

# The Next Day

2<sup>nd</sup> in the Foothills Romance Series

Carrie Thorne

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*For my family. All of them.  
Pacific Northwesterners to boot.  
Characters that will appreciate the loving references dabbled throughout.  
Like the note on the door about the key under the mat. Yeah, that happened.*



*The Key is Under the Mat*

“Supposedly there are mountains around here.” Shifting his weight with the truck as he rounded yet another bend in an endless series of S-curves, Zane remarked on the thick trunks that lined the narrow road. Pressure built in his ears as the altitude climbed, forcing him to swallow to equalize.

After another few miles of rapidly alternating light and shadow, flipping his sunglasses up and down as he was either blinded by burning sun or dense shade, the forest opened beyond. An unfamiliar pang clenched and loosened in his chest as the vast valley beyond glowed under supernaturally blue skies, feathery green trees coated the jagged slopes, and diamonds glinted off the anastomosing river beyond. As the wind kicked up, no longer diffused by the trees, the tarp over his possessions in the back of the truck flapped against the tie-downs.

“What do you think, Jack? Hell and gone from San Diego or New York.” He glanced to the simple steel box buckled into the passenger seat at his side. The urn didn’t respond. Rubbing his eyes, he chuckled at himself. “No offense pal, but it’s time to scatter you somewhere around this absurdly beautiful place. If I keep this up, people are going to think I’ve lost my fucking mind.”

In her digitally smooth voice, his phone advised him to turn right in two miles. “About time,” he muttered. He eased up on the brakes, delicately balancing burning out versus losing control at ninety miles an hour, thanks to the heavy load down the steep decline.

A few more miles, and he reached a carved wooden sign reading, *Welcome to Foothills. Population 8,698*. There had been a three at the end, but it had been painted over with an eight in its place. Another sign behind it congratulated its football team on winning state last year, then another advertising local trails and campgrounds.

Foothills proper was excessively charming. Colorful buildings dotted Main Street, and the sidewalks were packed with a whole lot of hiking boots. In under sixty seconds, he’d reached the opposite end of town. The sultry voice interrupted his music again, urgently demanding he take the next right. *Keep your panties on*.

More windy roads. More trees with the occasional gorgeous view that flashed by in a blink. Shit, this place was isolated.

From nowhere, a deer leaped out in front of him like a damn suicide bomber. Slamming on the brakes, he cringed as he waited to hear the crash of his stuff breaking free from the tie-downs and shattering the rear window. Holding his breath, he looked back and confirmed the load was still secure. *Phew*.

Pleasantly ignorant, his GPS informed him that his destination was on the left.

The narrow drive was canopied with more green; maple and cedar that had been there since early last century. The house was a faded-brown craftsman style home sat at the top of a sprawling park-style front yard. Some of the shutters were at odd angles, the paint chipped, but it was sturdy. Nice place to call home.

Asher was a lucky guy.

Zane pulled into the carport off the detached garage. Tucking his phone into his back pocket, he hopped out. His joints crunched as he stretched his arms and rolled his shoulders. Just under thirty-six hours on the road. Not bad considering he hadn't cared to make a road trip out of it. He'd been lucky it hadn't rained; his tarped load might have done the job, but it would have been dicey.

He dashed up the garage stairs to his new apartment. A bristly welcome mat informed him to 'fuck-off' unless he'd 'brought beer'. The corner of his mouth quirked up. Classy. Asher's touch, no doubt.

Pulling a red envelope off the front door, he read the message. *Guess you found the place. Give me a call when you get in. Key is under the mat. –Asher.*

As promised, he found the key under the mat. He rolled his eyes as he slid the key into the lock. Crime rate must be pretty nonexistent around here.

Not bad. The windows were all wide open, but a lingering smell of wet dog was unmistakable. Prior tenant must have been a dog person. He didn't mind, he'd always wanted a dog. Maybe now that he lived in the fucking sticks...

Otherwise, the place was spotless. Faux-wood flooring spanned the main room, an L-shaped plush couch faced an electric fireplace. On the tag was a sticky note that read, *Happy Housewarming*, in elegant handwriting. Not Asher's. Who the hell would have bought him a couch?

The breeze from outside gusted in through the open windows, the warmed cedar tickling his nose before spiraling up to the exposed-beam ceiling. Open and airy, the place had just been updated. The kitchen had shiny black granite countertops, stainless steel sink and faucet, with matching appliances. Shit, nice digs.

Zane couldn't say what he'd been expecting, but this wasn't it. Probably something more like the tired shoebox he'd had in San Diego. He'd moved into the place when he'd joined the SEALs, a cheap place for a couple just starting out; he hadn't felt like getting a new place even when he'd paid off his student debt with the GI Bill and his combat pay.

He fired off a quick text to Asher, *Here. The place is great.*

His phone buzzed a few seconds later. *I'll let you get settled. See you tomorrow?*

*Bring breakfast.*

He dashed down the stairs to start unloading. What he was going to do after that, he didn't have a fucking clue.



Freya chugged her water. The cool flow soothed her scratchy throat but failed to lighten the lead coating her eyelids. Jetlag was a bitch. She would kill for a caffè, but as she'd have to attempt sleep again in another few hours, she didn't dare.

She glared at her suitcases. It hadn't been worth the money to ship her few belongings from Florence, so she'd just kept her clothes, a few favorite trinkets, and then shipped her art supplies and the completed paintings she hadn't been ready to give up just yet. Flying back for a showing and to pack up her things had been a headache and a half. Double jetlag was like a monster of a hangover, and she hadn't felt one of those since her foolish early twenties. At least Sophie had

enough basics to stock the house for now, and Freya would only be here for a few months while she looked for something more permanent anyway.

Permanent. That would be nice. The last few years had been a whirlwind, couch surfing when things were tight, living in closet-sized studio apartments with roommates or boyfriends when she had the cash. Art school, internships, waiting tables. None paid well.

Until the last year. Things seemed to be taking off. Not like a jet leaving the runway, more like a rusty sedan in need of an oil change, but she'd established enough of a foothold in the art world that she might be able to continue the momentum from home. A few big galleries had even expressed interest in carrying her work on an ongoing basis. Her income was meager but steady... otherwise she would still be over there.

An engine rumbling down the driveway pricked her attention. Too big for Sophie's new RAV4 that she'd paid cash for with her inheritance. Freya had thought herself frugal, but Sophie spent so much of her childhood rationing every penny that she rarely splurged.

Foothills was too spread out to function without a car, unless she wanted to move closer to downtown, but she had craved the wide-open spaces of rural Foothills. While she needed a car, the expense was daunting. By the time she made it to the window to see who was here, she saw the rear of a truck loaded with tarped boxes in the carport next to the garage.

Hmm. This must be Asher's SEAL buddy, Zane. He'd mentioned that Zane would be arriving soon, and to give him some space. Her cousin had been hurting when he'd gotten home from the Navy a few months ago, and apparently Zane was worse off, as he didn't even have a supportive family to get him through.

Uncle Paul and Asher had moved fast to get the apartment fixed up before Zane arrived. Her aunt and uncle had practically adopted Sophie the first time their daughter had brought her home, and brought her further into the fold each time. It looked like they were on track to take Zane right under their wing as well. No wonder they were her favorite aunt and uncle. Their children have been her best friends since childhood, and Paul and Denise were honest people that cared about their home and family, blood related or not.

While the dust still settled in the driveway, Sophie pulled up in her new SUV. Freya would say *shiny* and new, but the driveway was a dustbowl, so nothing was shiny around here for long. Uncle Paul, officially still the owner, had promised to have it graveled before fall, or it would be a mudhole. Parking in the empty two-car garage, Sophie appeared with a pair of grocery bags and sneakily eyed Zane's truck, but resisted the urge to go pry.

As soon as Sophie made it inside, she dumped the groceries on the kitchen island and joined Freya by the window. With her heels, Sophie just topped Freya in height. "Did you see him?" Sophie asked.

Still holding her water close to her lips, wishing it were caffeinated, Freya shook her head. "No, I just missed him. He's been here," she glanced at her slim black watch, "three minutes."

"Should we introduce ourselves?"

"Asher said to give him space."

"Dang it." Sophie pulled off her cotton cardigan and tossed it onto the entry hook. Freya had known Sophie for just over a month, and already found her to be eternally put together, aside from her fingernails that were typically chewed to nubs. Not a huge wardrobe, but precise and stunning. Shrugging, Freya decided she'd just have to help herself to her friend's closet now and again.

Not that they were built anything alike. Where Sophie was slim and athletic, Freya was height and boobs and butt. As a teen, she'd hated her figure. In her early twenties, she'd risked basic nutrition in an effort to trim down.

Something about turning thirty had changed everything. She no longer hated her dark, frizzy curls, and loved that she had a curvy figure like the classic paintings and sculptures. And she no longer gave a damn that she was taller than most of the guys she dated, something she knew Sophie could relate to, as both were taller than average.

When Sophie had called to see if she wanted to be roomies while they both got settled, Freya had jumped at the opportunity. The pair had hit it off in the weeks before Pippa's wedding. And, according to Sophie's pleas, Sophie needed a buffer so she and Asher would take things slow, a roommate to keep her within her meticulous budget, and, offered a generous discount for Freya's artistic eye in fixing the place up. Freya had done a happy dance and a half. She loved her parents but couldn't imagine bunking with them again, and she didn't want to blow her budget on a place of her own yet.

As they stood staring like a couple of drooling puppies waiting for a treat, Zane came dashing down the steps.

*Oh.* She tightened her grip on her water, nearly dropping the cobalt glass as her attention locked on. Naturally, she'd expected the SEAL to be built. She hadn't expected... yeah, *that*.

Suppressing the sigh before she proved to her new roommate that she was the sex-deprived horndog she felt like, she bit her lips together. Solid muscle, his black t-shirt clung to some ripped shoulders, hugging some spectacular abs she wanted to lick, and she hadn't even seen his skin yet. Spiked up after a long day on the road, his walnut hair was just a little wild, an inch past a military fade.

Loosening the tie-downs on the back of his truck, he wound them back up and set them in the backseat of the truck, then did the same with the blue tarp. *Damn*, he moved like a confident man on a mission, but with a leisure that said he didn't give a fuck how long it took. A horny sigh passed her lips without her awareness, followed by a whimper.

Grinning at her side, Sophie teased, "Enjoying the view?"

Freya nodded. "He is a work of art. Look at the way he moves. That is pure power." He hoisted a huge box and carried it up the steps like it didn't weigh a thing.

"Think we should offer to help?"

"Maybe. Or you can pour us some wine and we'll just watch the show."

"I like you," Sophie teased. "But I do feel bad, just standing here while he carries all that by himself."

Freya glanced down at the strappy camisole and leggings she'd tossed on. Her dark waves were unrulier than usual, despite the shower. Wiggling her toes, she glared at her chipped blue nail polish. Sighing, she nodded. "I'll get some shoes."

"I'm going to go get changed first. I know I don't need to dress in slacks and heels for accounting work in Foothills, but I can't get used to not dressing up for work."

Smiling as she tossed on her canvas shoes, Freya shook her head, "Wear what makes you happy. Can I borrow a hair thing? Mine are lost somewhere in my luggage."

Sophie pulled out her ponytail and handed over the hair tie. Freya pulled her damp hair back into a messy bun and dashed out the door.



Sliding the cardboard across the slick floor to tuck another load under the kitchen bar, Zane spun on his heel and headed for the next box. His footsteps reverberated on the wooden steps as he thundered down. Slamming on the breaks, he skidded to a stop in the dirt before he crashed into a box with legs.

Behind the box, a muffled voice said, "Hi. I'm Freya." A pinky lifted off the box; was she trying to shake hands?

He grinned at the odd gesture, his eyebrows scrunched in curiosity. With a gentle pinky shake, he tried to see the bearer of the box. "Zane. Thanks for the help."

A lyrical quality to her voice, that flat west coast accent had a hint of something else he couldn't place, danced behind her as she headed up the stairs, "Anytime, neighbor." As she strolled up the steps, her hips swayed, her strong arms held steady around the box.

Dumbfounded, his feet rooted to the ground until she disappeared into the apartment.

Shaking his head at the odd meeting, he grabbed another box. Nearly dropping the damn thing, he boosted it higher, his forearms already burning to keep the thing from crashing to the ground and crushing his toes. He chuckled when he read the Sharpie label in front of his nose, *Kitchen, HEAVY*. At least he'd tried to warn himself.

Freya's feet tapped in a cheery rhythm as she dashed down the steps. He stood to the side as she brushed past. Carting the box up the steps, he had to lean forward so he didn't fall backward, his hands near shaking as he gripped the thing. Yep, he'd packed his entire kitchen in one massive box. Dumbass. Maybe cast iron hadn't been so brilliant after all.

He carted this one straight into the kitchen and turned to get the next. Another walking box appeared in the doorway. Dashing back down the stairs, he tried to keep up with her pace. Didn't want his volunteer to carry in more of his stuff than he did.

When he reached the bottom, a gorgeous woman with a slim runner's body came jogging out of the house. Recognizing her from the photo Asher had shown him, he didn't need the introduction. She smiled as she approached, "Glad you made it okay. I'm Sophie."

"Hi, glad to finally meet you. Where's that deadbeat boyfriend of yours?"

Rolling her eyes, she grinned, "Claims you could use some time to get settled. I think he just hates moving."

Tilting his head to the side, he teased, "Always the lazy one."

Glancing up, he saw Freya's fine ass swinging up the stairs as she carted up a pair of lamps. Suppressing a groan before he let on how long it had been since he'd even noticed a woman, the last few years in the Navy having crushed his sex drive to a flaccid pulp, he felt an almost foreign, but miraculously welcome twitch in his pants. Didn't matter what the woman's face looked like, he was absolutely interested. Closing his eyes, he kicked his mental ass for being such a shallow dickwad, while cheering that things were still functional down there.

Turning, he checked the boxes and grabbed another that said *HEAVY* on it. Not that he doubted his new neighbors couldn't handle it; hell, Freya's bare shoulders said she was fit as fuck, but it was his shitty packing job, he'd take the crap loads.

A few more times up and down the stairs, and they were already done. Trekking down the stairs for the last item, he watched as Freya's curvy backside strutted out of sight.

Sophie waited at the bottom. "See you around. Don't be a stranger. You need anything, directions, food, whatever, just come on over, okay?"

His breath came easy as he reached the ground. "I really appreciate the help. Thanks. Know any good pizza delivery around here?"

Shaking her head, Sophie grinned. “My first time living in rurality too. Say goodbye to conveniences like delivery. Anonymity. Variety. Walking anywhere useful.”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “You know, my sister said I could stay in her apartment in Denver while she’s deployed. Should have taken her up on it.”

“Give it a few weeks and then let me know how you feel.” She backed up a few steps. “Check your fridge. Paul and Denise stocked it for you, among other updates.”

“Asher’s parents did all this? I got to know them a bit on their trips to visit Asher. They’d take the three of us to dinner every time.”

“They’re good people. Be careful, they take in strays.”

There was that damn pang again. Like the one he’d felt on the drive in. “The couch?”

She nodded. “And the bed. See you around, Zane.”

Shit, he hadn’t even been in the bedroom yet. He’d been planning to sleep on the floor the first night or two until he picked up a mattress. The truck gate vibrated his palms as he slammed it shut.

Crunching the dirt under his feet, he halted. Heaviness in his gut weighed him down as he remembered he had one more load. He opened the passenger door and unhooked Jack. Carting the cool metal under his arm, he trudged up the stairs for the last time that night.

His eyes blurred as he looked around the room. Where the hell did one store their dead friend? Shaking his head, he blinked away the weird question. “Not like you’re going to care, you’re just a tin can of dust.” He tucked Jack’s urn into the back of the coat closet.



Can’t wait to read more? Me neither! Read [Carrie Thorne’s The Next Day](#) today!



## About the Author



Carrie's living her own happily ever after (with the inevitable ups and downs that go with it!) with her kids, husband, and dogs in the Pacific Northwest, working full time in healthcare, and always wishing the laundry would fold itself. When she's not rocking the world of romantic fiction, she's exploring the outdoors, travelling (or wishing she was), hanging out with her amazing family, or, quite frankly, she's a total introvert and you can usually find her curled up in front of the fire or in the hammock with a romance novel.

Writing romance is Carrie's not-so-guilty pleasure. She believes in writing genuine and strong characters, promoting positive ideals, that love and happily ever afters are for everyone, kindness is everything, and she cannot resist a zinging romance.

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