

Ruined by the Mountain Man

Chapter One

Laney

Maybe it's overreacting, but when my phone chimes with a third text message in two minutes, I'm seriously considering throwing it in the nearest lake. Or maybe "accidentally" dropping it in the street and driving over it. Dad would just demand I buy a new one immediately, so I guess there's no point.

I park outside Mainlined Coffee, a cute little shop with a black and white striped awning and a few outdoor tables. I'm supposed to be on vacation visiting my best friend, Angel. Not *working*.

White Falls sits at the edge of the mountains, all small-town charm with its old-fashioned black streetlamps and brick buildings with painted signs. There's even a movie theater with one of those classic marquee signs rimmed with lights. The kind of place you'd expect to see a red truck roll down the road with a golden retriever hanging out the window. It's beautiful.

And part of me wishes I hadn't come at all.

It's just that I haven't seen her since she moved to this picturesque town eight months ago. I miss her. And I can't remember the last time I took a break from work.

I'm twenty-one, and somehow my entire life revolves around managing my dad.

I watch a couple holding hands as they stroll down the sidewalk, looking happy and in love as they window shop, and feel a pang in my chest.

No time for *that*. Not that I have anyone I like. Just a stupid teenage crush on the most unobtainable, out-of-my-league man on the planet. A crush I can't tell anyone about. Especially Angel.

I drop my head against the steering wheel and drag in a deep breath.

My phone buzzes with a reminder that I have texts waiting.

Have you talked to Jason yet?

This contract is important, Delaney.

You know what this could do for us.

What it could do for *him*. I'm not sure where I'm supposed to fit into his plans anymore. I type out a quick reply before he can send another text.

I'm seeing him tonight, Dad.

After two days of his almost constant texts, Angel took pity on me and set up this dinner with her dad.

Three little dots pop up on the screen as he types a reply, making my stomach twist.

Don't mess this up, sweetheart. I'm counting on you.

With a sigh, I shove my phone into my purse next to the contract and climb out of the car, hoping he doesn't text more.

A brisk autumn breeze scatters brown and red leaves down the sidewalk as I approach the coffee shop. Even though it's nearly five, several people linger inside, getting a warm drink before stepping into the chilly evening air.

Three cowboys come out just as I reach the door. One holds the door, tipping his hat to me. Warm brown eyes meet mine, and a slow smile curves his lips. He's cute, with dark blond hair and a bit of scruff on his jaw, but just like every other man I see, my heart doesn't flutter at all.

"Thanks," I murmur with a small smile.

As the door swings shut behind me, he whistles. When I glance back, he winks and walks away. I bite my lip, trying not to grin. I can't remember the last time someone flirted with me. Or the last time I went out just to have fun. Maybe Angel and I can change that while I'm here.

I spot her behind the counter, talking with a couple of customers and head toward her. One of the men is big, easily 6'3", with a jacket stretched tight over his broad shoulders, cargo pants, hiking boots, and a messenger bag slung across his chest with an embroidered red cross. The man beside him looks close to my age, with cropped brown hair and a wiry frame practically vibrating with sidekick energy.

"Hey Angel. Hey Sasha!" the younger man calls, waving to my friend and a woman in back with gorgeous dark skin and eyes. "Asher and I need caffeine. Don't we, big guy?"

The larger man murmurs something I can't quite hear, and a light flush tinges my best friend's cheeks. She ducks her head to get something out of the pastry case, biting her lip in a smile.

Oh. Is she flustered?

I inch closer, eager to get a better look at the man who made her blush. A little older, maybe mid-thirties, with auburn hair and a trim beard... kind of hot.

I glance back at Angel. She's avoiding my eye—and his.

"I'll have one of Sasha's famous peppermint mochas," the younger man says.

"Sure you can handle it, Dillon?" Sasha asks. "I heard last time you had one, you couldn't sleep for two days."

Asher huffs a low laugh.

Dillon glares at him. "Don't listen to what these Hollow Point Rescue guys tell you, Sasha. They exaggerate just to tease me."

Asher mumbles something like "Easy mark," making Dillon puff out his chest and protest. Sasha chimes in, and Angel laughs.

I haven't seen her this light and happy in a long time. Her hair is tied back in a messy bun instead of styled in perfect blonde waves, and there's a stain on her black apron which would have given her a meltdown a year ago when she was swiftly becoming one of New York's top models. Now she has a healthy glow, making her even prettier.

I have a hunch Asher thinks so too. He hasn't taken his eyes off her since I walked in.

Angel hands over the coffees, smiling brightly.

Asher drops a twenty into the tip jar and takes his, saying something I can't hear to Angel.

Dillon takes his, now half into a tale about a black bear, using his hands to show the size and almost spilling his mocha while Sasha laughs.

"Come on, intern," Asher says, grabbing Dillon by the back of his jacket and pulling him away from the counter. He nods when he sees me, then steers his sidekick out.

I giggle, watching through the window as Dillon continues his story and nearly drops his cup. Asher points at the passenger door of his truck and stomps around to the driver's side with an eye roll.

"That boy might not make it to twenty-two," Sasha says. "Either the bears will get him, or Asher will finally snap."

Angel laughs and takes off her apron, then rushes around the counter to hug me. "I'm glad you're here."

I return it gently, knowing I'm one of the few she trusts with hugs. "I saw you six hours ago."

"I know, but the longer you're in White Falls, the more I want you to stay." She hooks her arm through mine and waves to Sasha as we leave.

"So, who was that?" I ask. We step outside, and I pull my jacket closer, wishing I'd brought warmer clothes. It doesn't get this cold in Nashville.

"Who?" Angel scans the sidewalk.

I bump her shoulder with mine. "That guy, Asher."

"Oh. Uh, just one of the mountain rescue guys. He and Dillon sometimes come in after work just to warm up."

I'm not sure that's all Asher is coming in for, but Angel is looking everywhere except at me.

Her cheeks are definitely turning pink again.

I don't push for more. It's not like I can tell her about *my* crush.

"Ready for dinner with my dad?" she asks.

"Yes! Definitely." My belly flutters. *No. Not at all.* "He probably doesn't remember me."

She laughs. "Of course he does. You're my best friend and Marshall's daughter. He's known you since you were three."

And will probably still see me as a kid. The thought makes me wince.

I stuff down the pang I feel, praying Angel didn't notice, and unlock the car. I can do this. For my dad and maybe for myself.

It's time I got over this crush on my best friend's dad.

He's... he's too old for me. My dad is one of his best friends... and since he's no longer performing, he probably isn't anywhere near as attractive as I remember.

I remind myself of all the reasons it's dumb to feel this way, and end with the biggest one of all—

A world-famous rock star would never look twice at me.

The sun is starting to set as we drive up the winding mountain road to Jason's cabin. It's so pretty here, with the fading golden light falling on the trees.

"When Dad decided to go off the map, he fell off the Earth." Angel squints at my GPS. "I still can't remember how to find his cabin."

I can't imagine the man who made stadiums thunder—and go completely silent when he spoke—living out here. How much has he changed since he walked away from it all?

"Is he happy here?" My dad raged for months after Jason quit Last Sanctuary. He swore Jason was going through a phase and would return any day. It's been over a year.

"I don't know," she says softly. "He's different. Quieter. Like part of him is lost. Last Sanctuary was his life, you know? Now, he's rocking this whole mountain man thing and trying to fill the hole with old man hobbies like fishing and whittling." She waves the words away like they make no sense.

I can't picture it either.

"I worry about him. I mean... maybe he's lonely. Maybe he needs someone."

My heart flips. "Would you be okay with that?"

"My dad seeing someone? Sure. There are even some women his age I think he might like. They come into the coffee shop."

Angel continues on about the ladies she's met, but all I can think about is Jason Cross smiling at some unknown woman the way I want him to smile at me.

Ugh, what's wrong with me? I couldn't be with him even if he magically did want me. It would hurt Angel.

"Oh! Wait, slow down. Here's the turn."

I drag my attention back to the road with barely enough time to hit the brakes and turn onto a long gravel driveway. Cedar and pine trees line each side, casting dark shadows as the sun sinks below the horizon.

Angel vibrates with excitement as we come around a small bend, and his cabin comes into view. "He'll be surprised at how much you've changed."

I park in front of his "cabin" and try to close my mouth. When Angel said cabin, I expected a quaint, single-story log cabin with a rocking chair on the front porch. Not... this.

It's a cabin, and it's built with logs. That's where the similarities end. It's two-story with wide glass windows and a glass front door. River stone decorates the pillars and chimney, adding a natural touch. Warm lights glow from inside, and I see a shadow move within.

Angel is already out of the car, heading up the path.

I grab my purse and hurry after her.

She knocks just as I make it up the front steps.

Moments later, the door swings open, and all the air rushes out of my body, leaving me lightheaded.

Jason Cross—lead singer of Last Sanctuary, Angel's dad, and my teenage crush—stands in the doorway, pulling on a dark green T-shirt.

I follow the fabric as he tugs it down over abs cut like marble with a trail of dark hair leading down in a forbidden line.

"Hey, baby doll," he says in a voice made of pure whiskey and seduction.

I jerk my eyes up from his stomach, over the very wide breadth of his chest, his trim beard, and into the electric blue eyes that have starred in my fantasies since before it was legal.

Jason pulls Angel into a light hug, but his gaze is on me.

God, the mountain man look on him is... holy hell.

The last time Angel and I went on tour with the band, he was all rangy lean muscle and vibrant energy. He poured his soul out on stage night after night, rocking the crowd for hours. The dark brown, shoulder-length hair he always wore loose is tied back, with a touch of gray at his temples.

The lean body I remember is gone, but instead of a dadbod, he's put on muscle.

Lots and lots of delicious muscle.

Even his thighs look bigger in his jeans.

"Dad, you remember Laney, right?"

My eyes snap back to his.

There's a light I can't identify there, and his lips curl the tiniest bit.

"Of course, I remember Laney," he says, stepping forward. "She's impossible to forget."

Then he draws me close to his body and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a hug.

I breathe in his scent, a mix of whisky and something woodsy, and try to pretend I'm not melting at his touch.

Read the book here: <https://geni.us/Ash-Ruined>