

Excerpt from Mountain Kiss

Only a mistletoe kiss, a moment of mountain madness, my foot! Don't get hung up on me! Seriously? Moi? Hung up over one kiss? One man? Foot loose and fancy free, that's me. The nerve! Who does Jesse Days think he is? Just because he's here at the Lodge helping me out doesn't mean I'm up for grabs. He's still "hired help."

Sunny Weathers had been keeping her eyes on him since they'd first met last summer. She flashed back to the first time she ever saw him. It wasn't all that long ago, really a matter of months.

A cacophony of sound met her ears that morning. Workmen were raising a ruckus when she went out to investigate. Jesse seemed to be in charge. His shirt was off due to the heat and physical exertion. She liked the way the sweat made his chest glisten. She felt her stomach do a back flip. He was piping hot. Ignoring her raging hormones, she asked, "What in heaven's name is going on here if I may ask?" Turned out Skye, her sister, had hired him to do the restoration work on the Lodge and its cottages. He knew where to find existing, legal hardwoods and knew the old methods of hewing and construction. Jesse had explained the restoration process. "See these shingles? They're mountain grown cedar, handmade. To preserve the integrity of the historic structure, you need to replace cedar with cedar and match it."

"How on earth can we do that?" She had cried, "These must be the originals. We can't cut down park trees."

"Fortunately," he answered, "cedar still grows here in the hills, and we have out-of-park sources. All we have to do is make sure you have an artisan with similar tools to craft the shingles. And that's where I come in," he said modestly, but a spark of pride shone in his too-blue, bottomless eyes. He winked. Sunny felt her lady part melt with that sexy-as-all-hell wink.

She wondered now if that's when she began her increasing fascination with him.

As Sunny worked today, it was clear to her that they needed some muscle to move the tables, ladders, and scaffolding from areas under construction. They needed the space so they could become a temporary emergency relief center and residence for victims of the Chimney 2 fire. Hurricane-force winds had reached the mountains, further igniting the hills.

The first fire broke out and was under control until those winds hit. The fire was devastating, robbing people of home, business, livelihood, and worse, kin. Fourteen souls lost their lives in the fire. Sunny Weathers needed help so she and her sisters, Skye and Storme, could assist others.

The mandate from their grandmother's will stipulated they must restore the family Lodge or lose their inheritance. They had devised three phases of work to accomplish that Herculean task: restore the Lodge to profitability. That was a feat made nearly impossible with the worst forest fire in a hundred years. She managed to call some friends. Bo Davies, Craig Knight's coon hunting friend, responded to her plea. Luke was consumed with park work but sent his brothers, Mark and Matt.

The men took a much-needed break when Millie, the Lodge cook, marshalled them together for lunch. Over hot coffee and ham sandwiches, Sunny chatted with the menfolk. Jesse Days, Sunny's latest crush, watched her like a hawk and finally unfolded his long, lithe body to saunter to her side as she rose to clear the table.

"Need some help?" he asked.

"Sure. If you want," she returned.

"I want," he said.

"Al-righty, then, you can help with these."

He carried used plates and mugs to the kitchen. "Hey," Bo called, "any more bread?" Sunny went to fetch some more. So did Jesse. They reached for the bread plate and their hands touched. A shock wave went through her at his touch. Her hand shot back and so did his. The platter shattered when it fell on the floor.

Not liking the current that flowed between them, she said sharply, "See what you've done! Some help you are!"

"Accidents happen," he replied with pleading, puppy dog eyes. "Sorry. Say you'll forgive me."

She gave him a look. He salvaged the bread, saying, "Five-second rule applies. This bread is fine. No harm, no foul." Sunny grabbed a broom and dustpan. "Looks like you're mighty upset over spilt milk, or has something else got a burr in your rear?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You're riled. Hell, one touch and you are mad as all get out. You weren't mad when I got lucky under the mistletoe."

"Well, maybe your luck just ran out," she said. "As I recall, mister, you said that was a—and I quote—just a moonshine mistletoe kiss and not to take you seriously, so I'm not."

"Did I now?" he drawled.

"Yes, you did. This is me not taking you seriously."

"That was a right stupid thing to say," he admitted. His candor took her aback, and a shadow of a smile crossed her face.

"I didn't want to lead you on, is all. That was a magical night. I'm not into long-term relationships," he acknowledged.

"And you think one kiss is enough for me to hear wedding bells? Pl-uze, don't flatter yourself. Although..."

"Although what?" he asked.

“Other things might interest me,” she said coyly.

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know...” She batted her eyes at him and gave him a searching, saucy, look. “Things like seeing if you are worth my time.”

“I can show you a mighty fine time,” he said, a glint appearing in his eye.

“Any man can do that much,” she said wryly.

“How ‘bout you give me a try anyhow?”

“You up for the challenge?” she asked.

“Something along those lines,” he acknowledged. “How about we check it out?”