

WILD



HEART

**Stacy Gold**

Onyva Press

**Copyright © 2022 Stacy  
GoldPublished by Onyva  
Press**

**All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.**

**This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.**

**Cover, print layout and ebook design: Brian Kannard**

**Icons provided by: Vector Vectors by  
Vecteezy[https://www.vecteezy.com/free-  
vector/vector](https://www.vecteezy.com/free-vector/vector)**

**Print ISBN: 979-8-9856460-0-9  
eBook ISBN: 979-8-9856460-1-6  
iBooks ISBN: 979-8-9856460-2-3**

**Printed in the United States**

*Thanks to my amazing dev editor, Elizabeth Nover at RazorSharp Editing, who helped me troubleshoot early drafts of this story. Without her guidance it wouldn't be even half as good as the book in your hands.*

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for taking a chance on my backpacking romance, *Wild at Heart*. This book means so much to me, because it's the type of story I wish I could've read when I was younger.

You see, I got my first backpack for my sixteenth birthday. While I'd been car camping with Girl Scouts and boyfriends, I'd never camped overnight on the trail. Definitely not alone. I also didn't know any other women who had, so I had no examples to follow. Still, it only took one trip for me to get hooked.

This led to a degree in Resource Management and Environmental Education, and a position as a U.S. Forest Service backcountry ranger. Being out in the wilderness with everything I need on my back makes me feel confident and secure and incredibly happy. I adore the solitude, the stunning scenery, and knowing I can take care of myself.

I've now spent my adult life skiing, whitewater raft guiding and kayaking, mountain biking, and hiking, mainly in the company of men. So, with my romances, I want to show women as smart, capable, and competent in the outdoors—not damsels in distress. And also as beautiful, desirable, sexual people totally deserving of love (even if we don't need rescuing).

I hope you enjoy reading it even half as much as I enjoyed writing it. Please do let me know what you think by connecting with me via email, my newsletter (sign up at [stacygold.com](http://stacygold.com)), or leaving a review.

Happy reading!

Stacy



# Chapter 1

## JULES

“I’m so jealous, Jules.” Bryn perched on the end of one of the beds in our hotel room at Cascade Locks, watching me pack gear. The thin, gray light of pre-dawn filtered through a crack in gold curtains that’d seen better days.

I tucked a bag of snacks and my rain jacket into the top of my backpack, cinched the drawcord, and buckled the lid with a solid click. “Of what, twelve guys dumping me for their exes in a row? I’m sure we could arrange that for you too. If you ever really start dating again.” “Ha. Funny.” She toed my calf. “You’re taking five weeks off to go backpacking solo. Who cares why?”

Tingles of excitement zoomed around in my chest and I flashed her a grin. “Yeah. Dealing with zero assholes and zero clients for more than a month does sound pretty heavenly, doesn’t it?”

She grinned back. “Like I said, totally jealous. At least of your trip.” Her expression went serious. “I still can’t believe the

next guy you date is gonna be unlucky number thirteen, though.”

“Yeah. I’ve thought about that. Probably too much. Definitely enough to jinx the next one for sure. So, I’m swearing off men for at least a year to restart the count.” I hesitated, the excitement buzz fading. “A year is enough time to consider it a clean dating slate, right?”

“Wait. You mean you’re swearing off dating, or swearing off sex too?”

“Yes. Both. All of it.” The last eight years had been nothing but suckage on the relationship front. It’d probably take more than a year to fix my shit. But nothing would change if I didn’t change something.

Bryn eyes widened. “You’re serious.”

“Dead.” Bending, I tugged the rough nylon laces of my left boot. The well-worn leather snugged around my foot. “I’m never gonna figure out anything buried in too much work plus too many bad dates.”

“When did you decide this?”

“Last night.” I shouldered my pack and adjusted the straps until the familiar weight settled on the tops of my hipbones. “What I’ve been doing isn’t working. It’s time to take a big step back and focus on myself for longer than just a few weeks.”

“I guess that’s one way to break the pattern.” Bryn opened the door and we stepped outside into early morning stillness. “And yes, a year is definitely long enough to clean your dating slate.”

Fog tendrils drifted from the Columbia River across the half-empty parking lot. The air hung thick with moisture and cedar and the sweet mustiness of damp soil. The best smell in

the world after too many days breathing city fumes.

“I sure as hell hope so. If not, at least maybe I can figure out what to do about my business. I can’t keep working this much.”

We strolled across the lot side-by-side, the chill air nipping my skin through my nylon hiking pants and shirt, waking me up. The sky glowed marigold behind the inky silhouettes of the mountains.

“You’ll come up with a plan. You always do.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” We crossed the empty high-way, walked a few hundred yards and turned off. Gravel crunched under our soles. “And thanks for driving me down here from Seattle. And picking me up at the other end.”

“Of course. That’s what best friends are for.” She wrapped a hand around my arm and leaned in, hugging one of my few body parts not covered by my backpack. “Though I still wish I was going with you. I could use a break from assholes and clients, too.”

The first golden rays of sunlight slanted through the tree branches, lighting the dirt road ahead. “We’ll have to plan a girlfriends’ trip once I get back.”

“I’m holding you to that.” Her warm hand tightened on my biceps. “Maybe we can convince Aly to come with us for once.”

I snorted. “We’ll get Aly on a backpacking trip when pigs fly. But I’m all for trying.”

A handful of parked cars and a dark brown trailhead kiosk appeared, marking the southern end of the Pacific Crest Trail through Washington. And my starting point. And the start of five weeks of solitary bliss in one of my favorite places in the whole world.

Bryn pulled out her phone. “Hey. Let me grab a shot of

you in front of the sign, to commemorate the moment.”

“Okay.” I took a few steps  
back. “Say, single life.”

I popped a hip and smiled for the camera. “Single life.”

“Perfect.” She slipped her phone into her pocket. “I love you, girl-friend. Stay safe out there and call me whenever you hit civilization.”

“I will.” My throat tightened. “I love you, too.”

I was totally looking forward to hiking solo. To enjoying time alone and figuring out my craptacular situation with no distractions.

But, for a second, I couldn’t help wondering if I should’ve taken Brynup on her offer to hike this first section with me.

Deep down I knew it would be a distraction, though. I needed alone time, in the woods, to find my center and do a serious assessment of my life. Especially my love life. Because I kept picking the same kind of winner, over and over, and I was done losing.

“See you in a couple weeks.” With a wave, I pivoted on my heel and stepped into the emerald glow of the Pacific Northwest rainforest. Happy with my choices. And looking forward to not having to do anything, at any set time, for anyone other than me.



## EVAN

Sitting cross-legged on floor, the hardwoods cooling my thighs, I thrust another stuff sack into the flimsy neon green



nylon bag that passed for a backpack. The idea that everything I needed to survive for a week in the woods would fit securely in this thing seemed optimistic, but the salesperson at the outdoor store swore it was the best for going fast and light.

Three loud thuds reverberated from my heavy, dark-stained oak front door through my uber-sleek loft apartment. I grabbed another piece of improbably small and light gear, ignoring the door. If anybody talked me out of this trip, I'd never get up the guts to do something like this again, and I needed to do something.

Even the thought of staying in Boston, marrying Lainey, and finding another Financial Analyst job made me nauseous. I had to get away and go somewhere totally different, if I was ever going to figure anything out. Because I didn't know who I was or what I wanted and staying here hadn't generated any epiphanies.

The booming faded. I exhaled into the silence. "Come on, Evan."

I jumped. *Fucking John.*

"I know you're in there. I saw your car outside and the lights on." His knuckles tapped the door this time. "Talk to me, bro. You haven't been answering your phone. I'm worried about you."

The plaintive tone in his voice pressed on me. A few tiny chunks of my limited resolve crumbled. I wedged my water filter and cook stove into my pack.

"At least let me know you're all right."

Setting down my titanium pot with a clank, I crossed the living room and did the last thing I wanted to do. Or maybe the second to last thing since Lainey wasn't the one standing on the other side of the door. I turned the knob.

My brother loomed over me, lips pressed in a thin line, eyebrows pulled together, fist raised to knock again. *Stay strong, Evan. Stay strong. You can do this.*

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You don't need to break down my door. I'm fine, I promise."

One thick shoulder shoved against me and he barged into my apartment, waving at the pile of multicolored bags and bits piled on the floor. "What's all this?"

"A backpack. And gear." "What's it for?"

"Backpacking."

"No shit, Sherlock." He spun to face me. "You haven't been camping since Cub Scouts. You're not planning to pull a Chris McCandless and die in the wilderness, are you?"

"Fuck you." *Stay strong. Stay strong.* "For your information, I have been backpacking since then."

"When?" He lifted his chin.

"Boy Scouts, when I was twelve. The year you went off to Stanford." I held my rain jacket and pants folder over the top of my pack and flipped the lid to lock everything in place. The buckle didn't reach. I pulled and shoved. "Those were some of the happiest days of my life, so please don't try to talk me out of this trip."

"Does Lainey know about it?"

"I wrote her a note." I pointed at the counter.

"Now I know you've cracked." John lifted the paper off the granite kitchen island and scanned it. His eyes widened. "You're going backpacking in Washington State? Couldn't you go somewhere closer to Boston? I mean, doesn't the Appalachian Trail go through part of New England?"

*Annnnnnd...This is why I haven't told anyone my plan.* I grit- ted my teeth and laid my stomach across the top of the pack, striving for maximum compression. The tips of the buckles almost touched. *Damnit.*

I rocked back on my heels. "Anywhere in New England is not far enough away from here."

"What about the Rockies? Isn't Colorado far enough?"

"Colorado is too rugged and high elevation. Besides, I've always wanted to check out Portland and Seattle."

He shook his head. "Well, at least I know where to send the searchand rescue team."

"Very funny."

"Are you sure this isn't just unemployment depression talking, bro?"

"Positive. Honestly, losing that job was a relief more than any- thing else." I tossed the rain pants aside, folded my jacket flat as possi- ble, and laid it on top. Balancing the pack between my legs, I strained to clip it shut, praying it wouldn't burst at the seams—here, or on the trail.

"So, let me get this straight. You've got a hot fiancé from a wealthy family who's about to make partner at her law firm—"

"She's not my fiancé anymore." I growled. The buckle clicked. I rocked back on my heels and glanced at the ball of black nylon on the hardwood floor. *It's August. Even in the Pacific Northwest, I can survive a week without rain pants.*

His eyes went wide. "What? Seriously?"

"Seriously." John's stare pulled the words out of me. "I'm dying here. That job, my relationship, they've been sucking

away my soul.”

“Damn. I knew you weren’t super happy, but I didn’t realize it was that bad. I figured you were finally learning how to toe the family line without losing your mind.”

“I’m not like you, John. I wasn’t born to be the golden boy of the Davenport clan.” I hoisted my pack onto my back, the weight digging into my shoulders, and tried to remember the right order for adjusting the straps. “I’m not sure what I want to do with my life, but I know this isn’t it and I don’t think I’m ever going to find it here.”

“Mother and Father are going to freak the fuck out when they hear you left.”

A bucket of ice-cold guilt poured over me, cooling some of my resolve. “They’re going to be even more upset when they hear I left Lainey.”

“Yeah, and they’ll call me when they can’t reach you. So will Lainey. What should I say?”

This time the guilt hit more like a thick, icy blanket of snow. The kind that traps you and suffocates you if you aren’t careful. I ran my fingers over the bumps and ridges of the stones of my leather brace-let—the one Uncle Martin gave me the year he died—searching for confidence.

“Tell them you don’t know any more than what is in my note. I’ll be home in ten days, so it’s not like it’s the end of the world. And right now, I have a plane to catch.”

“I’m guessing there’s no cell service out there.”

“You guessed right. Besides, I got rid of my phone.” “You wha—?”

“Don’t.” I held up my palm. “I’ll explain it all later, but I really have to go.”

John crossed his arms, eyes pinched at the corners, and blew out a breath. "Fine."

"I owe you one. Seriously, you get the award for world's best bigbrother for this one."

"Gee, thanks. Just don't blame me if you come home to a seriousshitstorm or three."

I grabbed my duffel bag of extra clothes and opened the door. "I'm well aware the only person I have to blame for my shitstorms is me."



## Chapter 2

### JULES

Tiny raindrops pattered on my nylon roof. Tucking my dirty hiking boots into the corner of my vestibule, I butt-crawled inside, shimmy-ing out of my damp rain pants along the way.

Belly still warm from a hot dinner of tuna mac, I pulled on long johns and fresh, dry socks. I slithered into the cozy cocoon of my sleep- ing bag with a deep, contented sigh. The rain picked up steam, hitting my tent like a line of drummers at a halftime show. Laying back, I stretched long, shifting around to work out the kinks in my back.

Four days in and my life had already settled into the familiar rhythms of the trail. Wake before the sun heats the green walls of my tent. Make a hot breakfast. Break camp. Hike through spectacular scenery. Eat snacks. Hike some more. Eat some more. Set up camp. Make a hot dinner. Sleep. Repeat.

Nobody to deal with. Nobody else's problems needing solving, or egos needing stroking. Not even any real decisions

to be made beyond when to eat and when to make camp.

In other words, total fucking bliss.

Not that I'd gotten very far on solving my own problems. But I had miles and hours and days of thinking time ahead. I could afford to relax and just be for at least a week. Get back in touch with the me I was when I was alone, instead of always being somebody's graphic designer, consultant, coach, armchair psychotherapist, or goddamn ex-girlfriend.

Tension that wasn't from carrying an almost thirty-pound pack crept into my neck. I grabbed my book and set my headlamp on medium, reading until I couldn't hold my eyelids up. Which took about three minutes.

Lights out, surrounded by sighing forest and tapping rain drops, sleep sucked me in the way it had every night so far—hard and fast. No dreams, just thick, heavy, total relaxation.

My eyes snapped open for no apparent reason. I held my breath, listening through the rain drumming my tent.

A man's voice rang out from feet away, the tone somewhere between exasperated and hopeless. "Seriously?"

Nylon rustled and shifted outside my tent, loud even through the rain.

I exhaled. *What kind of dumbass tries to set up a tent in the dark, in this weather?*

A branch snapped. "Fucking goddammit!" This time his voice hit a note somewhere between pissed and despondent. Nylon crackled and shushed.

Snuggling in deeper, I covered my head with my bag to block out the noise of my new neighbor. The rain's tapping lulled me. My eyelids drooped like they had weights attached and—  
"Sonofabitch."

I flipped over and stared up at the night-dark ceiling, listening to continued cursing, crinkling, and crumpling. The guy wasn't setting up his tent, he was in a full-fledged, mixed martial arts fight with it.

"Fuck. Me." Scrabbling for my headlamp, I unzipped my tent and aimed the beam across the small clearing. Raindrops formed silver lines, obscuring my view.

My light caught a bit of reflective material. And a bare leg. And what looked like a pile of fabric thrown over a boulder but had to be a rainfly tossed over the asshole who woke me up.

"Um, helloooo. What the fuck are you doing out there?" My breath hung like a ghost in the beam of light.

"Oh, nothing. Just trying to get some shut eye. Except my tent justbroke, it's pouring rain, and I'm soaking wet."

"And why, exactly are you setting up in the middle of the night in a rainstorm?"

"Because I need somewhere dry to sleep." *Fuck. I knew I shouldn't have asked.* "Don't you have rain pants?"

"If I had rain pants, don't you think I'd be wearing them?" The pile of nylon shifted and settled, and the bare leg disappeared.

"You're going to go hypothermic dressed like that."

"Tell me something I don't know." The rain pounded down. "Are you going to turn off that light, or what? I am trying to get some sleepover here."

"Sure thing." I clicked off my headlamp and sat in the dry comfort of my tent, staring out into the dark, wet night.

The chances of my random neighbor getting any shuteye



out there were pretty much nil. Ditto the chances of me sleeping through the night with his periodic shifting and cussing.

The chances of him getting hypothermia dressed like that in forty-five-degree rain, on the other hand, were pretty damn high.

I clicked on my headlamp. "Aren't you freezing?" "Pretty much."

Something told me I would regret my next words. But I didn't want his death on my conscience. "You can't stay out there all nightlike that. My tent isn't big, but I can make room for you. If you want." "God, yes. Thank you." He flung off the rainfly and trotted over.

Rainwater splashed under his running shoe-clad feet and clung to his bare shins.

Face obscured by a ratty beard and his hood pulled low over his nose, rando dude dove for the entrance to my tent.

"Hey. Hey. Slow down." I held up a palm. "Take off that jacket and your muddy-ass shoes and leave 'em in the vestibule. Otherwise it's going to be as wet and nasty in here as it is out there."

"Okay. Okay." He stomped and shivered, slipped off his rain shell, and sat in the entrance unlacing his shoes with shaking, wrinkled fingers. Water pooled on the tent floor around his ass.

"Shit. You're soaked. Take off everything before you get all the way in here."

He glanced over a shoulder and a pair of deep blue eyes gazed into mine. "You're not trying to take advantage of me, are you?"

A zing of electricity shot through my chest and settled at the apex of my thighs. For no good God damn reason.

"I'm trying to keep you from dying out there. So, hurry up." I snagged my pack towel, wiping up the puddle inching toward the foot of my sleeping bag.

He hesitated, teeth chattering. The musty smell of damp wool filled the tiny space.

"I promise I won't make fun of your tiny peen. If that's what you're worried about, we can chalk it up to shrinkage."

"No. I'm wondering how we're both going to fit in here." "You're not that big."

"You don't know that." The corner of his ashen lips quirked, but he peeled off his shirt and reached for his waistband. He lifted his hips off the floor, the muscles in his back rolling and flexing. And just like that, a naked, quaking stranger filled my tent.

If I didn't get this guy warm soon, I'd have a bigger problem on my hands. I scooted to the side and opened my bag. The damp nylon wall pressed against my back. I shivered. "Zip up the door and climb in."



## EVAN

Trembling and chattering, and eternally grateful, I crawled into her sleeping bag, burrowed my head under the covers and curled into a shaking ball. I'd never been so cold in my life.

Fuck. What am I doing out here? Other than almost getting myself killed in a freezing rainstorm, in the middle of nowhere.

The sleeping bag wasn't near as warm as I'd hoped, or maybe I was colder than I realized. Either way, I wasn't going to complain. Not given my options.

"Please tell me you still have a dry sleeping bag out there." My savior's voice rang loud even through the nylon and insulation. "Because I'm pretty sure we won't both fit in mine."

"I have a sleeping bag in the top of my pack." I pointed in the general direction even though she couldn't see my hand under the covers. "Not sure about the dry part."

The rain pounded on the tent. My body quaked. Fear and acid roiled my gut.

"Shit. Okay. Be right back."

I curled smaller, as much for warmth as to give her room to get out of the tent. The zip and snick of the door warned me she'd gone and returned.

"You're fucking lucky."

"Not usually."

"Well, you are tonight, because your pack was sitting upright and wide open, but your rainfly kept everything from getting soaked."

The shush of a sleeping bag sliding out of its stuff sack filled me with a ridiculous amount of excitement. I could've happily huddled under five sleeping bags.

Cool air and light wafted in and tremors ran from my head to my toes. My savior's body slipped into my cozy cocoon,

blocking the sudden draft. She spread my bag over the top of us, filling the gaps, and I prayed I'd start to feel warmer soon.

"Straighten your legs, would you? I need at least a little room."

Much as I didn't want to give up any possible body heat, I stretched out long. She spooned in behind me, the scratch of her clothing on my bare skin making me hyper-aware of my nudity.

"Aren't you supposed to be naked too?" My teeth chattered. "To warm me up faster?"

"Yeah...No." She took her hand off my hip. "I think you've gotten lucky enough tonight."

"I mean, that's what always happens in books and movies."

"You're still shivering. And you're talking and making perfect sense. So, I really don't think that's necessary. I can give you plenty of body heat through my clothes." She exhales. "Besides, I make it a policy not to get naked with anyone unless we're on a first-name basis."

"Funny. So do I. Yet here I am." I'm pretty sure I tried to shrink inside myself. Vulnerable didn't even begin to cover how I felt in that moment. Stupid and scared and vulnerable came closer.

Her guffaw shot through the tent like a bullet from a gun, but her warm hand landed on my hip again. "I guess there's an easy way to fix that. I'm Jules."

"Evan." My shivers slowed from constant to intermittent. "Thank you for coming to my rescue, Jules."

"I couldn't leave you out there in the rain. You'd have kept me up all damn night." She curled in closer, her head against my mid-back, her knees hitting my hamstrings.

I settled into her welcome heat. We barely fit in her tiny

tent like this. No way could we lay side-by-side. She was giving up a comfortable, good night's sleep for me. A total stranger. "I still appreciate it, even if you did it for selfish reasons."

"You're welcome, then. But don't get too comfortable. I'm kicking you out at first light."

"Roger that."

She might've saved my life, but I had zero plans to spend any more time with her than absolutely necessary. So far, this backpacking adventure had given me more blisters and discomfort than personal insights or inspiration. I was done being cold, wet, dirty, hungry, sore, tired, and undercaffeinated.

All I wanted to do was survive the night, speed run the rest of this damn trail, and get the hell out of here. Hot meals and hotter showers beckoned.



## Chapter 3

EVAN

Hot. Why am I so hot?

I peeled open my eyelids to a green nylon wall dappled gold with sunlight. And a mound of sleeping bags. And a pint-size, fully dressed body splayed over my naked one.

My brain tilted and swirled. I scrubbed my hand over my face.

Then it clicked and I cringed.

I'm not sure this backpacking trip was the worst decision I'd ever made, but it wasn't anywhere near the best, or even middle of the pack. I needed to get out of here. Out of this tent. Out of this goddamn for-est. Out of Washington.

*I should've gone to the beach.*

Standing in my climate-controlled apartment in Boston, a week-long backpacking trip on the other side of the country had seemed like a fun and exciting way to change up my life and reconnect with my better self. How hard could it be if I'd done it when I was twelve with no problem? Ha. Funny.

Somehow, I had to extricate myself without waking this woman and get on the trail. Bad enough she had to rescue my pathetic, freezing ass, the last thing I wanted was to relive all that glory with her in the bright light of day like some weird walk of shame.

Or listen to a laundry list of what I'd done wrong. I got enough of that at home.

Only one problem. We were two people sardined in a one-person tent. I couldn't slip out from under her without her noticing.

I put one hand on her shoulder, solid muscle firm under my palm, and gave it a little shake. "Hey, Jules. Wake up."

She stirred and lifted her head, her frizzy brown hair a dark halo surrounding a pair of amused, dark brown and amber eyes. "You're right. You're bigger than I thought."

"Sorry." Heat ran to my face. "I have to pee."

She slid off to the side, her back bowing the wall of her tent. "And I thought your morning wood was because I'm so damn sexy."

"No! I mean, I wasn't thinking of you like that. Or thinking about sex."

"So, you don't think I'm sexy." She fluttered her eyelashes.

*Shit.* "It's not that. I'm sure you're gorgeous—"

Her eyes widened. "You're sure I'm gorgeous? You can't tell?" "No. It's...I...I don't know. I was too busy freezing my ass off last

night to even look at you.”

“Ah, so I’m not pretty enough to catch your eye. Not even now, in broad daylight?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. *How was I supposed to respond? What did she want to hear? Why did women always trap me into these conversational corners—with no good answers and no way to escape?*

Jules snorted. “I’m fucking with you, Evan.”

I opened my eyes to her smirk. “Not funny. Do you think you could let me out of here?”

“I’m not keeping you in here.”

I glanced at my sleeping bag covered body and back at her. “I’d love a little privacy.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, moving toward the door. “It’s not like I didn’t see it all last night.”

“Let me at least pretend like I have some dignity.”

“Good luck with that.” The zipper snicked open, and she crawled out.

Sitting up, I scanned the tent. “Hey, what’d you do with my clothes.”

“I shoved them down in the foot of your sleeping bag to dry out.” I reached into the depths of our bags and found my shirt and shorts and boxer-briefs. Not only were my clothes ninety percent dry, they were warm. Well maybe not warm, but definitely not early morning icy. *Brilliant. Why didn’t I think of that?*

“Thanks.”

At least fully clothed I didn’t feel completely at the mercy of mother nature, or kind strangers—even if it wasn’t true. Backing out of the tiny tent, I pulled my sleeping bag along



with me. Packing up and getting out of there couldn't happen fast enough.



## JULES

I took a deep breath of fresh-washed forest. Of Christmas trees and damp pencil-shavings. Rough rock bit into my ass, but I needed a dryish place to sit in the sun and crank up my stove. One affording a front-row seat to view the random guy I'd rescued.

That, and I couldn't convert my sleeping pad into a chair with Evan laying on it.

*Naked.*

Turning on the gas I flicked my lighter. Flames leapt up with a soft *foosh*, burning blue and hot. I placed my pot of hot water carefully on top of the tiny burner, trying not to wonder what Evan looked like in the light of day.

Or who he was. Or why he was out here in the middle of nowhere—apparently without many backcountry skills.

None of which was my business. Except maybe the “what he looked like” part. Not because I wanted to see him naked in all his glory. Just to put a face to the name.

Other than that, I did not need to get involved.

A fine, tight ass backed out of my tent. Evan turned to face me, sapphire eyes beaming from beneath a mop of dark, unkempt hair, longer on top than on the sides. My breath caught.

*Fuck. Me. This man is gorgeous.*

He flashed his pearly whites and I struggled for focus.

And composure.

“Thanks again for saving me from freezing to death last night. I hope you slept okay, despite me crowding you in there.”

“No biggie.” I shrugged and fiddled with my stove, ignoring the energy crackling between us. “I would’ve slept worse knowing you were dying in a rainstorm, feet from my tent.”

No way was I about to tell him it was the best sleep I’d had in eight years.

Though it probably had more to do with getting in the backpacking groove, and long days on the trail, than anything else. Certainly not because I spent a night squeezed into a too small tent trying to keep some rando guy from freezing.

He’d be on his way in a few minutes. This would become nothing more than an entertaining story to laugh about over drinks with Brynand Aly when I got home.

Evan scanned the clearing. I pulled a tea bag out of my stuff sack and set it alongside two packets of instant oatmeal.

“I put your gear over there, at the base of that tree.” I pointed at the neat bundle that was his backpack and tent wrapped in his rainfly. “Oh. Wow. Thanks.” He crossed the clearing. “You didn’t have to do that.”

I let my gaze roam his lean body. His ass and legs were nicely muscled, but trim and fit like a runner versus seriously built. Still, he was more than good-looking by most any woman’s standards.

Something inside me heated. Just a little. And I hadn’t even had any tea yet.

“No. I didn’t. But if the wind had picked up you might’ve

lost something important—like your tent. If nothing else, I wanted to make sure your shit stayed dry. I don't have spare gear to loan you, and I'd rather not have you sharing my tent again."

*At least not if we're only sleeping.*

I crushed that thought.

"Good points. The state of my gear was the last thing on my mind—aside from the unusable state of my tent."

"What's wrong with it, anyway?" The water on my stove burred. I dumped my oatmeal packs in my bowl and my tea bag into my mug. "Well, let's see. I'm pretty sure I broke a pole..." He reached for the pile of aluminum tent poles, opening the segments and fitting them together one-by-one. The steady click-clack filled the morning quiet. "Yep. This one is broken off at the end. And when it broke..." He flapped open the pile of nylon and stuck his fingers through a jagged tear along one seam. "It ripped a hole through my rainfly. Looks like I'm sleeping under the stars from here on out. Unless it's raining." A shiver ran down his arms and out his fingers.

"Let me be the judge of that." I poured and held up the pot, cinnamon and mint steam wafting warm across my face. "Hot water?"

"No thanks. I've got cold breakfast."

"Suit yourself." Crossing the clearing, I picked up the broken pole. "You're lucky. It broke below the hub and I've got a pole splint in my repair kit. Easy fix."

"That still leaves a big, gaping tear in my fly. No matter what you do, it's going to leak."

"Eh. Most every gear problem is fixable with the right tools and a little know-how." I met his too-intense gaze and

the hairs on my neck did a little dance. Evan was far sexier than he should have been.

Especially since he looked at me like a potential savior he wasn't sure he could put his faith in, not like a woman he wanted to sleep with. Or even found mildly attractive.

"I'm guessing you have both of those."

"In spades. But it's going to take a few minutes to get you fixed up. Why don't you grab your mug and have a cup of tea?"

"Oh, that's all right." He waved a hand around. A worn leather bracelet, studded with stones, wrapped his wrist. Totally at odds with his shiny-new, high-end trail runners and hiking clothes.

"You sure?" Between the cold of last night, and the damp chill of the morning, I expected him to jump on the chance for a hot beverage.

"Positive. Especially since I don't have any tea."

"I've got extra."

His face, his whole body really, tensed. I set down the broken pole and got out another pack of tea. "Grab your mug."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Or I wouldn't offer." I gave him my warmest smile.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" He dug around in his pack with one arm.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you don't know me."

"You're right, I don't. But I'm a nice person." I stirred my oatmeal. "And we're two people in the middle of nowhere, where every piece of gear, every decision, can mean the

difference between life and death. You look closer to the dying side of that equation. I told you, I don't want that on my conscience."

[Click here to keep reading.](#)