me a few visits since. While I wouldn't say he has been doting, he has been attentive. And that's nice.

But again, how much of that is job and duty?

Whatever it is, I know I'll go crazy if I spend one more day cooped up in bed while everyone else is out enjoying this mountain air.

Pushing myself out of bed, I'm pleased to find that after doing a few of the stretches the doctor recommended, I'm only a little stiff and achy. After taking a long, hot shower and drying my messy curls, I almost feel human again.

Opting for a pair of tennis shoes instead of my hiking boots, I make my way down the stairs. I'm nearly out the door when Silas pops out of his

office.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought I’d go for a little walk.”

His brows come together. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

I roll my eyes. “I feel great. I just need to move around a little. The doctor said I should, if you’ll remember.”

He stares at me silently for another moment. If he was a stranger, I’d probably wilt under the intensity of it. But now that I’ve gotten to know Silas a little over the past few days, he—like the rest of the guys who work for the lodge—is a big old teddy bear.

Sighing, he runs a hand over his buzzed head.

“Okay, you can go for a walk. But I’m going with you.”

Joining my side, he takes my unwrapped hand in his. It sends a jolt of electricity through me, leaving every inch of my body tingling. Just like it does every time he’s near me.

As we step outside, I take a deep breath through my nose.

“Oh, this is the stuff.”

He glances down at me, and I detect just the hint of a grin. He’s been doing more of that lately—almost smiling.

I turn back to look out at the land around us. “It really is like another world here.”

He nods. “I fell in love with this country the moment I got here.”

“Were you on vacation?”

He shakes his head. “I came up for the job.”

My eyes widen. “You hadn’t been here before you took the job?”

“I figured one place was the same as the other. I just wanted to go somewhere quiet.”

Then he stares ahead in thoughtful silence. I wonder if he’s thinking about his time in the military. Though he hasn’t said anything about it, Jules told me he served three tours. I can’t even imagine what that must have been like. I’ve always stayed pretty close to home. And the most danger I face is driving on I-5 between Seattle and Tacoma.

But not Silas. He’s looked danger in the face time and time again and come out of it the strong, caring man I see here.

Without even realizing I’m doing it, I give his hand a squeeze and lean against his arm. “What’s your favorite part about living in Alaska?”

He tilts his head to consider the question a moment. “This.”

“This?”

He nods and pulls me to a stop. “Close your eyes and don’t say anything.”

Doing as ordered, I clench my eyes shut. With every passing second, I become more and more aware of the sounds of birds chirping and the leaves rustling. I hear the chatter of animals that might be squirrels or some other animal. And as I breathe in deep breaths, the clear air settles in my lungs. Tension I hadn’t even realized I had in my shoulders slips away.

Minute. By. Minute. A calm, peace settles on me. A oneness with myself, the land around me, and the man holding my hand firmly in his.

When I open my eyes again and meet Silas’s dark stare, I feel like a new person.

“That’s it.” His voice is low, the timber echoing in my chest. “That’s why I love this place.”

Silas

I'm getting ready to head out for the bonfire when Hank steps into my office. I arch an eyebrow. "Can I help you with something?"

He shakes his head, but he's wearing a smirk I'd like to wipe clear off his face. "Couldn't help but notice you've been spending a little extra one-on-one time with one of our guests."

"So."

"Seems to me, you've never really spent much time with any of our female visitors."

"How often do we get any?"

Hank wiggles his eyebrows. "You're changing the subject."

"And you're being an ass."

Patting me on the back, Hank moves to leave. "I think it's nice. That's all."

"And I think you should mind your own business."

But he's gone before I finish speaking.

Scowling at the spreadsheet of bookings on my computer screen, I think about a certain guest who has been occupying more of my time. Hell. She's taking up most of it. When I'm not making excuses to be around her, I'm thinking about those big blue, violet eyes. And the way her hips fill out a pair of leggings.

The way it felt to have her in my arms, staring up at me like I was a God-damned hero or something.

Pushing myself up, I shove my hands in my pocket and stare out the setting sun. They're getting things ready for the bonfire, and there she is—my girl. Hmm. My girl. It does feel like she's become that. I don't suppose there's any use in trying to fight that.

She throws her head back and laughs, and my gut constricts. I can imagine the sound in my head almost as clearly as I can imagine what it would be like to take her and make her mine.

My fingers practically itch to do that. If she was any other woman, I would have done something about that already. But Violet isn't any other woman. When she becomes mine—and I have no doubt she will—I won't be able to let her go.

My lips curl into a frown as that dick Kevin makes his way toward her. I blame him for Violet's fall. He might not have pushed her over the edge, but he should have been paying better attention as her hiking partner.

Hell, I should have been paying better attention. But God as my witness, I'll never let anyone hurt another hair on her head.

Kevin takes a step closer toward Violet, and she takes one back. That a girl. Before I can think twice, I'm out of my office and out the door, stalking toward the two of them. When I'm a few yards away, Violet sees me coming and her face lights up.

It's like she reached out and caressed my cock. I'm tired of pretending she isn't the only woman on my mind. When I reach her side, I give a stern look to Kevin.

"I hope you don't mind, but there's something I need to talk to Violet about. In private."

Annoyance flickers in Kevin's eyes for a minute, but with a nod, he takes a step back. Slipping an arm around Violet's shoulder, I lead her away from the fire.

"If you're going to lecture me about being out here, you can save it. The doctor never said I had to stay in bed forever. And going to a bonfire is hardly strenuous activity."

She's right. Sitting by a fire isn't strenuous at all. But what I have in mind most definitely will be. "That's not what I want to talk to you about."

Her brow knits together. "Then what?"

"This." I turn her to face me and press her back against a tree as I bring her mouth to mind.

I swallow her gasp of surprise, along with the sigh that follows as she slides her hands up my chest. She grips onto my shirt and tugs me closer. I oblige, opening her mouth to mine. Our tongues collide, and she lets out a deep moan. Or maybe it's mine. I angle my head to deepen the kiss, slipping my hands down to cup her ass and pull her up against me.

My heartbeat pounds, pushing desire through my body with every beat. I know this kiss will only end in one way. With our mutual satisfaction.

As gently as possible, ever mindful that she's still healing, I grip her thighs and lift her up, bringing her legs around me.

I thrust against her, groaning at the feel of her up against my hard length. Ripping my mouth away from hers, I have to tangle my tongue with hers once more before I rest my forehead against hers.

“Come home with me?”

Her lips curve up. “I’d love to.”

Chapter Four

Violet

My body is tingling when Silas lifts me into his arms like I weigh nothing. My eyes flutter open as we reach a small cabin in a clearing.

“Welcome to my place,” he explains as he pushes the door open.

Slowly, he lowers me to the ground, my body rubbing over his in a way that sends fresh, delicious waves of delight and tingles through me.

He tugs my shirt over my head and tosses aside. I instinctively hunch my shoulders, as if to cower. But he grips my chin and shakes his head.

“Don’t hide from me, honey. I want to see every gorgeous inch of you.”

Well, two of us can play at that then. Reaching for the bottom of his flannel shirt, I tug it out of his jeans, up and away. My breath catches.

“My God you’re incredible.” Every darn inch of his muscular chest and arms. I can see his full sleeves now. The black ink makes a design from the elbow to shoulder of each of his arms. Sometime, I’ll have to ask him what it all means.

My stomach flutters. This is it. I’m about to get my wham, bam, thank you ma’am vacation fling. Only, the way Silas is gazing into my eyes with enough heat to light the fireplace, I know there will be no wham, bam anything.

I’m also not sure this is just a fling. It feels like more. So much more.

His hands move up and down my side, and I’m practically sizzling in anticipation. He presses a quick kiss just to the left of my lips. And another to the right. Then he takes a light nip at my lower lip, and I’m practically ready to growl.

“Give me one minute.”

Leaving me next to an oversized, handcrafted table, he turns toward the fireplace and lowers to start a fire. Never tearing my eyes from his muscular back as he piles logs, I shimmy out of my leggings and down to my panties and bra. This is so not my MO, but—darn it—he seems to like me the way I am.

Seeing myself through his eyes helps me see my body more clearly. I am beautiful. Those ex boyfriends can kiss my ass for making me ever

doubt that.

The fire is roaring by the time Silas turns back toward me. His eyes rove my body hungrily.

“The red looks even better on you than I imagined.”

Before I can answer, I’m back in his arms, his mouth on mine. He lifts me and carries me toward the fireplace. Laying me out on a furry rug, he tears his mouth from mine to explore my body.

His hard hands and whiskered face touch every inch. My toes curl into the fur as he removes my bra and sucks one of my nipples into his hot mouth. I arch up off the ground, calling out his name.

While he suckles me with his mouth, his free hand slides down over the curves of my hip and thigh until it comes to the juncture of my panties. I’m already wet for him. How could I not be? His finger slides under the silk until he finds me.

“Oh, I can’t wait to taste you,” he says, lowering his head to do just that.

His hands and mouth go to work on me. Stoking the fire inside me the way he did the one in the fireplace. I’m making sounds I never knew were in me when. Then, the pleasure inside of me erupts. Ecstasy pulses through every inch of my body. From the tips of my fingers to my toes. I’m all fluid and motion.

I’m all his.

I slump back into the rug, my eyes clenched shut. When I can finally breathe and open them, I find him hovering over me.

“What are you waiting for?”

He gives a half grin. “I need to grab a condom.”

“I’m on the pill. I’ve been tested,” I rush out, my body already eager to feel him—and just him—inside of me.

“I’m clean too.” He nuzzles the side of my neck.

Then, bracing himself on his forearms, he thrusts into me.

“Oh, God.” My eyes clench shut again. I can feel him quiver against me as he groans.

Then he moves in and out of me again. Every delicious inch of him. Over. And over. And over again. Until that familiar feeling tugs at my belly again. Building and growing. I come apart again in another orgasm as he plunges inside of me once more, finding his own.

My name on his lips, he falls to his back, pulling me with him.

As we lie there, our chests rising up and down as our breaths and pulses return to normal, I'm not sure why or how it happened. But I feel so open with Silas. Not just in the bedroom. I feel like I could tell him my life story, and he wouldn't bolt.

So that's what I do. Curled up in front of a roaring fire, spread out over him on a bear-skin rug, I tell him about what I love and hate about my job. I tell him about my family. I tell him about the jerks I've dated who left me feeling broken and unwanted. Then, instead of telling me to be quiet and go to sleep, he tells me his story. He tells me about serving in the Middle East during his military career. He tells me about his tattoos. He tells me about the women who weren't in it for the long haul.

We talk on and on into the night. By the time the fire is burning down to embers, and I can barely keep my eyes open, I know. This man is different from any other I've known.

I could spend the rest of my life with him right here, just like this. It's both a thrilling and somewhat terrifying thought. But for now, I'll choose to be thrilled. I can deal with the nerves later.

Chapter Five

Silas

I'm buttoning up my flannel shirt when Violet steps up behind me. She slowly slides her hands around my waist and up my still bare chest, sending my heart racing.

She pokes her head around my shoulder, and I meet her gaze in the mirror.

"I have to meet my tour in fifteen minutes."

"I know." Then her hands move down, pushing mine away as she unbuttons my shirt and reaches for the clasp at the top of my jeans. "I only need ten."

Then her hand dives under my jeans, grabbing my already throbbing cock. She silently urges me to turn around and lowers to her knees. Groaning, I clench my eyes shut and give up my protests.

True to her word, I'm out the door ten minutes later, decidedly more satisfied than I had been before. Ezra catches the grin on my face when I jog up to the lodge, and he rolls his eyes.

"God, it's catching. You and Noah are a couple of saps."

He won't get any argument from me on that. Sure enough, in just a few short days, Violet has wrapped me around her perfect fingers. And she's wrapped herself around my heart. While I'd truly believed I didn't need anyone, that I was good on my own, I've never been happier to be wrong.

Though we haven't broached the subject yet, I'm hoping I might be able to persuade Violet to extend her trip another week. That should give me enough time to make her see that she belongs here with me. Or that I belong with her. I don't particularly want to move to Seattle, but there's plenty of great outdoors around Seattle. I should be able to find something to do.

Some of my good mood disappears when I see that Kevin is in today's excursion group. That guy is bad news. I still haven't forgiven him for putting Violet's life in danger. It's even worse that he spent the next few days pining after her. Though he seems to have gotten the hint that the lady is spoken for now.

And if he gives any hint that he hasn't set his sights elsewhere, I'd be more than glad to make him.

Pulling my pack on over my shoulder, I lead the group toward the trail. By unspoken agreement, Ezra falls to the back of the line. After working together so many years, we don't have to hatch out a plan for each excursion. We just know.

We're a couple of hours into our hike when we pause for a break. The guys reach into their bags for bottles of water and pouches of jerky. I'm just pulling out my canteen when I look up and see Kevin and a couple of his buddies near a rock formation. I follow the direction of their attention and see what has them captivated. It's an eagle. He's a beauty. Part of me wishes Violet was here to see it. Once she's fully recovered from her fall, I'll take her on a private excursion.

I grin thinking about what a private excursion with Violet might look like.

I'm momentarily distracted by the thought, I don't notice that Kevin has started scaling the rock formation. He seems oblivious to the fact that the rocks are giving way around him as dust flies by.

"Son of . . ." I cut off the oath and run forward to grab him by the back of his shirt. I push him out of the way. I'm about to give him a piece of my mind when I hear the rumble. I look up just in time to see a boulder fall loose.

And then I don't see anything.

Pain radiates through every inch of my body. Moaning, I blink open my eyes and stare in confusion.

"What the hell?" Then Violet's beautiful face appears above me, her purple eyes wet with unshed tears. "Hey babe? When did you grow a second head?"

She chuckles even as she gently cups my cheeks. "Thank God. How do you feel?"

"Like a pile of rocks fell on top of me."

"That's fair. It took Ezra and the guys ten minutes to dig you out from the pile."

My eyes narrow as it all comes back to me. Kevin being stupid. Me pushing him away. The boulder. “Did anyone else get hurt?”

She shakes her head. “Noah says it doesn’t look like you broke any bones, but Hank is flying in the doctor to check you out. They should be back tomorrow.”

I start to protest, but Violet just shakes that beautiful head of hers again. “I won’t have any complaints from you.” She lets out a breath that’s almost a whimper. “And, darn it, you are going to feel better in no time. I won’t have you taking any risks. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you.” Then, I raise my arms and bring her to my chest, groaning a little at a sharp pain.

Violet loves me. There’s not doubt of it after seeing the relief on her face, the fear in her eyes. While I hate that I’ve scared her, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t glad to see that she loves me.

Because I’m head over heels for her. It’s good we’re both on the same page.

Chapter Six

Violet

Leaving Silas curled up on a comfy chair in his office to sleep off a pain pill, I go off to find Jules. No surprise, the doctor practically forced Silas to take the dang pill before she left. Doc made me swear I'd keep an eye on the patient and make sure he doesn't try to get back on his feet too soon.

It's probably the hardest assignment I've ever received. And I once had to get up in front of my fourth grade class to recite the preamble to the Declaration of Independence from memory. And there wasn't a Schoolhouse Rock song for that one!

Still, while I may have to endure a bunch of whining and wheedling—and while I'll have to keep my eyes peeled on Silas—I agreed without hesitation. Silas saved my life just a few days ago and played my nurse. It's the least I can do for him.

Not to mention I'm ridiculously crazy about the guy. He has me thinking about and hoping for a future I never imagined.

I find Jules in an office on the other side of the lodge. Noah is sharing his space with her while they build a cabin on the property. She showed me the architectural rendering, and it includes plenty of space for her to set up shop as she launches her company. Which is what I'd like to talk to her about.

I knock on the door, and she glances up with a smile.

"Come on in!" She motions me forward. "I'm dying to show you my latest designs."

"I'd love to see them."

Taking an empty seat across from her, I pick up the notebook she's slid across. Drawn on a sketch of a woman with plenty of curves, this particular outfit is lined with faux fur around the neck and wrists.

"Is this for your winter gear line?"

She nods. "When I met with the investors and manufacturers, they said we should be able to get this one out on the market by fall." She gives a heavy sigh. "Of course, that's going to be tough to do. I have to finish the

sketches, make the samples, test them out. Then there's building the website and social media. Ad placements. And so on."

"It's a lot for one person to do." I clear my throat. "Which is what I wanted to talk to you about. It seems like you might be in the market for someone with marketing skills."

Her eyebrow goes up. "You're not saying what I think you're saying."

"I know it's probably not in your budget. But I have some savings. I don't need a big salary to begin with. You could pay on scale. Or—"

Before I can finish with my not-so-polished pitch, Jules has rounded the desk and thrown her arms around me.

She's nearly squeezed the breath out of me when she pulls back. "Are you sure? You know that's part of why I wanted you to come here."

"That and your whole Camp Mountain Man scheme." I roll my eyes, even though she's proven both of those ideas are good ones. "It's been a long time since I've been excited about my work. I really think we could do some good together."

"We could build an empire together." Jules gives me one more squeeze then leans back to sit on the edge of the desk. "Your interest also wouldn't have anything to do with a certain strapping, brooding, hunk of a man."

I wrinkle my nose. "Mmmmaaaaayyybbbeeee."

She claps her hands together. "I knew it. I just knew you and Silas would be perfect for each other. I swear, he's a new man now that you're here."

"It's all happening so fast." My heart flutters in a mix of nerves and excitement. "A week ago, I would have said—heck, I *did* say—you'd be crazy to get me thinking about living here full time and jumping headfirst into a relationship, but . . ."

"There's just something about these mountain men." Jules sighs and stares off dreamily. "Don't I know it. And don't think that just because we're building an empire I've given up on making my plans to match all of these men up with the right woman."

"Good luck with that." Letting out my breath, I thrust out a hand to Jules. "So, do we have a deal?"

"We'll iron out the specifics later, but hell yes!" She clasps her hand with mine. "Now go tell that mountain man of yours the good news."

I'm brimming with anticipation, and my face hurts from smiling, as I reach Silas's office. Like I just told Jules, I know this is all happening fast.

Still, there's no denying the connection we have. Neither of us was looking for someone. But here we are. Maybe it's time we both give love another chance.

Because that's what this is: love. I'm just sure of it. Plus, I'm ready to prove to Silas that unlike the women in his past, I won't bail on him. And I know he'd never . . .

I pause at the doorway to his office. My heart stops as I watch a gorgeous, dark-haired woman throw herself at Silas.

"I missed you so much," she says. "When I heard what happened, I had to come see you. I love you."

His arms lift to wrap around her. "I love you, too. I'm glad you're here."

Flashbacks of walking in on my cheating exes flood my brain. I can't believe it's happening again. Pain shoots through me, and I step backward, until I nearly bump into the staircase.

I was wrong. Nothing has changed. I don't belong here. And I certainly can't trust myself to give my heart to another man.

Chapter Seven

Silas

Wincing, I pull back to get a good look at my sister, Bea. There was a time when I loved nothing more than pulling her hair. She usually deserved it. Especially after the time she blamed me for breaking the living room window when *she* threw a baseball through it. We scraped and scrabbled our way through childhood. Each of us made it our mission to drive the other insane.

And there's just about no one in this world I'm happier to see.

I shake my head. "I can't believe you're here."

"When Ezra called to say you'd been hurt, I jumped the first plane to Anchorage." She pulls her lips into a tight smile. "How are you doing?"

"I've been worse."

"Typical macho man response." She rolls her eyes. "Trust you to play this whole thing off like it's nothing."

"I'm really fine."

Her eyes narrow. "You know, I almost believe you. Despite the fact that you're tucked here in a comfy chair like a proper invalid, you look good. Happy."

Trust her to see right through me.

"I am happy." I clear my throat. "I'm in love."

Bea spouts and sputters the basic who, what, when, where, how questions. I can't help but chuckle, even though it makes my ribs hurt like a son of a bitch.

"Her name is Violet. She's Jules's best friend." I lift a shoulder. "And she's fucking amazing."

"Who would have thought you'd find your soulmate here in the middle of nowhere? I can't wait to meet her."

Though, there's a glint in her eye that has my guard up.

I shake a finger at her. "No third degree. No twenty questions. You will not scare her off."

Bea only answers by laughing. She opens her mouth, probably to begin another inquisition, when there's a clatter down the stairs. I'm just pushing

myself up from the chair when Jules appears at the door to my office, chest rising up and down.

Her eyes dart between Bea and me, and she collapses against the door frame.

“Oh thank God. It’s just Bea.” She presses a hand to her chest. “I told Violet there was no way you were two-timing her. That there had to be a good explanation.”

My brows knit together. “Wait, what happened with Violet?”

“She came down here a few minutes ago. She was going to tell you she was quitting her job so she could move up here to work with me and be with you. But,” — she points at Bea — “she saw the two of you hugging and heard you say something about loving and missing each other.”

Panic slices through my heart. “Where is she?”

“Packing.”

Bea’s eyes go wide. “Why didn’t she ask what was going on? Isn’t leaving a bit of a knee-jerk reaction?”

“If you knew what she’d been through.” I shake my head as I reach for my crutches. “You’d understand why she’d choose flight over fight.”

Waving off Bea and Jules, I hobble my way up the stairs. I have to stop to rest more times than I care to admit, pushing past the pain shooting through my leg and ribs. By the time I reach the door to Violet’s room, beads of perspiration cover my brow. Leaning against the wall, I pound on her door.

“Violet. We need to talk.”

“No! You of all people should understand.”

I shake my head, though I can’t help but grin at my sassy girl. “That woman you saw. She’s my sister.”

There’s silence, but a few seconds later the door flies open. One look at Violet’s tear-streaked face grips at my heart, making it ache.

“Your sister?”

I nod. “The guys called Bea after the accident. She flew up from Chicago to make sure I was okay.”

Relief washes over Violet’s face and she wipes away at the tears. “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.”

Then, she’s in my arms, her head carefully resting on my chest.

“Honey, you’ve been burned before. Badly.”

“But you’ve never given me any reason not to trust you.”

“True. But we’re both still healing.” In more ways than one. “Not only have we both taken nasty falls in the past week, but we’ve both had our hearts ripped apart by people we loved. Your heart is still a little tender.”

“I’ll never doubt you again,” she promises.

“I’ll never give you a reason to.” I press a kiss to the top of her messy, blonde head. “I love you more than anything in the world. And I plan to spend the rest of my days making you feel safe and happy.”

She pulls back to glance up at me. “You love me?”

I nod.

“I love you, too.” Then a grin spreads across her face, and my heart is filled to bursting with joy.

As our lips meet, I am more convinced than ever that I’ve found my match. Bea was right. Who would’ve guessed I’d find the other part of my heart in the middle of nowhere? I’ll be grateful I did until I draw my last breath.

Epilogue

Violet

Three years later

I have to read the email for a third time before the full meaning hits me. “Oh my God!”

Across the room, Silas gives me a look of warning, and I cover my mouth. Oops. Dropping my hands again, I mouth a “sorry.”

He winks but goes back to rocking our son. Though Jasper is still a couple months shy of his second birthday, his terrible twos are already here in full swing. After spending most of the afternoon protesting a nap, he finally cried himself out about twenty minutes ago.

Though Silas had been a little nervous about fatherhood, he’s taken to it like a natural. In fact, out of the two of us, he’s the more patient parent. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t feel lucky to have him as a partner. His ability to sooth the tender feelings of a toddler is only one of a thousand reasons.

Reason number two: He built the rocking chair himself. As in he chopped down one of the trees behind our cabin, prepped the wood, and carved a freaking rocking chair. It’s more beautiful than anything you’d find in a store.

Reason three: On the morning of our wedding, he picked me a bouquet of flowers from the meadow where we took our first walk together. Bea put some of them in my hair. And I’ve never felt more beautiful as when I stood next to him, vowing to love, honor, and protect each other all the days of our lives.

Reason four: He’s been my biggest cheerleader the past few years while Jules and I launched her plus size athletic wear company. That has meant being an equal part caregiver to our son. Not to mention, he’s great at giving my wine glass a healthy pour at night while I vent about my worries and concerns.

Reason five: Well, I can’t think about this reason without blushing. Let’s just say I’ll never get enough of my sexy mountain man in—or out of—the bedroom.

I could go on and on.

Arching his neck, Silas checks to make sure that Jasper is in fact sleeping. Satisfied we're good for at least an hour, he leaves briefly and returns empty handed.

"What's the good news?" he asks.

"How do you know it's good news?" He arches an eyebrow, and a giggle bubbles out of me. "Okay, you're right. It's great news. I just got the latest sales figures."

"And?"

"Jules and I are projected to finish the quarter as the number one women's outdoor company."

Silas's face lights up a second before he wraps me into his arms. "Babe, I'm so proud of you."

"We couldn't have done it without you and Noah."

"We're in this together." He presses his lips to my forehead. "That said, all the credit goes to you and Jules. We'll have to celebrate."

I pull back to look up at him. "I can think of a good way to celebrate."

His mouth lowers toward mine. "Just show me the way."

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XOXO, Kate

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Fall Before You Leap

SARAH: Ridiculously Royal #1

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DALLAS: Sunset Canyon Fire & Rescue #1

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