

Sheltered by the Mountain Man

Chapter One

Mason

Solitude doesn't fix anything, but it sure beats the hell out of pretending I'm fine.

I pour myself another cup of coffee and stare out the kitchen window at the forest beyond. The skies are cloudy and darker than they were half an hour ago. There's a big Pacific storm headed this way. It's supposed to arrive tomorrow, but further north. Those clouds say otherwise. Shit. Looks like I need to get more firewood ready.

I found this little cabin two months ago when I first came to White Falls. It was one of three my buddy Ezra was looking to purchase as part of his project to help broken vets like me heal our internal wounds. The peace and beauty of the mountains called to something inside me that had been unsettled for a long time. Since before leaving the service. I bought the cabin for myself, then did what I came to do—arrange the Citadel Securities side of financing the project.

I guess that makes me the unofficial first vet of Ezra's project, though he doesn't know it. Since moving here, I've done my damndest to keep my distance from everyone. After what happened six months ago in New Orleans, I needed to be away from people. Somewhere where no one has to count on me.

A grunting snore breaks the silence, and I shake my head.

Make that *almost* no one. My German Shepherd, Nitro, is stretched out on his plaid dog bed, belly up, and sound asleep. He's supposed to help me settle down. Instead, the damn dog drives me crazy. This is what I get for getting a shelter dog instead of waiting the eighteen months for a retired military dog.

Nitro belches, and it wakes him up. He lowers his doggy eyebrows and gives me a look, as if *I* was the one to wake him. I chuckle. He's a bonehead, but I wouldn't trade him for any other dog. Maybe he isn't the companion I thought I wanted. He *is* the one I needed. For better or worse, we have each other.

He licks his chops a couple times, eyes growing heavy, and dozes off.

I finish my coffee, squint at the skies, and grab my phone. I promised my buddy, Derek,

an update on the project today. Looks like it'll have to be a quick call. That storm is moving fast.

He answers on the second ring. "I was starting to think you didn't have cell service up there," he grumbles in greeting.

"You miss me, Fletcher?"

"You're the only one who hasn't hooked up with a woman, so... yeah." He sounds disgruntled over his friends' happiness. It tugs a smile to my lips. I may be as big as a bear, but Derek Fletcher is as grouchy as one.

"That's not something you have to worry about with me. There aren't any lost little lambs wandering around the woods, and I'm not leaving unless I have to."

Of course, that's when my brain helpfully supplies an image of the woman I saw at the bank yesterday. Shiny brown curls, sweet smile, pretty eyes... Some asshole had bumped into her as she was leaving, sending a bag from the local library tumbling to the ground—spilling books everywhere. He didn't even stop to help.

I'd been grabbing paperwork for Derek and stepped forward, but she'd already gathered everything up and left before I could.

She looked soft and curvy... and not for me.

I shake the thought away and focus back on Derek.

"Glad someone has some sense. What's the news on the project?"

"Ezra and I got through to that last seller. We closed on the deal yesterday. All that's left to do is sign some additional paperwork on Monday, and we're good to go."

"How many cabins are on the acreage?"

"Three and a half. One is more firewood than cabin."

His voice turns gritty. "It's a start. If we can help someone, keep them from going down that dark path, it's worth it."

"Yeah." I've stared down that road longer than I want to think about. Maybe we all have in our own way.

"You okay, man?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to say, "I'm fine." That's my standard response. I know it won't fly with Derek. If it had, I wouldn't be here right now. He saw through my bullshit and assigned me the task of finishing up the business with Ezra. I believed him when he said neither he nor Gideon, the other leader of Citadel Securities, could get away to do the job. I know better

now. Fucker was sending me here, hoping that like Ezra, I'd find my own peace. Damn him for being right about me and this mountain. I don't really blame him. The last two months have been the best in years, and that means something. I owe him the truth in exchange.

“Tired. Things are better here, though. The solitude is easier to deal with.” Easier than people. I don't say it, but Derek hums in understanding.

“You can be a hermit if you choose, man. Maybe I bitch about these guys hooking up, but I can't deny they're happier for it. I'm not suggesting you find a woman, but remember that when you push people away, no one will be there when you need them.”

I grunt, not sure what to say to that.

“Right. Motherly lecture over. You're welcome. I gotta go. Gideon needs me to hold his hand on something.”

I hear a few muttered curses in the background. There's a smile in Derek's voice when he says, “Send me copies of the agreements.”

“You got it.”

“And Mason? Keep in touch. If I have to come up there to make sure you're okay, I'll kick your ass.”

My chest warms. Yeah, I love these guys as if they were blood brothers. “Okay, mom. I promise to call you and Aunt Gideon soon.”

Derek laughs, and we disconnect the call.

A woman is not in the cards for me. I know that. Especially sweet little things like the one from the bank. Keeping up with these guys, that's doable. I grab my coat and Nitro's leash, opening the front door. Those clouds are definitely darker. “Come on, boy. It's going to have to be a short walk. There's a storm coming, and I have to make sure there's enough firewood to keep your fuzzy ass warm.”

Nitro jumps up and runs to my side, tail wagging. His nose twitches as he sniffs the air, and his eyebrows go up when he looks at me.

“I know. That's why you have to get your business done.”

The German Shepherd trots down the steps of my small front porch and circles the house to his favorite spot out near the tree line. I bring the leash, even though I've never needed it. Nitro is well-trained. He picks a spot to do his business, still sniffing the air.

There's a crispness to the day that's invigorating. The trees have fresh growth, and a few

flowers are attempting to brave the frost lingering in early spring. The air's clean. Soothing. I let the peace of the forest seep into my soul, hoping it eventually dulls my ragged edges. Maybe it will, but I doubt it. There's something missing. For all the quiet of the forest and the days without traffic and people and conflict... it's not enough. Some part of me isn't whole.

Nitro's nose is back to the ground, sniffing as he runs along the edge of the woods.

“All done?” I ask him. Looks like I need to split more wood. What I have now should be enough to get us through the storm, but I like to have more chopped just in case. I don't have many neighbors up here, but if anyone needed anything—

Nitro's ears go up and his body leans forward. In a flash, he launches into the woods. Something large pushes through the bush, snapping twigs and branches as it goes. Nitro growls, letting out a sharp couple of barks as he chases.

“Dammit, dog! We don't have time for this.” The clouds are darker by the second, and he's rushing off after what? A deer? He sees them all the time up here.

Muttering a few more curses, I run after him. I can't leave my boneheaded dog out during an intense Pacific storm. From what Ezra told me, they can have high winds and drop loads of snow or rain in a short period. He could get hurt or trapped out here.

“Nitro!” His trail heads deeper into the forest. If he hears me, he's ignoring me. “I should have gotten a cat!” I yell after him.

He yips in excitement, sounding closer.

“Come on, buddy!” Branches slap at my jacket as I push through the dense forest and up a slope. In the distance, I hear a rumble of thunder. The temperature is dropping. The fucking storm is here a day early, and my dog is going for a walkabout. I stumble into a clearing in time to see my dog's tail disappear into the brush on the other side.

“Nitro!” I push for more speed and charge after him. From now on, he's going on a leash for every walk. Fuck, I must have dropped it somewhere. Hopefully, it's in the yard at the house. I'm going to buy ten more as soon as I'm home.

My dog finally hears my grumbling and stops at the top of another slope, looking back at me. He tilts his head, his ears perked, as if he's surprised I'd catch up.

“What were you chasing? A deer?” I yell as I stomp closer. “You could get hurt out here.”

He sits, tail wagging slowly, waiting for me. He looks... proud of himself.

I blow out a hard breath and approach slower, afraid he'll bolt again if he realizes how irritated I am. "There you go, good boy. Stay."

Nitro bobs his head and paws the ground, wagging his tail harder.

"What is that?" I frown. "Is that a boot print?" I take the last few steps, reaching for his collar as I crouch to get a better look. The worn tread leans heavier on one side. But just the one set, heading away from the trail. Odd. Hikers usually—

The ground shifts out from under my foot.

Whatever Nitro was trying to show me is lost as the embankment we're on gives way. I release his collar and grab for the branch of the nearest tree. It snaps in my hand.

Then I'm falling.

I hit the ground hard in a shower of dirt and debris, somersaulting once and landing hard on my hands and knees. I slide another ten feet, rolling, and land on my back. Nitro is barking like mad, an edge of panic in his yips.

Breathing hard, I take stock of my body. Pain lances my right thigh and my temple throbs. I must have hit my head at some point. My left ankle is already swelling in my boot.

Nitro slides down the embankment and runs to my side. He circles me, licking my face.

Above, the clouds are a nasty, greenish gray. The storm is going to hit any moment. Meanwhile, I'm flat on my back, injured, and isolated except for a dog who is just fine. I'm the one who needs help, and there's no one around.

"Perfect."

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