

Taking the Leap
A River Rain Novel, Book 3
By Kristen Ashley
Teaser Chapters

Prologue
Someone Like Me

Alex

It was happening.

He was flirting with me.

John “Rix” Hendrix, the coolest guy I’d ever met, the most interesting person I’d ever known, the most handsome man I’d ever seen, was flirting...

With...

Me.

And I was somehow managing to flirt back (kind of).

Okay, I might be relying on something from Moscow to do so (that something being their mules), but it was happening.

And I knew I wasn’t making more of it than I should.

I knew that because Chloe and Judge were with us. We were out having drinks, celebrating the official beginning of our new Trail Blazer program (that day, Judge, Rix and I had signed on to new job titles with new responsibilities and new salaries with the expanded program—I got a promotion and a fifteen percent raise!—definitely worth sitting down to drinks with the man who terrified me most on this earth).

Chloe was giving Rix and me smug looks, but mostly me, and once, she’d even winked at me.

As an aside: Chloe Pierce, my boss Judge's girlfriend, was the coolest, most interesting, most gorgeous woman I'd ever met.

And even though (fortunately, so far, though maybe not now?) Rix had missed it, but although she hadn't said anything, I knew Chloe knew I was crushing on Rix...*big time*.

And I had been.

Crushing on Rix.

Big time.

She was happy for me.

I was happy for me!

Because Rix was *flirting with me*.

Me!

And the reason why this was crazy was not only because he was cool and interesting and handsome, and as yet, such a man had never shown any interest in me (no, the men who had shown interest in me lacked one or more of those qualities).

It was because I was, well...

Me.

First off, I was shy around cute guys (okay, I was just plain shy, but it got a lot worse around guys, and off-the-charts worse around cute ones).

Not to mention, I knew how to put on mascara, I just wasn't a big fan of wearing it (so, unless it was a super special occasion, or I was with my family, I didn't).

I had a little house up in the mountains (TBH, it was more like a big shack), but I was rarely in it because there were a lot better places to be (and my house was awesome, I just had a ton of interests and not a lot of them happened in my house).

I knew how to cook in a kitchen, but I cooked way better over a campfire (and in a hot coal pit).

There were Star Trek nerds, I was just a star nerd (that being, lying under them at night in the middle of nowhere and staring at them until I fell asleep).

I would rather snowshoe into a forest in the dead of winter, set up a tent and spend a couple of days in nature, reading by a headlamp at night cozied up in a one-woman sleeping bag

in a one-person tent than sit by a fireside during a snowstorm with a mug of hot cocoa (though, that was nice too).

Many women didn't get me.

Men didn't either, and it was actually more men who didn't get me than it was women because I wasn't stereotypically womanly. Most woman got there were lots of different kinds of women. Most men (in my experience) weren't that broad minded.

No, actually, it was more my family who didn't get me than anyone else.

My family didn't get me at all.

Which wasn't really surprising, seeing as I didn't get them either.

"Sexy as fuck," Rix was saying.

I came out of my musings to focus on his words.

Words he was aiming at me (me!).

Words of which one of them was "sexy."

A flutter assaulted my belly at hearing his gravelly voice utter that word (at me).

"What?" I whispered, like talking louder might break the spell of how close he was sitting, leaned in even closer, talking to me, but doing it with his attention centered right...on...*me*.

Yowza.

"That glass dome glamp sitch in Joshua Tree," he answered, reminding me what we'd been talking about. "Never thought I'd say those words, glamping is better than not camping at all, it just isn't my gig. But it was just that fuckin' awesome. Bedding down under the stars at night..."

Oh my God!

He was into sleeping under the stars just like me!

"Waking up with the sun..."

That wasn't as great as stars, but it was cool.

Something happened to his eyes which saw results in specific parts of my body before he finished.

"The shower that was top and sides all glass. Getting wet and clean with a near-on three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the Joshua trees and the desert. Only thing missing was I didn't take a woman with me."

He stopped speaking.

Shoot.

That meant it was my turn.

“You’ll have to...” My voice was clogged due to the fact my mind was on Rix in a shower that was all glass. Rix...*wet* and *slick* and *slippery*...in a shower that was all glass. So I cleared my throat, and when I did, his lips hitched in a way that those specific parts of my body, already perked, became veritably *primed*. “Text me the deets for that. I, uh...don’t usually glamp but...”

I let that trail off, not because I didn’t have more to say, but because I’d lost the ability to speak.

This was because his eyes were watching my mouth while I was doing it.

“Text you,” he murmured to my mouth, like that wasn’t where his mind was going.

I also had a sense of where his mind was going.

As in, he didn’t want to text me the info.

He wanted to personally show me the site.

With the glass shower.

That he would be using.

With me there.

Or, perhaps, in it with him.

Lord.

“Yeah,” I forced out, and it did, indeed, sound forced.

No, that wasn’t right.

It sounded breathy and strangled.

As you could probably deduce, I was generally no good at flirting (or chitchat, or mingling, or social situations on the whole, but definitely top of that heap was flirting).

However, with Rix, I was a mess and not only now. All the time.

I didn’t think in the time I’d known him we’d ever had a single one-on-one conversation.

This was the first of those too.

His attention returned to my eyes. “Yours?”

“Uh...sorry?”

“Coolest place you ever spent the night,” he reminded me of the subject we’d been discussing.

It had been my question, and it might have been the ballsiest question I’d ever asked any man, not just Rix.

“I go off route,” I told him.

“You mean off trail?” he asked.

I nodded, but then shook my head, which meant I ended up making a circle, which made Rix’s lips hitch again, this time just with amusement. And making him smile like that, I felt like throwing my arms out and arching my back, like I was breaking through the tape at the finish line, coming in first, winning the prize.

“That too,” I made myself say. “But I meant off route. I’m a byway person, not a highway person. And I was on a byway, outside Ouray—”

“Colorado.”

I nodded.

“One of the prettiest places on the planet,” he stated my personal opinion.

“Yeah,” I said softly.

He let that soft sound float between us for a second.

I felt weird about it, weird in a wonderful way, like the sound I’d made was pretty and the word was meaningful, and he was getting off on riding it and the feeling behind it, before he prompted, “You were on a byway...”

Good God.

He was.

He was paying complete attention to me.

Listening to every word I said.

So *this* was how it felt to be the center of Rix’s attention.

I’d wondered for a very long time.

I’d been a lot of beautiful places (a lot, a lot), but none was as heavenly as that right there.

“I was on a byway,” I repeated, “and I pulled into this diner. Cool place. Had a counter with a pie under glass at the end of it and everything. Sat next to an old-timer, we got to talking,

and he told me about some hot springs not many people know about. I remembered the conversation, what he said. So, on a long weekend, I drove back up in the winter, snowshoed in where he said to go, and he was right on the money. It was exactly as he described. Trees and snow and this tuft of steam coming up from the spring. Pristine, not a footprint, no one around. Pitched my tent close to the rocks around the spring, barely had to use my sleeping bag they were so warm. Sat in the spring until my fingers wrinkled. Slept with my head out of the tent, gaiter pulled up over my nose, listening to the burbling of the water, staring through the evergreens up at the stars.”

I stopped talking, and Rix didn’t start. He didn’t move. And somewhere in sharing this memory with him, I’d missed his eyes had slid back down to my lips.

When he continued not to move or say anything for a long time, I finished, “So that’s the coolest place I’ve ever spent the night.”

“Heaven,” he murmured, not shifting his gaze.

A shiver trailed down my spine.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “Heaven.”

He still didn’t move.

I started freaking out, my lips with his attention on them beginning to feel tingly, and not thinking, I caught the bottom one with my teeth.

When I did that, his gaze came up to my eyes, and he had such a cocky look in his own, knowing just how hot he was, knowing just what reaction he was causing in me, it was not only mesmerizing, it was akin to about twenty minutes of foreplay.

Great foreplay.

So great, I almost moaned.

I did whimper (slightly and horrifyingly, because he heard it, and I got another hitch of his lips, and not the amused hitch this time, the *other* one).

Holy crap.

I might orgasm...

From flirting!

I instantly stood.

He sat back as I did, his brows snapping together as he looked up at me.

“I’ll be back!” I cried.

I was unnecessarily loud. Thus, I felt Judge and Chloe’s startled attention come to me too.

But I raced away.

Straight to the bathroom.

I didn’t have to use the bathroom.

I had to give myself a pep talk.

Because this was Rix, *finally*, Rix and me talking, *flirting*, and I couldn’t muck this up like I did practically every interaction I’d had with him.

And we worked together at River Rain Outdoor stores, before Hale Wheeler swept in and offered Trail Blazer, new titles and pay raises. At River Rain, Rix and me were not in the same department, but now we were on the exact same team. So not only would I see him every day, I’d be working side by side with him...every day.

I was in luck, when, upon a panicked check, I saw the bathroom was empty. Therefore, as I tried to instill myself with some courage, I wouldn’t have an audience of some pretty, mountain-fresh, tanned, boho goddess washing her hands or using the facilities (which would, as every shy girl knew, have the opposite result when it came to courage).

It was just me in the restroom.

Me and my insecurities.

I stared at my hazel eyes in the mirror (a tortoiseshell brown around the pupil, leading to a marbled green that filled out the rest of the iris, not the violet of my sister and mother, not the green of my father, just plain-Jane hazel (as my sister described it)).

Then I took in the big, fat, dark pigtails that contained my thick hair and fell either side of my neck, down my chest.

Prescott, Arizona, where we all lived, was not a bustling metropolis.

I’d been here a while.

So had Rix.

This meant I not only worked with him, but I saw him out and about.

He was who he was, *how* he was. Those wide shoulders. That dark hair, short at the sides, longer but spiky at the top, most of the time messy and sexy, but sometimes sleek (and sexy). The square jaw. Those thick eyebrows that traveled to the corners of his eyes.

And the brown eyes that said he had a thousand stories to tell, some you wouldn't like, others that would leave you breathless.

Being all he was, he was never out alone.

What I meant was, unless he was with his buds, he was always with a woman.

He had a type.

Tall. Slender. Leggy. Athletic.

I was not tall.

I hiked. I paddleboarded. I kayaked.

I also ate.

So I did not have a svelte bod.

And those women I saw him with, they might all be mountain-fresh, tanned, boho goddesses who could keep up with him on a trail run (something he still did, even after he tragically lost both legs below the knees while fighting a wildfire in his previous occupation as a firefighter—see? totally the coolest guy I knew). But they also wore flowy dresses or Daisy Dukes and billowy blouses with flat sandals with tons of straps and mascara and maybe a winged eyeliner if they were feeling feisty, accompanying all of this with funky-chic wide-brimmed felt fedoras.

I'd look like a moron in a fedora.

I could just imagine what my sister would say if she saw me in a boho fedora.

As I was wont to do, the instant a thought that included my sister hit my brain, I shoved it aside.

But when I did, I was stuck with me.

Staring at my round face with its rounder cheekbones which was, indeed, tan, I tried to see myself with broad, tanner, muscled Rix, and I couldn't even conjure the image.

"What am I thinking? I work with this guy," I mumbled to my reflection.

I had no business flirting with a co-worker.

That was stupid. Crazy.

Embarrassing.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe it wasn't even flirting.

(Though I didn't have a ton of experience, I did have some, and it *felt* like flirting, not to mention, Chloe knew I was crushing on him, and she'd winked at me.)

"But this is Rix," I kept mumbling.

And it was.

Rix.

My perfect man.

He camped. He hiked. He kayaked. He came to work in the morning after a trail run or a ride on his handcycle. He headed out to parts unknown on his days off with his tent in his truck, coming back to work practically shimmering with the rapture of spending time in nature.

I did not trail run or ride, but I definitely came in from the outdoors shimmering after spending time in nature (at least, I felt like I did).

I'd never asked, I'd been too shy, but I'd bet actual, real money Rix had often fallen asleep under the stars, and not just in a glass glamping dome among the Joshua trees.

I bet he knew how to cook an entire meal under the earth.

I bet he knew what an impending thunderstorm smelled like, that certain snakes were threats (if you're caught by surprise...or being stupid), but bats and coyotes and bears were usually not (unless you caught them by surprise, or you're being stupid), and that you never, ever drank water from nature unless you went through the process of treating it.

Was all that not worth the risk?

Worth the risk of being embarrassed should I not be reading the current situation right?

Worth the risk of feeling the thrill?

The thrill of finding someone, and being with them...

Someone who got me.

Someone like me.

It was.

It was totally worth it.

To have Rix's big hand (I'd noticed his hands—his *big, rough* hands—and I'd noticed them about seven hundred thousand times in the exactly two and one-eighth years we'd been working together) wrapped around mine as we picked our way across a natural stone bridge over a creek.

To zip our sleeping bags together and whisper (and do other things) to each other under the cover of night.

Yes, even someone to cozy up with by a fire with cocoa and read on snowy days when we weren't under a ceiling of sky.

But to have those moments, say, to look into his eyes over coffee in the morning, and know he felt like me.

He was like me.

Because he was the one soul on this planet who *got me*.

"It's *so* worth it," I whispered.

A toilet flushed.

I jumped.

Someone was in there?

Yes, someone was.

A pretty, mountain-fresh, tanned, boho goddess wearing a felt, wide-brimmed panama hat and a big smile came out of a stall and headed with that smile aimed at me to the sink next to mine.

"Just to say, sister, it *is*," she declared. "If you're talking about that hunk of tall, dark and handsome who was up in your space out there, it is *so worth it*," she declared. "Especially if he looks like that, is as into you as that and has a kickass name like Rix."

"I'm a nature nerd," I blurted, why, I did not know.

She shrugged even as she rubbed soap into her hands. "I've read *The Shell Seekers* thirteen times, and if a dude is not down to read it, even if he might not like it, he's out. We all got our thang. And by the by, that guy didn't look like a banker to me." She turned off the tap, shook water off her hands and turned to the dryer, exclaiming, "Killer! They have an Airblade!"

She then stuck her hands into the Airblade.

I stood staring at her attractive, sinewy back and shoulder muscles exposed by her spaghetti-strapped, oversized, muted-but-dizzily-printed dress, and I did this so long, the Airblade had worked its magic, and she'd turned.

"What are you still doing in here?" she demanded. "Go get 'im, tigress."

"I work with him."

She tipped her head to the side the same time she hitched a hip and put a hand on it. "So?"

"That could get messy."

"A non-messy life *totally* sucks."

This might sound crazy, but I knew she was right.

I got into a zen state when I cleaned my house, and I dug it.

Nevertheless, when it was done, a part of me always missed the boots thrown by the door, the coffeepot upended in the drainer, the Oxo pouring canister filled with homemade granola left on the counter, the throw tossed wide over the couch, the book spread open and lying on its pages, the jacket thrown over the back of a chair. All the signs that said, "Someone lives here, and they're not here tidying, they're out, busy *living*."

Did that translate to relationships?

To romance?

"I'll tell you what, a guy was that into me, I'd be *all the way* down with getting messy," my new bathroom friend announced.

Had Rix been *that* into me?

"I'm shy," I whispered.

"No shit?" she asked. "Girl, I noticed you two a while ago. At first, I wanted to walk by and high-five you for the way you were playing that player. Then I realized, well, hell. This is no play. This bitch is scared out of her brain about this dude, and it's so cute, *I could just die*."

I was back to staring, this time at her mountain-fresh face.

"He thought it was cute too," she proclaimed. "But he thought it was so cute, he was itching *to pounce*."

Rix.

Pouncing.

Oh Lord.

Now I was in danger of a standing-up, Rix-nowhere-near-me, bathroom orgasm.

“*Really?*” I breathed.

“Hi, I’m Dani.” She stuck her hand out.

I took it. “I’m Alex.”

To that, she for some reason shared, “Your hair is *goals*. I’m about to go and do what no woman under seventy has done in twenty years. Schedule a perm. Only so I can plait thick, fat braids like yours. You could play tug of war with those bitches. They’re glorious.”

I couldn’t stop my smile.

She let my hand go. “Now we know each other, I can tell you, I’ve had my fair share of experience with players.”

She was seriously pretty (and sinewy and tan and could pull off a panama hat, even in a ladies washroom), so I bet she did.

She kept talking.

“And as such, being a self-proclaimed expert, I could regale you with many tales of my field experience, so I know that man is seriously into you.”

“I know him, and I’ve seen him with other women. He’d be more into someone like, to be honest...*you*.”

She shook her head, came to me, hooked arms, and guided us to and through the door.

“This is what shy chicks don’t get,” she started. “Guys like that have had me, over and over again. If they wanted girls like me, they wouldn’t throw us back.”

She seemed very sage, however, it should be noted that was a sad thing to say, but she didn’t seem sad at all in saying it.

Maybe she’d found one who didn’t “throw her back.”

“Are you with someone?” I asked.

She made a scoffing noise, complementing it with, “Hell no. Hark back to aforementioned field experience. But also, I’m not settling down. I don’t have a hold on even half my own shit. I don’t need to take on some guy’s shit too.”

I pulled on our arms before we climbed the steps that led back into the bar so we'd come to a stop, and considering what she heard in the bathroom before she came out, I shared, "I don't think I have to tell you that I'm leagues away from owning anywhere close to half my shit."

Dani grinned. "Okay, what I didn't say was, even if that's the case, if a big, broad, hot, seriously-into-me guy got up in my space, and we clicked, like, bones and hearts and souls and stars aligning *clicked*, and he wanted to be along for the ride as I figured it out, I would *not* say no."

Stars aligning.

"I'm twenty-eight," I told her. "And I've never had a long-term boyfriend."

She swayed back. "You a virgin?"

At this question, I started to pull away because it was in that moment it hit me how much I was baring to a complete stranger.

She held on tight.

Even so, I said, "We're getting kind of deep. I think you're cool, Dani, and I appreciate you cheering me on, but I just met you."

"That's fair," she replied. "We won't go there. And you're right, we don't know one another, so I may be wrong, but maybe you haven't had a long-term situation because you never took the risk. I mean, I got experience, and some of it tore me up." Her grin returned. "But that doesn't mean I haven't also had loads of fun."

I had no reply because I knew she was right, and it wasn't like I didn't want to admit it, it was just that I didn't know where to find the courage to go for it.

She got closer. "Nothing is permanent, Alex. Not peace. Not happiness. Not joy. People don't understand that. They want those feelings all the time. But they're just not to be had. Also not permanent?"

Her last sentence was a question, an indication she wanted to be sure I wanted her to continue imparting her wisdom on me.

Obviously, I nodded.

She continued, "Heartbreak. Or pain. Or fear."

Holy wow.

She was right again.

“Once you understand that,” she started to sum up. “Once you get that everything comes and then it goes, you learn to take the leap.”

When I had no reply, she kept going.

“You even learn how important it is to take it.” Dani turned her head toward the stairs, looked back to me, and gave me a big, encouraging smile. “Leap, sister.”

She then gave me an arm hug, let me go, and she and her panama hat floated up the stairs and into the bar.

I stared after her.

Then I remembered the way Rix looked when he stopped staring at my mouth, he gazed into my eyes, knew he had me, and he wanted that.

He wanted *me*.

“Leap,” I said under my breath.

Still totally scared to death, I nevertheless lifted my chin, headed up the stairs and straight to our table.

Chloe, Judge, no Rix.

Did he take the opportunity of me leaving the table to hit the loo as well?

I was almost to my vacated chair when I noticed Chloe and Judge were not sitting close, murmuring to each other, like they had been when Rix and I were doing the same.

They were staring back where I came from, across the space, to the bar.

And they looked ticked.

Even Judge, who was the single most easy-going guy I’d ever met. His jaw was all tense and a muscle was flashing up his cheek.

Curious as to what was pissing even Judge off, I turned in the direction they were staring and stopped dead.

I’d walked right by him,

Rix.

He was at the bar with a blonde, mountain-fresh, tanned goddess. He was also in her space, listening to her with rapt attention.

I could almost hear the propellers lifting up my heart, making it soar, splutter and give out and then it was in a nose dive.

Free falling.

I'd been gone...what?

Ten minutes?

"I gotta go," I said, again loudly, and both Chloe's and Judge's heads swung my way.

If I wasn't entirely engrossed in the fact my heart had crashed at my feet, I would have stepped back because Chloe looked like she was about to spit fire.

Instead, I grabbed my army-green hobo bag and tossed the long strap over my shoulder.

Judge started to rise from his seat. "Are you okay to drive?"

Damn it.

I probably wasn't.

"I—" I began.

But Chloe was now up too. "We'll take you home, Alex."

"No, you guys stay...um..." I didn't know what else to say because I couldn't drive, and I didn't want to make them end their night, and I couldn't catch a thought in order to decide which of my friends to call to ask for a ride home.

It was then, my eyes, without my permission, strayed back to Rix.

My throat tightened.

But my attention was caught by something else.

And I saw Dani was now sitting behind Rix, eyes to me, and when she caught mine, she mouthed, *Asshole*, then she magnificently frowned.

I wanted to find that funny. I wanted to feel the bolster of female camaraderie.

I didn't do either.

"We're taking you home," Judge decreed. "I just had one beer, Alex, so I'm good to drive. And Chloe and me are ready to roll."

I bet they were, in their loved-up bliss, perfect for each other, all moved in together, building their family (of dogs, for now).

They were *the best couple ever*.

If you asked me a year ago—that a gal like Chloe would be it for Judge—I’d have said no.
But she was.

Top to toe, inside and out, she was sophisticated and a city girl and had traveled the world and was super rich, and she worshiped him and didn’t hide it.

She was lucky, she got that back. But that was Judge. When he found the one for him, that would always have been what he’d give.

And he did.

But me?

I was going home alone.

Again.

Having a great day, getting a promotion and a raise, heading into a future working on an amazing program doing good things for kids, a program endowed by one of the richest men in the world, downing some drinks with good people, flirting with a gorgeous guy...and ending all of that crawling into bed alone.

Again.

Way to go, Alex.

Awesome celebration.

Yay me.

Ulk.

“You sure?” I asked Judge. “It’s a ways out of your way.”

“Absolutely,” Judge answered, his tone flinty.

I nodded.

We headed out, me ducking my head as I trailed behind them.

“I’ll talk to him later,” I heard Judge mutter.

I then heard Chloe reply, “You are not saying a word to him.”

“What?” Judge.

“We’ll talk. Not now.” Chloe.

We hit the door and then the cool air hit my face.

But for the first time in my life, heading outside didn’t make me feel free.

No.

Instead, it cost me a lot...

But when I stepped outside, I just stopped myself from dissolving into tears.

Chapter 1 *The Morning*

Rix

It was the morning after Judge, Chloe, and Alex all ditched him at the bar.

He'd gotten out of bed as usual, at five.

He'd gone out for a bike ride.

Came home, made and downed a smoothie, showered, and now he was in Scooter's drive-through, getting a coffee.

That entire morning, he'd not once thought about the woman he fucked the night before, then, after they were both done, minimal cuddle time and an exchange of numbers (hers, he wasn't going to use, his, he'd shifted a digit so he didn't have to deal with ghosting her, and yeah, that made him sound like a dick, but her place was a disaster, she had three cats, and it felt like he walked out of there with layer of fur on him and throat full of dander—woman, man, he didn't give a shit, you kept your house, especially if you had pets—all that was on top of the fact she wasn't that great of a fuck).

He'd left her in her bed to get his ass home and hadn't thought of her since.

Nope.

All he could think about was Alex, all alone in a hot springs in the winter somewhere outside Ouray, staying in that water until her fingers were wrinkled.

And he did this wondering if she'd been naked.

What was that about?

Although the woman had a great head of hair and an even better ass, both that any heterosexual or bi man breathing would notice, Alex had always been that mildly annoying co-

worker who was that because, when she allowed herself to be visible at all, which wasn't often, she acted weird.

Worse, she had no clue how to deal with a person living with a disability, which, when this was made noticeable—and because she was weird, this was noticeable way more than it should be—was a lot more than mildly annoying.

But until last night, he'd never spotted what a cool color her eyes were.

Two-toned.

He'd never seen that on anyone.

More, until last night, she'd never given him the chance to do the work it shouldn't be his to do: show her he was a guy without legs, but bottom line, he was still just a guy.

Further, he'd never realized how she was a lot like him, active, outdoorsy, happier on the road to somewhere, a trail to nowhere in particular, or best of all, smack in the middle of nothing that was everything than she was being anywhere else.

He was taken out of this thought, and how aggravating it was they were finally getting to know one another, and then she pulled an Alex, started acting strange and ditched him, when the person behind him in the drive-through tooted their horn.

Rix felt his eyes narrow as he looked to his rearview mirror, because whoever it was needed to chill. He couldn't exactly get out of their way, driving off without his coffee.

When his gaze hit the mirror, he saw the hood of a bright yellow Jeep, and before he'd even looked to the windshield, his throat had constricted.

But he looked to the windshield, knowing what he would see.

She wasn't the only one with a bright yellow Jeep in Prescott, but she was the only one who would toot her horn at him in Scooters' drive-through.

Peri.

His ex.

As in, ex-they-lost-money-on-deposits-after-she-dumped-him-when-he-lost-his-legs-fiancée.

Shit.

She waved at him, her hand moving fast, a smile on her face under her Oakley Split Times.

Jesus.

Smiling and waving like she hadn't completely gutted him when he was at his absolute lowest.

He lifted his own hand and flicked a couple fingers out, thankful the Scooter's kid was leaning through the window with his coffee.

Rix took it, put it in his cupholder, and moved to his hand control to go for the accelerator, stupidly happy that he'd put his legs on that day, rather than doing what he normally would do when he went to work, using his chair.

His truck had been retrofitted with controls so he could use his hands to drive. But today, Peri in his rearview—and shit you not, that was apt—he was glad he'd put on his legs, even if she couldn't see them.

Though, the minute he started to pull away, she hit her horn again, three quick beeps.

Rix slowed and glanced at his mirror in time to see her sticking her head out the window, her long blonde hair falling to the side.

“Hang on a second, Rix!” she shouted.

“*Shit*,” he hissed to himself.

He should just go. Except seeing her going somewhere in her Jeep when he was out in his truck, and a couple of times noticing her in a place where he was (so he'd usually then leave that place so he didn't have to deal with an uncomfortable conversation, like this one was undoubtedly gonna be), he hadn't seen her since it all went down, and the fact it went down at all, she didn't deserve his time.

He didn't go.

He pulled off to the side.

She didn't glide to the window and get her coffee, she pulled off beside him.

When she got out, something drove him to do the same.

No, not something.

He was on his legs. When they did whatever she was angling for them to do right then, he would stand in front of her and look down at her to remind her of the them they used to be.

The them she threw away.

Because one of the parts of them she said she loved, since she was nearly five ten, was that he was six two, and she'd had a lot of boyfriends before him, but she hadn't had a lot of opportunities to tip her head back when she kissed a man.

She got off on him being dominant in a number of ways, not just that one.

Until she didn't.

When she was at the back of her Jeep, she peered around to him, her body jolting.

Yeah.

There he was, standing.

Half of the them they used to be.

Not the man in the chair she'd left behind.

And she was the other half, unchanged, sunshiny and exuding energy.

She quickly recovered from her surprise at seeing him on his feet.

"I'd heard you got your prosthetics," she noted.

Yeah, with the help of some parallel bars, a righteous physical therapist, and family and friends who took his back, he'd first gotten up on those mothers nearly two fucking years ago.

"You heard right," he unnecessarily confirmed.

"Can you wait a second?" she asked. "I'm just gonna go grab my coffee."

Only Peri would think, with a line that was four cars deep, she could drive off, park and walk up to the window to deal with her order like the world revolved around her shit and how she wanted it to go.

But even with this thought, he jutted out his chin to agree.

She turned and strutted back to the coffee joint, and Rix watched as she tossed her bright smile to the driver of the car at the window and scooted her slender body between that car and the building to get to the window.

The driver was a woman. She appeared peeved.

A man would have a lot more patience with Peri. Rix knew that from experience.

It didn't take her long to pay, scuttle out of her position and lope to Rix with her hair swaying, coffee in hand.

Her manner was all Peri, confident that she was all she was. Tall, gorgeous, great figure, head-turning, attention-grabbing just from walking into a room...or across the tarmac at a coffee place.

He crossed his arms on his chest.

It wasn't intentional, but it was a good move, her eyes dropped there as she stopped a few feet away from him, and he saw her tanned cheeks get pink.

Score one for Rix, because she dug his height, she also dug his build, including his chest, which was a lot more developed now since he had to use it so much.

"Yo, Peri," he greeted.

Her gaze lifted to his face.

"Hey," she breathed.

He felt that in his dick, like he always did when she talked like that.

Then something bizarre happened.

In his head, he heard Alex saying *Yeah*, all husky and hot, and he felt *that* in his dick *and* his balls.

What was that?

"Listen, I..." Peri regained his attention. When she got it, he noted she seemed like she was struggling. She started again. "How're you doing?"

Uh...

What?

"How am I doing?" he asked.

"Yeah, things going good for you?"

Was she serious?

He hadn't stood face to face with her in two years. And the last time he was face to face with her, he wasn't standing. He was lying in their fucking bed, and she was ripping his heart out in order to take a shit on it.

And she waylays him at a coffee place to ask how he's doing?

“I’m on my way to work, that’s how I’m doing. I’m also wondering why I had to pull over at Scooter’s to tell you face to face how I’m doing. If you’re curious, you got my number, you could text.”

She winced like he’d been an asshole or something, when he hadn’t been altogether friendly, but he hadn’t been an asshole, then she stated, “I deserved that.”

All right.

What?

“You deserved what?”

“You never used to talk to me like that.”

“Talk to you like what?”

“Like you don’t have time for me.”

For shit’s sake.

“Peri, no disrespect, but right now I actually *don’t* have time for you seeing as, like I said, I’m on my way to work.”

“We need to talk,” she asserted.

They did?

“About what?” he inquired suspiciously.

“About us.”

There it was.

The answer to his earlier question.

She was not serious.

This assertion came out of nowhere.

And with what she’d made of them, and the time that had elapsed in between, which was significant, he knew one thing.

It would go nowhere.

Rix took a calming breath before he reminded her, “Peri, there is no us.”

“C’mon, honey, there’ll always be an us,” she said quietly.

Nope.

She was not serious.

And with her standing there, five feet away, her coming there in her Jeep, him in his truck, when they used to wake up beside each other and go to work together if their schedules synced, paying separate for coffee, when no way he'd let her pay for shit, a stark reminder of what became of them, all of this because of her decisions and actions, he was losing his hold on calm.

To move them along, he shared more history, and since it would no way adhere to what he was saying anyway, he didn't sugarcoat it.

"The memory is burned on my brain, about two days after I got home from the hospital, you spotting me as I transferred from chair to our bed, then you sitting down beside me in that bed and saying we weren't going to work. I also remember you relating to me how decent of a person you were, seeing that, even though I no longer had a job, not to mention, I had no freaking clue what I was going to end up doing to make a living since I'd been a firefighter since I was nineteen, and incidentally, I had no legs..."

She winced again.

He powered through it.

"...you were okay that you took the financial hit of canceling the reception place, the cake and the flowers. Though I ate it because I paid for the invites and the save the dates, which, and not only because we'd sent them, couldn't be returned. I was just lucky it was my friends who were going to be our photographer, caterer and DJ, considering the day I was supposed to marry you, I was in a hospital bed, and they were more worried about that than getting paid."

She studiously kept hold on his gaze, not looking down to his legs, when she stated, "That was so close to when it all happened, Rix. You have to understand. I was still adjusting."

Jesus, he couldn't believe his ears.

"*You* were adjusting?"

"It happened to us both," she shot back.

Okay.

He tried.

But now, calm was a memory.

"No, it did not." Rix waved a hand at his legs. "It happened *to me*."

She leaned in earnestly. “It happened to both of us, honey. That’s what you didn’t get. And we need to talk about it.”

“The time to talk about it was before you gave up on me. Or, to give you some space, not long after. Not years later, Peri. But you dumped my ass *two days* after I got home from having both my legs amputated. From that point on, we didn’t have anything to talk about anymore.”

She lifted both hands, still holding her coffee in one, and pressed them toward him.

“We shouldn’t be discussing this in Scooter’s parking lot.” She dropped her hands. “Come over. Any night this week you want. I’ll make us dinner.”

Dinner?

She wanted him to sit down to dinner with her?

The woman liked her weed, maybe she was high.

“I’m not coming over for dinner, Peri.”

“Rix—”

He shook his head and cut her off. “No. You made your decision. It wasn’t yesterday that happened. It was almost two years ago. We’ve moved on.”

“Yes, *you* ’ve moved on to screwing everything in Yavapai county.”

Wait.

Was this shit because she was jealous?

“You don’t get a say where I put my dick anymore, babe,” he pointed out.

“That’s not you.”

“What’s not me?”

A snap was hitting her voice. “You aren’t that guy, Rix.”

“You’re wrong. Remember? That’s why you left me. I’m an all-new guy, Peri.”

She leaned back. “I see. So you have something to prove,” she surmised. “Think on that and think on refusing to come over to have dinner and talk things through. Think on it while thinking on who you’re proving that something to.”

Yup.

No longer calm.

At all.

“Whoa.” He uncrossed his arms to lift a hand, palm her way, not pressing. “Now I get it.” He put that hand on his chest. “Sorry, we went our separate ways, I haven’t been in the loop. Guess congratulations are in order that you got your degree in counseling since you fucked off and left me,” he noted sarcastically. “We haven’t had a full conversation since the day you moved out, but still, you understand my motivations and have a diagnosis about my behavior. Well-spotted, Dr. Poulsen.”

She wrinkled her nose in irritation.

He’d used to think that was cute.

The fuck of it was, it was still cute.

“You know I hate it when you get snide like that,” she retorted.

Rix gestured to her Jeep. “Feel free to be on your way.”

She stared at him through her Oakleys.

He stared back through his Smiths.

And that was another reminder. Three years ago, he wouldn’t know dick about sunglasses, except he needed them, and he’d buy what he liked. Now, after working outdoor retail since he could get back to a paid job, he did.

That wasn’t a bad thing, his job hadn’t sucked, he got a good discount, his salary had been decent, his insurance great, his firefighters’ insurance covered his leg situation until the day he died, so that wasn’t a worry, and he could add to his 401K.

It wasn’t anything near what he loved doing.

He’d been doing what he loved doing.

And then that tree came down.

Their staring contest lasted far too long.

Though, when he was ready to end it, she did.

And she did this by whispering, “We’re not done, Rix. We’ll never be done,” and as if it proved some point, she slapped the rear quarter panel of his truck (and it sucked, but he had to admit, him turning off to have this chat instead of driving off, like he should have done, definitely proved her point).

After she did that, she whirled, her hair flying, that familiar jump in her step that was one of the first things he noticed about her, how she even walked with an extra current of electricity, and she rounded her Jeep, got in, and pulled out.

In this time, Rix did not mess around.

He was in his truck and ready to roll too.

He was pissed he had to follow her to the stoplight.

He was relieved she went left, and he was going right, to hit downtown, where their new offices were.

With the new program, they needed more space. They were relocating from the local River Rain Outdoors store that also housed the national headquarters, which was on 69 between Prescott Valley and Prescott.

The new offices weren't ready to move in yet, but it was getting close, and after officially signing on the day before, Judge had planned for the three of them to meet up with their new finance guy at their new space to see how the renos were going and get the lay of the land.

He wanted to be excited about all this, like he'd been the last few months as he trained his replacement at the store and they started work on how they were going to merge River Rain's Kids and Trails program with Hale Wheeler's Camp Trail Blazer, then build more programs from there.

He wanted to be excited that he'd be making more money than he ever had in his life, that he had the kickass title Director of Programs (Judge was Executive Director, Alex was Director of Outreach, and their new guy, Kevin was CFO).

He wanted to be excited that his job would not be confined to one building in one town, but he'd be all over, not just the US but eventually the world.

And he wanted to be excited when he hit downtown and drove to the back of the building, the entire top floor their organization now occupied, and he found a parking spot that said, Rix Hendrix, Director of Programs, Trail Blazer, which he knew was the real reason Judge wanted them there that morning.

The signs were a surprise, they were awesome AF, and Judge, Alex and Kevin, as well as Rix, all had one.

But he wasn't excited.

His mind was filled with Peri's bullshit, the color of Alex's eyes, and what the fuck Alex's deal was that they were finally connecting, then she stands up in the middle of it and walks off, doing this before she ditches the bar (and him) altogether.

In other words, he wasn't in the greatest of moods when, carrying his coffee and thinking he should have probably gotten them all one (but he only knew Judge's order, though he wondered what Alex drank, and that was whacked too) he finished climbing the four floors to the top, something that put him right in Trail Blazer's new space.

It was a good find, being right off the square and having windows all around. Great views. Brick walls. Kickass columns cutting through the space.

It was gonna be fantastic working there.

In front of the elevator that was between the sets of stairs that came up on both sides at the back of the building, there was an area where a receptionist desk would be when they decided on furniture. A wide panel behind it made of rough but attractive wood that Rix knew would eventually have the Trail Blazer logo on it, once they'd decided what that would look like. And beyond that was a sea of open space that would soon hold furniture, office equipment and staff. All around the edges there were offices, with Judge and Kevin getting corner ones and Alex and Rix sandwiched between them, side by side.

The renos were done, they just needed the tech stuff to happen (and that was gonna happen imminently) and to fill the space with furniture.

And bodies.

His mood didn't get any better when he rounded the panel, saw the rest of them already there, standing outside what was going to be Alex's office (the one that would be between Judge and Rix's), and it was only Kevin who called, "Hey, man."

Alex, as usual, barely glanced at him, which answered the question that whatever breakthrough they had last night had more to do with her downing mules like they were Kool-Aid than them actually finding a connection.

But it was Judge that surprised him. His closest friend, and now boss, looked right at Rix and didn't hide he was pissed, and Rix knew him well enough to know who he was pissed at was Rix.

Rix glanced down at his watch.

He wasn't late so what the hell?

He returned his attention to Judge and lifted his brows.

Rix doubted Judge would get into it then, whatever it was, but he didn't get a chance when Kevin asked, "Did you see the signs for our parking spaces?"

He turned to Kevin. "Yeah, I saw 'em."

Kevin smiled.

It was forced, but Rix smiled back.

Kevin's smile faded because he knew Rix's wasn't real.

Rix had met Kevin first as a customer at River Rain stores, the local one that Rix managed until yesterday.

Kevin was a big-time trail runner and kayaker, so he was in the store a lot. They'd struck up a friendship, which meant he'd been out both running and kayaking with Kevin, also hiking. He'd further been in with Kevin, watching football or basketball in some bar or at one or the other's houses, shooting the shit, eating wings and drinking beer.

The guy was a CPA, had a Master's of Economics from Howard University, loved the outdoors but didn't so much like his job working as the top finance guy for a huge HVAC company that serviced Yavapai, Coconino, Gila and Mohave counties.

Rix and Judge were so tight, a friend of Rix's was a friend of Judge's, and Kevin was the first person who sprang to mind when they were divvying up duties and deciding which positions needed to get filled first.

They all agreed, since Wheeler was endowing the program with half a billion dollars, a finance guy was kind of important.

They were at one with poaching him, and fortunately, Kevin was at one with jumping ship and coming onboard Trail Blazer.

This wasn't a surprise, Kevin was heavy into the outdoors, he was going to be making more money, even if they were a charity (Judge—and Wheeler agreed—felt that salaries should be competitive in order to find the right staff), and he was already a volunteer for Kids and Trails.

The perfect fit.

“The signs aren't the only surprise.” Judge spoke for the first time since Rix had arrived. He also started to move across the expanse of the space to a long foldout table. “The designer has narrowed it down to three schemes that fit our budget for the furniture, and we got the logo options, five of them, all of them Wheeler's already approved. We need to make some decisions.”

He'd made it to the table and was spreading out some big sheets of paper that, even from where Rix stood, he saw had a bunch of pictures of furniture on them, and some regular sheets that had logos printed on them.

As they all made the move to approach, Rix decided he'd give it another go, edged toward Alex, and greeted, “Hey.”

Alex was not five ten.

Tops, she was five six.

To kiss her, he'd have to bend deep.

Or coax her into his lap.

Jesus.

He'd gotten laid last night, what was his deal with this shit about Alex?

He didn't have a shot to figure that out.

Her brown and green eyes flicked up to him, and he saw she was pissed too.

Okay.

What in *the* fuck?

He stopped, reaching a hand down to touch her forearm, and she jerked to a stop with him.

She didn't have her usual trouble looking at him then.

She glared right into his eyes.

Yes.

Glared.

She'd ditched him, what'd she have to be pissed about?

"I said 'hey,'" he noted, his voice rougher than normal, because he was ticked.

"Hey," she spit out like the taste of it sucked.

"What's up?" he asked.

She tipped her head woodenly toward the table. "We're deciding furniture and logos."

"I mean with you throwing attitude at me."

Her eyelids coasted slowly down and coasted up even slower.

This unfortunately gave Rix the opportunity to note that she had very long, thick eyelashes, she wore no mascara, maybe because she didn't need any, probably because she didn't wear makeup at all, and they weren't the auburn color of her hair.

They were dark, with auburn at the tips, something he could see in their sunshiny offices, but not last night in the dark bar.

Seriously interesting.

And gorgeous.

He'd never noticed that either.

"Sorry?" she asked.

This took him out of his thoughts about her lashes, but only landed him in the sitch that he had to admit, she had a great voice. He'd always thought that, even before, when it hit him only vaguely. It was almost...cultured, like, sophisticated, which was strange for her, since she was definitely not a city girl. It was also deep. Not exactly Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*, or he didn't think it was until they were talking last night about glass showers and hot springs.

Then, it was totally *Body Heat*, but better, because she had no clue it was.

It was annoying to have this in his ears when he was ticked that she was ticked because she had no reason to be ticked.

If anything, he was the one who should be.

Which reminded him...

"I asked, what's up with your attitude?" he repeated.

"My attitude?"

“You’re pissed at me.”

“I’m not pissed at you.”

He’d had just that kind of morning, he didn’t do what he normally did, ignored or avoided her shit.

They were going to have to work together.

She was going to have to get over it.

So he called her on it.

“Listen, Alex, I’m used to you not knowing how to handle the fact I got no legs, I’m not used to you being cool with me, opening up, connecting, like you were last night. Though, gotta say, I shouldn’t be surprised you were reminded you were uncomfortable being around a guy like me and got up in the middle of a conversation and ditched me. But now I wanna know how that translates to you being pissed at me when it should be the other way around, ’cept it’s not because I’m used to your whole bullshit awkward act.”

She stared up at him as he spoke, the color draining from her face, and the instant he finished speaking, she asked in a quiet voice, “Not knowing how to handle it that you don’t have legs?”

“I’m not the only double amputee on earth, Alex. Maybe the only one you know, but I’m not the only one. And we’re gonna be working a lot closer together. I suggest you get your shit together about it, because it’s not cool.”

She stood entirely unmoving, including her eyes, which didn’t blink, as she continued to stare at him.

“What’s the holdup?” Judge called.

Rix turned his head that way. “We’ll be right there.”

When he turned back, he saw Alex looking that way, and she said something else.

“I’m heading to River Rain.”

Of course she was.

Dodging him rather than dealing with him.

Her normal MO.

Rix clenched his teeth.

“What’s going on?” Judge asked.

But before Alex could pull an Alex, avoid getting anywhere near him as she made a hasty exit, probably (although there wasn’t much around except that folding table) finding something to bump into along the way, which would have been cute, if the reason she so desperately wanted to get away wasn’t so fucked up, she looked up at him.

And then, shocking the shit out of him, under her breath, for only him to hear, she decreed, “You aren’t the only double amputee on the planet, John Hendrix, but you sure are the stupidest one.”

After delivering that, she was not awkward, and she didn’t bump into shit.

Except him, because she far from avoided his person.

She crashed her shoulder right into his arm, doing this deliberately, so he swayed in a twist and his coffee sloshed in his other hand as she stormed past him and then through the space, her loose curls contained in her signature ponytail at the back of her head bouncing as she went.

Okay.

Again.

What in *the* fuck?

“Give us a minute, Kev,” he heard Judge mutter as Rix stared after Alex, who shoved angrily on the bar on the door to the stairs and then disappeared behind it. “My office.”

At Judge’s last two words, Rix looked to his bud.

Or more accurately, watched Judge walk to the biggest office in the space, the one on the northwest corner.

Still clenching his teeth, Rix followed.

“Close the door,” Judge ground out when Rix made it into the space.

Oh yeah, his friend was pissed.

Though, Rix reckoned he was a helluva lot angrier.

Rix closed the door, and for the second time that day (and it wasn’t fucking eight-thirty in the morning, for shit’s sake), he crossed his arms on his chest, even still holding his coffee.

It was a power maneuver, because, as previously noted, Rix was not unaware he was significantly developed in his upper body.

It was also a defensive maneuver, one his mother pointed out to him that he'd started using a lot, particularly during initial rehab after the amputations, and again when he went back to begin the painful and frustrating process of learning to use his prosthetics.

"We're all official now, work has started, we're not in our permanent offices yet, but this is happening, so you're going to have to get your shit tight about Alex," Judge demanded.

"I'm sorry?" Rix whispered.

"You need to be professional, and that means none of that shit you pulled last night, or whatever you did just now."

Rix didn't trust himself to speak, so he didn't.

"We have the means to do some pretty amazing things, Rix, so get it together," Judge finished.

"She just called me stupid," Rix pushed out, sounding just as furious as he actually was.

Although Judge looked surprised, he didn't look surprised about what Rix thought he should be surprised about, considering his response was, "In a sense, she's right."

Okay.

Not even eight-thirty and this was maybe the sixth time that day he couldn't believe his...*goddamned...ears*.

"So you're standing there, telling *me* that *I* gotta get my shit tight to work with some woman who has absolutely no clue how to behave around someone with a physical disability?" he asked. "Is that what you're saying to me?"

"No," Judge bit out. "I'm saying to you that you gotta get your head out of your ass and work with a woman who is so into you, she can barely see straight, and not turn on the charm and lead her ass on, only to dump her when something better catches your eye."

This time, Rix stood silent, still and unblinking.

"She's good at her job. *Really* good at it, Rix. But she doesn't need it, and she could get hired practically anywhere she wanted to go. Don't make us lose her. She's been by my side for a while now, we work great together. I need her. So pull your shit together, because I need you too."

On that, Judge made his way to the door, but stopped at Rix, who was just inside it.

“You know, I don’t get it. I never will. But buddy, whatever you’re working out, leave people like Alex out of it. She’s way more vulnerable than you’ll ever be, I don’t give a shit you lost your legs. And if you open your eyes and see beyond you, you’d get that and stop acting like an asshole, and not only to Alex.”

And with that, Judge walked out and back to where Kevin stood at the long table, not hiding he was watching.

Rix twisted away from them in order to stare out the windows toward the square, Judge’s words slamming through his brain, along with a fuck ton of memories of run-ins with Alex Sharp.

Work with a woman who is so into you, she can barely see straight, and not turn on the charm and lead her ass on, only to dump her when something better catches your eye.

His life might have completely changed after what happened in that fire.

But he hadn’t, not really.

Before Peri, hell, just last night, he was a man who got a lot of female attention.

He’d had women do some crazy shit to get his.

And he’d been around women who were shy who wanted it but had no idea how to go about getting it.

Alex was not creeped out about his legs, his chair, or his prosthetics.

She was a woman who wanted his attention, had no idea how to get it, and worse, had no idea what to do with it once she got it.

How the hell did he miss that?

Last night, he’d been flirting with her, lowkey, but he was doing it.

And he had to admit, when she responded...

No, the *way* she responded, all bashful and cute, he’d taken it out of lowkey mostly because he’d noticed her eyes, her voice was doing a number on him, and her hair was in those righteous pigtails that were so thick, straight up, his fingers itched to pull on one to see how close he could get her to him before she pulled away.

Then she’d gotten nervous, panicked and escaped.

Because the guy she was into was coming on to her, and she was Alex, she had no idea how to deal.

Christ.

Not only had he missed all that, he'd been a dick.

And not just a dick.

A colossal one.

"Well, hell," he whispered.

Judge was right, he had to get his shit tight.

And he had to smooth things over with Alex.

But right then, she was gone.

He'd come up with a plan to sort that and then he'd sort it.

They had a lot in common, and unfortunately, when he finally got his head out of his ass about her, it was at a time when he realized he wanted to fuck her.

But they worked together, he was fired up about this job, about working with Judge and Kevin, about doing the good they were going to do, he knew Alex was too, so he reckoned neither of them wanted to screw it up.

So they'd figure it out.

For now, there was nothing he could do, so he took a deep breath, turned, and walked out of Judge's office to go do something he had zero interest in and something else he only had slightly more interest in.

Look at and decide on furniture and logos.