

HEATHER A. BUCHMAN

And  
Then  
You  
Fall

Volume I in the  
Crested Butte Series

And Then You Fall

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## All I Want is You

Your breath and your heart  
The way that you're smart  
The charm of your tease  
When you make me say please  
Your eyes and your hair  
The look of your stare

You make my soul lift higher  
You set my love on fire  
Baby, every word I say is true  
All I want is your mouth, and your lips  
And your soft fingertips,  
The curve of your spine  
Well it's gotta be mine  
The warmth of your kiss  
When we're lying like this  
The heat of your touch  
Well it's never too much

You make my heart beat wild  
Turn me into child  
Where the hell would I be without you  
The soft skin on your bones  
And the smile I would own  
When the blood in my veins flows  
With all that remains of doom.  
All I want is you.

—CB Leighton



For cute, guitar-playing, songwriting boys  
and the cowgirls who can't help but love them.



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# Chapter One

Liv picked up the iPad and hit replay on the song coming through the Bluetooth speakers. She intended to set the tablet back down on the ledge in the barn, but she hesitated, picked it back up, and scrolled through the Twitter feed. It took her a minute to zip through the hundred new tweets since the last time she looked, but didn't see anything from the one person she was hoping for. Why would she? It was only ten in the morning.

She'd already checked at least four times in as many hours. What rock star tweeted between midnight and noon? As logical as that was, it didn't stop her from looking. Besides, he would never define himself that way. Just a working musician, he'd say. He might even admit to being a songwriter. And a dad. Not that Liv would ever be in the position to have a conversation with him, again.

She heard a car pull up outside the barn just as she tapped the screen to check Facebook, also for the fourth time that morning.

"Oh Liv, aren't you getting tired of listening to this? Time for a new playlist." Paige Cochran planted her heels in the dirt to shift open the heavy barn door. As usual, Paige was dressed more as though she was headed for a high-powered meeting at the investment firm she consulted for, than she was for a visit to her best friend's barn.

"But I love this song," Liv muttered as she flicked through the playlists looking for something else to listen to.

"Here's the thing—"

"Don't say it. I can listen to whatever the hell I want to in my own damn barn."

"Oh, a little testy this morning? What's going on?"

“I’m sick of people complaining about my music,” Liv growled.

“People? What people? Who have you seen lately besides Pooh and Micah?”

Pooh was a fourteen-year-old sweetheart of a mare. The quarter horse belonged to Liv’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, who stood firm on the name Pooh when they’d gotten the horse when she was ten. “You don’t *know* Winnie the Pooh is a boy, ya know. He could be a girl.” Renie, short for Irene, informed her, not realizing the slip in her own words.

“You’re right,” Liv had answered, rolling her eyes. “*He* could be a she. What was I thinking?”

The other horse, Micah, was Liv’s baby. The four-year-old appaloosa gelding showed promise as a barrel racer, but Liv couldn’t bear to part with him for proper training, nor was she able to train him herself. Those days were long since over for her, they had been since before Renie was born.

“You didn’t answer me. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, just getting tired of my own company. I’m bored, and I’m sick of this cold weather.”

“I sent you a text to see if you wanted to meet for breakfast, but you didn’t answer.”

“Oh sorry, I didn’t see it. I’m done out here, we could head into town if you still want to.”

“We can stay here. I know you have coffee, and probably something fresh out of the oven that I shouldn’t eat, but will anyway.”

She was right. Liv had made cinnamon scones that morning before she came out to the barn to get her chores done. With Renie away at college, she’d end up adding most of them to her already overloaded freezer if Paige hadn’t shown up.

“Aren’t you a little overdressed just have to coffee with me?”

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“I have a business proposition for you. I was going to try to talk you into heading up to Denver with me later this morning.”

Paige managed to get herself involved in at least one new business venture a month. For someone who was supposed to be semi-retired, she still worked fifty or sixty hours a week. If there was a deal to be made between Denver and Colorado Springs, whether it involved an investment or promoting some other kind of new business, Paige ended up on the inside edge of making it happen. She was a far cry from the room mom Liv met fifteen years ago when their daughters started kindergarten together.

“I have to go to Vegas next week. Mark said he’d horse-sit so you can come with me.”

Mark was Paige’s husband and when Liv met them, Mark was traveling twenty-five days each month as the lead singer of a folk band. Diagnosed with cancer only a year later, Mark retired and never looked back, choosing to focus instead on their three children, the youngest of which had remained Renie’s best friend since their kindie days.

Mark still wrote music, but spent most of his time picking up odd jobs, like painting houses or other handyman-type projects, often for friends of theirs. He never hesitated to come and help Liv whenever she needed it, sometimes without her even knowing it. He’d say he was coming over to ride, but soon she’d see him out mending a fence, or heading into her house to fix something she hadn’t noticed yet. Liv didn’t know what she’d do without him, or Paige. They were her lifeline, especially now that Renie was attending college out of state.

“A trip to Vegas would certainly help with the grouchy-bored thing. And the cold weather. Come with me. Sit in the sun. Get *ungrouchy*.”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Liv turned on her heel, grabbed her iPad and headed out of the barn in the direction of the house.

“I’ve come with a bribe.”

“What’s that?”

“CB Rice is playing at the House of Blues next Wednesday.”

Paige played dirty. Liv had been listening to one of his songs when she walked in just a few minutes ago.

“Did you think there was a chance I didn’t know it?”

“And still you say you don’t know if you want to go?”

“That’s *why* I don’t know. I’m almost forty, a little old for this stalker-groupie life I’ve found myself leading the last few months.”

It was bad enough that the universe seemed to throw the two of them together every time she turned around, but to put herself directly in his line of fire? He would start to think their random encounters weren’t serendipitous accidents at all, but rather her stalking him.

Six days later, Liv boarded an early morning flight, headed for a few days at Mandalay Bay, and another not-so-chance encounter with CB Rice.

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Liv couldn’t recall how long it had been since she first downloaded his music, or how she found it to begin with. But she did remember the first time she saw him in person.

Liv and Paige got tickets for a concert at Red Rocks for Renie and Blythe, Paige’s youngest daughter, while they were home for summer break from college. The band headlining that night was a cross between a rock and a reggae band, perfect music for a hot summer night.

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Red Rocks kept the first twenty rows at most shows set aside for general admission. They arrived early and were able to sit in the center of the sixth row.

There were two opening acts that night, CB Rice was on stage first and a band Renie and Blythe knew from Denver was second.

That was the first time Liv heard him play live, and the first time she met him. After their set, he and the band came and sat in the roped off section where the sound equipment was set up, which encompassed the center section of the rows directly behind them.

Renie tapped her mother's shoulder and pointed behind her. When Liv turned around, she looked right at CB, who just happened to be looking in her direction. When their eyes met, Liv felt her cheeks turn pink, and she looked away. When she looked back a split second later, he was still looking right at her, only this time he smiled, and winked.

Liv continued to sneak looks back at him throughout the show. Every so often he'd turn his head and catch her.

When the main act finished their second encore and the four turned to leave, Liv felt another tap on her shoulder. When she turned around, he was right behind her.

"I'm Ben Rice, ma'am," he said, holding out his hand.

"Hi," she answered, having a hard time looking him in the eye. No one should be that hot, maybe on stage, but not in person. "I'm Liv, Olivia Fairchild. Olivia Fairchild," she eked out as she shook his hand. "Oh—and this is my friend Paige, my daughter, Renie, and Paige's daughter Blythe."

He shook each of their hands and turned back to Liv. "Thanks for coming to the show tonight."

"Um, thank you," Liv stumbled through a response. "Well, bye then."

Liv remembered breaking out in a near run in the opposite direction toward the parking lot, followed by an hour's worth of teasing by Paige and the girls. The entire way home they teased her incessantly about the rock star that had a crush on her.

"He called me 'ma'am,' didn't any of you catch that? I probably remind him of his mother."

"Even I don't buy that," laughed Paige.

"I've never been so embarrassed in my life."

"About what? How was that embarrassing?"

"He caught me staring at him during the concert. More than once."

"I looked back several times myself, my friend, and each time I did, he was watching you. I'd say whatever the attraction was, it was mutual."

\*\*\*

Whenever they went to Las Vegas, which wasn't often, Liv and Paige stayed at The Hotel, part of the Mandalay Bay complex. Situated near the end of the Strip, it catered to a different clientele than some of the other resorts. The lights weren't as bright, the casino noises weren't as loud, and the crowd was more subdued. That suited Liv and Paige just fine. Neither was there to gamble. Paige had a few meetings scheduled, but otherwise they'd be camped out by one of the eleven-acre resort's pools.

"Maybe we'll bump into him in one of the elevators. Or he'll be at the bar tonight."

"Would you stop it? You're making me a nervous wreck. Wasn't it you who said we were here to relax? Did you mean only you were going to be permitted that luxury?"

"Oh come on, you don't think I see your eyes scanning the crowds?"

"He's not here yet."

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“And how, pray tell, do you know this?”

“Twitter. He’s playing a benefit tonight—at home.”

Liv looked off in the opposite direction. “Yep, I’m a stalker.”  
Paige heard her mumble.

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The second time she saw him was in January, just a couple of months ago. Renie had a few days left of Christmas break when she and Liv decided to take an impromptu ski trip. When they woke up Friday morning the sun was shining and the weather forecast was good for the rest of the weekend.

They packed their bags and skis and hit the road, making the two-hundred mile drive from Monument, Colorado, to Crested Butte, in just over four hours. They checked into their room at the ski area and went downtown for drink. It was the first time Liv and Renie went out for a drink together. Her daughter had only turned twenty-one a few days before.

Liv felt hideously old when they walked into “the Goat,” a Crested Butte institution on Elk Avenue, the main drag of the historic downtown district. But when she grabbed her daughter’s arm to tell her she wanted to go somewhere else, Renie wouldn’t stand for it.

“Come on Mom,” she’d said. “I’ve always wanted to hang out here, I love this place.”

“But I’m a hundred years older than anyone else in here.”

“You’re not, and you’re gorgeous, and everyone is going to think you’re my sister, not my mom. We’re staying.”

They’d only been there a few minutes when Liv noticed a poster promoting bands scheduled to perform at the bar. She had to get up and walk over to it to make sure her eyes weren’t deceiving her. Sure enough, CB Rice and his band were playing the following night. What were the odds?

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“Let’s stop and get the tickets on our way to the pool,” Paige suggested, putting on her sunglasses and grabbing her bag.

“No, let’s wait.”

“Why? We can get it out of the way and it’ll be one less thing to worry about.”

“I haven’t decided whether I want to go or not.”

“But isn’t that why we’re here?”

“No. It isn’t. You’re here for business meetings and I tagged along because I would’ve been bored at home and I wanted to relax and get some sun.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious Paige. I don’t know whether I want to go tomorrow night.”

“You listen to his music almost non-stop, he’s playing a benefit show while we’re here. Not going is nonsensical.”

“I’m not kidding when I say he is going to think I’m stalking him. I’ve ‘run’ into him twice in less than a year Paige. This will be the third.”

“So, this is the only time it’s intentional. You’re in Las Vegas, staying at the same complex where the House of Blues is located. You see he’s performing while you’re here . . . why wouldn’t you get tickets? It makes more sense that you would go.”

“I don’t know, I need to think about it. If I decide I want to go, we can still get tickets tomorrow.”

\*\*\*

Liv walked over to the bar at the Goat, where Renie waited for her and sat back down.

“What’s up Mom?” she asked.

“CB Rice is playing here tomorrow night. Remember—”

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“The guy you met at Red Rocks. Yeah, his family owns this place.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know that? Rice? His grandfather was one of the developers of the ski area. At one point I think the family owned most of the businesses downtown.”

“How do you know all this?”

“What do you think those magazines they leave in hotel rooms are for? Haven’t you ever read the history of Crested Butte? We’ve been coming here at least once a year since I learned to ski.”

Liv had no idea. No, she hadn’t ever read any of the magazines in the hotel rooms. She was a single mom, she had her hands full unloading bags and getting skis and boots and snow clothes ready. Then figuring out where they’d go for dinner and how she’d entertain her daughter until bedtime. Not that Renie wasn’t helpful, or able to entertain herself, but most of the responsibility for everything they did fell on Liv’s shoulders. It had been that way since Renie was born. By the time she fell into bed each night, Liv had no energy left to read a book, or a magazine. It was true at home and worse when they traveled.

“By the way, I didn’t *meet* him at Red Rocks, we saw him *play* at Red Rocks.”

“But he’s the guy who came up and introduced himself to you after the show, I know he is. Look.” Renie pointed to the photo behind the bar that Liv hadn’t noticed. “See, that’s him right there.”

Sure enough. It was him. Right there. Liv felt the familiar ache between her legs as she looked at the photo. There was something about that man, and his music, that made her quiver just thinking about him. She shuddered. *I cannot think this way. I’m with my daughter. What is wrong with me?*

“And, wow! There he is,” Renie pointed behind her mom.

Liv turned to see Ben stop to greet customers as he took off his red and black plaid Woolrich jacket and hung it on the coat rack inside the door. The man was a god. Well over six feet tall, he had the broad shoulders of an athlete. He was muscular, not body-builder muscular, but definitely hard-as-rock muscular. He reached up to put his straw cowboy hat on the rack with his jacket and Liv remembered he kept his head clean shaven.

He turned and looked straight at her, bestowing one of his charming smiles on her.

“Hey little lady,” he said, reaching for her hand. “It’s good to see you again.”

Liv figured he had no idea whether he’d seen her before or not, and even if she was vaguely familiar, she was sure he didn’t remember from where.

“You were at the show at Red Rocks last summer.”

*Gab.* Liv almost swallowed her tongue as Ben turned and gave Renie the same warm welcome.

*Oh no.* This was the worst thing imaginable. Liv was full-on imagining this guy naked, the one who was talking to her twenty-one-year-old daughter. What if Ben was interested in Renie?

“What’s wrong?” Renie turned and looked at her. Which part of that had she said out loud? Ben was looking at her too.

“Um . . . nothing, I just realized that I left the iron on in the hotel room. I should probably head back. Renie, do you want to take me to the hotel, and then you can come back, of course. If you want to.”

“Mom, I turned the iron off. You didn’t even use it.”

Damn. It wasn’t as though she could come up with another emergency reason to leave. But there was no way she could sit on this bar stool and watch her daughter be wooed by a man who made her heart race the way Ben did.

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“Good, you can stay. What’re you drinking?”

“I’ll just have another beer,” Liv heard herself say. Where had that come from? She couldn’t stay, she couldn’t watch this, it would be like watching the train wreck of her non-existent sex life. And her own daughter would be driving the train.

“That’s my girl,” she heard Ben say. Who was he talking to? Her, or Renie? Her heart was beating so hard she could barely hear herself think.

And where was Renie anyway? Liv saw her a couple stools over, talking to one of the guys who came in when Ben did. She was resting her hand on his forearm and leaning into him as he talked.

A wall of male blocked her line of sight as Ben maneuvered his way back to the bar stool Renie had vacated.

“Here you go. So tell me, what brings you to Crested Butte? You don’t live around here. I mean, I’d know if you did.”

“Skiing,” she answered between drinks of her beer. “My daughter goes back to school in a few days and we thought we’d sneak a quick trip in before she did.”

“I’m Ben,” he said, sheepishly. “I’m not sure if you remember.”

“And I’m Liv.” Of course she remembered. He was just trying to be polite because he hadn’t.

“It’s nice to meet you again, Liv.” He glanced at her near-empty beer, the one he had just gotten for her. She was so nervous she had practically chugged it.

“You need to be mindful of the altitude up here little lady. Beer goes to your head a lot quicker at 9,000 feet than it does in . . .”

“Monument. I’m from Monument. Do you know where that is?” She felt the same way she had at Red Rocks, she could barely look at him, he was just so . . . hot.

“Is that near Denver, or is it Colorado Springs?”

“Both, it’s pretty much right between the two. And we’re at 7,000 feet. But you’re right, I must’ve been more thirsty than I thought. Listen, I’m going to take the shuttle back to the ski area. Can you let Renie know I left her these and I’ll see her back at the hotel?”

Liv set her car keys on the bar, turned, and fled. As little as she was, five foot four and one hundred and twenty-five pounds, she could weave her way in and out of the crowd forming in the popular bar.

*Please don’t let him follow me, please don’t let him follow me,* she pleaded over and over again silently. The shuttle was only a few feet from her and she jumped on just before the driver closed the door on her.

“You’re my only passenger this run ma’am. Where’re you headed?”

“The Grand, thanks.”

Liv sat in the first row of the bus and buried her hands in her face. What had she been thinking? Oh my God, she’d just left her daughter in a bar. Alone.

She felt her phone vibrate in her pocket, pulled it out, and saw Renie’s name on the caller id.

“Mom, where are you?”

“I’m sorry, I felt sick. I think it’s the altitude.” The driver turned around and glared at her. Maybe he thought she was going to get sick in his shuttle bus. She waved her hand and mouthed, “I’m okay,” which seemed to assuage him.

“What? I can’t hear you. Where are you?”

“I’m on the shuttle,” she shouted into the phone.

“Why?”

“I don’t feel well.” She was practically screaming into her phone. The shuttle driver was going to pull over and kick her off the bus.

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“Okay, I’ll meet you at the hotel. I’ll leave now.”

Liv hit the off button on her phone. There was no point in continuing to scream at her daughter. And now that she’d ruined Renie’s good time, she could rest easy that she was on her way back to the hotel, and at least safe. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. That was the second time she’d raced away from him. What was it about this man that made her want to run as fast and as far as she could in the opposite direction?

It wasn’t as though all men had this effect on her. Or that she hadn’t dated. She had dated plenty over the last twenty years, or maybe the last ten. And maybe not plenty, but some. Before that she had her hands full raising her daughter by herself, and never would’ve had the time to think about dating.

“Ma’am, we’re here,” the shuttle driver said, startling her.

“Oh. I’m sorry. Thank you.” She pressed a five dollar bill in the receptacle, hoping he’d consider that enough of a tip.

“Thank you ma’am and I hope you’re feeling better,” she heard him say as the doors closed behind her.

Her car was in the parking lot and Renie was climbing out of it as she walked up.

“What was that all about?”

“I think I drank my beer too fast. That and the crowd in the bar—I felt very overwhelmed. I’m so sorry I ruined our night out together.”

“It’s okay. I was just really worried about you. If we stayed any longer we wouldn’t have felt like skiing tomorrow anyway. Here.”

Renie passed a piece of folded paper in her mother’s direction. “What’s this?”

“Ben’s number. He wants you to call him and let him know you’re okay.”

Could this night get any worse? Or more embarrassing? She crumbled up the paper in her pocket. There was no way she'd call him. By now he'd likely forgotten about the crazy old lady who ran out of his bar after finishing her beer in thirty seconds flat. Thank goodness she'd never have to see him again.

\*\*\*

Ben recognized the petite ash blonde as soon as he saw her sitting at the bar. Liv, that was her name. The first time he saw her, after they played at Red Rocks, he couldn't keep his eyes off her. She was with friends, sitting in the row in front of him at the show.

She had turned to look at him and when her bright blue eyes met his and she smiled, he felt as though the air had left his lungs. God, she was beautiful—one of the most naturally beautiful women he'd ever seen.

For the next two hours he watched her. It was apparent that she loved music—and she felt it. Not everyone did. She danced, she laughed, she smiled, she lived. That was why he remembered her name when he introduced himself at the end of the show.

"I'm Liv," she'd said. And he was ready to. He'd endured too many struggles in the last few years. He'd worked so hard to keep the music, the band going. He wasn't going to give up. This was his year. They were going to take it to the next level. No more local clubs, this was the year they'd tour nationally, he could just feel it. Their new album was about to drop, and he felt good things about this one, it was better than any they'd released before.

When he saw her again tonight, he knew that fate had brought her here to him for the second time, to remind him not to lose focus, keep his eye on the prize, to keep living. One day at a time.

Besides her beauty, which she seemed completely unaware of, there was something about her that made him yearn to know her better, but for some reason, he made her skittish. Maybe she wasn't

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feeling the same magnetic pull he was to her. Or, maybe she was feeling it and that is what made her run away from him. The draw he felt to her was so strong. If he wasn't so sure he was ready for it, it would've scared the hell out of him too.

\*\*\*

“Do you want a Bloody Mary or are you ready to move onto something else?” Paige was tapping her on the shoulder.

“What? Oh, yes, a Bloody Mary, please.”

“Were you sleeping?”

“I must've drifted off. I'm sorry.”

“You're here to relax, as you keep reminding me, so quit apologizing. I'll be right back. And put some sunscreen on before you fall asleep again.”

Liv hadn't been asleep, just thinking about Ben Rice, again. She pulled out her phone and checked Twitter. Nothing. Then Facebook. Nothing. She knew he wasn't here yet, he had that benefit at home tonight. Wait, was it tonight, or had it been last night? She checked again. Shit. It had been last night. Now she'd never relax. He could actually be here already.

## Chapter Two

Ben Rice started skiing and playing guitar before he could read, just like his dad and grandfather before him. When he was in high school, he formed a band that he named CB Rice, in honor of his hometown, Crested Butte, and his family. It confused people. They'd call him CB. That was his band, he was Ben. It didn't take long before he got used to it. If someone called him CB, he knew they were a stranger. If they called him Ben, they were a friend.

Making music was the only thing he'd ever wanted to do. Twenty-five years, hundreds of shows, and a half dozen albums later, he was still doing it. He loved it, more than anything.

Performing, hearing the crowds, watching them get into his music—there wasn't much in life that did it for him the way being on stage did. He'd given up a lot in his life, but that's one thing he never would. He'd be performing until the day he died. Yeah, that kind of attention you got addicted to, and it was one he couldn't live without.

He toured as much as he could with his band. They averaged some one hundred shows a year, mostly in Colorado. But he expected that to change. The band was solid. They'd even played Red Rocks, which had always been a dream.

He considered himself an average guy, even if his grandfather was one of the original developers of the Crested Butte ski area. He'd worked for his family all his life. He didn't mind hard work. When he wasn't touring he spent a lot of time at the Goat, his family's bar and restaurant.

Ben learned the importance of giving back to the community from his parents and grandparents. He and the band performed

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countless benefit concerts over the years for medical research, and for patients faced with life-threatening illnesses, like cancer, who didn't have insurance.

When he was thirty-seven he had been diagnosed with cancer himself. It was the same year he and his wife divorced. He fought both the disease and an ugly custody battle at the same time. He'd gone through the standard treatments, and to this day, was cancer-free. When he was home, his two boys stayed with him as much as they did with their mother.

A little over a year ago his family and band mates staged an intervention, he spent a couple of weeks in rehab and quit drinking. Battling every day with alcoholism was the hardest thing he'd ever done—harder than fighting cancer, harder than watching his marriage and his family fall apart. But, he had a year of sobriety under his belt and he'd never felt better.

It was harder to fight the urge to drink when he was on the road with the band, especially when they'd arrive at a gig and there'd be a case of beer and a bottle of Jack waiting for them. He didn't struggle with it as much when he was at home, especially when he was at his family's bar. So many people there knew him. He'd get distracted by conversation, or if he was really tempted to have a drink, he'd walk over, pick up his guitar, and start to play. Once the crowd started to get into the music, the adrenaline rush from that was enough to take the other cravings away.

Singing, performing brought him back. It reminded him not to give up, not to let go of how far he'd come. Not give up on his kids, not give up on himself, and not give up on his life. Giving up on his marriage had been hard, but when he looked back on it, he and his ex were better off apart. He believed, deep in his soul, that there was someone else out there for him, someone he was meant to spend the rest of his life with. He also believed that fate would put

her in his path—all he had to do was keep his eyes open and recognize when it happened.

He and the band were in Las Vegas to play an annual fundraiser. It had started out as a benefit for a hometown girl who relocated from Crested Butte to Vegas years before. They'd gone to high school together, and she was a bartender at the House of Blues. When the manager found out how hard she was struggling to make ends meet, he'd called Ben, and arranged the benefit. Sandy Smith had lost her fight with the disease, but the benefit lived on. In its fourth year, it raised funds for cancer research. Mandalay Bay kicked in a hefty chunk of change as did the House of Blues. Last year they'd raised over two million dollars. This year they were hoping to double it.

It would be an all-day event, tickets were \$100 a piece. CB Rice was slated to go on right before the main headliner, who Ben had asked to play when they'd opened for them at Red Rocks. The lead singer's wife had battled cancer herself, so the band had been quick to agree to participate.

There wasn't much for him to do today, but he flew in early anyway. It wasn't his event, or even his fundraiser anymore, yet he still took responsibility for it, and wanted to make sure he was here to help if he was needed. It meant an extra day away from home, which was always hard, but it was for a good cause.

He pulled out his cell and dialed his son Jake's number as he walked through the casino in the direction of the pool.

"Hey Dad."

"Hey man, how's it going?"

"Okay."

Typical tween on the phone, he probably should have just texted him. "I'm good. I'm headed out to the pool. This place is like a

giant water park. I should have brought you and your brother with me. Next year. Remind me, okay?”

“Okay Dad. Sounds good. Wanna talk to Luke?”

“Yeah I do, but Jake, wait. I miss you, and I love you.”

“I love you too Dad. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“Okay man. Behave.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s not a big deal okay? You’ll be home day after tomorrow.”

Jeez, his kid slayed him. “I know, it’s just two days too many.”

“Yeah, here’s Luke.”

“Hey Daddy. Where are you?”

Luke was only nine, and still had a little boy’s voice. At twelve, Jake’s voice was starting to change. Sometimes he sounded like a little boy and sometimes he sounded like a man. And then at other times he sounded like some kind of screeching prehistoric bird. God he missed his kids.

“I’m in Las Vegas buddy, and next year when I come to play this show, I’ll bring you and your brother along. You’d love this place. There are wave pools and a lazy river and all kinds of slides and other stuff you can play on. There’s even a beach.”

Silence.

“Luke, are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m here. I miss you Daddy.”

“I miss you too bud. I’ll be home in a couple days.”

“Okay. Bye.” Click.

Oh well, at least he got to talk to them for a few minutes.

He opened up Instagram. He’d take a few shots, text them to the boys and maybe post some stuff on Twitter and Facebook about the show tomorrow. They weren’t sold out—yet. And he wanted them to be.

He stood in place and turned in a circle, taking shots as he turned. He was able to fit most of the pool-side marquee announcing the show into one.

The band had a cabana reserved and it looked as though he wasn't the first one here. He grabbed a towel and threw it on one of the lounge chairs, tossed his phone on the table, and reached around to pull his shirt off over his head. A couple hours by the pool wouldn't hurt anything at all. He didn't remember the last time he had a whole day with so little to do. Forced rest, he'd take it.

He sat down and picked up his phone, scrolling through the photos he'd just taken. He texted several to Jake and then went back through them trying to decide which ones he should post. He zoomed in to take a closer look. Most of them he zipped through pretty fast, not post worthy.

Wait. He went back to the one he was just looking at and used two fingers on the screen to zoom in closer. There was a woman in the background who looked so familiar. Who was she? He studied it but it was too out of focus. He stood and looked around. He looked at the photo again, trying to figure out where she would be sitting based on the other landmarks. Damn, he didn't see her.

He wandered out of the cabana area, searching. There was just something about her familiarity that tugged at him. He needed to find her.

He walked over by the lazy river and waited as people floated past him. He stood there for what felt like an eternity, until he started seeing the same people float past him, again and again. He turned to leave, and bumped straight into an inner tube.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I can't see where I'm going," a tiny voice giggled from behind the giant pink tube. Ben lifted it out of the woman's hands and came face to face with her—Liv. Even with as out of focus as the photo had been, he'd known who it was. This

was the third time in less than a year that fate put her in his path. This time he wasn't going to let her go.

Liv gasped. And then got very dizzy. She heard him asking her if she was okay. He set the inner tube down and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Liv, look at me. Are you okay?"

She looked into his devastatingly big blue eyes and couldn't decide whether she was going to die, right there on the spot, or if she'd never been as okay as she was at that moment.

"Hell-o? Liv? Anybody home?"

That was a different voice. Oh, that was Paige's voice. And those were Paige's hands waving in front of her face. How long had she been standing there, frozen?

"What? Yes, I'm okay. I'm so sorry, I couldn't see where I was going." Liv turned to pick up the inner tube and hightail it out of there.

"Oh no you don't. You're not getting away so fast this time." Ben picked up the tube and held it far enough away that she couldn't reach it. Considering he was a foot taller than she was, he didn't have to hold it very high.

"Liv, it's me, Ben."

"Hi Ben. How are you?"

"How am I? Don't you think it's a little wild running into me? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here on business and I made Liv come with me. I'm Paige. We met once before, briefly, at Red Rocks."

Paige was talking. Thank God, that meant she didn't have to. And Ben was answering her. More talking she didn't have to do. Now if she could just curl up into a little ball and slink away without anyone noticing, she'd be fine. Oh, but wait, she wanted to listen to that

voice just a little bit longer. She loved his voice—even when he was just talking.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

Oh crap. She was backing away from him. And he noticed. “Come with me. You, too, Paige.”

“Where are we going? Ow. Can you ease up a little bit please?”

Ben was holding her hand so tightly it hurt. “I’m not letting go this time Liv. If I do, I may never see you again.”

Once they were safely within the confines of the cabana, Ben pulled out a chair and pointed at it. “Please have a seat.”

When Liv didn’t sit, he took a step forward. “Liv, please.” He sounded more exasperated than he would’ve liked. Liv sat and he moved to the other side of the table, pulling a chair out for Paige.

He sat down in the chair closest to Liv. He wanted to sit and stare at her, memorize every line on her face and curve on her body. Here she was, sitting next to him, this woman who haunted his dreams, he knew he was destined to get to know her.

She was certainly a mystery. *Didn’t she recognize him?* It sounded like her friend did.

“Okay. Now that I think you may stay put for a minute . . . hi Liv. How are you? It’s nice bumping into you here.”

“Ha, ha,” she answered, looking away. He touched her cheek, turning her head so she’d look at him.

“Hi Ben, it’s nice bumping into you too.” She took a deep breath, and added, “I’m surprised you remember me.” She was looking down again. He didn’t want her to look down he wanted her to look at him. He moved his hand from her cheek to her chin and lifted her gaze to his.

“Why do you always run from me?” he whispered.

Paige jumped up from her chair. “I think I’ll go get us a couple of drinks. Liv? Ben? What would you like?”

“Paige, please sit back down,” he calmly stated, without looking away from Liv. “We have cabana service. Tell me what you’d both like and I’ll order it for you.” He still hadn’t taken his eyes off Liv who looked like a deer in cross hairs.

“Liv, what would you like to drink?”

“Lemonade?”

“Is that a question or is it what you’d like to drink?”

“Lemonade, please.”

“Paige?”

“I need something a little stronger. I’ll have an Sea Breeze please.”

“I’ll be right back . . . I’m only walking a couple feet away . . . I’m ordering drinks . . . do not get up from the table . . .” He kept his voice low and free of any inflection, like a hypnotist.

He came back and pulled his chair even closer to Liv. “So—let’s start over, way back at the beginning. Why don’t we talk about how you bolt away from me every time I try to start a conversation with you? Is there something about me you don’t like?” He rubbed his head. “I’m bald. Is that it? You don’t like bald guys.”

“No, I like bald guys. I mean, there isn’t anything about you I don’t like. No, that isn’t what I mean. See? I can’t even put two thoughts together. I ‘bolt,’ as you put it, because I don’t want you to know I’m an idiot.”

Ben leaned back and laughed. She was so damned cute. She made him laugh. If there was one single thing he knew, she wasn’t bolting from him today. No way.

She started to laugh too. Then Paige did. Soon all three of them were laughing. Ben reached over and put his hand on Liv’s arm. “Better now?”

“Yes,” she giggled a little. “I’m better now.”

He talked them into ordering lunch and when they finished, Paige excused herself to go to a meeting she had that afternoon.

“I should go too,” Liv started to get up from her chair.

Ben put his hand on her arm. “No. Stay. Can you stay? Please?” He wasn’t used to women trying so hard to get away from him. It was usually the other way around.

Liv turned and looked at Paige, as if to ask for a reason to leave. “I won’t be back until dinner. Stay. *Enjoy* yourself.”

“Well, I guess . . .”

“There, it’s settled, you’re staying. Paige, before you go, what do the two of you have planned for dinner?”

“We hadn’t gotten that far.”

“Good, then you’ll join me, and the band. We’ve got something special planned tonight. I think you’ll like it.”

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She was having such a nice afternoon spending time with him. She had to admit it was completely unexpected. They talked and hung out at the pool, sitting on the steps. He told her about his two boys and she told him more about Renie. He noticed her getting chill bumps and led her over to the hot tub. “Let’s get warm,” he said. She was plenty warm, overheated in fact, but that wasn’t something she’d admit to him.

Ben, with clothes on, made her blood boil. Without them, she could feel the sweat bubbling on the surface of her skin. Every bit of him was muscle. She longed to know what it would feel like to have those powerful arms hold her, his ripped chest flat against hers, his strong legs wrapped around her.

He sat down first and pulled her to sit in front of him, as if he’d read her mind. She could feel him hard against her when he pulled her back closer to him. She tried to move further forward.

“Feel what you do to me Liv?” he whispered, pulling her closer still as he ran his lips along the place between her neck and her shoulder. Liv heard a moan and wasn’t sure if it came from him or her. She closed her eyes and leaned further back into him.

“That’s my girl.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and scooted her so she was sitting on his lap.

“Ben—”

“Shh . . . the music is starting to play. Listen.” He started to hum, then sing softly in her ear.

*The soft skin on your bones and the smile I would own.*

He nuzzled into her hair and breathed in. “You smell so good, God, what is that? Lavender? Or lemon, I can’t figure it out.”

Liv couldn’t wait a moment longer, she turned far enough that her lips could touch his, and that was all it took. His mouth devoured hers. Liv pulled back and bit her lip, her stomach lurched and her eyelids drooped. Ben’s hand slid into her hair and gripped a fistful of it, gentle but firm. He tugged her head back, feasting his eyes on her lips.

She trembled at the heat between them, the steam rising off the warm water in the hot tub swirled around them. His arms moved back to her waist and tightened around her, pulling her even closer. He gave a rough groan as he lowered his head and kissed her again. His body was big and solid against hers. She sank into him, his mouth was warm and firm, yet so tender. He slid his tongue over her bottom lip and nipped at it.

“Want you,” he groaned. “Want you naked, under me, around me.”

Liv pulled back, gasping to get air into her straining lungs.

“Let’s go somewhere we can be alone,” he said, his lips parted, his eyes dark and hungry. “I want to get you out of this bikini,” he

finger slid just under the small triangle of material covering her breast, “and see every inch of skin on this amazing body.”

Liv shifted away from him, trying to get her wits about her. She wanted his lips back on hers, wanted him naked too, but . . . she needed to slow down. She moved further away from him, but held his gaze as they sat looking at each other.

“Too much?” he ventured.

“Too soon,” she answered.

Ben insisted on walking her back to her room, to her door. “This way if you run again, I’ll know where to find you.”

“But—”

“Shh . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I can’t explain this overwhelming attraction between us. It doesn’t feel as though I’m just getting to know you, it feels like I’ve somehow known you forever. That must sound crazy. Listen, I won’t push so hard.”

It wasn’t that. She was sure he was used to getting what he wanted, and in this case she wanted the same thing he did. She just wasn’t sure how to tell him how long it had been since she’d done this. *I hope it’s like riding a bike.*

“Pretty much, but like no other bike you’ve ridden before baby,” he said, nuzzling her neck. Oh no, had she said that out loud too?

Ben leaned up against the wall outside Liv’s hotel room. His body pulsed with lust, his eyes closed, his heart thundering. They opened and fixated on Liv’s gaze. She really had no idea how breathtakingly beautiful she was. He could spend all day studying every inch of her.

Her skin was kissed by their day in the sun, and her hair hung in waves around her face. The thin cover up that left her arms bare was so feminine, the way it wrapped around her slender body. And

her eyes, the bluest he'd ever seen, were gazing at him apprehensively, he could read every ounce of her insecurity in the look she was giving him.

"I'm going to leave now Liv, and it isn't because I want to. We have reservations at Charlie Palmer at eight. Would you like me to come back to your room and walk down with you, or would you like to meet me in the lobby?"

"Paige?"

"Paige is invited as well. The band has a private dining room reserved for a special dinner tonight. We'd love for the two of you to join us."

"Do you need to check with them first?"

"No Liv, it's my band. Which reminds me, do you have tickets for the show tomorrow night?"

"Um, no, we hadn't gotten around to getting them yet."

"Good, you and Paige will be my guests."

He wanted to reassure her, explain how he didn't care about anything else at that moment besides being with her. How could he tell her what he was feeling when they'd essentially just met? She'd really bolt then. This was new for him, having to exercise such restraint. He was used to reaching out and taking whatever it was he wanted. Something was telling him that wouldn't work with this woman.

He touched her face, her cheek velvety soft beneath his fingers, calloused from years of guitar playing. He pulled her back into his arms, bent his head and found her mouth again with his, to show her how much he wanted to be with her, when he couldn't find the right words to tell her.

Dinner with the band was raucous, loud and fun. Liv envied the way they all embraced life with such gusto. Some of the other bands that were playing the benefit were there. Before she knew it, it was after one in the morning.

Paige was much more of a night owl than she'd ever been. And it didn't surprise Liv one bit to hear Paige discussing record deals and song rights with the other guys in the band, or that she'd gone outside to smoke a cigar with a couple of them. It would never have occurred to Paige to be unfaithful to Mark, she just fit in easily wherever she happened to be. And when business was involved, Paige was in her element.

Ben was stroking his fingers down her arm, going back and forth, lulling her into a state of complete relaxation. "Tired?"

"A little," Liv answered as she stifled a yawn. "What about you? You have a big day tomorrow."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about that." He took the glass of wine she still held and set it on the table, his eyes focused on hers the entire time. He rose slowly and took her hand, pulling her with him. Ben's eyes darkened, he bent down and his lips closed over hers. He ran one finger from beneath her chin, straight down and stroked over the place where her dress met the top of her breasts. She breathed in deeply, inadvertently pushing herself closer to him.

"Come with me," he murmured, slowly walking toward the door.

"I can't."

"Oh, but you can. Let's take a walk in the moonlight."

"A walk, and then we have to say good night."

Ben started humming, then singing again.

*The charm of your tease when you make me say please,  
your eyes and your hair, the look of your stare, the way  
that you laugh . . .*

There was that ache again, it hadn't really gone away, not since that morning. "Wooing me with your music, that's not playing fair."

He kept singing.

## And Then You Fall

*All I want is your mouth, and your lips, and your soft fingertips, the curve of your spine well it's gotta be mine, the warmth of your kiss when we're lying like this. The heat of your touch well it's never too much.*

His lips crushed into hers. "Jesus, Liv, do you know how much I want you?" They shared a heated smile and Liv started walking in the direction of the elevators.

"But my room is this way," he tried to pull her in the opposite direction.

"And my room is this way. Would you like to say goodnight here?"

"No, I wouldn't like. But think about this Liv, if I walk you to your room, the room you're sharing with Paige, we won't be able to be alone. On the other hand, if you come with me, we can be alone all night."

"Which is precisely the reason I'm heading to my room. It's been a long day, and tomorrow will be too. Let's say good night Ben."

"Not yet Liv." He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed across her knuckles.

The elevator dinged. "Walk me to my room."

They made it almost all the way down the hall to her room before he pushed her against the wall, torturing himself kissing her lips, her neck. "Just let me feel you against me . . ."

His hands crept up to her breasts as he ravaged her mouth. He lifted her off her feet and slid her body back down his. He wanted her warm, smooth skin against his. Liv arched against him, crying out as he nipped at her neck.

"Stop, wait. Ben, stop. We have to stop." Liv put her hands on his arms and pushed him back away from her.

"Don't go . . . let me stay. Let me stay with you tonight."

Liv managed to get her key card in the door, and was halfway through, "Good night Ben. Sweet dreams."

Ben turned and put his forehead against the wall as he heard the door click behind her. He doubted the sweetness of his dreams, but he didn't, for a second, doubt how hot they'd be. He'd never wanted a woman the way he wanted her. How much of that had to do with her resistance to him, he wondered.