



When Andi Sheffield meets Daniel Lewis she has to re-evaluate her convictions. The raw passion of their collisions is beautiful and terrifying. Daniel has a past of his own. Revealing it might mean losing her; hiding it will violate her trust.

**The Summit**  
By Alise Paige-Briant

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# The Summit

Alise Paige-Briant

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## Part One

### Four Years Later

#### *“Gale”*

Lolo. What an androgynous name for such a rugged, masculine environment. Mountains rise up out of the flat plane. They are fierce and stern, yet I can't get that old Kinks' song out of my head. L-O-L-A Lola. Nothing here walks or talks like a woman, though... this place looks in every way like a man.

Even the landscaping at this resort lodge is manly. I look up from my laptop toward the pool area and see conical evergreen shapes that block my view. There are flowers in bloom, but even they look like they belong in a place like Bitterroot. Tall aggressive lupines.

I've been in Montana for almost a week now. Katherine, my agent, has convinced my publisher that picking up the tab for me being here is nearly a guarantee of a best seller. I don't know how she does it but I'm not questioning her motives or her abilities. Making the New York Times Bestseller list once is no sure bet that I'll get there again but being here in Lolo is freeing. I've been productive. Maybe it's the thin, crackling air that has invigorated my creativity, but I'm several chapters into a story that seems to be working for me, as much as Tattoo did when I was writing it. Maybe more.

But my ass is sore from sitting here for the last few hours, and the morning is wasting. I need a run, although running in this high place isn't as easy as it is back home. Not that I would call an Upstate New York run easy. Neither my knees nor my wind are what they once were, but I've been working up to a better pace and longer distance every day since I've been here. I squeeze into my sports bra, sized for amply endowed runners, and the tee shirt I picked up in Bozeman when I landed there. Something touristy with a grizzly on it, only because my best friend Denise will get a charge out of it. She's the one that bought me the brown leather bracelet carved with bears and grizzly paws before I came.

My knee-length and skin-tight fitness pants are still a little damp from yesterday's washing in the sink, but they'll be wet again in a few minutes anyway. The legs beneath them are beginning to brown from my daily runs. My hair, usually kept down in long, dark blond slinky curls that I control only with an abundance of hair products, goes up in a tight knot.

The back door to my suite opens on to a ground level patio with a small grill and what look like wooden tables and chairs. They are synthetic, but a good fake and no splinters. I use the open space there to stretch and bend my five-foot-ten frame and work out the kinks that come from parking myself too long in front of a keyboard. The pool deck is on the far side of the landscaped barrier that affords me a good deal of privacy, but I can hear a small high-pitched voice calling for her dad to LOOK. LOOK AT ME! DAD, *WATCH!*

I don't see the little girl behind the big voice, but I hear the splashing and laughing. The trail head that I found the first day I checked in here is several yards beyond the gate to the pool and I pick up the pace and move toward it.

"Dad! You're not looking!"

"I see you, Aiyana. That was a great handstand," a deep rich voice answers.

"I can do it even longer this time."

"I'm watching, baby girl. I'm timing you."

I glance to my left, toward the gate, in time to see two scrawny ankles pop up through the surface of the shallow end, and teeter and wiggle for several seconds before they crash back down and a little blond head with goggles on it pops up, replacing the feet. She immediately turns to find dad with the deep voice, who is sitting with his back to me in one of those looks-like-wood synthetic deck chairs, leaning forward so that he can watch Aiyana. He's been swimming with her recently since his hair is wet, and he's got on only trunks darkened with water. His hair might be light, but it's hard to tell because it's still dripping down his back. It's shoulder-length and his back is... nice. Rippled, muscular. And covered on the left side with a long beach towel. Lola pops into my head again, the line that invites the dear boy to come home.

*The Summit*

“How long this time, Daddy?” Aiyana is adorable, blonde and innocent.

“Two seconds longer than last time.” Dad raises his arm to give his little swimmer a thumbs-up.

I move past the gate and lose my view now, but I can still hear them as I move faster toward the trail head. Yesterday, I made it four miles. My goal for today is five. It’s already hot, but surprisingly dry. Not like the muggy summers at home. It’s still early June, so maybe it gets more brutally humid as the summer moves on. At this point, though, I’m grateful. I’ll be leaving the laptop behind for eight days to go on what might be a real backcountry adventure, and I’m working hard to get in condition. I’m feeling the sloth of too many hours in a chair work its way off me in sweat and aching muscles. I’m beginning to love this place. Even with its gender neutral name.

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When I finish my run – and it’s almost five miles but not quite – I’m slick with sweat and I think about diving into the pool with all my clothes on. It’s a passing thought, though, because I know I will feel disgusting, dripping both perspiration and chlorine when I’m done, so I force myself to take off the wet clothes in the cool of the suite’s air conditioning, stand under the shower for a minute, and get my swimsuit on. I grab what’s left of a tub of hummus and the veggie sticks I bought in Missoula and head out to the pool deck with Cutting for Stone in my hand. There’s something about hummus-covered, veggie stained fingers swiping away at my smart phone that grosses me out, so I’ll stain the pages of a real book instead.

Aiyana and her dad are gone. Were they even there when I got back or did the reek of my exercise drive them away? It’s a shame, really. I suddenly feel like being in the company of other people, and what I saw of dad’s back was... captivating. How long has it been since I’ve ogled a well-muscled male back? I couldn’t say that Silas was anything close to a sex god. Maybe not even close to being sexy at all, now that I think about it. But he hadn’t lasted long anyway. I had no idea what I was looking for when I hooked up with him. Maybe just a distraction from being a recent widow. It hadn’t really worked. Silas used up more of my energy than I was ready to give. While Graeme provided benefits always just shy of friendship, with Silas the

friendship came long before the benefits. Neither was ideal, and in Silas' case, the benefits didn't justify the investment.

In ten minutes, my food is devoured, and the heat is so pleasant that I toss my book on to the table beside the empty tub and close my eyes. And down I go.

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Maybe it is the subtle breeze that smells of evergreen that wakes me. Or maybe it's the low rumble that, at first, I think is thunder but then understand it's coming from me. I'm famished, even after the snack I polished off. The sun is settling toward the west, but my skin is still warm from spending the last couple of hours out here, absorbing my vitamin D. I had thought I needed to swim, but now I'm feeling lazy and I think a shower and a hot meal in the lodge's restaurant sound more enticing.

//

I convince myself that by taking my laptop to dinner I can justify the hours I spent in the mountains and by the pool, not writing. And right now, not writing is kind of a big deal, since once I hit the Bob Marshall Wilderness in a few days, I'll be without power and phone service for over a week. A notebook...the paper kind...and a couple of pens will be my only tools, other than an honest-to-God camera and whatever little shovels they give us for our latrine breaks. I hate to take a hiatus from my story for that long, but this is a trip I've promised myself for years and I'm trying to think of it as a true vacation. I've vowed not to even write the experience into any stories in the future, just so that I can be in the present up there... not imagining it into anything other than Right Now. Capital R. Capital N.

There's a fancy formal restaurant here, called The Nest, on the top floor of the main lodge. Tonight, it's crowded with tourists that arrived yesterday and who've spent the day in two busses cruising the Bitterroot National Forest. Or at least the part of it you can appreciate from a thirty-passenger vehicle. They've changed from their traveling white sneakers and fanny packs into slacks and shirts with any variety of Montana insignias stitched in or ironed on. I stand out in my skinny cropped jeans, flowy silk blouse in lapis blue, and the short leather jacket that makes my legs look even longer

than they are. There is a line at the hostess station, and I'm not in the mood to make small talk with gabby tourists, so I make my way back down to the first floor. There, I find the bar restaurant with the unlikely coastal name Pearl's, here in this landlocked state. I'll have to ask about the name. The Nest I can understand. Diners really do have an eagle's eye view from up there, but Pearl's? I'm not making the connection.

The place has a high ceiling with richly darkened beams, and the floor to ceiling windows on the front side of the lodge face a deeply cut valley beyond the patio and outdoor tables. I request the booth at the back corner, behind and to the left of the bar. It's less likely that anyone will feel the urge to join me if I'm tucked away back here. My table is across the aisle from the service bar, and as I walk past, the bartender gives me a courteous nod and a smile. He's in a black collared shirt that has Pearl's written in bold white block letters across the left side of his very beefy chest. Maybe he doubles as a bouncer because his biceps are enormous. He is bald and badass and pretty sexy. The name on the right side of his chest says Ned.

I give my server, Julie, the expense card generated by the lodge when I arrived. The name Gale Martin is above my suite number. All my charges go on this card, thank you Katherine, and Julie delivers it to Ned at the bar while I look at the menu she's given me. It's printed on the back cover of an old 33 album, and when I turn it over, I get it. The cover is Janis Joplin, lounging in draped red pants, red feathers in her hair, on a brocade love seat with blue draping on the floor and walls. Pearl, 1971, with the Full Tilt Boogie Band. It's only then that I realize the walls here are a blue fabric of some sort, and the seats are lined in a dark brocade with flowers. Pearls hang in loops from the bottom of the lampshades over each booth. It's subtle... no red feathers, thankfully... but it works.

Upstairs, where I've eaten twice this week, the menu is the sort made for Montana's visitors, and what they might expect from a wilderness lodge. Trout, elk, huge beef and bison steaks, and sides of locally grown crops like garlic potatoes, beets, and homemade wheat breads. Pearl's menu is not so stereotypical, and not pub grub by any stretch. Gastropub, maybe. I can choose from Asian scallion pancakes with moo shu pork, duck confit crepes, pan roasted salmon with barbeque beurre blanc, crispy pork belly. There's a



burger here, too, for people expecting bar food, but the moo shu pork is calling my name. I order it with a sixteen-ounce Tito's vodka with tonic and lime.

Julie is young, probably early twenties, adorable and attentive. I'm guessing she's a UMT student picking up extra cash on the weekends. She asks me a few questions about where I'm from, what brings me to Montana... the usual... and I explain that I'm a writer, trying hard to write, while I fire up the laptop. She gets the hint and leaves me to it until the pancakes and pork arrive.

I move my laptop aside while I dive into the food, and it is succulent and savory. I am as consumed by it as it is by me. While I nibble at a corner of the thin pancake stuffed with pork and shitake and cabbage, I see that the tabletop is lacquered over little items related to Janis Joplin. Copies of autographs on ripped paper, good replicas of the \$18 ticket stubs from Woodstock. And right under my left elbow, a purple invitation, very authentic looking, that reads "Drinks are on Pearl".

I lick the soy sauce from my fingers and go in search at the world's biggest answer to every question imaginable. Google. I know this story, but I want to make sure my memory serves. And there it is. Two days before her death, Janis revised her will, setting aside money for a memorial party at the Lion's Share. Her invitations had gone out to 200 people, and they read "Drinks are on Pearl." I wonder if this one buried beneath the thick clear coat is an original, and if so, where it came from.

Julie returns with a second vodka and tonic, clears my plate and disappears into the kitchen behind me. I'm glad I've eaten a pretty substantial meal because this next tall drink is getting to my head after a few hours in the sun.

When I see Julie again, she is giddy, animated, and talking way above a whisper to Ned at the bar.

"Oh my God, Daniel's here!" she says, her tan skin growing hot pink, even in the dim light of the bar.

"You'd be smart to just pretend he isn't, Miss. Keep your head. Mr. Lewis likes his staff to be professional," Ned warns in a low voice. He has the remnants of an Irish brogue.

“I know, I know. But he’s just so…” She flicks her hair and waves a hand in front of her face. “Hot!”

Ned rolls his eyes and shoos her off to check her tables. I can hear him muttering under his breath.

I’m intrigued. The doors leading from Pearl’s to the main lobby are glass, and just beyond them, holding the door partway open, a man with his back to me appears to be attempting escape from an older couple that look like they’ve just wrapped up their dinner at The Nest. Could be the doggie bags in their hands that give them away. Mrs. Tourist is attractive, probably in her late sixties or older, wearing gobs of jewelry and makeup, and chatting away to her tall captive. He nods at her, nods again, as though this will hurry her along. He finally reaches up and pats Mr. Tourist on the shoulder and says something that seems to break the chains of his entrapment. There is something oddly familiar about this man, but I can’t put my finger on it.

Finally, he is released, and the couple moves away. He turns and makes long strides to the bar, his attention on Ned. He’s in jeans, boots, and a pale green long sleeved jersey. His sandy sun-kissed hair is fairly long, and Julie is right. He is a stunning specimen. But his eyes are what push the breath out of my lungs. They are the palest green against his tanned skin, framed by long lashes.

“Mr. Lewis,” Ned says. “What can I get for you?” The brogue seems a little more controlled now.

“Pour me an All Souls, Ned. Please.”

It’s hard to focus on my writing. It’s hard to do anything but watch this Lewis guy as he straddles a barstool and shoves his bangs out of his face. This close, I can see how unusual his eye color is, their tone made more obvious by the jersey he’s wearing. The lashes almost appear to be coated with mascara, they are so dark, and they highlight the intensity of those light irises. The contrast of his light eyes with his bronzed skin makes me think of the actor from Vikings. Travis something.

He has classical lines, arched brows that make him look curious about life, and a mouth that borders on wicked. His tan betrays him as a man who enjoys being outdoors. Jesus, I have to stop staring at him and get back to the laptop before I start acting like Julie.

“Long day, sir?” Ned is engaging Lewis, who nods in return.

“Very, very long day. How long is this tour group with us?” He says this in a low conspiratorial voice.

“Another day and another night, sir.”

“Oh, good God. Ah, but I’ll be out of here tomorrow, so you’ll have all the fun after that.”

“The fun, eh?” Ned shakes his head and laughs. “Heading out east, sir?”

Lewis takes a long drink of his amber beer and sighs. “Yeah, and I can’t freaking wait. It’s the first time all summer.”

Ned leaves him to make drinks for Julie and another server, and I sit back and watch the fun as this Lewis guy does his best to ignore a couple of women at a table ahead of me that are primping and giggling, trying to get his attention. It makes me wonder if I’m as obvious, though, and I look back to my glowing screen and smile to myself. I’m no different than this perky little twenty-something that has the hots for her boss, and he is way out of my league. Ned calls him “boss” and I wonder if he’s the manager here.

I can’t help but look back up after a page of some drivel that I’ve just typed in an effort to keep my eyes in my head. And when I do, he is watching me. Talking to Ned but looking straight at me. Instantly, I can feel a blush starting at my clavicle and speeding up to the roots of my corkscrew hair. I’ve let it go long, natural, and springy tonight. Sometimes I hate that I am blonde and fair. I can’t keep a secret. I force myself to smile at him and then look back to my computer. The screen doesn’t judge.

“Did you get the little one delivered back to her mum?” Ned is asking.

“Yeah, but she wasn’t happy about it. This was her birthday weekend, and all she wanted to do was swim in the Lodge pool. Yesterday was her party, and all her friends were here, but today was pool time with dad. She had a fit when I had to take her back to Maria’s.”

“And how old is Aiyana now?”

“Just turned five on Friday. Acts like she’s fifteen. She’ll be the death of me, Ned.” Lewis laughs.

His laugh sounds warm and familiar, and now it all hits me. He’s the dad with the lovely back, whose daughter Aiyana was showing him tricks in the pool this morning. The dad in only his towel and his wet trunks and his

wet hair. I risk a glance back up at him and there are those green eyes watching me again.

Julie saves the day by moving to my booth, standing directly between me and the deity at the bar, and asking me if I'm ready for my check, and really, what other reason do I have to linger? If I could think of one, I may stay here all night. Or at least until this man at the bar takes his leave. I have to admit that I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes and my thoughts away from him. I tell her I'm ready and start digging in my purse when I realize that Ned has my expense card at the bar. Julie has moved away and I'm hoping this is just a standard system they have, and Julie will return the card without me having to get up and ask for it.

I look up, hoping I can still spot Julie, but Ned is now at my side, delivering another Tito's in a tall icy glass. I tilt my head and start to tell him I hadn't ordered this. It will probably put me over the edge. But he beats me to it.

"On the house, ma'am."

"Oh." I seem to have lost all my language skills. Maybe I've had a stroke and become aphasic in the last three minutes. Ned is handsome in his own burly way, and I feel like I'm a pre-teen at her first dance, waiting for one of the boys lined up on the opposite wall to ask her onto the floor.

"Mr. Lewis, our owner, sends the drink with his compliments, Ms. Martin."

I manage to nod again, the "Ms. Martin" thing weirding me out, and this time I remember that thank you is the appropriate thing to say.

"Oh, and Mr. Lewis asks if he can join you, Miss." Ned adds, almost as an afterthought.

Clearly it is not an afterthought. He's pulled my expense card to get my name, and Lewis (the *owner*?) has already instructed him to ask my permission to join me.

By the pure power of my mother's endless training in manners and social appropriateness, I pull my shit together. Straighten up. Look casual. Smile. Nod. Say the right thing without appearing to be too excited.

"Yes. Of course, Mr. Lewis can join me. That would be fine," I manage. "Oh, and thank him for the drink."

Ned smiles and goes back to the bar where he has a quick conversation with the gorgeous one. The gorgeous one unfolds himself from the bar stool and carries a fresh glass, along with a corked bottle, to stand beside me.

“Are you sure I’m not interrupting?” he asks. Up close, I hear the same dark timbre that I heard by the pool.

“No, no.” I think I’m stammering. Definitely blushing.

“No, you’re not sure, or no I’m not interrupting?” He gives me a lopsided grin.

“Sorry. You’re not interrupting.”

To make the point, I save my work and power down the laptop.

“I was just getting in some work time with dinner, but I’m all done for the night.” I’m definitely done. Not a new or unique thought will come to my head after this.

He’s still standing, so I wave my hand to the Joplin upholstery across from me and ask him to sit. When he does, he puts down the glass and bottle, and reaches for my hand.

“Daniel Lewis.”

The handshake is firm, and his hands are warm despite holding the chilled bottle, and slightly calloused. Touching him sends a pleasant thrill through me. I wonder about his hands. If he is the owner of this place, he’d have plenty of workers to deal with manual labor. Either way, he conveys confidence and a startling energy in that rough hand.

I’m about to offer my name when he says, “Gale Martin, right? Ned tells me you’re an author.”

Ned? How would Ned know I’m an author? This is the first time I’ve laid eyes on the guy. It occurs to me that the Gale Martin expense card is probably tied to my publishing house and that when Ned ran it through for tonight’s dinner it may have shown up there. Or else the some of the staff here have actually read Tattoo and the word has gotten out.

“Yes, I am an author.” I don’t comment on the name. “I’m actually in Montana to work on my next book. I’ve got about six more weeks to get very creative.”

“Good. Any luck?”

“I was just thinking this morning that I was making good progress. It’s easy to sort of relax and let things flow out here. Put real life aside, you know?”

“So I’m told. Unfortunately, this is real life for me. Not that I’m complaining.”

“So, Daniel Lewis. Without the ‘Day’. I suppose every person that thinks they’re clever asks you about that.” I sound like I think I’m clever.

“Pretty much.” He removes the wire cap and pops the cork on the bottle. I can see Big Sky Brewing, and All Souls on the label as he pours himself a glass.

“And you’re the owner?” I ask, trying to move away from the quip about his name.

“Ned spilled the beans? Yeah, Lolo is mine. Well, the Lodge, not the city. Actually, something my dad wanted to do ages ago, maybe on a smaller scale, and I sort of made it a reality.”

“How long have you owned it?”

“Started construction about six years ago. Opened about a year later.” He takes a long swallow of his beer and looks up at me.

Fuck me, but those eyes are intense. The contrast between the dark lush lashes and the pale eyes is like nothing I have ever seen before aside from a cover of National Geographic. I squirm in my seat and lose my ability to string a sentence together. Finally, he quirks up his lips and fills in the gap.

“So, are you enjoying your stay with us? Is there anything that you need while you’re here? Any feedback for me?”

He’s slid his strictly professional face back on, and I take a deep breath, relieved to be able to speak intelligently again.

“I absolutely love this place. You’ve done a great job, Mr. Lewis. The staff are fabulous. I’ve been enjoying the trails and my room is right beside the trail head. In fact, I believe I may have seen you with a little girl at the pool this morning. It’s right outside my door.”

“Oh. I didn’t see you. I’m sure I would have remembered.” His green eyes are watchful and attentive.

There goes the pink skin again. I’m wishing the lights were lower.

“I wasn’t at the pool itself. I just passed by when I started my run.”

“Oh, gotcha. Anyway, yeah, that was my daughter, Aiyana. She loves coming out here to swim in the big pool.”

“She was cute. I saw her do a handstand. Do you live far from here?” I remember Daniel telling Ned that he’d taken Aiyana back to her mom’s, so I’ve assumed that he’s divorced, but I’m looking for confirmation.

“Aiyana lives with her mom in Helena most of the time. Unfortunately. She’s growing up too fast and I feel cheated. I try to get her with me as often as I can.” Daniel’s face has grown serious over this subject, and he looks as though he’s about to tell me more. At the end, he thinks better of it... I am a complete stranger, after all... then leans back and stretches a long leg out into the walkway.

“It’s an unusual name. How do you spell it?”

“A-I-Y-A-N-A. In some local Native languages, it means ‘flowering’ or ‘to flower’.” He pauses and smiles.

“What about you?” he continues. “Do you have kids?”

This is not somewhere I really want to go right now but I can’t think of any suitable ways to avoid it. I’m still not sure how I feel about it myself, and I wonder how other people view my relationship with Jay. And I’m definitely not going anywhere near my possible future with kids. Or lack thereof.

“Not really.” He looks at me with those quizzical eyebrows. “I mean, I have a stepson. My late husband had a son with his first wife. Jay is his name. He’s eleven now. But after Graeme died it’s been a challenge to spend time with Jay. You know, I really don’t have any legal rights at all.” I suddenly feel like this is a path with no good ending, and I’m getting that back-of-the-throat tightness of emotion that I hate to feel in public.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were a widow. How long has it been since your husband died?” Daniel lifts his beer and takes a long sip, never taking his eyes away from my face.

“Four years. It was right after that when I started writing. You know, the whole ‘escape the miserable world’ syndrome. I just sort of poured myself into my first published work, and then it was all history. I managed to make myself a whole new career, and I suppose Graeme is responsible for that in a strange way.”

“What did you do before he died?” Daniel’s voice has grown softer, even as the bar has started to fill up, but it has so much clarity that I can still hear him. I think he is keeping his voice low to make this turn in our conversation more private.

“I headed a non-profit. An employment center. I loved it, so I was as surprised as anyone else when I gave that up to start writing.”

Daniel watches me for a while without comment, his expression reflective.

Finally, he says, “I’m always amazed at how diverse people can be if they try. No one is ‘just an author’ or ‘just a businessman’ or ‘just a mother’. Not everybody works at polishing their facets, but it sounds like you have. You’re an interesting woman.”

“Thank you. You barely know me, but I appreciate the observation.”

Now he gets that look, that shiny celadon tint in his eyes, his mouth curling into something seductive.

“You’re right. I barely know you. Why don’t you tell me more?”

I’m lost. Daniel is handsome. More than handsome, he is breathtaking. He has a lodge full of guests, and he’s just finished telling Ned what a long day he’s had. He seemed in a hurry to get away from the Tourist Twins outside the door and I’m sure he has dozens of priorities that he’s juggling right now. And hasn’t he mentioned to the bartender that he’s off to somewhere else tomorrow? Yet here he sits, his right leg stretched out into the aisle, sipping on his beer like he has nothing better in the world to do than listen to me prattle on.

“I’m sure you have plenty of demands on your time, Mr. Lewis, rather than to hear my life story. And far more interesting ways to occupy your time.”

“It’s Daniel. Without the Day.” He shoots me a wink. “And I can’t think of anything more interesting at the moment. Please. Tell me about Gale Martin.”

I’m actually well versed in the biography of Gale Martin. I suck a long swallow of vodka through my straw and start with the routine I’ve learned in interviews and at book signings.



“Okay, Daniel Without the Day. Quote. Gale Martin is best known for her New York Times Bestseller, Tattoo, a novel about professional misfits living and working together in Central New York. She is also the author of four short stories, one published in the *New Yorker*, and two novellas. She is currently at work on her second full length novel, yet to be named. She lives in Connecticut with her dog, Babe, the blue Dane, and enjoys travel. End of Quote.”

“Fascinating. That didn’t tell me a damned thing.” Daniel sits up and leans toward me, pouring another glass of beer from the bottle. The space between us bounces with his energy, and I pick up the aromas of wood and leather and open air. “Where did you run today? What did you have for dinner? How long will you be in Montana?”

“I ran almost five miles out the Northside trail. It was beautiful. I didn’t realize that there’s a lake back there. I talked to a mountain goat. For dinner I had moo shu pork in scallion pancakes. They were delicious. I probably still smell like soy sauce, and I may have dribbled some on my blouse. I’ve been here in Montana for almost a week and I plan to be here until the end of July. I’ve been in Montana once before, to hike in Glacier, and I loved it. I’ve wanted to come back ever since, so I coerced my agent into strong-arming my publisher to spring for this trip. This is my third vodka tonic and I’m feeling a little bit drunk. Oh, and I hate tomatoes. Better?”

He’s grinning at me, and I want to slide down the curve of his lips. I think I even tricked him into glancing at my chest when I told him I’d dribbled my dinner there, even though it isn’t true. I can’t believe I did that.

“Much better!” he says, laughing now. “Well done!”

“Can I ask you a question now, Daniel Without the Day?”

“Just one?”

I nod.

“Go for it. But if it’s only one, you’d better make it count.”

“Alright. One question, but it has several parts. No, don’t look at me like that... it only requires one answer. This bar, Pearl’s. Is the theme yours? Did you come up with the Janis Joplin idea? The blue fabric walls and the brocade upholstery and the pearls on the lampshades? Are you the fan? And most of all, is this invitation to her memorial real or a good copy?”

Daniel 's eyes are now wet from the laughter that he is working hard to contain.

“That is NOT one question. That’s not even several parts to the same question, and it sure as hell requires more than one answer!” He says this with an almost straight face, although the tiny crinkles beside his eyes betray him.

“Alright, but they are all related. At least I’m not all over the place like ‘how long are you in Montana and what did the mountain goat say.’”

Now he gives up his business aloof façade and lets himself laugh. He laughs hard, doubling over his beer and shaking. Finally, he straightens and gets himself under control. Sort of. Ned glances over from the bar and tilts his head as though he’s never heard Daniel laugh before.

And it is so funny, just watching his face as he struggles to get serious, that I start to giggle, which sets him off again. We’re reacting to each other and when I see him open his mouth to laugh, I can’t stop. I’m seized up with rippy giggles, and it occurs to me out of nowhere that we could set each other off like this in other ways. It seems so natural, responding to each other.

“Okay, okay,” I say between giggles. “Are you going to answer me?”

“Yes, just a sec.” Daniel says this while inhaling, as though an intake of air will calm him down. He straightens up and makes his face serious. Even frowns. Then loses it again. “Jesus, hold on a minute.”

Finally, he gets it together. “First of all, I am totally impressed that you made the connection between the name and the décor and Janis Joplin, and I am doubly impressed that you even have a clue what ‘Drinks are on Pearl’ even refers to.”

I’m sobering up now because I really want to hear this. I nod respectfully and lose my stupid grin.

“Yes, I am the fan,” he continues. “I collected a fair amount of memorabilia before I ever dreamed of opening a bar. Probably because my dad was a fan too and he kept telling me how much this stuff would be worth. The Woodstock tickets and autographs are real. I only got my hands on one of the memorial invitations, and it happens to be at this table, under your arm. There are replicas on other tables. This one is probably worth a fortune, but only if someone could get to it, and it’s too late now. I’ve had it covered up

with poly, so it really can't be extracted and resold now. Probably dumb on my part. If this place every goes under, I'll have a restaurant table hung on my living room wall."

He pauses, then asks, "Do you like it?"

"I love it. I couldn't figure out how a place in the mountains of Montana could be named Pearl's unless you were doing a raw bar or a seafood theme, until I saw the album cover you use for a menu. Then it made sense. And I am a huge fan. I'd like to steal her psychedelic Porsche from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Maybe you can help me."

"We'll leave tonight." He drinks the rest of his beer and Julie appears out of nowhere to offer another. He asks me first.

"Care for another? It's on me."

I know it's late and I've heard him talk about his stressful day. The last vodka was enough to make me silly and one more will make me stupid. I'd like nothing more than to stay and talk with this beautiful man, but I think at this point it would be too much. Maybe even rude. So, I decline.

"Thank you, Daniel, but as an old acquaintance from Helena once told me, 'the old fade burger is on the grill'. It's time for me to let you go and call it a night."

He laughs again. "Fade burger? That's priceless."

He pulls out a few bills and hands them to Julie. "This is your tip, Julie. Comp the rest, including Ms. Martin's dinner, please."

Julie looks at the cash in her hand and grows absolutely buoyant. I try to tell Daniel that I don't want him to comp my meal, that I'm more than able to pick this up myself but he waves me away.

"Are you walking back to your suite?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, hesitating. I feel like a fish gulping for air right now. "It's not that far."

"I'll walk you. It's late and your room is on the way to my truck."

Thank God for the third vodka and maybe the laughs because I manage not to throw up or even to blush. I even squeak out an "okay".

He waits patiently while I fumble around to get my laptop in its case, my jacket on and my purse over my shoulder. Julie returns with the expense card that has been in Ned's keeping. Daniel lifts the laptop case off the

tabletop and throws it over his own shoulder and gestures to the main doors. Outside, it's dark and the moon is hiding half its face. I'm glad I have my jacket because I'm suddenly shivering, although I know part of that is just nerves, being in close proximity to Daniel. He gives me his right arm and I loop my hand around his bicep, which does nothing to ease my high state of arousal. He's ropey and hard muscled, which brings back my aphasia. We don't speak at all for several minutes.

As we approach the end of the building that houses my suite, he says, "I have two more questions."

"Just two? Are you sure?" I tease.

"Yes, just two."

"Are they in multiple parts? Because I'm a little tipsy and I probably can only answer if they are individual questions."

"I'll keep it simple," he says, smiling. His teeth glow white with the moon.

"Ask away," I challenge him.

"So, what exactly *did* the mountain goat say?" he asks.

"Well, I asked him if I was going in the right direction and he said..."

"Let me guess. He said naaah."

"Exactly."

Now we are at my door and he eases the laptop off his shoulder and on to the wide rail surrounding the flower box while I dig in my purse for my key card.

"What's your other question?" I ask.

"I have to be away on business for about a week or so," he begins. "Will you still be here when I get back?"

"Actually," I tell him, "I'm leaving for a while, too. I'll be back like on the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>, I guess. I'd have to look."

"Great. I'd like to see you again when I get back. Take you out somewhere. Spend some more time together."

He is very close now, definitely inside what would normally be my personal space. And of course, I can't just act grateful, let alone sexy. Instead, I say, "Are you asking me out?"

"Yes, I'm asking you out."

“That’s actually three questions, not two.” I jab. Very sweet and sexy. If you’re a porcupine.

“Not really, because it wasn’t an inquiry. It was just a statement of fact. I’d like to see you again. It’s really more of a disclosure than a question. If I ask it as a question, I run the risk of you saying no.”

I am grateful that he is playing along with me, letting me make some mistakes without pointing them out to me. I can’t imagine anyone telling him no, and I wonder if his self-esteem is not what it appears to be on the surface. I finally find my key.

“Would you like to come in?” I ask, before I can stop myself and because I’m not really sure how to end this.

He hesitates, looking at my door and then back down at me. He is very close now. I can smell his earthiness.

“I’d love to, but I shouldn’t. Next time. Ask me then.”

He steps back and pulls his billfold from his back pocket. He takes out a card and hands it to me. Daniel J. Lewis, Proprietor. Lolo Lodge. His email, his mobile and office numbers.

“Promise you’ll call me when you get back to Lolo,” he says.

I take the card and nod. And while I am looking down at the rich embossed paper, he lifts my chin with his hand and kisses me. It is a brief kiss, but soft and warm and he pulls at my lower lip just for a second before he lets me go. Just enough to convey something beyond polite, just enough to hint at something definitely not polite at all. He watches my eyes for my reaction for a moment, then he pulls away.

“Ms. Martin, sleep well. Until we meet again...”

He turns and strides away before I can comment on the name.

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I’d love to stand where I am and watch that back and that butt while he walks away from me, but if he turns and sees me, I’ll be busted for the stalker that I am. We’ve had plenty of laughs tonight and I’d rather not be the subject of the joke at the end of it all, so I let myself into my unit. I’ve left the nightlight on over the stove, so I even manage not to stumble or trip, which

is a wonder since my legs are gelatinous and my chest is much too tight for my thumping heart.

I occupy myself with charging my laptop and changing into the long T-shirt that I sleep in. Then I stay busy by packing up the essentials from the list that was sent to me by S&S Outfitters outside of Augusta. Being jacked about taking that little excursion is probably the only thing keeping me from getting under the covers with my hand in my panties and Daniel in my head.

But the packing list is important, and very specific, and I want to make sure I get it right, and this buzz I have isn't helping. This trip is the one thing that I insisted on even though my agent objected to the idea that I would be in the wilderness for a week on horseback. I'm going with a small group of other guests and two guides into the Bob Marshall Wilderness the day after tomorrow and Katherine is freaked out that I'll get eaten by a mountain lion before I can finish my book. That's a chance I'm willing to take and this is a trip I've dreamed about for a good deal of my adult life. Somewhere along the way I saw photos of the Chinese Wall and became obsessed. Maybe even more obsessed than I am right now with Daniel Lewis, whose middle initial is J and therefore does not stand for "Without the Day."

When I crawl into bed a couple of hours later, I finally let myself hit replay on the evening's mental video. Watching Daniel walk into the bar, the way he watched me from his perch on the barstool, the sound of that deep, clear voice. It squeezes my chest and shortens my breaths to remember him sitting across from me, laughing, or listening to my answers to his questions. I still don't understand why he spent any time at all with me, unless he's in the habit of selecting among his Lodge guests and the only other options were all sexagenarians and that's not the kind of sex he wanted. But then, why not follow me into my suite unless I gave out my hard-to-get vibe. I invited him in, and he declined.

Eventually, I'm just too tired to give it any more thought and I fall into sleep.



When Andi Sheffield meets Daniel Lewis she has to re-evaluate her convictions. The raw passion of their collisions is beautiful and terrifying. Daniel has a past of his own. Revealing it might mean losing her; hiding it will violate her trust.

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