

Chapter One

Tyler McCall drove the last four hundred miles without stopping. Not because he didn't want a break to stretch his legs, work out the crick in his neck, or see some of the scenery he was passing. But because he did.

Those were things the old Tyler might have done, taking his time to enjoy the California coast, the Oregon cliffs along the water, the views through Washington as he drove to the mountains he was going to call home for the next six weeks. The new Tyler, the one fleeing L.A., didn't deserve such pleasures anymore.

If Scott were here, he'd have been bouncing out of his seat, eager to see San Francisco, Portland, spend the night in Seattle and walk along the water, marveling at the mountains across the bay. Scotty had never left California—unlike Tyler, who'd traveled way too much. He still remembered snippets of Seattle from the months he'd lived there before his mother snatched him out of school and whisked them to— He couldn't remember where they'd gone next. Chicago? It was all a blur.

But Scott wasn't here. That was the problem.

So Tyler pushed on.

It was dark by the time he turned onto the long, winding road that climbed into Gold Mountain. Had it been daylight, he would have seen the iconic peak still capped with snow in July. A hiker's dream in the sunny, dry valleys. A wildland firefighter's nightmare.

Tyler switched on his high beams and coaxed the engine up the turns. He needed to sleep. He needed a shave. He needed something to eat besides sticky-sweet granola bars, their wrappers littering his truck.

Most of all, he needed a whiskey. Neat. A double pour—hell, make it the whole bottle. Scott's drink. He couldn't decide whether coming to Gold Mountain was supposed to make him feel better, or worse. If it was supposed to help him move on from what had happened to Scotty...or make sure he never forgot.

He had the address of his rental house programmed into his GPS, but based on the description and the hastiness with which he'd put down his deposit, he wasn't expecting much. Certainly not a welcome basket or a home-cooked meal. In L.A. he could stop on any corner but this town had clearly shut down for the night. Everything he'd looked into said Gold Mountain had developed a lot recently, but the one grocery store he passed was closed and he didn't think he could face another gas station dinner.

Up ahead, though, was a parking lot for a place called Mackenzie's, and on Saturday night, it was full. He slowed down. The building was wood, he noticed reflexively. No metal roof, no heat resistant paint. No protection when the wildfire risk this summer was the highest it had ever been.

"Stop worrying so goddamn much," Tyler said aloud as he pulled into the lot—the first words he'd spoken since gassing up in Eugene. It's what Scott would have said to him.

Then again, maybe Scott should have paid more attention to danger. It was a mistake Tyler wasn't going to make again.

“So, where you from?” The bartender’s name was Mack. She said she owned the place along with her boyfriend, Connor, who waved from the open kitchen and looked more like an acrobat, he was juggling so many pans.

Tyler had made a beeline for an empty seat on the edge of the bar where he could watch the action without anyone noticing him, but not two sips into that honeyed burn and here she was, making conversation with the newcomer even on a busy night.

Or trying to. He wasn’t exactly pulling his weight.

“California,” he said, swirling the liquid in his glass so he didn’t have to look up.

“That’s a long way.”

“Yep.” He took another sip.

She pulled the taps on two draughts at once. “Up here hiking for a few days?”

“No.”

He could practically feel Scott beside him, rolling his eyes. His first night in this town where he was going to spend the next six weeks of his life and he was already turning himself into some kind of pariah. He should say where he was from, why he was here, ask about the local attractions. He should make a fucking effort.

“I’m here for the summer,” he said, just as Mack was giving up on him and turning toward another customer. “Work.”

“Nice,” she said, pocketing a tip. “Like I said, I’m Mack. Come around anytime.”

“I’m Tyler,” he said. “I will.”

Smile, he told himself. It’s what non-assholes do.

When Tyler quit his job fighting wildfires in California, his boss and mentor Aidan said he wouldn’t tear up Tyler’s resignation letter if Tyler promised one thing. He could supervise the firebreak the Forest Service was putting in on the ridgeline above Gold Mountain, but only if he tried to enjoy it.

“I won’t let you leave my crew if you’re just doing it to beat yourself up,” Aidan said.

And later, when Tyler was cleaning out his locker next to Scott’s: “We all miss Scotty, Tyler. But what happened—it wasn’t your fault.”

At one point, Tyler had believed every word out of Aidan’s mouth. He’d hired Tyler when Tyler was fresh out of training, with nothing but a backpack and a pair of boots to his name. He’d quickly become more of a father to Tyler than the man who lived in Palo Alto and never wasted his time on things that weren’t important—like his son.

But Tyler wasn’t some wide-eyed kid anymore. He knew better than to believe what Aidan said.

Aidan. Scotty. The Forest Service. *Fuck.* He’d driven twelve hundred miles north from L.A., the farthest he could get without crossing into Canada, and he still couldn’t leave them behind.

Tyler looked around, trying to get out of his head. Couples chatting, groups of friends. The bar was L-shaped and he could see directly across to where a tall, broad-shouldered man with a bald head and a snake tattooed up his arm was taking up too much space on the end. He had one of those booming voices that carried, so even though his back was to Tyler, Tyler could hear him saying “just got back” and “you owe me,” followed by an even louder, “Don’t you fucking say no to me.”

Tyler glanced at Mack, who had paused to look sharply at the man. “Trouble?” he asked, even as he knew he should stay out of it.

But staying out of trouble wasn’t his strong suit. Especially if there was a woman involved. And Tyler could tell from the man’s tone of voice—possessive and ugly—that there was a woman involved. A woman who sure as hell wouldn’t want to be talked to that way.

Mack sighed. “When Russ is around, there’s always trouble.” He thought she might go to the kitchen for backup—Tyler didn’t see much in the way of security around here—but Mack called in a loud voice like she’d done this before, “Hey, Russ! Get out of here.”

Russ turned to Mack, which afforded Tyler a glimpse of the woman who’d been blocked by his enormous frame.

And damn if he thought he could stop staring.

She was beautiful, yes. But it was more than that. She was tanned, with a dusting of freckles suggesting she spent more time outside than just a weekend or two of vacation. She waved Russ away and he saw the shift in her muscles, the strength under the softness of her skin.

He liked that, the contrast. The hint of surprise.

Because under her scowl there was softness, too. The promise of curves if he got to see her standing. Lying down. Spread out on his bed.

Shit. Where had *that* come from?

But he'd been driving all day. Single for much longer. The plunging neckline of her bright, fitted shirt wasn't helping get his mind out of the gutter. Especially not with the necklace that drew his attention down...

"Get my girl another beer, Mack," Russ said, slapping the bar with his palm like he owned the place.

The woman's voice rang out over the din. "For the last time, Russ. I'm not your *girl*. And I don't want you buying me a drink." She used her elbow to block out space for herself and keep Russ from encroaching on where she was sitting. Tyler had a feeling this wasn't the first time she'd had to tell Russ to back off. Or that Russ had ignored her.

His first thought was that the woman should cut her losses and leave. But she was the one with the seat; she'd clearly been there first. Why should she have to give up her night?

She shook her head at yet another obnoxious comment from Russ and a flash of color caught Tyler's eye. He thought it was from her rings, or the light from the bar playing tricks, but then it happened again and he realized it was her *hair*. Bright blue streaked along the underside, so that when she ran a hand through her waves there was a flash of something so unexpected, he couldn't tear his eyes away.

"That's Abbi," Mack said as she mixed a concoction with bitters and a squeeze of lime.

"What?" Tyler was startled out of his thoughts.

"The woman at the end of the bar. The one you keep staring at." Mack gestured with her chin. "That's Abbi."

"I wasn't—"

She grinned. "Sure you were."

Busted. Tyler eased into a smile, testing how it felt.

"Jesus." Mack shook her head. "You have a three-word vocabulary, arms that could bend steel, and a dimple? Abbi's going to love you."

"Um—"

"My best friend. The one you're about to do a huge favor for." Mack refilled Tyler's whiskey and placed a pint of copper ale in front of him—the same beer Abbi with the blue hair was drinking.

"Don't tell Abbi you're rescuing her," Mack cautioned. "Normally I'd figure out something else but I'm swamped, and making Russ get out and stay out is tricky. Believe me, I've tried."

"You want me to do what, exactly?" Tyler asked, confused.

"Come on, new guy. Be creative. Don't you want to have a little fun?"

Not really, he thought.

But he couldn't sit there and do nothing. And was there anything wrong with letting himself unwind just a little?

Temporary new town, temporary new title, the first stop in his brand new life. Tonight, he didn't have to be the guy who'd let his best friend die in a wildfire that burned out of control in the San Gabriels. Tonight, he could be whatever Abbi wanted.

He took a deep breath, filling out his full frame, and crossed the bar. He felt like a kid again, when he'd had to be in the school play in, was it Dallas? San Antonio? The one he'd hated even more than all the others. He got stuck in the back row of the chorus, because he was tall, gangly, and not a very good actor. Something about faking it—he never could get it right.

But he wasn't a kid anymore, and he certainly wasn't gangly. Russ may have had an inch or two on Tyler, but he didn't have his build. Taking a page from Abbi, he elbowed Russ out of the way as though he didn't even see him. And then, sliding into the space he'd created, he did something completely uncharacteristic. The kind of thing Scott would have done.

With no plan and no clue what he was doing, Tyler opened his mouth and said the first thing that popped into his mind.

"Hey, baby, I'm *so* sorry I'm late."

Chapter Two

Abbi's eyes widened as the gorgeous man from across the bar put a fresh pint in front of her. Had he seriously just called her *baby*?

Even more unbelievably, the guy then nudged Russ like Russ wasn't built like a tree trunk, impossible to budge. "Excuse me, man. Mind if I pull up a stool?"

Russ had been standing over her like she might have forgotten he was six foot whatever and way bigger than her. Like his towering height might convince her to make the mistake of going home with him again. But now the guy from the other end of the bar was dragging over a stool to fit in the space where Russ had been standing. Apparently he didn't get, or didn't care, that Russ was enormous, tattooed, terrifying-looking, an ex-con, and probably the guy you'd have to call to fix your roof in a snowstorm or build you a new drainage system, so not exactly someone you wanted to piss off at a bar.

"Mack poured me another drink for you," the man said. "Glad you got started without me."

"On the house!" Mack called and winked before she spun away to attend to someone else.

That little minx.

Mack had set Abbi up with guys before. But usually she left the define-the-relationship part to Abbi. Abbi had been in some questionable situations—including the time she'd taken it upon herself to find out how far the tattoos went down Russ's back. (Answer: *all* the way.) But she'd never found herself with a boyfriend she hadn't met.

To be honest, she didn't find herself with boyfriends very often. Hookups? Hell yes. But the closest thing she'd had to a long-term relationship had been half a lifetime ago, when she was a completely different person. To even think of it as the r-word made her want to throw up.

Not that she was on the market, anyway. As a naturalist, she was always in the woods, traversing trails, maintaining campsites, keeping tabs on what was growing or dying off and trying to figure out why. She wasn't going to slow down or spend less time alone in the backcountry just for some guy—no matter how big his arms.

So he'd better know this was a one-time deal when she took the drink, channeled her inner thespian, and said, "Finally! I thought you'd never make it."

He was tall and chiseled, with muscles that looked like they'd rip his T-shirt if he flexed them hard enough—and if the fabric wasn't so faded and soft. His hair was cropped short but he had a few days of stubble to counteract the clean cut. He looked like he'd been living in that T-shirt and jeans for a while, but Abbi didn't mind.

She'd noticed him across the bar, thinking that if he needed to change his clothes, she'd be happy to help take them off.

But then she saw Mack pour him two drinks and had to extinguish that little fantasy. Clearly he was meeting someone. Back to figuring out how to get Russ out of her life. Not just for tonight, but permanently.

Only now it looked like she had her answer to that problem. And if it wasn't typically the way she'd choose to handle a situation...at least it gave her a start.

She realized Russ was staring at her, having no idea what to do with this intruder. He'd had his back to the bar and hadn't noticed Tyler nursing his whiskey, busy being quite obviously *not* Abbi's boyfriend. She should say something else, make this sham more legit. She cleared her throat. "So, sweetheart. How's it going?"

That wasn't going to win any Oscars. Or convince Russ to leave her alone. She touched the guy's arm in a way that she hoped projected girlfriend levels of familiarity and not shock—and delight—at how his skin felt to her touch.

Russ gave an exaggerated frown. "Who the fuck are you?"

Which, props to Russ, was an excellent question.

"Where are my manners?" The guy stuck a hand out to Russ. "I'm Tyler."

"My new boyfriend," Abbi said, in case Russ was too thick to get the point.

Russ stared at Abbi. "You don't have a boyfriend."

Abbi slid closer to Tyler, pressing her body against him.

Minus one for needing a man to save her. Minus another one for perpetuating all sorts of “You can’t have me because another man already claimed me” bullshit when saying no to Russ wasn’t enough.

Plus eleventy billion for getting to feel Tyler’s muscles up close and personal.

“I’m pretty sure I know who my boyfriend is.” She added a hand to his knee.

She hoped she wasn’t going overboard. But Tyler didn’t seem to mind. She ran her thumb over his jeans, just low enough to be chaste, just high enough not to be *too* safe. Abbi wasn’t a fan of safe.

Safe was boring. And Abbi was *not* boring. She didn’t need to be coddled. She didn’t need anyone to pretend to take care of her anymore.

“You think you can lie to me and get away with it?” Russ snorted and ran a hand down his mouth. Abbi knew that gesture, the one he used in some half-assed attempt to push the anger back in right before it exploded. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat. Abbi almost felt bad for him. But he’d come back from a four-month construction job in Spokane assuming he had every right to her bed when she’d been nothing but clear when he left that they were over. So there was a limit to her sympathy.

As soon as he returned, he’d started calling. And calling. Demanding to see her. Claiming she owed it to him to “give him another chance.”

When she stopped picking up, he drove by her place. Banged on her door so much she’d taken to pretending not to be home. He’d broken the hinges on the gate to her backyard and she’d dropped to the floor, cowering under the bed, as she heard the wood splinter.

Her friends told her to call the police, but she was adamant. No cops. Her sophomore year of high school, Owen Cash had looked right in Abbi’s eyes before he closed his book, put down his chalk, and let those grim-faced officers lead him away. She hadn’t been the one to betray him. She’d been so, so good about keeping them secret, just like Mr. Cash said.

But it still felt like her fault. Everything felt like her fault, no matter how many times she lied and said she knew that it wasn’t.

Tyler stood slowly until he was chest to chest with Russ. Abbi winced, bracing herself for the eruption of testosterone that was coming. On second thought, maybe this charade was more trouble than it was worth.

But Tyler didn’t explode. It was as though everything inside him circled too deeply to ripple the surface. “Is there a problem?” he asked with total control.

Russ sucked the air between his teeth, but Tyler wasn’t giving him the confrontation he craved. In the end, he muttered something about losers and walked away.

Normally Abbi hated playing the damsel, the one who needed to be rescued from the big bad man. It meant she’d wind up indebted to Tyler, and she’d learned a long time ago not to owe anyone anything.

But Tyler wasn’t Cash. And she sure as hell wasn’t fifteen anymore.

“Thanks for that,” she said when Russ left, and as much as she was glad to be rid of him, she wished she hadn’t lost her excuse to press close to her savior.

But when she glanced over her shoulder, Russ was making a beeline for a group of guys he knew who were sitting at a table. Maybe there was still a chance to turn this night around.

“He’s still back there,” she said, hoping Russ would leave. Hoping Russ would stay if it meant Tyler would, too.

Tyler ran a hand over his jaw, slow and easy, as if trying not to let those dimples show. “Then I guess you’re not rid of me yet.”

He sat next to her and reached for his drink. She watched him swallow, the column of his neck, his Adam’s apple moving up and down. No matter that she had a beer in front of her—she was suddenly parched.

“Where are you from?” she asked, straining for conversation when all she really wanted was to taste the whiskey off his lips.

“Not here.”

“What do you do?”

Half a smile. The sense he wouldn’t let himself give more. “No talking about work.”

Abbi let her own grin spread. “Fine with me.”

It wasn’t like Sexy Stranger needed to know about the firebreak the Forest Service was building around Gold Mountain, or the fact that Abbi’s career hinged on making sure it didn’t go through.

Her office was so small, there were hardly any opportunities to advance. But her boss was retiring, giving Abbi a once-in-a-lifetime chance to secure her dream job. As head of the Gold Mountain Nature Center, she could oversee projects and bring real change to the field. She knew she didn't have all the skills the hiring committee was looking for, but she'd begged for the chance to take the lead on blocking the firebreak. If she succeeded, she'd have a proven track record showing she could handle it when things got tough. If not, and an outside candidate came along with more experience, then it looked like she'd be stuck at the same rung in the same small office forever.

But nothing killed a lady boner quite like talking about all the ways she might fail. Shamelessly, she slid her leg up his, letting him know what she *did* want to do instead. The muscle in his jaw jumped. His eyes flashed dark over his whiskey glass.

"California," he said suddenly. "Southern."

"What?"

"That's where I'm from. Different from here."

"No shit."

"Yeah. That's kind of the point." He leaned closer. "Laugh like I just said something funny."

"Why?" she asked, and he gave a tilt of his head behind her, where Russ was looking at them.

"We have an audience."

She grinned and he inched closer, bringing his lips to her ear. He whispered: "Poor Russ can't stop staring at you. I can't say I blame him."

Abbi traced a hand up his knee. Brought her other hand to the stubble on his jaw. Were they still pretending? It was getting hard to tell.

She thought about Russ, watching. She thought about work, waiting. She thought about Cash, those memories from long ago. But she didn't want to be thinking at all.

His lips were so close to hers. Almost touching, almost pulling away. The anticipation as exciting as what she was waiting for.

A few hours with someone who wasn't from here, who'd be gone before he started pushing too close... It was exactly her kind of setup. No risk, and all the reward.

She moved like she was going to kiss him and felt him arc toward her touch. At the last second, she turned and traced her lips up his cheek, toward his ear instead.

"Let's get out of here," she whispered.

"Anything you want," he said.

She almost laughed at what he was suggesting. Could he give her a different life? A different past? Could he grant her a new job title and more opportunities and make the mess she faced with the Forest Service go away?

Too bad his words were empty. Too bad the things she wanted were really hard to get.

But she pushed all that down and slipped her hand in his. There was one thing he could give her.

"How about you as my boyfriend for the rest of the night?"